

“Sure hope things go better tomorrow”

Letters from a Traveling Salesman, 1928–1935

by VaDonna Jean Leaf

*“I made \$9.20 and a jack rabbit today.
Will mail you the rabbit tomorrow.”*

IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION year of 1930, Arthur Leaf (the man who would, some twenty-four years later, become my father-in-law) lost his land, the new house he had built, nearly all of his worldly goods, and, with great shame, his church. Bankruptcy was considered such a disgrace that the church board met and voted to strike his name from the membership. What he did not lose was the spirit to survive hard times by taking on extra work away from his family.

Hard times were not new to Leaf and his family in north-central Iowa. In the mid-1920s he had farmed forty acres that he owned and 160 acres that he rented from his grandfather. When the lease ended unexpectedly in 1928, upon the death of his grandfather, he realized that he would need more income than what a forty-acre farm could provide. Looking around for extra work, he found a job that year as a traveling salesman, a job that helped Leaf provide for his family during eight years of finan-

cial strain, bankruptcy, and recovery.

In 1928, thirty-six-year-old Leaf went on the road, driving a second-hand Ford Model T car and selling subscriptions to the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, and other magazines. He also sold pots and pans, tools, groceries, and spices from a company called Hitchcock Hill, and gardening and nursery stock for Sherman Nursery of Northern Iowa, located in Hampton.

To care for the cows, horses, chickens, gardens, and fields, he left behind his wife, Johanna Marie, and four children: Paul, age seven; John, six; Florence, five; and red-haired baby Dale. Art would be gone during the week on pre-arranged and take-a-chance routes. He planned to come home on weekends to tend to the necessary farm work.

Art and Marie were anxious about this new venture. Would they make a living? Would they be able to make payments on their small



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A jaunty Art Leaf behind the wheel, sometime before he undertook the rigors of winter driving in his new job.

farm? Would the car hold together? How long would the tires last? And there would be expenses on the road for lodging and for meals ("eats" as Art called them).

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Art had said.

Marie was frightened to face alone the hazards of wintertime: wood stoves, chimney-soot fires, frozen pumps, blizzards. And there was the care of four young children, especially Paul, who was sick a great deal. She made one firm stipulation about this separation: Art was to write home every day. Marie and the children wrote back, mostly on one-cent postcards (to save on the three-cent cost of a letter), and sent them to General Delivery in the towns where Art expected to be.

Found sixty years later in an attic, a sample of this correspondence survived. The existing letters are few. They are neither a day-to-day account nor a thorough record. For instance, no letters speak of the couple's grief when youngest son Dale dies of polio in August 1929, nor of their joy when Doris is born in 1932.

Nevertheless, the handful of letters and cards sketches out an Iowa family's life during troubling times. Often written from small-town hotels or from a rented room in a private

home, Art's letters home give glimpses of the life of a traveling salesman during the Great Depression.

Leaf's sales reflected the unsteady cash flow of Iowa farmers, and his letters note the rash of farm auctions. He dealt with customers who backed out on sales or who paid in goods rather than money. Prepared for such barter, he strapped a chicken coop onto his Model T. The chickens he received in trade were worth ten to fifteen cents each at the local grocery store. If he made a good bargain he would get enough cash to cover the subscription price plus a few cents profit. (The letters that follow have been edited slightly.)

*Belmond, Iowa
December 12, 1928*

Dear Marie and kids,

Well, another day is gone and I am back in my room again. I made \$9.20 and a jack rabbit today. Will mail you the rabbit tomorrow but it may be spoiled when it gets there if they keep it [too warm] in the mail [room]. If it is, it will be all right for the chickens.

Am going to try and get a couple more and bring Sat. if I can.

I met a boy on the road carrying two of them



Art Leaf (seated) and Marie Swanson (left). Photograph taken before their marriage.

and a rifle so stopped and asked if he would trade a rabbit for a year of the paper and he said he would so I took him up. The rabbit was still warm so could not mail him till tomorrow.

There are sales around here every day. One sale south of town yesterday, one east today and one north tomorrow so in the afternoons so many people are not home. But it seems to go fairly good anyway.

