



In 1938 professional photographer Don Ultang captured on film the ritual of an Iowa farm family moving on March 1. His image reminds us that this tradition, like so many practiced in rural communities, generally involved neighbors helping neighbors.

Moving On in 1917

by Hazel Phillips Stimson

March 1st, 1917, arrived cloudy with an east wind and twenty above zero. Papa arose about five o'clock and built the fires before he called us, but none of us lingered that morning, we were so excited. Mama nursed the baby while we set breakfast on, big

bowls of oatmeal, slices of homemade bread with butter, and lots of milk. I was twelve and Junior was eleven, so we could help with the moving, but Papa took the girls (Edna, nine; Blanche, six; Nona, three) and six-month-old Donald to stay with a neighbor,

Lizzie. Edna wanted to help move but she had to help Lizzie with Baby.

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my only chance to make back the five thousand two hundred and fifty dollars I'm behind."

"So he went ahead and done it, and the first popperful of corn he popped over the kerosene lamp caught fire and burned up the whole durned shootin'-match! Yes, sir; he was an unsuccessful man, Henny K. Lunk was. He couldn't succeed at nothin' he undertook. Why—"

"What were you going to say?" I asked, when he hesitated.

My friend drew his hand across his forehead and looked out at the river and shook his head.

"Unfortunate! Unlucky!" he said, sadly. "Even when it come right down to suicide—"

"You don't mean to say that he—"

"He tried, but he didn't have no luck at it," said the old fellow. "He shot at himself and missed. He jumped in the river and they pulled him out. He done everything he could, and tried every way he knew, poor feller! but he didn't have no more luck at suicide than he had at business! He was a durned failure at suicide like he was at everything else. He'd be alive yet but for one thing. It was mighty sad!"

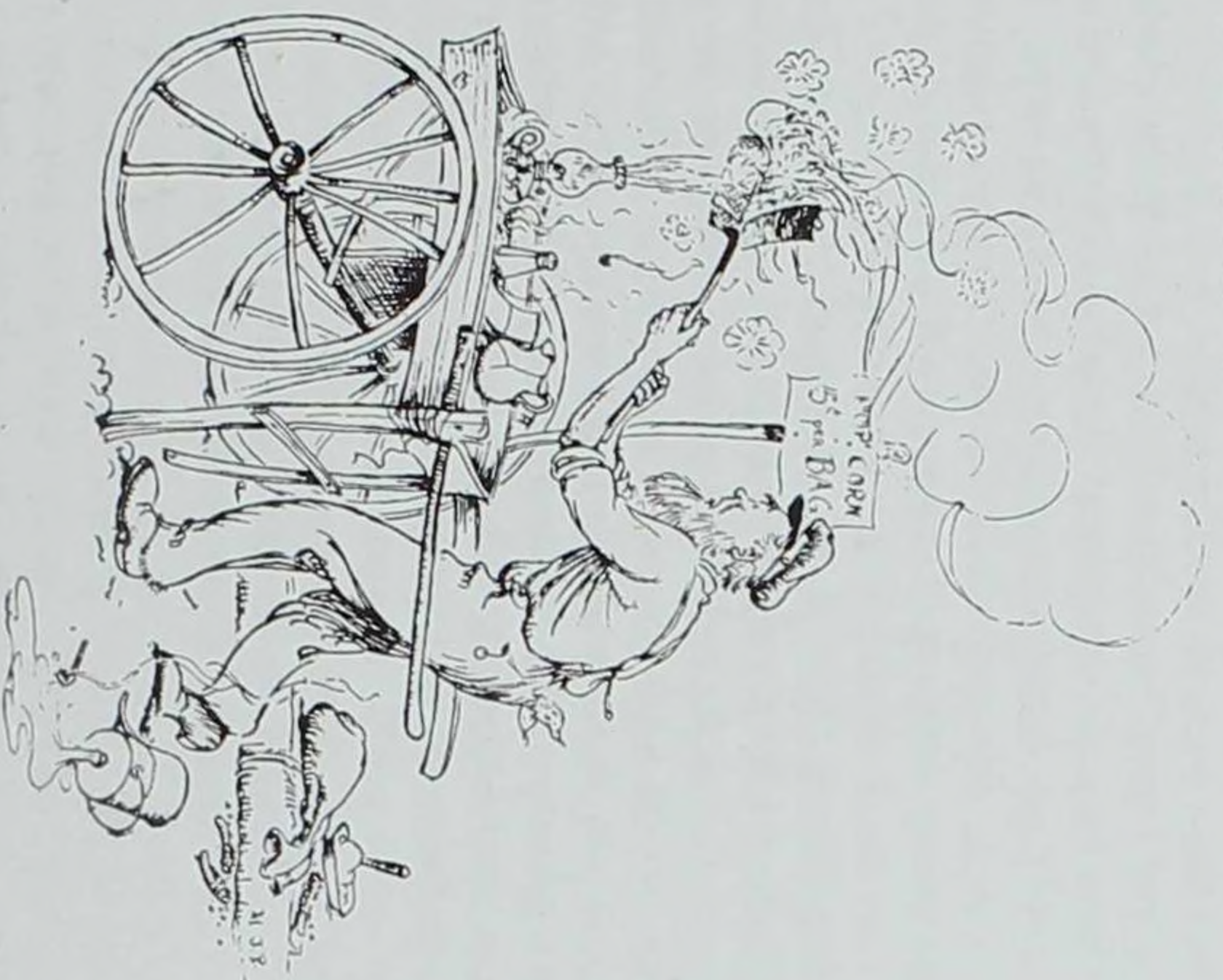
"What was it?" I asked.

