

Ninety Is Enough: A Portrait of My Father · *Frederick M. Manfred*

MY FATHER WAS born in the small village of Tzum, near Franeker, Friesland, in The Netherlands, March 31, 1886. He was baptized Feike Feikes Feikema, VI, though he later was known as Frank Feikema.

The first Feike back in the 1750's had been a man of property, owning a big farm called Groot Lankum near Franeker, but he'd lost it due to a pestilence which wiped out his herd of Frisian-Holstein cattle. The once proud Feikemas fell into the labor market.

Feike V, my Grampa, still had some of that old pride left in him. He refused to be a laborer, and instead sailed before the mast. He talked a lovely Frisian girl named Ytje Andringa, who came from a rich family, into eloping with him. When she was disinherited for doing so, Grampa Feike V decided he had enough of the Old Country, and with his wife and just-born son, my father, left for the United States.

Several years ago, when I visited Tzum, I discovered that Grampa's house had been razed, along with others, and had become part of the property owned by an old people's home. I did find my father's name registered in the Doop Boek (birth book) in the beautiful old Tzum church and saw my grandfather's signature. I saw the font where my father was baptized. I tried to imagine what that baby might have looked like before it was whisked off to America.

When Grampa landed at Ellis Island, the immigration officer had trouble pronouncing his name, Feike F. Feikema. Finally the officer told Grampa that he'd better have at least a first name people could pronounce. He asked Grampa what town he came from, and when Grampa answered, first Frjentsjer, the Frisian version, and then Franeker, the Dutch, the man said, "We'll put you down as Frank and whatever that last name of yours is." So Frank it was after that, and in time my father was called Frank too. That was a strange naming; the Frisians and the Franks had been hated enemies for centuries. Actually Frederick would have been a better translation. Frederick and Feike come from the same Indo-European root of "pri-tu" meaning "love, free, friend." And "ma" means "man of" or "son of."

Grampa and wife and child first headed for Orange City, Iowa, a Dutch settlement. Restless, still full of pride, Grampa next moved the family to Grand Rapids, Michigan, also a Dutch settlement and where some relatives of his wife lived; then to Perkins Corner, Iowa, where he farmed a quarter section; then to Lebanon, Missouri, where he worked on a railroad; then to Doon, in Northwest Iowa, where he became a stone mason; then to what later became known as the Bad Lands of South Dakota; and finally to Doon again, where he built storm cellars and cement block houses and worked on

the railroad as a section hand in the wintertime. Five more children were born to Grampa and Gramma during all that wandering, Kathryn, Jennie, Nick, Abben, and Gertrude. All were raised as Americans, not as Frisians or Hollanders. Grampa swore when he landed in America that he would never speak either Frisian or Dutch again, but only what he called "American." He made only one exception and that was to speak Frisian to his mother, my great grandmother, who came to America shortly after he did and lived in Sioux Center, Iowa. My memory of Grampa is that he spoke good English, with no trace of a foreign accent. Frisians are related to the Angles and Saxons and have little trouble learning to speak English.

Shortly after Gertrude was born, Gramma Ytje died and the family was broken up. My father was farmed out to various American families living in the country, the Pohlman's, the Harmings, the Reynolds, all of them originally coming from New England by way of the Western Reserve. Aunt Kathryn went to live with a wealthy family in town named Holmes. Thus at a very early age my father was taken out of school and such learning as he had soon vanished. It had also become apparent that he had some trouble learning in school, unlike Aunt Kathryn who was very good at it. He was good at figures but never letters. When he signed his name he had to stop and think each time he wrote a letter, as though he had trouble remembering their order, which suggests to me that he may very well have had some form of dyslexia.

In the 1890's people got around by horseback or by horse and buggy. There still were many wild prairies left, especially along the rivers and where it was hilly. My father told me that he remembered riding a horse once for some ten miles without hitting a fence. Some homes were still being built of sod. There were no groves or trees about except along the rivers. There were of course no radios or telephones. There was a local newspaper, *The Doon Press*, but gossip moved slowly from home to home. And moving slowly, it was thoroughly digested, until various kinds of usable wisdoms emerged.

Pa soon found out that he had a good ear for music and learned to play the harmonica, the accordion, and the fiddle. Presently he was in demand to play at as well as call square dances. The church he went to, the Congregational, didn't frown on dancing or singing. He also developed into a pretty fair country baseball pitcher.

He apparently was a doughty fellow. Once he accidentally jabbed a hayfork into his knee in the dead of winter. He was a long ways from the yard at the time but had the presence of mind to first make a tourniquet with his handkerchief before jerking the hayfork out of the bone. On another occasion, while shingling the cupola on the locally famous Reynolds round barn, the cleat on which his foot rested gave way, and he began sliding. He

fell off the cupola and hit the main roof. Despite desperate clawing and scratching, he kept on sliding. When he knew there was no way of stopping the slide, he figured out where the fresh cow manure pile lay below and, deliberately rolling himself over and over as he slid, managed to aim himself for it. He shot out over the edge of the roof, and miracle of miracles, landed in six feet of loose green slush. The cupola was seventy feet above ground. He came out of it covered with manure but otherwise without a scratch.

Pa met my mother, Alice Van Engen, tall and golden blond, when he was twenty-three. There is no evidence that he had a girl friend before he met her, though I did hear from some old timers that the girls of his day considered him a catch. He was handsome with his black hair, light gray piercing eyes, and a powerful six-foot-four frame. He liked to say that he was just as tall as Abraham Lincoln. He had fair skin and always had a sweet smell about him. Even when he sweat he had a good manly aroma about him. He danced with girls but didn't date them. He met my mother at her cousins' house on a farm near Doon. She'd had a sad romance with a fellow in Orange City, Iowa (my mother wouldn't let him kiss her much and the fellow, not being able to wait, knocked up the hired girl where he worked), and her father, my grampa Frederick Van Engen, sent her to her Van Engen cousins near Doon to get over it. While she was there, Pa happened to drive onto the Van Engen yard and the two fell for each other. From what my mother told me, and from what Pa has said, they were innocents when they married. My father often remarked to us boys, as though to instruct us, "When I got married I could look any woman in the world in the eye. And I still can."