I took back another dish pan and wrench today, and took some checks dated ahead.

Have you heard from [the mortgage holder on our farm] yet?

There is no ten cent store here that is very good. Every thing is awful high here. They even had the nerve to ask 15 cents for a writing tablet.

My meals today cost me: breakfast 25, dinner 40, supper 15 and my room and car storage 75, and 60 cents for gas. Leaves me \$6.90 clear. Am sending the two checks dated ahead in this letter.

I ordered 3 more cookers and 3 blankets [premium gifts for subscription orders].

And asked for more territory so will know what plans to make for next week.

Am wondering how your cold is coming and how the kids are. Has the snow gone yet? I am

used to bare ground here now so it would seem funny to come back and drive on snow again. I was stuck in the mud today and had to back-up half a mile but most of the roads are gravel.

I don't seem to get any chickens in trade at all now so I guess I didn't need the coop very bad.

How is Ma [Art's mother] getting along? I am anxious to hear from you that you are all right down there. If you don't get a chance to mail anything have your Ma send me a card when she goes downtown [in Stratford] so I will know how you are getting along.

Tell the kids I will be glad to see them when I get back. It seems that it keeps me busy evenings more than I thought it would. I did not get in town till 5:30 and then went and made out the daily report and mailed it [to the home office], and went out and had supper and got the car put away and now it is 8:30 so I will go to bed soon and will mail this tomorrow. Will mail that rabbit at noon tomorrow as the mail going south leaves here at 1:30 in the afternoon so it should get there the next morning.

This is all for tonight. Wish I will get to hear from you in the morning.

Good night
Art

Belmond, Iowa
Dec. 13, 1928

Dear Marie and kids,

It sure has been a miserable day today. Started to rain when I was making my second call and rained all day. Kept on working till dark and made \$6.80 and a pair of Ford coils and my dinner and a tire chain.

Was lucky to have gravel roads all day. The dirt roads are awful now. So I don't know how I will travel tomorrow if it does not freeze up but I think it will do that.

I think I sold another cooker today. He said I should come back next week as he would get his cream check from the Creamery on Sat. and would have the money then. Well, there is not much that I can think of to write about so my letter will not be long tonight. The rainy weather is awful hard on my clothes and overcoat. I did not get wet but got so muddy. I have only one blanket left now and no wrenches and four cookers so will have to work on cookers tomorrow. I have taken in two dish pans and

two wrenches [in trade]. I mailed the rabbit today. Don't know if it will be very good when you get it or not.

I just counted up and have taken 17 orders so far; 7 of them are new and 10 renewals and it totals up to 51 years [of subscriptions].

Well it is after eight o'clock again so I guess I will quit and go to bed all by my lonesome again.

I will be glad to be back home again. Tell the kids I think about them every day and wonder how they are and wonder what they are doing. I suppose they are sleeping now or asking for a drink of water or something.

Wish you were here so I could give you a good hug and kiss but will have to wait till Sat. I guess.

Art

Jewell, Iowa
Monday Eve.
[Date unknown]

Dear Marie,

Well I am here and got a good room but had a poor day as far as business goes but hope it will be better tomorrow.

I stopped and got my check of Bill at Stanhope so if I spend all I got I will have the \$1.50 left when I get to Stratford, anyhow. But I hope I will have a good day tomorrow.

I am going to try and get an early start and make a real day of it and see what I can do. I worked till seven o'clock this eve so haven't had time to get lonesome yet. Just had supper and found a room and got the car in the garage. Well, the room is ready now so I will go out and mail this and come back and go to bed.

Wish I could give you a kiss before going to bed but can't tonight. Am wondering what the kids are doing now and what Paul said when it was bedtime and what sister said when she wants to hug her dad.

Will write you again tomorrow.

Art

BESIDES WORKING as a traveling salesman, Leaf tried to diversify his farm income. He grew and sold seed corn and garden vegetables and raised sweet potatoes for sale at the A. T. John-

son Grocery Store in Stratford. He hatched and sold baby chicks. For a summer of mowing a rural cemetery with a reel mower and cutting around the grave markers with scissors, he earned \$37.50. And he continued selling newspapers and magazines and nursery stock.

