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Ronald Reagan A Biography

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Chapter 1

HEARTLAND

Jack Reagan arrived in Tampico, Illinois, on March 23, 1906, as senior salesman in charge of the clothing and shoe departments of H. C. Pitney's General Store on South Main Street. The Reagans had come to Illinois from Ireland before the Civil War, but both his parents died of tuberculosis, so an elderly aunt raised him as a proper Irish Catholic. He was 23 years old and had been married to Nelle Clyde Reagan, who was 11 days younger, for 16 months. Pitney's establishment was the largest general store for about 20 miles in either direction, and the job seemed a fit for the qualities Jack Reagan possessed in abundance: optimism, self-confidence and ambition. He was a talker, a storyteller, and had the Irish trait of blarney, meaning charm and flattery.

Tampico was similar to thousands of other towns spread across the American Midwest in the early 20th century. It had eight street lights, a busy downtown on weekends, churches, schools, a population under a thousand and farms in abundance. It was here that Ronald Wilson Reagan was born on February 6, 1911, at 4:16 A.M., after 24 hours of labor and a storm that dumped seven inches of snow on the town. Tampico's doctor was out on call, so the birth began with a midwife until the doctor finally arrived to complete the delivery. The labor was
long and hard, and this would be Nelle’s last child. The baby was born in a four poster bed in the front bedroom of a five room flat above the general store where his father worked. He weighed in at 10 pounds and had a penchant for crying, so much so that his father compared him to a “Dutchman.” So was born the nickname “Dutch,” which would follow him the rest of his life.¹

A large part of Ronald Reagan’s early life is explained by his father chasing rainbows in a desire to achieve financial independence by owning his own shoe store. Jack Reagan was a drinker and a dreamer who fancied himself as a premier salesman since he graduated from something known as the American School of Proctipedics. During World War I the father tried to sign up for the military, but was turned down. His younger son recalled, “He always protested his bad timing . . . too young for the Spanish-American—and too old for ‘Over There.’”² To fulfill his father’s dream, the family lived in a succession of small Illinois towns: Galesburg, Monmouth, and Tampico again until they finally settled in Dixon in 1920. The source of President Reagan’s faith in America came from these childhood experiences. “Almost everybody knew one another,” he wrote in his memoir An American Life, “and because they knew one another they tended to care about each other.”³

Dixon, with a population of 10,000, was the largest city in Lee County. It was a metropolis by Midwestern standards, 10 times larger than Tampico, and located 90 miles from Chicago. The place was 92 percent white, with a 92 percent American-born population. The town had 2,500 farms, about half operated by owners and the other half operated by tenants.⁴ Ronald Reagan put down his roots here from age ten, after moving seven times in the previous nine years. It was a family of four: Jack and Nelle, with Ronald’s older brother Neil, nicknamed “Moon” by his father. In later years the president described people in his hometown as hardworking, united in a sense of purpose that enabled them to overcome adversity, take risks and build something for themselves and their children. All in all, it was what he said it was, “a Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn childhood.”⁵

At least that was the ideal in Dixon, “City of Opportunity on the Hudson of the West,” but it was not realized in the Reagan household. Neil remembered, better than his brother, the years of family itinerancy, living off soup for a week and sharing a cramped, wet bed with his
brother. Alcohol was Jack Reagan's cross, and the cause of his family's misery and misfortune. He went to Chicago on "buying trips," ostensibly for the store Jack and Mr. Pitney owned in town, but really for escape. "I was eleven years old the first time I came home to find my father flat on his back on the front porch and no one there to lend a hand but me." The binges alienated the family from feeling very close to their father, and kept them from realizing any financial security. "My mother would pray constantly for him," Ronald Reagan recalled, "she just refused to give up, no matter how dark things looked." On the eve of Prohibition, a cold January night in 1920, the members of the Christian Church in Dixon gathered to hold a midnight service of celebration.

