

4.10 John and Nellie Rapalje



Clearview Alvia
Leatherwood Dahlias
Maggie Valley/Waynesville, North Carolina

Ephesians 2: 8-9

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.”

The Grandparents I Never Knew

John D. Rapalje, Sr. (1874-1940), Nellie Seaman (1886-1935)



I don't know very much about Dad's mother and father—Dad never talked about them very much. They both died when Dad was a young man. However, don't mistake Dad's lack of conversation about his parents for lack of compassion for them. For his entire life, Dad kept a half dozen pair of socks that had been folded by his mother Nellie (Seaman) while he was in his first year of college. For all these years, our mother (Grandma Bunny!) was the only one who knew.

Then, as late as last year (2020), I discovered a small plastic box that NO ONE ever told me about. This box contains what appears to be ALL of Dad's father's cancelled checks for his entire lifetime from 1915 to 1940.

Can you believe my Dad kept socks folded by his mother and ALL his father's checks for his entire life, for 60 years, carrying them with him whenever he moved, from New York to New Jersey in 1940, to Chicago in 1946, and to Florida in 1949??

I remember one thing Dad told me about his father—Dad's father was brokenhearted about the loss of his beloved wife, Nellie, of appendicitis in 1935! His dad lived another 5 years, while Dad was in college in Philadelphia at Drexel

Institute of Technology, now Drexel University. It appears that his dad never really recovered from her loss! Sadly, they were married for only 21 years before the death of his wife! Dad's father's own parents, Van and Gus Rapalje, were married for only 18 years before the death of his mother when John Sr was only 17. This would be three generations of Rapalje men who lost their wives at a young age. Dad lost his mother when he was 18; Dad's father, John Sr, lost his mother when he was 17; and Dad's grandfather, Van, lost his mother when he was only 7. I was blessed to have my mother until I was 68.

On one occasion I asked Dad's cousin Ed Powell if he had any memories of my grandmother Nellie (Seaman) Rapalje. Ed told me that he remembered her standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes and singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus!" No wonder I LOVE to wash dishes! I also remember hearing that Dad's mother's favorite saying was "A place for everything, and everything in it's place!" I certainly see the value and importance of this saying, but sadly I do NOT seem to have inherited this gene from her!

My grandfather John D. Rapalje, Sr., the eldest child of Nicholas Van Antwerp (Van) Rapalje, did appear in several U.S. Census Reports, beginning with the 1880 Report:

In the 1880 census, Nicholas (Van) [my great grandfather] was listed as the head of his own household at the age of 33, a farmer and gardener, with a 29-year-old wife Ann Augusta "Raplye". Listed with them in this census are John D. "Raplye" [my grandfather], 5 year old son; Sarah A. "Raplye", 4 year old daughter; Wm. D. "Raplye", 3 year old son; Robert A. "Raplye", 1 year old son; Danl. L. "Raplye", 1 month old son [in reality, it was a daughter and her name was Cornelia K--we knew her as Aunt Neil]; and 4 farm laborers and servants ages 18-40.

[For additional information about this US Census Report and the spelling and pronunciation of our name, please see "Supplementary Information: The Spelling and Pronunciation of the Name Rapalje" at the end of this story!]

The census of 1 June 1900 in Ward 2, City of New York, Borough of Queens, New York listed: Nicholas Rapalje, 53-year-old widowed male head of household, a farmer; John D. Rapalje, 24 year old son, a farmer; Robert A. Rapalje, 21 year old son, a farmer; Daniel Rapalje, 20 year old son, a farmer; Cornelia K. Rapalje, 18 year old daughter, a farmer; and Maria C. Rapalje, 16 year old daughter [we knew

her as Aunt Rite], a farmer. So far, I have not been able to locate the 1910 Census Report, possibly because the family was moving from New York to Delaware!

Before the birth of my father, John D. Rapalje, Jr. in 1916, Nicholas [Van] had moved his family to Delaware, where he owned a farm with his son [my grandfather] John D., Sr. near Harrington, DE. His other son Robert Augustus, who married Mary Quillen Dickerson, owned the adjoining farm. Nicholas [Van] passed away in 1917 and his son Robert in 1919. The 1920 Census shows these adjacent farms owned respectively by John D. Rapalje, Sr. and the Dickersons (parents of Robert's widow Mary).