Ma was devoutly religious, though not of the fanatic kind. She was gentle, quietly determined, and very bright. (I go into all this in great detail in my last novel, *Green Earth*, which is in part autobiographical.) She quietly got Pa to leave his church and to join hers, the Dutch Christian Reformed Church. She also persuaded him to quit playing and calling at square dances, though she didn't mind if he played his jolly tunes on the harmonica and the accordion at home. She herself was highly musical and they often played together, he on harmonica and she on the parlor organ. Sometimes she sang (she was a good soprano) while he played. She also urged him to quit playing baseball, "a little boy's game," but that he wouldn't do. He no longer played for the town team but did play for the church. I remember only two arguments or tiffs between the two, and one of them had to do with baseball. It was the Fourth of July and Doon was playing Sioux Center at a church picnic. Pa was to play third base. Ma wanted him to listen to a famous Navajo missionary instead. Ma worked on him all the way to the picnic grove and all Pa did was smile his sideways

smile. When they got there, Ma discovered the missionary had moved his talk up an hour so he could watch the game. Pa would never admit it but I think he knew that the missionary loved baseball.

Pa and Ma got married January 22, 1911. They had only a couple hundred dollars to begin farming and only a few possessions. They bought a team of horses (Pa already owned a wonderfully swift and willful trotter named Daise, a pretty roan), a cow, a heifer with calf, a few chickens, and a few pigs. They also bought a few implements at farm sales, a walking plow, a walking cultivator, a disk, a drag, and a cornplanter. At the end of the first year they'd paid off all debts and had bought more horses and cattle.

I was born January 6, 1912, during a fierce blizzard. My grandmother, Jennie Van Engen, was there and she helped Ma have me while Pa was gone to fetch the doctor with a team and bobsled. When after a great struggle Pa and the doctor finally made it through the storm, I was already lustily bawling away. Earlier Pa had found a full bottle of whiskey in the haymow and he promptly asked Ma for permission to break it open and celebrate with the doctor.

My mother, who was death on drinking, reluctantly agreed. Later she took the bottle and put it in the bottom of her wardrobe. When my mother died in 1929 there actually was some whiskey left in that bottle. Uncle Hank, my mother's brother, gave her a slug of it to revive her for a time when she was dying of rheumatic fever.

My father insisted that I be named Frederick, and not either Feike or Frank. He had come to love my mother's father, Frederick Van Engen. Furthermore he was a little tired of all that Feike the Fifth and Feike the Sixth stuff. He stuck to his guns too when his father's brothers, my great uncles, drove great distances to protest my being named Frederick. "He is the Feike," the great uncles proclaimed, faces livid, "the stamhâlder, the son and heir, the seventh in a row since the first Feike!"

Pa's insistence on naming me Frederick helps explain why he didn't object when I changed my name from Frederick Feikema to Frederick Feikema Manfred in 1951. I'd found out from a linguist that Feike and Frederick had the same Indo-European root at about the same time that I had enough of having to spell out my name to long distance telephone operators as well as having to explain that as a Frisian-Saxon I really was about as Anglo-Saxon as anyone. Pa knew the problems of having a "funny name" in America.

My first memory of my father was the day he caught a ride to town with a neighbor and later in the afternoon, to our surprise, came rolling onto the yard driving a new car, a chain-drive Overland, beeping the bulb horn, scaring the dog under the corncrib, making the cattle bawl out in the barn-

yard, causing the horses out in the night yard to pop their tails, and chasing the chickens back into their coops. My mother appeared at the screen door to the kitchen, drying her hands on her green apron and wondering what all the racket was about. My father invited her to get in and he'd take us all for a spin around the section. My brother Edward and I quickly climbed in back, our usual seat in the carriage, breaths short for joy, eyes as wild as cock-eyed roosters. My mother got in very reluctantly. She didn't like "the automobile" as she always called it. Pa bugled the horn again and we were off. The sun was shining and all the neighbors' chickens were working the ditches for grasshoppers. When Pa blew the horn, the chickens sprayed in all directions. The front of the Overland went through them like the prow of a boat pushing through white water. When the ride was over, my mother got out of the car, not saying a word, and with a sick smile went directly back to her kitchen. Ma never did get to like "the automobile" and so long as she was alive she never permitted Pa to drive over 30 miles an hour. "Or I jump out."

Pa continued to surprise us when he came back from trips. One day he went to Sioux City with a shipment of hogs, taking the Great Northern from Doon. A day later he arrived home catching a ride with a neighbor. Eddie and I ran out to the gate to see who it was. When Pa stepped out of the car we didn't right away recognize him. Pa had bought himself a complete set of new clothes, a new gray overcoat with a black velvet collar, a new gray hat with a black band, a new gray suit, and a pair of black gloves. The face looked familiar but all those new clothes threw us. Also this strange man with Pa's face didn't act like Pa. This man acted like a high-monkey-monk from the city with fancy dude manners. He had a package with him which he carried into the kitchen and proceeded to open. It turned out to be a special dress, floor length, for my mother. It was when Pa took off his hat and bowed to Ma and then kissed her that I finally made out for sure who it really was.

One day I heard some coughing in the barn and when I looked I found Pa's favorite horse Daise down. I'd known he'd kept her in the barn that day for some reason, but I was shocked to see Daise lying on the floor. One never caught a horse down. I ran to get my father in the house. Pa was smoking his pipe, feet up on the reservoir of the stove. When I told him what I'd seen, Pa clapped out his pipe in the range, and hurried out to the barn. Pa took one look and knew the worst. He got down on his knees beside her and held her head.

