

EWING FAMILY NEWS

Descendants of William Alexander Ewing

Family Legacy Lost ...

A Tribute to Opal (Coxley) Becker

Opal was a very quiet person, so people who weren't around her much didn't get to know the strong person that she was. Her passing in 2016 closed a chapter of family history, leaving no living descendants to carry on that branch of the family's legacy. The story of Opal and her family is highlighted with personal accomplishments, punctuated by tragic events.

The Coxley Family

It appears that the Coxley family legacy actually began only three generations before Opal... at least, with that spelling of the name. Her great-grandfather, Joseph Coxley, was shown in some pre-Civil War land records with the last name spelled as "Cochley." There must have been some confusion with the spelling when he joined the 55th Ohio Volunteers, as all his military records show him as "Coxley," and he evidently kept that spelling after the war. Joseph Coxley had six daughters, but only had two sons, the oldest of which was Opal's grandfather, Gustavus Adolphus Coxley. The younger boy, Burtis Coxley, had one son but it is believed that Burtis's son had no children to carry on the family name.

Gustavus ("Gus") Coxley brought his family to Kansas in 1888, settling on a farm that neighbored the homestead of William Alexander Ewing in Wells Township, Marshall County. There were four children in the Coxley family: Salome, Dean, Ezra and Alex. The first three Coxley children were born in Ohio, prior to the family's move to Kansas. The youngest, Alex, was born a year after they relocated.

Salome was the oldest child and the only daughter in Gus Coxley's family, and as she approached adulthood, she gained the attention of one of the neighbor's boys. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but at that same time the Coxleys decided to sell their farm and buy new land about ten miles further southeast, in the Reserville neighborhood. The move provided them with a larger farm, but couldn't happen quick enough to prevent the marriage of Salome to Ira Ewing in January, 1901. Then, in 1905, tragedy struck the Coxley family when young Alex developed a severe case of appendicitis, the appendix ruptured, and the infection that followed took his life at the tender age of 15. And just nine years later, Ezra Coxley also suffered an attack of appendicitis and died of the infection. Although he was 29 years old at the time, he had not married. At that point, this branch of the Coxley family had shrunk from six members to only four.



Opal Marie (Coxley) Becker

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By 1917, Gus and Nancy Coxley were beginning to think about retiring from the rigors of farming. At age 66, Gus was depending upon his son, Dean, for most of the heavy work. And that had been the case for a long time. So, when the year was nearing winter, Gus and Nancy Coxley bought a small house in Frankfort and retired to enjoy "town" life. Dean, now 34, married a neighbor girl and they established their home on the Coxley farm, where Dean had lived for 16 years. His new bride, Ila Mills, had grown up on a farm about a mile from the Coxleys. Her parents were Lewis C. and Nora (Reynolds) Mills.

Dean and Ila started their family with the birth of a son, Leo, on February 23, 1919, but it hadn't been easy for them. Ila contracted a severe case of the measles during her pregnancy... not the 3-day variety, but what people called the "old-fashioned" or "German" measles, causing severe sickness and an extended period of infection. The sickness made it difficult for Ila, but was even worse for her fetus. He would be born with physical and developmental challenges that would be with him for his entire life.

In the fall of 1919, Dean Coxley bought an additional 120-acre farm that joined the west side of his family's land. It was a working farm with a house, barn and other buildings, providing a place for Dean's sister, Salome, and her family to live. Her husband, Ira Ewing, and their two oldest boys could provide Dean with much-needed labor as he developed his farm and grew his herd of registered Herefords.



Dean and Ila (Mills) Coxley

A year later, a second child was born into the Coxley family. This time there were no complications, and a bouncing baby girl was born on September 19, 1920. They named her Opal Marie.

1922 would bring another tragedy to the Coxley family. Salome Ewing was pregnant with her tenth child, and shortly before her delivery date she hemorrhaged, causing the sudden death of Salome and her unborn child. With the loss of his sister, Dean Coxley and his children were the only remaining descendants of the Coxley family.



Opal Marie Coxley

Opal's Story

The Reserville schoolhouse was less than a mile from the Coxley farm, so when Opal reached school age, it was an easy daily jaunt. Her father served on the governing board of the one-room country school for

many years. When she completed the elementary phase of her education, Opal enrolled at Frankfort High School, where she graduated in 1938. During her high school years, she began working Saturday mornings in the office at the school, a job that she continued for a year after graduating.

In the fall of 1939, Opal moved to Kansas City, where she enrolled in a one-year course at Huff Business College. Upon completion of that, she landed a clerical job with the Kansas Department of Health, which took her to Topeka and started a life-long journey.



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December, 1941, marked a turning-point for everyone in the country, as the U.S. was plunged into World War II. Massive numbers of people were required to power the military effort and women were asked to fill the voids that were created in domestic operations when the men left for the battlefields. Production of needed equipment, surveillance of homeland security, continuation of normal local services, raising funds for the war effort, and providing support in a wide variety of ways... all were being powered largely by women, and Opal played a major role in that endeavor.