But despite Leaf's attempts to patch together an income, in 1930 bankruptcy struck. It was not a bank that held the lien of six thousand dollars on Leaf's small farm, but rather a wealthy man in the community. The lien holder foreclosed with reluctance and sorrow, family members recall, and they continued to speak of him with great respect.

A neighbor was chosen as referee, and it was his duty to tabulate and appraise all the livestock, farm equipment, and household goods. Any item valued under fifty dollars could be retained by the family; any item over fifty dollars in value went to the mortgage holder. Thus the land was taken, as was the house Leaf and his father-in-law had built with their own hands. Because there were children, one cow was left for the family. Two teams of horses and the harness, and the chickens and pigs were taken. An old Fordson tractor with steel wheels, a two-bottom plow, a corn planter, and a cultivator were each valued under fifty dollars and kept — perhaps so Leaf could farm again if he could find land to rent.

"They even came into my house and took the rug off the floor," Marie said later. "And they took my double-tub washing machine, my phonograph and all my Swedish records" (perhaps to compensate for leaving behind machinery).

After the bankruptcy, came dismissal from their church. With wounded hearts that never truly recovered, the Leaf family moved onto a twenty-eight-acre farm. In place of cash rent, the landowner received one-half of all income Art and Marie and their children made on the four acres of hayland and two acres of vegetable garden. (The rest of the farm was timber pasture.)

Leaf continued selling subscriptions and household, farm, and nursery items. And he worked for neighbors making hay or picking corn by hand, earning the usual wage of that time, one dollar a day.

The children did their share of work, too, as ten-year-old Paul reported to his father in a

letter sent to General Delivery, Algona, Iowa.

Aug. 10, 1931

Dear Daddy,

We have pulled the weeds in the squash, corn and beans patch. The pumpkin bugs are on squashes.

We got four tomatoes out of the garden. We are going to the mail box. Florence is going to write to you tomorrow.

Your son,
Paul

ART LEAF WAS BEDFAST most of the winter of 1931/32, suffering from exhaustion, depression, and worry. Paul later recalled that winter as a time "when Dad was in bed all day." Apparently both Marie and her mother, fearing the loss of Leaf's job, had written his employer to

explain that he was sick. In March 1932 Leaf's regional field manager, W. J. Payne, wrote back, expressing concern over Leaf's illness and adding that "Mr. Leaf is one of our good workers and we appreciate him."

Three months later Leaf again needed to take time off, but for a happier reason.

[June 18, 1932]

Dear Mr. Leaf,

I certainly want to congratulate you on the new baby daughter that arrived at your home a few days ago. I hope that both the mother and baby are getting along nicely.

We will excuse you for being off a few days under the circumstances but hope that the youngster will prove an additional incentive for you to work harder and get more business in the future.

E. P. Schwartz
[*Register and Tribune*
subscription manager]



Marie and the children handled the farm work when Art was on the road. Paul (far left, with his aunt Linnea's arm around him) is next to brother John. Marie, center, holds baby Dale.

LETTERS IN THE WINTER of 1934/35 reveal that Leaf was still selling subscriptions on the road, driving across north-central Iowa in an unheated car.

Lakota
Jan. 15, 1935

Dear Marie,

Well, I got here about 10 o'clock. Went out and got a two year [subscription,] all I got all day. Was very cold here, right close to zero so had a hard time to keep warm while working. Quite a little snow here [too] so that helped to make things disagreeable. They had a heavy sleet just before the snow so from [Humboldt] and up the paving was like a sheet of glass so had to drive very carefully.

I got a room in a little hotel here. I don't think I am going to like it very well but had to take it as it is the only place in town. Got my car in the garage for the night.

The room cost me \$2.00 for the week so thought I had better stay here than drive to another town.

I have not heard anything of the other men yet so don't know how things are.

Things don't look quite so prosperous as they did at [Ottosen?] but they had good crops here.

It was really [too] cold to go good to work today. Hope it warms up tomorrow.