After a while Daise coughed in his lap. That ignited Pa. He gently lay her head down in the straw and ran to the house to call the veterinarian. When my mother wondered a little about the cost of the long distance call, my father whirled on her and cried, "My God, woman, that's Daise that's sick!

My Daise! You know, the pretty roan what's been with me all these years. Who even took me to Orange City to see you."

When he couldn't raise the vet, Pa asked Ma if she had some liniment around. She didn't. So next he asked her for the whiskey bottle lying in the bottom of her wardrobe. She gave it to him reluctantly. He ran to the barn with the whiskey to give Laise a slug of it. But Daise only coughed when he opened her lips and poured some into her mouth. The whiskey spilled out into the straw.

Daise was dead within the hour.

My father cried. I'd never before seen him cry and I was too petrified to move. I didn't want to see it but at the same time I couldn't move either. Pa dug a huge hole for Daise in the pasture and buried her. He refused to call the rendering plant.

I was about nine, when my father awakened me in the middle of the night one March. He was full of tender concern, which surprised me. What was up? I soon learned. After I'd dressed we went to the hog barn. There he explained to me what he wanted. He had purebred Poland China sows, with papers, and they had one fault. Because of special breeding they often had difficulty giving birth. What was needed was a long slim arm to reach inside the sow to help the little piglets down the birth canal. Somewhat numb, and curiously also liking what I was doing, I helped most of those sows have their pigs that spring.

Later that year hog cholera hit. The vet came too late to give the little pigs serum and they all died. My father once again cried, and then retired to his favorite spot beside the kitchen stove, feet up on the reservoir, pipe clamped tight in his mouth. He refused to move. Ma didn't know what to do with him. Finally I took it upon myself to get out the old walking plow and open up a long deep furrow in the hog pasture and bury all the little pigs. They'd begun to stink and were covered with green flies. Gone was Pa's dream that by selling purebred hogs he could finally make a killing and then buy himself a farm. He and mother dreamed every spring that someday they'd own a farm and be independent. Both hated being renters. Pa with his brother Nick and his three sisters Kathryn and Jennie and Gertrude owned Grampa Feikema's cement block house in town, but that was not the same thing as owning a real farm.

It was about that same time that an investment man heard that Pa and Ma had managed over the years to build up a savings account of some fifteen hundred dollars. The man persuaded them to invest half of it, seven hundred fifty dollars, in the Northwest Harness Company. It happened that Pa liked the Northwest harness for farm work. Pa thought them the sure thing. The man told Pa and Ma they were bound to double, if not triple, their money in a year's time. The company was new and was sure to grow.

With fifteen hundred, possibly even two thousand two hundred fifty dollars, they would finally have enough to buy the farm they had their eye on. It would help make up for the loss of all those purebred Poland China pigs. But in 1922, during a recession, the Northwest Harness Company filed for bankruptcy.

That same summer Pa and Ma invested the remaining seven hundred fifty dollars in their savings account in a general store that a friend of theirs built in Lakewood, halfway between Doon and Rock Rapids, for the convenience of nearby farmers. On stormy days, rain or snow, both Doon and Rock Rapids were pretty far away for quick shopping. Lakewood, unincorporated, had a grain elevator, a depot, a lumberyard, and a blacksmith. There were five houses.

One afternoon, no one knows how, a fire started in the storekeeper's house and then jumped across to the general store. There was no fire-fighting equipment in town. Ma learned about it via the country telephone when Central gave the alarm with a general ring. Pa with the whole family drove like mad to the final hill. When he saw how far along the fire was, he pulled up. Pa and Ma watched it all burn down from the hilltop. I remember staring down at the two great pillars of flames and smoke with a boy's deep sick feeling in my stomach. There went another seven hundred fifty dollars.

When there was nothing but ashes left, Pa turned the car around and drove home. All he said was, "Couldn't even get close enough to light my pipe with it."

At the Doon Christian Grammar School, which my mother decided I should attend instead of the country public school, there were two boys much older than the rest of us. The law was that you had to go to school until you were sixteen. One noon when I went to the church horse barn where I kept my mare, Tip, I caught the two fellows tormenting her. They had climbed onto the rafter above her and with long sticks were jabbing her in the ass just under the tail, and laughing loudly when she bucked and enked up in the air.

It happened that about a month before I'd complained to my father that these two fellows were bullies. My father listened a while and then gave me some father-son advice. "Look, what do you want me to do, take off work and go to school and punish those boys for you? Their parents would be in an uproar if I did that. No, son, that's a battle you've got to fight yourself. Even if they're much bigger than you, go after them. Let them know you're a fierce critter if they push in too far. Go after them even if you know you're going to lose. They'll remember your teeth the next time." He paused; then went on. "Course I don't ever want to hear that you started the fight. Or that you're a bully. Then you're going to have to deal with me. But otherwise, if you know you're in the right, fight!"

Seeing those two bozos tormenting my horse enraged me. I lost complete control of myself. I never once gave it a thought that both of them were twice as strong as I was. I grabbed Tip's bridle which was hanging on a nail behind her and went after them. They made one mistake. They dropped down off the rafter and, still laughing at the great joke of it all, started to run for the rear of the barn thinking to "escape" that way. But the rear door had been nailed shut and they couldn't get out. I had them cornered. Tip's bridle had a heavy breaker bit in it because she had too strong a mouth for me. The bit was a good inch thick, and heavy, and every time I came around with it over their backs as they tried to scrunch down as small as possible in the corner of the stall, they yelped twice as loud as Tip ever did. Finally an image of my mother popped into my head, and she asked, "Boy, boy, is this what I raised you to be? A killer? Alice's boy?" I let up. But I swear that if her image hadn't spoken up, I would have killed them. It's the only time in my life I ever thought of killing anyone.