Nelle, a small and pretty woman with auburn hair and blue eyes, found strength in her faith. She had accepted a Catholic wedding to Jack and a Catholic baptism for Neil, but in 1910 she was baptized on Easter Sunday into the Disciples of Christ denomination. She was not swayed by her husband's cynicism or failure; instead, she became a pillar in her local church. Her second son remembered that she "had the conviction everyone loved her because she loved them." Her prayers, humility, and faith were the bedrock of the family, and a bridge over troubled water. Nelle's abiding faith had a dramatic influence on her second son. "Dutch was always Nelle's boy," said one biographer. She assumed responsibility for the spiritual preparation of the children, told them to pray often for their father, and led them in devotionals. Nelle left it up to the children to make a decision for baptism, and Reagan made it at age 12. The Disciples of Christ denomination separated from liberal denominations, opposed slavery, supported temperance, and emphasized human responsibility before God. "Because a lot of Nelle's great sense of religious faith rubbed off on me," wrote her son, "I have always prayed a lot, in those days, I prayed for our country, for our family, and for Dixon."

At his inauguration, Ronald Reagan used Nelle Reagan's Bible to take the oath of office, and he kept it on his desk when in the Oval Office. With his father often absent, whereabouts unknown, he developed a kind of protective barrier to insulate himself from being hurt. He was a quiet boy, rarely downcast, but he also learned to protect himself from other people. Later in life, Ronald Reagan liked to put a good face on the family's uncertain lifestyle. "Jack could have sold
anything," he liked to say, and undoubtedly the son inherited a personal warmth and gift of storytelling from him.12

As he grew older, Ronald Reagan came to better understand what had driven his mother and father apart. Children of alcoholics sometimes escape into imaginary worlds of fantasy and role playing to help cope with an everyday world of disappointment and pain. Ronald's response, by all accounts, was to replace his father with imaginary heroic figures of his own making. Sometimes these were people he read about, and at other times they were people he saw. In his own hand, Reagan recalled, "sitting in the Family Theatre watching the marvelous flickering antics of Tom Mix and William S. Hart as they foiled robbers and villains and escorted the beautiful girls to safety, waving back from their horses as they cantered into the sunset."13 This escape served Ronald "Dutch" Reagan well as a child, and it later helped in his radio and acting career. The day-to-day reality for the family, though, was disappointment and frequent unemployment.

Solace came in the imagined adventures and actual ones in Dixon. The Pitney and Reagan store was right downtown, and the family lived not far away, on South Hennepin Avenue, within walking distance of the old Red Brick School where Ronald went to class. The country was enjoying postwar prosperity, but the Reagan family seemed exempt. The two brothers, still called "Moon" and "Dutch" by everyone except their mother, had little in common except a love of sports. Even though the second son was two and a half years younger than his brother, he was just a year behind him academically. The town straddled the Rock River, which froze in the winter and became a skating rink, and served as a recreation area for swimming and canoeing in the summer.

"Hearty Midwesterner" is no exaggeration for anyone familiar with the cold and isolation of the northern Illinois region. The farms were spread out over miles of ridges that rolled endlessly over the plains. Coming to town in Dixon was a refuge, an island in the ocean of land. People were drawn to one another in that environment, and so was Ronald Reagan. "All of us have a place we go back to," wrote the president in his campaign biography, "Dixon is that place for me."14

Later, Reagan's scenario of his early life would be criticized for its narrowness and innocence. But young "Dutch" didn't feel that way as a child. "As I've grown older, perhaps there has always been a little of
that small boy inside of me who found some reassurance in the applause and approval he first heard at nine or ten." His was a life of rustlings in the trees and splashes in the Rock River, coal smoke, snow and frost, and winter storms when the wind howled around the house and tore through flimsy walls. He stayed inside and developed a lifelong habit of reading. He read *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Horatio Alger books and a forgotten book about a Midwestern boy who marries a beautiful socialite and saves her from a life of desperation.

Reagan’s biographers endlessly pour over his childhood looking for clues that suggest his future. Peggy Noonan believes that in these years Reagan developed a natural talent for listening, speaking and seeing things as an artist. As an adult, Reagan read to his children, which probably means he was read to as a child. His prose as an adult was smooth and simple, suggesting that he linked his imagination to his hand when he wrote.