"He fretted so much over not bein' able to die that it killed him," said the sunburned old man.

I looked at him and at the lines of regret and sorrow that his face had taken on, and then I put out my hand and took his and shook it violently.

"Now I know you!" I exclaimed. "I couldn't quite place you before, but I know you now! How are you, you exaggerating old rascal? How are you, Henny K. Lunk?"

"Well, I reckon I'll pull through awhile yet," he said, with a cheery smile. "if no saw-back whale don't swallow me in four swallows." ❖



THE FIRST POPPERFUL OF CORN CAUGHT FIRE

Traditions

March 1 was traditionally moving day for farmers in Iowa. Sales of farm land, rent and interest payments, and lease arrangements with new tenants were often dated March 1. As historian Frank Yoder observes, the late winter was a naturally slow time in the agricultural cycle. Moving on March 1 allowed the new owner or tenant to be established before spring field work began. By March, much of the feed, hay, and straw for the livestock—as well as canned goods, firewood, and coal for the farm family—would have been consumed and therefore wouldn't need to be moved. Roads were likely to be clear of snow but not yet thawed into the quagmires of mud that once made spring travel on country roads so difficult.

Lowan Hortense Butler Heywood compared this moving-day tradition to the migration of birds and other natural signs of spring. "One day the whole neighborhood is as permanent, as settled, as stable as if it were to exist thus for years to come," she wrote. "The next the roads are filled with a unique procession—farm wagons piled high with household goods and trailing behind them corn plows, seeders and other pieces of machinery, loads of grain wherein the clever housewife has packed her precious fruit jars, loads of squealing hogs, [and] small herds of restless, frightened cattle."

Hazel Phillips Stimson, of Independence, Iowa, remembered moving day when she was a child in 1917, and in 1976 she wrote down those memories for an essay contest by the Iowa Commission on Aging. To this basic tradition in rural Iowa, Stimson adds the color of detail and emotion. Her essay (like Heywood's) is archived in the Special Collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).

—The Editor



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bowls of oatmeal, slices of homemade bread with butter, and lots of milk. I was twelve and Junior was eleven, so we could help with the moving, but Papa took the girls (Edna, nine; Blanche, six; Nona, three) and six-month-old Donald to stay with a neighbor,

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drawers and big boxes, while Papa knocked down the beds and removed the mirrors from the dressers.

