

With surprising candor, a son looks back at his parents and the social dynamics of their neighborhood.

Mrs. Horton

by Loren N. Horton



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

My family never fit easily into the rural Iowa neighborhood in which we lived, because neither of my parents were born in the area, and we were not related to most of the other people in the area, as was common among the neighbors. We always were respected, but almost like an exotic, foreign family.

Nevertheless, my father, John Samuel Horton, regularly served on various boards—the district school board, the county school board, the telephone company board, the 4-H board, the Farm Bureau board, and so on. Also, he ran for elective office (he always lost), he worked at the election polls as clerk and judge, he worked for the Agricultural Adjustment Act during the New Deal, measuring “set-aside” land. He learned how to do electrical wiring, and he and my older brothers wired many of the houses in the neighborhood when the Rural Electrification Administration put up lines in the area. In other words, he saw such positions and work as part of his civic duties.

My mother, Iva Verona Brooks Horton (*left*), always was known by everyone in the neighborhood as “Mrs. Horton,” while all of the

other women were known by their first names. She refused to join the neighborhood women's club, which my father called the "Sew and Blow Club," but which I think actually was named the "Stitch and Chatter Club." I do know that there was much more chattering than stitching at club meetings.

She was active in the Farm Bureau Women's Group, attended many meetings in which lessons of various kinds were given, and she took classes, too. She learned to play the piano that way, and she learned to identify classical musical periods that way. But she refused to be a leader or an officer. She referred to such leadership positions as "getting us talked about by the neighbors." Calling attention to oneself was a bad thing, to her Victorian way of thinking.

However, as an anomaly to her attitude about calling attention to oneself, my mother regularly wrote the neighborhood news column for the *Murray Journal*, the *Osceola Tribune*, and the *Osceola Sentinel*. From about 1936 through 1950, she was one of the guest columnists for the *Des Moines Tribune*, for a column called "A Farm Woman Speaks Up." The supposed columnist of record was Inez Faber, under the pen name Elizabeth Beresford, but she got together a circle of women from central and southern Iowa, and they wrote most of the columns for her.

My mother enjoyed reading and creative writing. Whenever there was an occasion for some tribute to be written, such as in honor of a 50th anniversary or a wedding, people always came to her to do the writing of it. I remember them well, coming to the house and asking her to write something "that will sound pretty." She always did.

My mother cooperated with

some neighbors, and virtually shunned others. When the threshing ring came to our farm, there were only three women she would allow to come and help her cook: Blanche Coon, Blanche Gill, and *very* occasionally another woman. No one really liked this last woman, mainly because she thought she was better than other people. For instance, at 4-H club meetings all of the other women either fixed or brought food. This woman usually wore a wine-colored velvet dress and sat in the living room, making no effort to help in the kitchen. The most insulting remarks made about her were that "she never brings her apron so she can help out." This really was an insulting thing to say about another woman.

There were several events at which all of the neighbors gathered and brought food, such as the last day of school, a box supper, a pie supper, a cake walk, or a program at school. One of the famous dishes *always* brought to these gatherings was Laura Kane's "Bavarian cream." It was red jello beaten up with whipped cream. It was my favorite food as a child, and we never had it at home. Another famous dish, which no one liked, was another neighbor's chocolate cake with white frosting. The cake was monumentally dry and crumbly, and the frosting was very thick and so solid that whenever a knife or fork was inserted, the frosting shattered into dozens of pieces. Everybody avoided this cake, just as everyone fought to get at the Bavarian cream from Laura Kane.

My mother enjoyed only a few things among the many that, as a farm wife, she had to do. She most assuredly did not enjoy cooking, gardening, washing and ironing clothes, can-

ning, housecleaning, and other such tasks. She gardened a lot and enjoyed flowers, but not vegetables or fruits. The washing, ironing, and housecleaning were done on what could charitably be called an irregular basis.

She sewed shirts for my three brothers and me, she made dresses, nightgowns, and aprons for herself, and nightshirts for everybody in the family. When I was quite young, she made for me what was called "rompers," a one-piece garment. She was very skillful at patching overalls, especially at the knees. Although she was quite good at utilitarian sewing, she much preferred to do sewing that offered a more creative outlet.

One of her favorite things to do was to quilt. She never made crazy quilts or patchwork quilts. Often she designed her own quilt patterns, but more often she took existing patterns from newspapers and magazines and from Farm Bureau meetings, and adapted them to her own ideas. After my folks moved from the farm into town, they burned or discarded hundreds of patterns before I could rescue them for their historical value.

She used all sorts of fabrics when she cut out quilt pieces. Usually the pieces were from old dresses and shirts, quite often from flowered or patterned feed and flour sacks, and sometimes from remnants given to her by other people. There was always a box or basket sitting by her chair, in which she kept the remnants, scissors, and whatever quilt piece pattern she happened to be working on at the moment. When we were sitting around the stove on fall and winter evenings, she would cut out quilt pieces while my father cracked walnuts and picked out the meats.

Some fabric remnants were large enough that Mom cut carpet



Iva and John Horton and their sons (clockwise from left) George, Harvey, Lowell, and Loren, about 1940.

rag from them, sewed them together, and rolled them in a large ball. When she had enough balls, she would take them to the weaver who wove them into long carpets, which we used as stair runners and in front of the kitchen stove and the sink. Carpets woven of denim from our overalls were used inside the back door to wipe our feet on when we came in from outside.

Quilts were utilitarian objects to us. We used them on beds for warmth in the winter, and we laid them on tops of beds all year around as "bed spreads." Mom also made comforters, which were made

of larger pieces, were tied rather than quilted, and had thicker padding between the cover and the backing. Cotton batting was used in quilts, but sometimes old blankets, (even horse blankets), worn-out quilts, or other large sheets of fabric were used as padding in comforters (or "comforts," as we called them).

When my mother was ready to "put a quilt in the frames," the frames were set up in the west end of our living room, and until a significant proportion of the quilt was finished and "rolled under," the traffic pattern through the room was very interrupted.

Various neighborhood women came to help her quilt. Among them might be Maggie "Mippy" McNeal Coon, Mary Alice "Allie" Twombly Brand, Loura Adams Kane, the two Blanches, Fern Moran, Addie Woods Burchett, Marjorie Day Havard, Alta Welker Havard, Mat-

tie Kelley (known to me as Aunt Dollie), and perhaps others I can't remember.

Another neighbor woman sometimes came to help, but after she had left my mother would pull out all of her stitches and do them over, because the stitches were "too big, not straight, not neat." Another woman would have been welcome, but she didn't drive, and her husband was not welcome anywhere except in his own home—perhaps not even there. Of this man, my father once remarked: "I hope I outlive him, just so I can help bury him, and tamp the dirt down really hard on top of him so that he can't get out."

I well remember my mother describing the day, in about 1943, when she and Blanche Coon were helping quilt at Blanche Gill's house. After a while they noticed that Blanche Coon was quietly crying as she quilted. They asked her what was the matter. She told them that she had just gotten word that day that her adopted son, Johnnie, had been killed in action when his ship, the cruiser *Houston*, was sunk in the South Pacific.

In later years I asked Mom how many quilts she had made in her lifetime. She estimated that she made at least four a year from 1914 until 1940. After that she mostly made several baby quilts for various members of the family, and lap robes to distribute at veterans hospitals. She backed the lap robes with flannel because she thought that anything smoother would slide off the patients' laps.

She was still making lap robes until her eyesight failed in 1977. ❖

Loren N. Horton lives in Iowa City. He continues to research, write, and lecture on Iowa history, after 17 years of teaching and 24 years at the State Historical Society of Iowa.