His mother was a celebrity of sorts; she did dramatic readings, humorous passages from plays, speeches and books. Her motto was: “To higher, and nobler things my mind is bent,” and she was the living embodiment of that slogan, loving poetry, the dramatic arts, and the Bible. Ronald Reagan would later say that Nelle was a kind of “frustrated actress, meaning that she envisioned a life on the stage prior to marrying Jack.” Subsequent biographers noted that the one thing Dutch inherited from her was, “a distinctive mellow voice, tinged with a hopeful cadence . . . that impressed people with the honesty of the words he spoke.” Dixon was an environment in which he flourished, with an equable personality, content in his situation.

When young Ronald was 13 or 14, Jack Reagan took the family on a Sunday afternoon drive. His mother left her eyeglasses in the back seat of the car and her second son put them on. In an instant Ronald Reagan discovered that he was extremely nearsighted. A whole world opened up when he was fitted with glasses, and could play baseball and football. Before this time, he had been somewhat withdrawn in school, and because he had trouble seeing he relied on a highly tuned oral ability to concentrate and remember what he heard. “Dutch’s best sport by far was swimming, where agility helped and eyesight was less an issue.” Lowell Park was a 300-acre naturally forested reserve that bracketed the Rock River. At age 14, Ronald Reagan began a job as
summer lifeguard there that he would retain through college. One of his contemporaries remembered him as, "the perfect specimen of an athlete, tall, willowy, muscular, brown, good-looking."21

As teenagers, the boys began calling their parents by their first names. It was a turning point of sorts in the process of growing up to discover a core of strength within you to address adults that way in life. Gossip was a powerful force in small towns, and it didn't take much for people who had little to do but get interested in their neighbors lives to notice the Reagans. The whispering was of the quiet and faithful wife of an alcoholic, who remained pious and determined in the face of adversity and public scorn. Jack fought alcoholism all his life until he ultimately died, having contracted heart disease from a lifetime of chain-smoking cigarettes. Small towns had their virtues as well as vices, and gossip could be just as much a force for good. Nelle's accomplishments as mother, spiritual leader and oftentimes as provider were seen in the achievements of her faith, and the work of her children, especially the second

Ronald Reagan as a lifeguard in Lowell Park, Illinois, 1927. (Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.)
son. In addition to building a decent grade point average for college, he became a drum major, football captain and class president.

“In high school, I began to lose my old feelings of insecurity; success in the school plays in football and swimming, being the only guy on the beach with ‘Life Guard’ on my chest and saving seventy-seven people, being elected student body president, even the fact I could now see did a lot to give me self-confidence.”22 “Dutch” Reagan was Dixon’s model boy. “Ordinary people remarked on his simplicity, and good manners and liked being around him, he had a knack of making them feel good.”23 As someone who was on the way up, Ronald Reagan developed a consoling sympathy for those left behind. Throughout his life, he believed that people made their own luck and deserved their fate.

To the extent that the 1920s were the age of radio, movies, country clubs, fast cars, joy riding and dancing cheek to cheek in a new mass culture—Lee County, Illinois, was not part of the Jazz Age. Nevertheless, two people had a special effect on Ronald Reagan in these years. The first was a new English teacher at Dixon High who emphasized imagination and originality in prose more than spelling and grammar. B. J. Frazier staged complete plays at the high school using scripts from recent Broadway hits. He encouraged the students to analyze the person they were portraying instead of just memorizing the lines of the character. Frazer’s encouragement and his stage techniques played to Reagan’s strengths, and proved invaluable to him when in the radio studio, on stage, and finally in the spotlight as a politician.

