

## Life on Grandfather's Iowa Farm

BY FLORENCE ROE WIGGENS

When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization.  
Remarks on Agriculture by Daniel Webster

*The following essays are two chapters from Mrs. Wiggins unpublished book entitled Strawberry Point. Other portions of this work have appeared in The Christian Science Monitor and the Annals (Winter, 1964). Mrs. Wiggins' book grew out of a desire to picture for her grandchildren an age they will never know. These children, reared in the shadows of a big city, have "given delighted and wide-eyed attention to this chronicle of the simple life of yesterday in the Middle West—a story as remote from and foreign to their own experience as any Arabian Nights' tale and to them equally fantastic." Mrs. Wiggins, a resident of California, graduated with B. S. and B. M. degrees from Coe College in Cedar Rapids fifty years ago this June.*

Though Grandfather Roe arrived in Iowa the summer of 1851, yet it was the spring of 1854 before the move to the large farm near Strawberry Point took place and tillage began. The work on the farm was shared by every member of the household, but Grandfather himself set an example that was hard to equal. His industry and his ability are as proverbial as were his grandfather's before him. True to his pioneer upbringing and his experience in the "big woods" of Michigan, he became an expert with an axe—a training invaluable when he arrived in Iowa where there were so many acres of timber to clear.

All during the early years in Iowa, there was no railroad and the closest market for farm produce was Dubuque, fifty miles away. It took Grandpa three days to make the trip—one day to go, one to sell his load and one for the return trip. When the new farmhouse was built in 1857 he hauled most of the lumber from Dubuque. The heavier timbers were hewn from trees that grew on the farm.

In this new country of northeastern Iowa where men made their own laws and abided by them, Grandfather's reputation for fair dealing won for him the respect of his neighbors, and he was often called upon to settle disputes that arose. After carefully weighing the evidence and talking to each man alone, he would give his opinion as to how the argument should be settled. His decision was usually accepted as final, for his judgment was considered fair and unbiased. At one time a young couple in the neighborhood quarreled and the young woman sought asylum at the farm. The next day Grandfather called on the husband and brought the young man home with him. After the "Company supper" of fried chicken and strawberry shortcake (it was June) Grandpa, Grandma and the two guests retired to the parlor. The reconciliation effected behind tightly closed doors and drawn blinds was highly successful and the young couple lived together "happily ever after".

Sarah Roe, like her husband, could be counted on for practical help in every neighborhood emergency. Even though she was a capable housekeeper and her home was the center of her interest, yet it was far from the circumference of her world and her activities. "To keep things going" Grandma often worked late into the night. Long after the family was in bed, the hum of her spinning wheel could be heard or the clatter of her loom. Farm homes, in the early days, were veritable factories. Grandfather took the wool to a mill to be carded, but from that point on Grandmother took over. Spinning, dyeing, weaving, knitting, beside the more routine tasks of caring for the dairy, scouring, cleaning, baking and brewing, left very little leisure for the farm wife of a hundred years ago.

When the Civil War came, Grandmother was deprived of her two most valuable helpers. Eleanor and Mary, the two oldest daughters, were relegated to help their father keep the farm work going—a monumental task for one man and two young girls. The boys of the family were only curly-headed youngsters at that time and hired help was impossible to obtain. On the mornings when their father went to market, the girls were up at four o'clock to help load the

wagon. After he left they took over the chores—the feeding of the stock and the milking.

While the childhood of a hundred years ago contained plenty of work yet there was fun as well, although the good times were very often sandwiched into the work schedule. If a straw lot had to be cleaned up there was always "time out" for picking a ripe watermelon and enjoying it in the shade of a big maple. When gooseberries or wild blackberries were ripe there were excursions to the wild bushes that lined the paths through the pastures, and these trips were often the excuse for picnics. In a household of seven active children there was seldom a dull moment and often there was much good natured teasing as well. Some of the adventures of that day were hard for the victims to live down and some have been handed down through the years.