My father was soon called before the church consistory. The minister told him what the problem was. His boy, Freddie Feikema, had beat up on two boys, members of the church, and what did he have to say about it. My father got to his feet and said he'd like to ask one question of each of the parents of the two boys.

He asked the first parent, "Nuh, and how old is your boy?"

"Well, yah, he is going on sixteen."

He asked the second parent, "And your boy?"

"Well, yah, Frank, you know, he's going on sixteen too."

Pa then turned to the minister. "Domeny, my boy is only ten years old. Why, even the horse they was tormenting is younger than them." And left.

I was in high school, going to Western Academy in Hull, Iowa, some seven miles away, when one weekend in late November, running all the way home, bursting into the kitchen, I found my father sitting beside the stove again, feet up on the reservoir. This time, instead of smoking his pipe, he was holding a hand over his nose. Something wild had happened. His nose was as purple as a plum and as big as an Idaho potato. There was still some blood on his upper lip.

Mother was ironing workshirts nearby. "Yes," she said, pointing her iron at Pa, "there sits a man who's now taken to jumping off windmills. Instead of just barns. And worse yet, there sits a man who won't go to see a doctor when he might be mortal hurt." My mother rarely indulged in irony, but when she did angels revolted in heaven.

I asked what had happened.

Pa didn't say a word.

Ma said, "Like I just said, he jumped off the windmill."

Pa finally said, voice nasal and gravelly, "Naw, not that. Like I said before, one of them rungs on the ladder broke and I fell off."

"You said you jumped the last ways."

"Well, yeh, after I saw I was gonna fall."

"You could have at least called the doctor." Ma went on to explain what Pa had done instead of going to the doctor. He'd whittled out two pieces of soft willow twigs, doped them with horse salve, then slowly stuck them up his broken nose and molded the nose into shape around the twigs.

I winced.

Pa saw my look. "Nah, you better get your yard duds on and do the chores. You still know what to do, don't you? Schooling still ain't chased that out of your head yet, has it?"

I hurried into my clothes. Without Pa, I'd have my hands full getting everything done on time, the feeding of the hogs and cattle and chickens and horses, milking and separating, feeding the calves. Eddie was a help but he was slow. But before I began, I had to know what had happened. I hurried down the hog pasture to the old wooden mill with its huge wooden fan. The fan was stuck; it was half-turned around, facing the wind when it should have been going with the wind. I climbed up the wooden ladder until I found the broken rungs just at the entrance to the platform on top. There were three of them. They'd become rotted at the nail holes and parts of the rungs were still caught in the three nails. I climbed down carefully, noting as I did so that there were other near-rotted rungs. I next worked out where he'd fallen. The ground was frozen some two inches deep, and I found where his heels had hit and dug a hole some three inches deep through the layer of frost and the softer earth beneath. The next thing I saw was a gouge in the earth some fifteen feet farther along. There was blood in the gouge. It must have been the place where his nose had hit. I looked up at the mill platform above me and figured Pa must have dropped a good fifty feet.

I had trouble understanding it all, and was trying to imagine how it happened, when I heard some neighing behind me. Looking around, I saw Pa's team of grays, Pollie and Nell, still hitched to the cornfield fence. The wagon was half-full of picked corn. Pa was almost finished picking corn; there were still two rows left. When he came to the end of the field he must have noticed that the mill was stuck and had climbed up it to turn the head around.

Pa back at the house hadn't mentioned the horses and the wagon out in the field. It meant he'd really banged his head, so hard he'd forgotten that he'd been picking corn. I climbed the fence, untied the horses, and drove them home. The sun was just setting, shooting great strokes of amber across the rolling fields.

Later on I got Pa to tell me how it really happened. Just as I'd guessed he'd decided to turn the mill head around before picking the last two rows of the year. The mill could be pumping water while he picked. Just as he took hold of the top rung into the opening of the platform, it broke in his hands. "I quick grabbed for the next one," he said. "But it too broke in my hands. I made one more grab for the next one, and when that broke, I knew I was gonna go. When I looked down, I saw how the old mill was all spraddled out as it went down and I knew that if I didn't jump outwards, I'd fall into those cross bars and really wreck myself. So I jumped for all I was worth. Then as I fell, I knew that if I didn't do something special, I'd spill my guts all over the hog pasture. I then remembered how grasshoppers lit after they'd jumped, their legs all scissored up like so, so I pulled my feet up into a half-crouch. By that time I was hitting the earth. And by dab, if I didn't land like a grasshopper and then bounce ahead. I couldn't quite get my hands out ahead of me in time, so that's why my nose took such an awful wallop. It knocked me out for a little bit too."

I kept thinking that he could have broken a leg or a hip joint. But he never complained about any aching joints or bones.

"Just that fetchsticking nose, which I had to remodel to look a little like I used to."

It was also about that time that Pa realized he was losing me. As long as I was a little boy I'm sure he always believed I'd become his right hand man on the farm. He rejoiced in the way I caught on how to do things: milking, driving horses, starting engines on cold mornings. But as the weeks and years went by it became pretty obvious that I was going to be a lover of books. Whenever we went to visit the neighbors, I always checked the neighbor's parlor first to see if they had any books before I went outside to play with their children under the trees.

"You've always either got your head in a book or in a cloud," Pa would say. "And when you walk across the yard, even with you staring down at the ground, you don't see what's underfoot. Pick up that loose piece of butcher paper there and put it somewhere. There's nothing so unsightly as a littered yard. Pick up, pick up, pick up."

Yet in a curious way, ambivalent, he gloried in my ability to read important documents for him. I started high school at the age of twelve, far too young really, but for his boy he thought it nothing unusual. When I told him stories about happenings at the academy, he'd follow my telling with a high light in his gray eyes, lips imitating my lip movement, waiting for the punch line so he could burst out laughing.