Having already packed everything possible, yesterday Mama had made a big baking of bread, a cake, two pies, and many cookies. Now she fixed egg sandwiches and filled a peach basket with baked beans, the sandwiches, and baked goods. She set the big coffee pot on top.

Neighbors' wagons backed up to the front door to take on their loads. Glen was first and the stoves were loaded. The men emptied the reservoir into dishpans, so now Mama did the breakfast dishes and packed them into the round washtub with many towels and washrags. She washed the pantry shelves and cleaned the floor where the stove and cabinet had stood. She kept back a broom and hurried upstairs to sweep and dust the floors, finishing on the narrow stairway. Mama made sure that the boxes containing the good dishes, glassware, and the mirrors went with a careful driver, and she helped him pack quilts and pillows around them.

She swept the front and back porches and each empty room, checking each to be sure it was empty.

Crates had been borrowed from the Produce house, and neighbors caught, crated the two hundred hens, and loaded them and the six brood sows into wagons. Milo, Lizzie's husband, with his two boys and Junior, was driving the cattle along the road.

Everything was carried up from the cellar, and the potatoes and canned stuff were packed in our 1916 Overland Touring car. Mama and I went with the first carload and we passed the cattle

and wagons on the road. I was excited over the big house, but I'm afraid Mama looked at the big windows and open doors with misgivings. Glen was firing up the kitchen range, which soon took some of the chill off the room, but Papa had to go to town and purchase another length of stove-pipe for the living room stove. He also bought several sacks of coal to tide us over.

Mama made a pot of coffee, put the beans on to warm, and set out the sandwiches and baked goods on the short counter. We emptied several boxes onto the pantry shelves and filled the reservoir from the pump just outside the door. One of the wagons with bedroom furniture arrived and Mama flew upstairs to help the men set up the beds and dressers.

There was a big sink with a hand pump for soft water, so Mama hung up a roller towel and set a basin in the sink so the men could wash up. About one o'clock, the table and chairs arrived and the men came in to lunch amid much joshing and horseplay. Soon some of the wagons were rattling off toward home just as the cattle arrived. More mouths to feed but first the boys must race up and down stairs, trying every door. Had they just walked ten miles? They wolfed down the last of the sandwiches and scattered to watch Papa bed the stalls and pens and to help with the poultry and sows as they were unloaded.

The last wagon arrived but alas, the tub of dishes had fallen off the wagon, and we found every dish was broken, as Mama sorted through the welter of towels and broken crockery. She didn't say much in front of the men, but was I glad I didn't do it!

Papa then had to take Milo

and his boys home and pick up the rest of our family as Mama and I hastened into the cold upstairs to make up the beds. Junior would have a single bed in a room by himself, but we had to have two double beds in the west room for us girls, and Baby's bed was in the east room with Papa and Mama's.

Back downstairs, we warmed ourselves and Mama found us some cookies. She sat for a few moments and stared at the mess around her. Sighing, she noted, "That washing machine should have been left on the porch and most of these boxes should have been carried down cellar. Papa and I'll do it after supper." Mama was uncomfortable, her breasts painfully full, as she waited for the baby to come [home from the neighbors].

"Gee, Mom, the new barn is super. It's warm and the hay falls down right in front of the cow mangers," said Junior, still excited. Mama found a cheesecloth and strained the milk into a flat crock and set it to cool on the pantry shelf. Papa arrived with a lustily crying baby. "Here is your mama. Did you think you had lost her?"

Baby clasped his mother and started to nurse hungrily. Mama smiled at her excited little girls and sent me to show them the house. Supper was simple: bean soup, bread and butter, cookies and milk. We were so tired we all dropped into bed, but Mama somehow managed to find time to hear our prayers and to tuck each of us in. ❖