Over the next four years, Opal was an active member of the United States Citizens Service Corps, a division of the Civil Defense, providing local support services outlined by the Civil Defense Council. She also belonged to the Topeka chapter of American Women's Volunteer Services, participating in War Bond drives and providing a variety of support services for soldiers at Fort Riley, Topeka Army Airfield and Winter General Hospital, which later became the Veterans Hospital. In addition to that, Opal also volunteered with the United Service Organization (USO), writing letters to "G.I. Joe" overseas, serving at USO Canteens and providing general support to boost the morale of U.S. soldiers. Opal contributed a significant effort to the national cause, while still working full time at the Kansas Department of Health.

When the war ended, Opal's volunteer spirit did not stop. She continued to visit patients at the Veterans Hospital and made treats for them. Opal and a number of her friends from the American Women's Volunteer Services also formed a new group, the Topeka Civic Aids. They helped in a number of ways, including decorating, serving, and ushering for special events at the Topeka Auditorium. They continued to volunteer at the auditorium for years, until the facility was closed due to the construction of the new Expo Center. In addition to that, Opal served as a volunteer worker for the national Office of Price Administration, for which she received a letter of commendation from President Harry S. Truman.

Over the years, Opal had made many long-lasting friendships among her fellow volunteers. A couple of them introduced her to Donald Becker, one of their relatives who had served in the Navy during the war. That introduction led to another long-lasting relationship. Opal and Don were married on September 30, 1950. They traveled with friends to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where they married in a simple ceremony and then honeymooned in Colorado.

A few years later, Opal and Don purchased a home in the Topeka suburb of Pauline, where they lived the balance of their lives. They enjoyed spending time with friends and relatives, playing cards and visiting. They also enjoyed numerous camping, fishing or hunting trips to favorite spots and were almost always present at family reunions or other



**The Dean Coxley family, late 1940s...
Dean, Leo, Opal and Ila.**

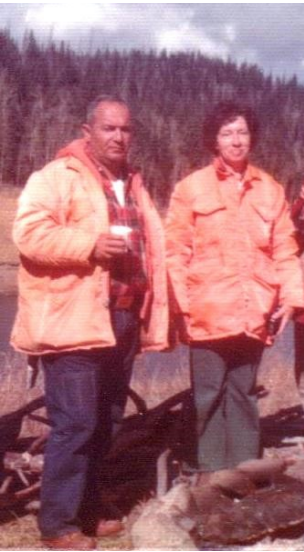


Donald Becker



**Opal and Don, at their first home in
Topeka, 1950.**

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gatherings. Opal continued her life-long work at the Kansas Department of Health and Don worked with the Shawnee County Sheriff's Department.

While life was relatively quiet most of the time for Opal, there were still times of tragic loss in her family. Shortly after World War II, Opal's grandfather, Gus Coxley, passed away on the last day of 1946. Then, just a few months after Opal and Don married, her father, Dean Coxley, died suddenly of a heart attack on October 16, 1950. Opal's mother and brother moved from the farm into Frankfort. Her grandmother, Nancy Coxley, still owned the farm and oversaw its management until she sold it prior to her death in 1953.

On February 6, 1981, Don suffered a severe heart attack which took his life. Just four years later, in 1985, Opal's brother, Leo, died at age 66. The Kansas branch of the Coxley family had shrunk, leaving Opal and her mother, Ila, as the only remaining members. Ila would live on for another eleven years, dying just four days past her 102nd birthday in 1996.

Through it all, good times and bad, which included a bout with breast cancer, the one thing that was constant was Opal's determination. Always a quiet person, she concentrated on the task at hand, paying close attention to all the details... in her personal life as well as in her work. The job that she had started right out of school in 1940 turned into a career, with Opal performing numerous functions within the department. When she retired 53+ years later, she had received a number of awards for her work, as well as numerous cards and letters of gratitude from people and organizations with whom she had worked.

Even in retirement, Opal continued to volunteer her time, helping at Stormont-Vail Hospital and the Kansas History Museum, as well as working occasionally in the office at Countryside United Methodist Church. She also travelled to other parts of the country and took cruises to Alaska, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean. She stayed very active until the last few years, when her health began to fail slightly. She moved into a retirement community in 2011, but even then, she maintained her ritual of going out to eat with friends and family as long as her health allowed. The world lost Opal, the last member of the Coxley family, on July 29, 2016, less than two months before her 96th birthday.

Some of Opal's personal items, including the awards and commendations that she received for her work, and the uniform that she wore in some of her volunteer activities during World War II, are on display at the Blue Rapids Historical Museum in Blue Rapids, Kansas.

Newsletters online

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On this website you will find previous issues of the newsletter as well as numerous photos and historical information about the family of William Alexander Ewing



Ila Coxley, Opal's mother, is shown here in the 1980s with her nephew, Frank Ewing. She set the record for longevity in the Ewing and Coxley families... at 102. Quite an accomplishment in a family that had two other centenarians as well as a number of people that attained an age in the upper 90s.