Except for one year, when I ran the seven and a half miles to and from school every day, he always took time off from work and brought me to

school on Monday mornings. When it was raining he took the horse and buggy and when it was dry he took the old Buick.

In 1928, right after I'd graduated from the academy, we began to get little signals that Ma wasn't feeling too well. She spoke of fainting spells, of her heart beating funny. None of us children (by this time mother had six sons and no daughters) believed that it was serious. Fathers and mothers just never died. They were always there. Just like God was always there.

But Pa took it seriously. They tried various doctors. By the time Ma arrived at the doctor's office she usually looked like she was in the bloom of health. She'd had a rest on the way over. Finally one doctor said it was her teeth and told her to have them all pulled. It was while she was having her lowers removed that she fainted dead away. It took some desperate action on the part of the dentist, Dr. Maloney, to get her back. From that day on she began to go downhill.

When she died on April 19, 1929, my father took it hard. (I was home at the time; my mother had asked me not to start college until I was eighteen.) Pa looked like a tall cottonwood with the upper branches blasted white by lightning. He was one of those who'd turned gray early, but on her death he rapidly turned white. We had no housekeeper, couldn't get one in those days, and the days were dark in that country farmhouse east of the Doon water tower. Pa never struck us, or cursed us, just went about in white-haired smoldering sorrow. But he kept us neat. He did most of the housework (cooking, washing clothes, ironing) plus doing his share of the yard work. He got us to church in time on Sundays. When company dropped by, he was polite, and set out the coffee and cake just as Ma would have done it.

In the middle of that dark sorrowing time, my brother Ed almost got killed. It was in November and very cold. The month before there'd been a powerful south wind for several days, sometimes almost eighty miles an hour, and it had ripped a lot of corn ears from the stalks, at least a good third of them. With Pa up on the cornpicking machine, Ed and I followed him, bent over as we ran along picking up the fallen ears and tossing them into the open section of a small elevator in the back of the machine. That running and gathering on the run just about killed us.

Pa felt sorry for us and gave us a lot of rests at the end of the field. Once we stopped on the far side of the north seventy. We were about a half mile from the house.

Our breaths caught, Pa climbed back up on the machine. He unloosened the lines to the five horses and shook them, saying, "Giddap. Time to get going again."

The horses didn't move. The bitter north wind was on their tail and they had it cozy for the moment.

Again Pa called out his resonant, "Giddap!"

Still they didn't move.

"Ed, pick up a clod there and toss it onto Old Nell's tail. That'll wake her up." Nell was in the lead team and was the most dependable horse we had.

Ed picked up a clod and deftly hit Nell in the tail with it. She didn't even switch her tail at it.

"By gorry now," Pa exclaimed. "Ed, pick up another clod, this time a big one, and let her have it harder."

Ed had to kick around in the frozen ground to find a clod. Finally he found one in front of the snout of the cornpicker. He chunked the big frozen clod hard on Nell's tail. That woke her up, and she leaned into her traces. The other four horses woke up then too.

The picker was always heavy-ended on the snout or left side, and the paried snouts swung left and grabbed Ed's right leg. He didn't have a chance to get out of the way in time. The gathering rollers began to chew into his leg. Ed was too startled to cry out.

Pa saw it all in a glance, and he hauled back on all five lines with all his might and let go with a great chilling, "WHOA!" His voice, always powerful, so pierced the consciousness of those five horses that they all froze in their tracks.

Holding tight onto the lines, Pa barked, "Fred, unhitch those horses one at a time. Queen first, since she's the friskiest. And let's hope she don't smell the blood." He leaned back to shut off the machine.

I unhitched Queen and Pa let go of her line. I led her to the fence and tied her to it. Then I peeled off the rest of the four horses, with Pa all the while sitting up on the picker seat eyes alert for the least motion in the machine. If those gathering rollers made one more revolution Ed's leg was gone. Ed meanwhile stood absolutely still, as though a wrestler had him by the leg and the best policy was just to stand still.

The moment I started to lead the last horse away, Pa scrambled down off the machine and had a look at Ed's leg. I joined him. The gathering rollers had just begun to grind into the bone about a half foot above the ankle.

"Ed, Ed," was all Pa said; and then, all business, he told me what wrenches to get from the toolbox on the back of the picker. Working carefully, silently, Pa and I managed to take off enough nuts to loosen the gathering rollers and open up the metal snout a little. Ed stood silent above, an occasional tear dropping off his wind-red cheeks and falling on our hands. Finally, thinking he had enough room, Pa began to extricate the mashed leg. I got to my feet and held Ed up.

When we finally got the leg out, we discovered that Ed could still stand on it. And it was then, everything finally safe, that Pa let go. He simply bowed over and cried, grinding his teeth.

The crying lasted about thirty seconds. Then, having had enough of that, Pa got hold of himself and, half-carrying Ed, helped him home and took him to the doctor. It took several months for Ed's leg to heal.

The incident added gloom to the household.

Worse yet, Pa got undulant fever that winter. He'd be his usual self for about an hour in the morning, and then was done for the day and had to go to bed. That left a lot of the yard work in my hands. In a way it was lucky it was winter; there was no field work to do.

When pigging time came around, Pa called me into the bedroom. "Son, according to my calendar, those sows will be coming in any day. Now you know what I've been doing the last couple of years. Trading young boars with a fellow from Edgerton, Minnesota, so's not to get inbreeding."

"I know," I said.

"Well, now when those pigs start coming in, I want you to watch for the peppiest and orneriest little boar pig in each litter. Make a mark in your mind about him. Do that with each litter. And when all the pigs are in, we'll trade our peppiest little boar for a peppy boar from that fellow in Edgerton. That little boar will be the one to wake up first after he's born, be the first to crawl between his mother's legs to get to titty, be so ornery about it he'll want all those tits to himself until he's had enough. You know, make a real hog of himself."

I wasn't sure I liked hearing all that.