According to my father John D. Rapalje, Jr., the Rapalje family moved back to Long Island in about 1921 and lived in Hicksville for about 5 years where Dad's father was hired as a foreman on several farms owned by Sam Burke. The family then moved back to Amityville, home of Nellie Seaman's family. There, Dad's father was custodian for the Amityville Cemetery. Although I do not know the location or years of service, John Rapalje, Sr. was a member of the Firemen's Assn of the Town of Newtown. His badge #204 was passed down to me by his only child, my father John D. Rapalje, Jr.



Badge of JDR, Sr



Nellie with JDR, Jr

Supplementary Information

The Spelling and Pronunciation of the name Rapalje

In the 1880 US Census Report, Nicholas (Van) [my great grandfather] was listed as the head of his own household at the age of 33, a farmer and gardener, with a 29-year-old wife Ann Augusta "Raplye". Listed with them in this census are John D. "Raplye" [my grandfather], 5 year old son; Sarah A. "Raplye", 4 year old daughter; Wm. D. "Raplye", 3 year old son; Robert A. "Raplye", 1 year old son; Danl. L. "Raplye", 1 month old son [in reality, it was a daughter and her name was Cornelia K--we knew her as Aunt Neil]; and 4 farm laborers and servants ages 18-40.

Many years ago, when I first read this US Census Report, I was amazed, although not terribly surprised, at the terrible misspelling of the name "Raplye". Having grown up myself with this name "Rapalje," hardly anyone would be able to pronounce or spell it either then or now. Moreover, in the year 1880, and in generations prior to this time, reading and writing skills were not common to most people, as illustrated by the custom of "making your mark," an x, instead of a signature, on documents. Many of our ancestors were illiterate. Originally, I suppose, many of our ancestors had spoken, if not written, names. Over the years, several different spellings emerged, either accidentally or by choice, such as Rapalje, Rapelje, Rapelye, Rapelyea, and even "Raplye" were often used, sometimes interchangeably. Now, one branch of the family spells it Rapalje, while another whole branch of the family spells it Rapelje. I'm sure there are other branches as well.

In all the years I have read this 1880 US Census Report, I have thought that the census takers of 1880, like most of my friends today, did NOT know how to spell Rapalje. Today I realized for the first time that it probably wasn't the census takers that didn't know how to spell Rapalje! It was probably the Rapalje family of that day that didn't know how to spell their own name! The census taker possibly asked them their name, and they replied, our name is "Rap-L-yea." It suddenly made sense to me, "Raplye" was NOT a misspelling of Rapalje! It may have been the way the family PRONOUNCED their last name in the year 1880.

Going back another generation, John Sr's parents were Daniel D. and Rensie Rapalje (our spelling!). In the US Census Report of 1850, the entire family is listed with the spelling "**Rapelyea**." Again, I suspect that this was yet another phonetic spelling of the family name. The name must have sounded like "Rap-eL-yea' "!!

So, if any of our descendants or distant relatives and friends wonder how WE pronounce Rapalje, let me say it this way. The "j" is silent . We say "Rap' uh-lee," that rhymes with "Happily!" Get it? We are "Happ-ily Rap'-uh-lee." With D for the middle initial, my father's name, my grandson's name, and my Martha's name all rhyme: "John D, Rap'-uh-lee" and "Martha D, Rap'-uh-lee."

The truth is, going back to Joris Jansen de Rapalie who came to this country in 1624, it was a French name with the French "i" changed to a Dutch "j". Originally, the name was likely pronounced with accent on the last syllable: "Ra-pull-YAY." Of course, some people pronounce the "j": Ra-puhl-JAY'.

There is a city in the southwest corner of Montana, called Rapelje, Montana, named after John M. Rapelje, general manager and vice president of the Northern Pacific Railway in the 1800s. Rapelje is a small rural town with a population of approximately 110 people in the 2000 census. In a recent telephone call to a school in this city, I inquired as to how the people in this city pronounce the name. The school receptionist, who had no idea about the history of the town or the railroad which by now is gone, said they pronounce the "j": "Rap' ul-jay."

In conclusion, I think the main pronunciations are "Rap ul-yay' ", "Rap' ul-jay", or as we pronounce it "Rap' uh-lee".

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