The second person of interest was Margaret “Mugs” Cleaver, the intelligent and pretty daughter of the minister of the Christian church where Nelle worshipped with her two sons. “Dutch” and “Mugs” were the perfect couple. He was president of the student body, and she was president of the senior class. They were both officers in the school Dramatic Society, acting opposite each other in a play called You and I. Ronald Reagan met her when he entered high school, and they dated for the next six years. She was the first girl he ever kissed, and he was quite explicit about his intentions. “I had expected to marry Margaret Cleaver since my sophomore year at Dixon High . . . I had hung my fraternity pin on her . . . I’d given her an engagement ring and we’d agreed to marry as soon as we could afford it.”24
Before college, in a time when the wind brought the smell of new plowed earth into Dixon, separation was not a part of their plan. In 1928, it was no strange coincidence that Reagan followed “Mugs” to Eureka College. He made no effort to escape the destiny that seemed to tie them to one another. The school was set amid a heavily forested rise, with wide green lawns. Nine buildings stood starkly against the landscape with Gothic steeples and Georgian pediments floating above large windows. To students it looked as if Camelot had dropped into “the middle of the Midwest.” Memorial Hall, Admin, and Chapel joined women’s dorms and a central heating plant. The major buildings were covered by ivy in a semicircle at the heart of campus. The college was affiliated with the Disciples of Christ, and located 80 miles south of Dixon. “I fell head over heels in love with Eureka,” Reagan later wrote. It had 200 students and 20 faculty members. The football team was coached by Ralph “Mac” McKenzie, who was not impressed with the walk-on player who claimed to be the “Star of Dixon High.”

When only 7 percent of eligible high school graduates went to college, it was almost a miracle that Ronald Reagan even enrolled, especially given his family’s economic circumstances. He had enough money to cover tuition, saved from his summer lifeguarding job, and other odd work, but he didn’t have enough for room and board. He was granted a Needy Student Scholarship and provided a job on campus: washing dishes in the girls’ dormitory.

Between football and his job, Reagan didn’t stand out as a student. One biographer described him as “Mr. Congeniality” to Margaret Cleaver’s “Young Miss Brains.” “Mugs” recruited her sister’s boyfriend to get him into a fraternity, Tau Kappa Epsilon. Most of the time, Ronald Reagan worked to establish himself in a place where his high school accomplishments were a faint echo. Although the stock market crash was still a year away, the dark clouds of economic uncertainty were already creeping over the farmers of the Midwest. Enrollments were down, affiliated churches were not able to support Eureka, students had to leave school to return home to work, and a sense of hopelessness crept onto the campus. The college president, and his administrative council, began laying people off. When this news reached the students, a strike was called for the resignation of the president.
The administration believed the actions were an act of moral decadence, but the students believed the issue was one of fairness. Ronald Reagan was selected to give a speech on behalf of the freshmen, and his remarks brought the crowd to its feet with a roar. "It was heady wine," he recalled. Many biographers cited this as Reagan’s first political act, but at the time it didn’t seem especially auspicious to the college freshman.28

Each summer, Reagan went back to lifeguarding and somehow managed to return for another year of college. "That sophomore year everything seemed to brighten all across my life."29 Only an unbridled optimist could make that statement given that 1929 was marked by the greatest economic collapse in American history. "Most of my attention was divided between Margaret Cleaver, who had accepted my TKE pin, which was tantamount to engagement, and getting my backside off Mac McKenzie’s bench."30 Despite a long romance, the marriage never came and the two drifted apart when they left college. In the words of Carl Sanburg, “For he went west, and she went east. And they both lived.”31 Years later, Margaret Cleaver Gordon mentioned that she gave the engagement ring back because he didn’t want to raise her children in Hollywood.32 The fall proved good for Reagan’s football career. His dramatic endeavors prospered as well. He joined the dramatic society just as a new teacher, Ellie Marie Johnson, assumed leadership on campus. Reagan delighted her with a willingness to memorize parts quickly and respond to direction. For her part, she put Eureka’s plays into national competition.33

As the Depression deepened, money problems occupied both the nation and Ronald Reagan. The latter made a loan arrangement with the following pledge: “which amount will be paid in the summer following graduation as arrangements can be made with the college to defer payments of certain bills.”34 The doubts and fears that troubled him were not evident to his friends, who remembered an always upbeat and confident graduate. But fears were there. Years later in a 1982 address to the nation about the economy Reagan said, “I have a special reason for wanting to solve this [economic] problem in a lasting way. . . . [When] I was twenty-one and looking for work . . . I can remember one bleak night in the thirties when my father learned on Christmas Eve that he’d lost his job . . . To be young in my generation
was to feel that your future had been mortgaged out from under you.”