"There may be one or two others that'll be just about as good, and if our first one dies, they'll make pretty good replacements."

"Yes, Pa."

"The rest of the males we'll nut. They won't be much good for anything but fattening."

"How about the gilts, must I watch them too to see which ones will make good breeding stock?"

"Naw. Cripes, where've you been raised? Naw, most all of them will make good sows. And you know, that's a funny thing. Let's say we get a hundred little pigs. About fifty-four of them will be males, and forty-six females. Some ten of those males will be stumperts, peewees, and will die no matter what you do for them. And there will be at the most only two females that'll die. All the rest of the females will make good breeding stock. All of them. Sometimes of those forty-four that are left I have a hard time picking the twenty I want to keep for breeding sows next year."

A thought shot through my head. "Is that true of human beings too, Pa? Where only one or two of the men are any good and the rest peewees? And where most of the women are good?"

A big smile grew sideways across Pa's grizzled chin. "I wouldn't want to say. Besides, I dassent ask around of my friends."

Some twenty years later I happened to tell this story to Dr. Starke Hathaway, psychologist at the University of Minnesota, the man who invented the Minnesota Multi-phasic Personality Inventory test. He let out a hoot and started to laugh. "Why, there's a fellow down at Indiana University who's been making a survey of human beings on that very subject. A guy by the name of Alfred C. Kinsey."

That summer, undulant fever gone, Pa managed to get a housekeeper named Hattie. She had eight daughters and one son. Three of the youngest daughters began living with us. All the rest were married. With all that femininity around us, things changed drastically in our home.

Later Pa married Hattie. They didn't always get along, which was a grief to Pa, since he hated all dissension. He'd only had two disagreements with our own mother, mentioned above, and he didn't know how to handle it. But as time went on, as he put it, "We managed to bang it out together until we got along better."

In the fall of 1935, a year after I'd graduated from college, I hitchhiked home to visit my father. I still didn't have a steady job. I helped him get of the last of the corn and then went over to a neighbor to help him finish picking his corn by hand. It had been a bad year for farmers. The corn was mostly nubbins, short stubby ears, hard to jerk out of the husk, and the pay was poor.

When there were no more odd jobs to do, I found myself at loose ends. I loved my father and my five brothers and liked living with them again for a while. But it was uneasy living under the same roof with a stepmother who quarreled with my father a lot and who in addition considered me a college bum because I didn't actively seek a teaching job, for which I was qualified with a Life Certificate from the state of Michigan. But what I'd seen of practice teaching, and of teachers, I knew it wasn't for me, especially if I wanted to write.

Then my stepmother got an idea. Why didn't we go to Los Angeles and visit two of her daughters. As long as I didn't have anything to do, I could drive for them. Pa had just traded in the old Chevy for a new Dodge so we could ride in style. After some talk it was agreed that we'd go. We took with us a farm boy named Bill DeBoer who wanted to try his luck milking cows in Artesia near Los Angeles.

We started very early one morning from Doon, in the northwest corner of Iowa, and headed down 75 past Sioux City, and at Freeman, Nebraska, picked up Highway 30 and headed west across Nebraska. We drove steadily all day. It got dark while we were still in Nebraska. And it was around ten when we got a cabin in Cheyenne. There were no motels in those days. All day long all we'd seen was flat land, sometimes gently rolling land, not un-

like the land around Doon. During those hours when we drove in darkness, the gathering hills of Wyoming couldn't be made out.

We woke to a deep fog in the morning. Visibility was almost zero. We had breakfast, and then slowly, lights on, we started out. As usual I drove, with the farm boy Bill sitting next to me in front, with Pa and Hattie in back, Pa sitting on the right side. From the sound of the motor I could tell after a while we were climbing. But from what we could see, a few feet on either side of us, and for all we knew, we were still traveling across flat land.

We came around a slow curve, going left, when abruptly the fog lifted, and below us on the right lay a vast long valley. We were traveling along the top of a mountain. Pa popped bolt upright on his side, staring down at the valley. He exclaimed in Frisian, his mother tongue, "Gotske, hwet gatten!" He pronounced the last two words as, "Hwat gawten!" It means in English, "God, what holes!" I hadn't heard him speak Frisian for years. What with his father dead and most of his uncles gone, he rarely spoke it any more. Then, as the road dipped down and the mountain side rose on our left, he said, "Why, these things (the mountains) are upside down holes!"

I've laughed about that many times. For a true expression of awe I've never heard it beat. It could have been Jim Bridger saying it the first time he saw the mountains.

It was on that same trip that Pa stunned me with his talent for music. One evening as Hattie and her two daughters were having a good time gossiping, Pa said to me, "Ain't there anything going on in this town that you and I could see?" I told him that I thought maybe there was and looked through the amusement section of the *Los Angeles Times*. I spotted a little story about the operetta *The Countess Maritza* being given in a theatre downtown.

"Hey," Pa said, "I'd like to see that. We had an opery house in old Doon once and I saw a good one there."

We got there early and took one of the cheaper seats. I told Pa how I and my friends in college used to get cheap seats and then watch to see what seats weren't sold up front and, after the first intermission, steal down and take them. Pa thought that a great idea.

We never got around to it. A few minutes into the singing, I heard a sound next to me. I looked. It was my father, crying. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, he thought the lyrics so beautiful. We didn't get up during either intermission. Afterwards, as I drove home, he still didn't say anything. He was too choked up with all the lovely music. When we got to the house the first thing he did was to ask his step-daughter if she had a harmonica or an accordion in the house. She had an accordion, which her boy

friend owned. Pa got it out and then before my astonished eyes, he proceeded to play most of the operetta *The Countess Maritza* back from memory.

My passionate strong-willed father was basically a musician who'd never had a chance to develop his talent.

A couple of years later Hattie decided she wanted to see her California daughters again. But she was puzzled as to how they'd make it safely without a driver to read maps.