Tell Paul if it stays awful cold down there he will have to see that the cows have enough to eat.

Am looking for a card tomorrow to hear how Paul was when he woke up.

Tell the kids hello and that [it] is rather lonesome here all by myself. Am going to make out my report now so will close.

Art

Lakota
Jan. 17, 1935

Dear Marie and kids,

I did not hear from you today but suppose it was so bad weather the kids did not go to school so you did not get a chance to mail anything.

I did not have a very good day today. Only sold a five [-year subscription] and took a note on that. It sure seems everything is against a person on this job. It was two below zero this morning and it is going to be colder tomorrow.



John, Paul, and Florence Leaf took on extra farm chores while their father was on the road.

I had planned to drive over to see Joe Larson [former neighbor and distant relative], but I did not feel like going out any more after I got in and got warmed up.

My foot has been hurting bad all day today and I wanted to get my shoe off and rest it.

I wish you would see what a different way of living this is to what we are used to. Here we are living together in this hotel, one horse buyer, one cattle buyer and his young wife, one veterinary, one mechanic and me. I sat downstairs and talked with them till eight o'clock and then came up here to make out reports and write this letter.

The horse buyer is an old man about 65 I guess, he was sore tonight, he got a truck to go out and get a truck load of horses for him and when they were coming back another truck crowded them off the road so they upset and he was pinned fast in the wreckage for about an hour. But he was not hurt more than bruised some.

I never got stuck today but pushed a lot of snow.

If you should have to call me by phone the name of this place I stay, it is Clara's Cafe.

I sure hope things go better tomorrow. I have not been able to send in totals yet.

I sure need business. I may work some on



Portion of 1931 newspaper photograph, in which Art Leaf (front row, left) takes his place with fifty-six other county managers at a Des Moines sales convention.

Sat. so may not get home til late unless I hear from you that you need me home early.

Tell the kids I wish I was going home tomorrow. It will take at least 5 hours to drive home the way things are now.

Art

*Thursday morning
[Undated]*

Dear Art,

The ground is covered with snow and it is still snowing. Paul got all the wood worked up and piled in nice round piles, one of split, one of chunks, one he can make either chunks or fine, and then he has a pile of chunks by the door and one of fine on the porch so we get along fine on wood. I slept good last night. The boys slept down stairs. I have an awful cold in my head. Doris counts on her fingers when Dad is coming home. Hope you bring me a few

hens. Paul is going to kill one hen today for his birthday today. Now I must dress baby. The children are all O.K. Doris slept good last night. We got your letter yesterday.

Love, Marie

THAT YEAR, 1935, Art and Marie and the children were able to rent a 218-acre farm with fifty acres of cropland, along the Boone River in Hamilton County. (In time they would buy the land.) The family branched into making sorghum syrup. Leaf named his product Bell's Mill Pure Cane Sorghum, after his new community. Paul, now fourteen, was put in charge of the cooking operations. Leaf and his son John handled the field operations. As the years passed and the demand for Bell's Mill Sorghum increased, they planted more acres of the sweet cane and hired ten to twelve workers each fall during the sorghum-cooking season.

The family joined a new church, which Art served as deacon for many years. Marie went back to teaching rural school. Paul was allowed to go to school only if there was no pressing farm work — often only one or two days a week. Nevertheless he was the salutatorian of his high school graduating class in 1940. Art and Marie's two daughters would be college graduates.

Art and Marie continued to live frugally. They feared debt and any purchase that was not essential, convinced that hard times were again just around the corner. They never bought a new car, new machinery, or carpet for the house — even though Marie often longed for a wool rug "like other folks have." Art did all the grocery buying, a task he had taken over during the hard years, when Marie had come home shamed and crying because she had been denied credit at the grocery store. They faithfully tithed to their church and often took great boxes of foodstuffs and clothes to families having difficulties.

In 1969 Marie died of cancer, and in 1976 Art died, at the age of eighty-three. For many years, he and Marie had owned their farm debt free. They had accumulated savings and enjoyed the respect of the community. Their story, told in Art's letters, is a tribute to one family's perseverance through hard times. □