Back home, Jack devised a plan that allowed him to take ownership of a shoe store, but the opportunity collapsed and the family was once again adrift.

He would write years later, “a way of life was ending and it was hard for me to see that it was also a beginning.” The end of college was an entrance into the despair of the Great Depression, but for a time in the spring, it was good to enjoy a summer of optimism. “Dutch” Reagan was president of his class at Eureka, Margaret was awarded the highest honor for grades, and her father gave the benediction. All 45 students stood in a circle holding a rope of woven ivy from the brick walls of the school building. The future promised little, but the president of Eureka College urged them not to be bullied by it. His new college degree now won him back his old job as a lifeguard.

The summer at Lowell Park meant that the chill of fall brought with it adult responsibilities. He had been taught by his mother that hard work would be rewarded, and he believed her, but no jobs were to be had. What distinguished him from others was perseverance toward his goals. A Kansas City businessman, Sid Altschuler, told him of contacts that he had with people in several businesses and offered to help. The assistance came with advice: not to base his career on the promise of money, but to find something he really enjoyed doing. Too shy to admit his real ambition of becoming a movie star, Reagan chose a more modest occupation. “I have to tell you, way down deep inside, what I’d like to be is a radio sports announcer.”

To understand the ambition it helps to know something about the setting. Isolated and introspective young people in the vast American Midwest learned about music, sports and life from radio broadcasts. “I remember sitting with a dozen others in a little room with breathless attention,” recalled Reagan, “listening to raspy recorded music and faint voices say, ‘This is KDKA, Pittsburgh; KDKA, Pittsburgh.’” Through some magic they did not understand, a distant speaker became a family guest, and something invisible became audible. For someone like Ronald Reagan, who loved stories and heroic accomplishments, taking fragments of life and telling people about them was a tailor-made occupational choice. In later life, a U.S. senator recalled the power of Reagan’s retentive mind. “You can tell him something just idly, tell
him a joke, and he’ll store it,” recalled Paul Laxalt, “it’s like sticking in a chip . . . and God only knows when it will surface.”40 The “follow your dream” advice from Altschuler led him to Chicago to canvass radio stations for a job.

After Labor Day, he hitchhiked to Chicago where one of his fraternity brothers put him up. In the sweltering September sun he visited the offices of NBC and CBS, but was unable to get past the receptionist. He hit the street from one radio station to another, finally, a receptionist told him to stay away from the big cities, and try small towns with smaller stations. He hitchhiked home in the rain. “Several days later, after my hopes had soared, I lost that job at Montgomery Ward.”41

It was the bottom of the Depression, one that did not appreciate ambitious college graduates. Back home in Dixon, his father was out of work until he was recruited for a New Deal alphabet agency, the CWA, which stood for Civil Works Administration, but was really a practical arm of the Democratic Party. In 1934 Jack Reagan found work removing Dixon’s streetcar tracks for use as girders at the new Dixon airport. The project was planned before the Depression and funded because it kept costs low. For a time, Jack hired Neil as a way to make ends meet for the family.42

In his first presidential election, “Dutch” Reagan voted Democratic, just like the rest of the family. The governor from New York, Franklin Roosevelt, seemed more likely than President Hoover to recharge the economy. Illinois went for FDR that year, but Hoover carried Dixon 52 to 48 percent.43 Jack Reagan was caught up in the Roosevelt campaign. In later years, he worked handing out supplies of food and distributing vouchers for rations to those in need. Jack also tried to find jobs for those unemployed. For the youngest Reagan, “the sight of men lining up to receive minimal state charity doled out by his father was shocking.”44 It was also disturbing to see how clumsy the New Deal was at welfare relief, with endless forms, bureaucratic delays, and lost applications. The good intentions of government were swamped in the realities of welfare state mismanagement. The son, like his father, revered FDR and the Democrats. Reagan found himself in a situation familiar to many of his generation, unemployed with good intentions, and unsatisfied ambition.
NOTES


14. Ibid.


34. Morris, *Dutch*, p. 87.