Pa said, "Oh, well, if that's where you want to go I'll get you there. We don't need any map readers."

Sure enough, Pa talked her into going without a map reader. They took the exact same route that I drove. Pa remembered all the corners where you had to turn. Hattie told me afterwards that she was as astonished as anyone when Pa pulled up in front of her daughter's door without once having to ask for directions.

Besides all the music Pa had a memory like Jim Bridger. His head was full of landscapes, one flowing into another.

Restless, Pa quit farming in the fall of 1935 and ran a filling station at Perkins Corner, Iowa, for a year. That wasn't the right thing for him either, so he quit that and came back to Doon and ran a dairy for a few years. It still wasn't right, so he sold the dairy and ran a cafe in Sibley, Iowa. That too turned sour on him and he took up carpentering. It developed that he was an excellent woodworker.

It was about that time that I came down with tuberculosis. I took the rest cure at the Glen Lake Sanatorium near Minneapolis. Pa came to see me at least once a month. While some of my other relatives might come to gloat over me, thinking, as I lay in my white bed, that's what Fred got for dreaming of becoming a big shot, a writer, Pa sat quietly by. All I can remember of those visits of his are four words, "Hello, son," and, "Good-bye, son." In between times he tried to smile. Several times he'd take my hand and hold it a while. He was so gentle about it that at the time I completely forgot the few lickings he'd given me.

I didn't see much of him after I left the sanatorium. I got married and had part-time jobs and started writing books. My wife Maryanna was never sure she liked him. She spoke of the piercing quality of his light-gray eyes. The way he looked at women always made her feel uncomfortable.

When I did see him he was always curious about my work. He couldn't read my books, but he was always interested to know about their success. He carried newspaper clippings about them in his pocketbook.

When the second world war came along, Pa heard the Navy needed woodworkers in California. The pay was very good, better than anything offered for carpenter work in Sibley, Iowa. He decided to give it a try and

got a job doing the woodwork in the captain's cabin in Liberty ships. Hattie soon followed with the children and Pa became a Californian.

I wasn't there when Hattie died. From what my brothers John and Abben told me, who'd also gone to live in California, it was pretty rough on him. He didn't like living alone. His step-children, all of Hattie's eight girls and their children, had come to love him as their own father and spent a lot of time visiting him. But at night when he went to bed he was still alone.

One day his milkman told him, "Frank, it ain't good for you to live alone like this. I can see it's getting you down."

"That's old news," Pa said.

"Tell you, Frank. I got a lady on my route who lost her sidekick a year ago and she too mopes around feeling sorry for herself. Why don't I have you two come over for dinner next Sunday so you can look each other over."

"Nah, it's too late."

"When you're both so lonesome? I tell you, you two were made for each other. I'll expect you next Sunday for dinner. Two bells."

"I'll think about it."

So the two met, Pa and Beatrice, in the milkman's house for dinner. And after the dinner they went their separate ways.

Pa thought about it for a week, then called Beatrice up and asked if he could come over for a cup of coffee the next Sunday. She thought it a fine idea.

She had him sit at her kitchen table while she set out the coffee and cake. They talked about the weather and how California was a fine place for people with old bones.

Pa had picked up his cup of coffee, and was about to take a sip, when he set the cup down again. "Say, Bea, before we go any further, you got to agree to one thing. It's something we better get straight right from the start."

"What's that, Frank?"

Pa had found out that she was Catholic and what he was about to ask her was a tough thing. He was still Christian Reformed (the word Dutch had been dropped by his church by then). "Well, Bea, you got to agree to join my church or it's all over between us."

Bea was startled, but she had come to like Pa's forthrightness. Furthermore, as Beatrice Roxanna Torrey before she got married to her Catholic husband, she'd originally been a protestant in Haverhill, Massachusetts. "All right, Frank. If that's what you want, that's what it'll be."

So in a strange way my father's life had come full circle. He'd started out as a young boy living with protestants who'd originally come from New

England and he was now going to marry a protestant who'd come from there.

One of my brothers was a little shocked that Pa wanted to get married again. The brother called me long distance.

"But, Fred, he's been married twice before. He should start thinking about the next life. Why should he want to get married again at his age? He's seventy-one. And then too, this Bea is so much younger than him. Twenty years."

"So what? If they love each other that's all that counts. Age has nothing to do with it. She might just pep him up enough to give him another twenty years of life. No, I'm all for it."

"But she smokes cigarettes! It's funny that Pa would want to tolerate that. You know how he always was about bobbed hair women smoking in public. He's acting silly in his old age."

"Maybe he loves her."

They did love each other. Whenever we visited them and were about to take them out to dinner, we could never get them to sit separate, whether it was riding over in the car or at the table. Several times we tried to get one of my brothers to sit between them but that didn't work.

"Hyar, not on your life," Pa would exclaim. "Bea sits with me or we don't go out."

Once we did manage to get him in the front seat and Bea in the back. All the way over to the steakhouse she leaned forward and put her hand on his shoulder while he reached back with a hand and placed it on hers.

I stayed with them many times. Lying on the couch which had been opened out to make a bed for me, I used to listen to them talk in their bedroom, door open. They had a light teasing game going at all times. Nothing rough, or mean. Tender. About whose turn it was to get up and make the coffee. Both loved that coffee spout. About who had the most pep. Both bragged to beat the band about that. About who scratched the worst with their toenails during sleep. It made me cry listening to them. It was the happiest chatter I'd ever heard between two people, especially between a man and a woman.

Bea once confessed to me, "Fred, that father of yours is almost too much for me. Heh. Such a sweet pest. But I wouldn't want to have him any different."

One day Pa came to me with a request. "Fred, one of these days it'll be time for me to go on. As well as for Bea."

"Naturally, Pa."