One story concerned Papa when he (George) was a bashful boy of fourteen. On a cold, wintry Sunday the family attended church as usual and brought home with them a young lady who was to help with the sewing during the coming week. Preparations were under way for Aunt Ett's wedding and the favored young man came home with them that day, too. Great Aunt and Great Uncle Torrey were also visiting at the farm, and that evening the four guests, and Grandpa, Grandma and Aunt Ett lingered around the fire in the dining room after the boys, George and Charles, had been sent to bed.

During the winter months the dining room served as a sitting room. The dining table was pushed back to make room for comfortable chairs that were pulled up close to the big "base burner". The boys' room was over the kitchen but the stair door leading to it opened out of the dining room. Their attic-like room at the head of the stairs was so small that there was very little space between the stairs and the bed.

That night George was standing by the bed removing his undershirt when suddenly he felt his underdrawers drop down around his feet. With his arms pinned over his head and his eyes covered by his shirt he became confused as he attempted to free his feet. He squirmed and turned until, in-

advertently, he stepped off into the stair well and was catapulted down the steep stairs.

At the landing which led into the dining room he turned a complete somersault and hit the door so forcibly with his feet that it flew open and poor George slid out into the room—into the astonished presence of an attractive young lady, staid and proper Uncle and Aunt Torrey, his embarrassed sister, her beau and his mortified parents.

Gentle Grandma exclaimed, "Why, George!" as she ran to cover him with her apron.

This stairway figured prominently in another adventure a few years later—the night George had his first date with a girl. On his return home, shoes in hand, he tiptoed to the stair door, hoping he would not be heard by his sleeping parents whose bedroom opened off the dining room.

The stair door did not open with its usual ease and George was forced to give it a mighty tug. A string holding the door from the other side snapped and, from the top of the stairs, there came a perfect avalanche of kitchen tinware. Everything from the wash-boiler to the dishpan tumbled down those steep stairs to welcome him home and announce the hour of his arrival.

When quiet was restored there were muffled giggles from his sisters' bedrooms and his young brother, Charles, had disappeared to find a safer place to sleep that night than beside his more than slightly annoyed big brother.

Grandfather, like his Roe ancestors, was deeply religious. From the time of the Revolution when William Roe and his wife joined the church of which her uncle was pastor, the Roes were devoted adherents of the Baptist Church. All through the pioneer experiences of the family as they migrated to Kentucky, to Ohio, to Indiana and on into Michigan they opened their homes for church services until such a time as a meeting house could be built. While the Roes were living in Michigan a cousin of Grandfather's, another William Roe, became a minister in a denomination known as the "Christian Church." Such was his dedication to this faith that he soon converted the whole Roe family. Grandfather

was an Elder in that church at Arlington, a small town six miles from the farm. He served there for over fifty years, from the time the church was organized.

Only once did Grandpa doubt the faith that he had adopted and that was of very short duration. In the early nineties spiritualism became very popular around Strawberry Point. Strange tales were related by people whom my grandparents knew personally and considered reliable. After careful thought they decided to investigate this new doctrine for themselves, and the next time a seance was held in the neighborhood they attended.

They were much impressed by the mysterious noises and communications which purported to come from those who had departed this world. But after returning home that night they were dismayed to find that the peculiar rappings they had heard at the seance had accompanied them home!

They endured the sepulchral sounds that seemed to issue from under their bed for quite some time. Then, after a whispered conference, they arose and, hand in hand, knelt by the side of their bed while Grandfather prayed for forgiveness. He promised God that neither he nor Grandmother would ever again try to solve the mysteries of the "spirit world".

Such was their faith that they were not at all surprised when the queer noises ceased abruptly. And that night their sleep was sound.

Every Saturday night during Papa's childhood the family gathered around the kitchen table to study the Sunday School lesson for the following day. Seven little red heads and two older heads with hair of the same flaming hue (although somewhat dimmed by time) all bent together over their common task. It was at such moments that peace and contentment seemed to rest on the household like a benediction.

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