"You're my oldest son and so I'm telling you. You know how I loved your mother Alice. She was a fine woman. A good mother to all you boys. And you know how I got along with Hattie. But, Fred, I tell you, Bea is the

best yet. She surely is a good woman. I'm really sweet on her and I want to be buried with her. And she wants that too. She says I'm her best man. I hope that's all right with you."

"Pa, I can't legislate your love affairs. We'll do what you ask of us."

Everybody had expected Pa to go first, he was so much older, twenty years. In fact when Pa and Bea first got married some of her friends thought it terribly unfair to Bea. She'd only have him a couple of years and then she'd once more be alone. She'd be much better off marrying someone her own age.

But Bea died first, of lung cancer. She'd never given up her smoking, especially not since Pa always enjoyed his pipe.

My youngest brother Henry saw Bea during her last days. "It was something to see when Pa went to visit her in the hospital. She'd be almost comatose until we'd enter her room. Then, the moment she'd hear Pa's voice, she'd light all up again. And when he said good-bye, he'd pick her up, she was so shrunken by then, and give her a hug and a kiss. It shook me up something terrible to watch that."

Once again at eighty-eight he was alone. It was decided by my two California brothers, John and Abben, that he should be moved to a home for the elderly. He was given a good room, had his favorite chair and television set, his box of pictures and other mementos.

He took it hard for a while. Then, picking up what he would call his gumption, he decided to learn to read. It was about time. He'd watch programs on public television showing the text of certain books and plays. By following the words shown with the voice reading them he managed to build up a reading vocabulary.

John learned about it one day when he dropped by to ask if Pa had got any mail he wanted read to him.

"Yeh, I got mail all right. A letter from Fred."

"Well, here, let me read it to you."

"I already read it."

"What?"

With a smile. "Yeh, I learned to read a little." Then Pa explained how he'd done it.

I visited him in October of 1976. He was eighty-nine. I was astonished to see how sharp his mind was. His memory of the old days was very keen. I didn't tell him at the time that I was writing *Green Earth*, a novel about our family, about his and my mother's life before I was born, all the way to her death when I was seventeen. I needed to know some details about the time when our new Reo threw a piston. I first told him what I remembered. He shook his head. "That ain't the way it went." Then he proceeded to go into such exact detail that I knew right away that his version was right and mine

was slightly off. But I kept my version in the novel; it made for a better story.

The second day I was there visiting him, someone asked me a question about something I'd talked about when I'd first arrived. When I finished, Pa gave me a raised brow look. "That ain't the way you told it yesterday." I was stunned. He not only could remember things accurately from the distant past, but he could remember in detail what had happened the day before.

His hearing remained keen until the very end. He had good eyes, and used glasses only for what he called close work. He had a little trouble walking the last couple of years because a young doctor had removed a thick callus from his foot. The callus should have been soaked off. When the scar finally healed he got around quite well again and walked as straight as ever. He prided himself in walking straight even though, as a very tall man, he was born ahead of his time. Three of his sons grew to be taller than he. I became six-nine, Edward John became six-eight, and Floyd became six-six. Henry, the youngest at six-four, became as tall as Pa. The other two, John and Abben, weren't quite as tall. He got after every one of us to stand straight and walk straight. He had to get after me the most because I had trouble with six foot eight doorways.

The last time I saw him I noticed how steady his long fingers were.

Then the next August, 1976, he'd had enough. He told my brother John that he was ready to go. There was nothing more for him to do. He'd pretty much done it all. There was nobody around he knew any more.

John tried to talk him out of the mood. "But you got us. And then there's all your grandchildren and great grandchildren."

"You boys are great, of course. But you're related to me and that ain't the same as being friends. We didn't choose each other."

Several times he was heard to say strange things. One of them was, "Where is everybody? Nobody around I can talk old times with any more. When I start telling my children about that baseball game at Alvord, where they tagged that guy out at home plate with a potato, they say, 'But Pa, you told us that yesterday already'. Well, I want to talk to somebody who'd like to hear that story again because they saw it too. Because it was a funny thing to see."

Again and again John would try to divert his attention to all his wonderful grandchildren, who loved him.

Pa hardly heard him. "Everybody in my bunch is gone. And if there is one left, he won't know from nothing no more. No, I've outlived all other memories but my own. Kids my own age, kids ten years younger, kids twenty years younger, are all gone. Why, I've even outlived my young wife

and her bunch, so I can't talk about even their old stories. I'm forsaken, that's what I am. Left behind.

The nurses would sometimes try to pep him up. It didn't help much. Not even the nurse he sometimes had an eye for could get him out of his mood.

"No, I think I'll go now," he said. "I've had just about everything earth has to offer. I've finished all my jobs. I miss Bea. I want to go jolly her up." He'd shake his hoary old head on which the white hair had become so old it'd turned yellow. "Bea surely was a good wife. We always had a joke going. She was neat too, with the house, with her body. That's important for a woman to do. She always smelled like cinnamon and wild roses."

"Oh, c'mon now, Pa, there's a lot left yet for you to do."

"For the first time I feel as old on the inside as I look on the outside. Ninety is enough. Be good to my grandchildren. Maybe they can do it. Live forever."

Over the next month his vital signs slowly went down. His doctor put him under an oxygen tent.

"What's that thing doing here? I want to go. Get it out of here."

It was removed. His doctor next gave him heavier doses of vitamin pills and had special foods served him.

"I don't want those things. I like the old grub."

Then on the morning of September 30th, 1976, Pa rang for the nurse. He had to go to the bathroom and he'd promised that if he got out of bed he'd always call the nurse. He refused to use a urinal. The nurse helped him to the bathroom and back to his bed.

Pa sat down on the edge of his bed. With a little smile he said, "Well. I feel pretty good. Now I'm ready for a good breakfast."

"I'll get it for you," the nurse said.

Pa lay down then to wait for the breakfast. The moment his head touched the pillow he was gone.

We buried him with Bea. In California.