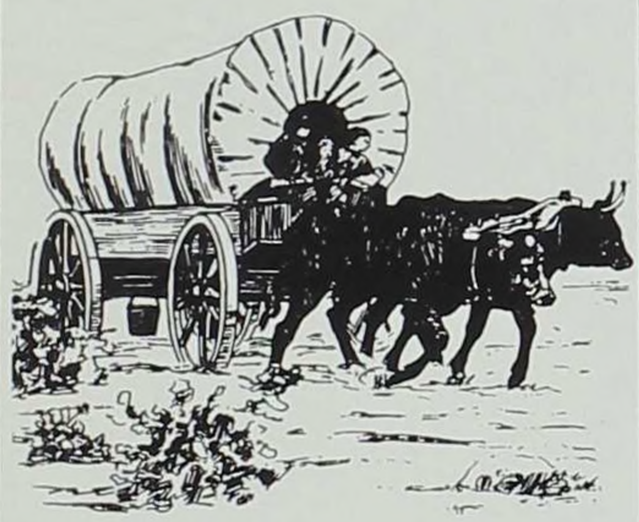
Iowa sculptor 160



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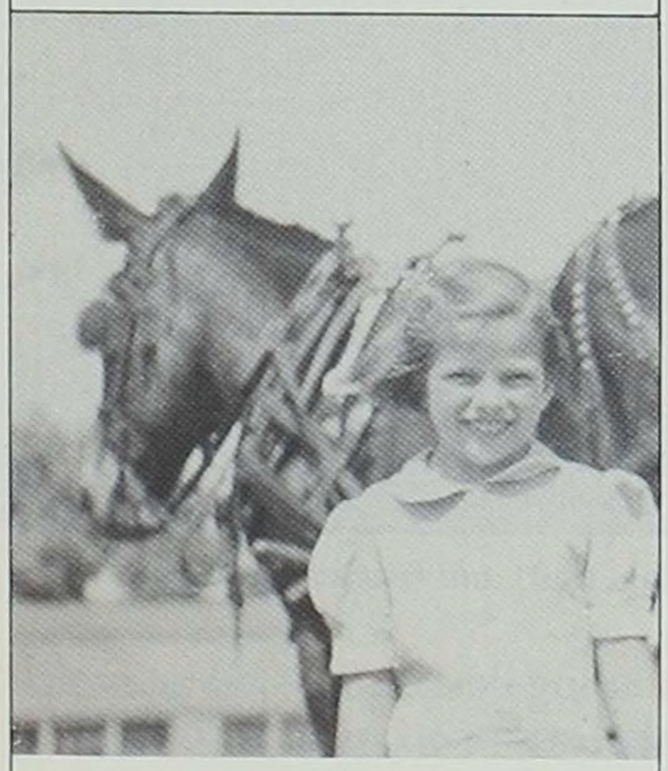

Rural childhood 146

COVER: Young Frederic Lord blows bubbles over toy soldiers in this 1912 photo. The photo is only one of a thousand in the Mather-Bush Collection, featured in this issue, beginning on page 174.

The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

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Letters from readers on inside back cover.

Farm

by Joanne Meusburger

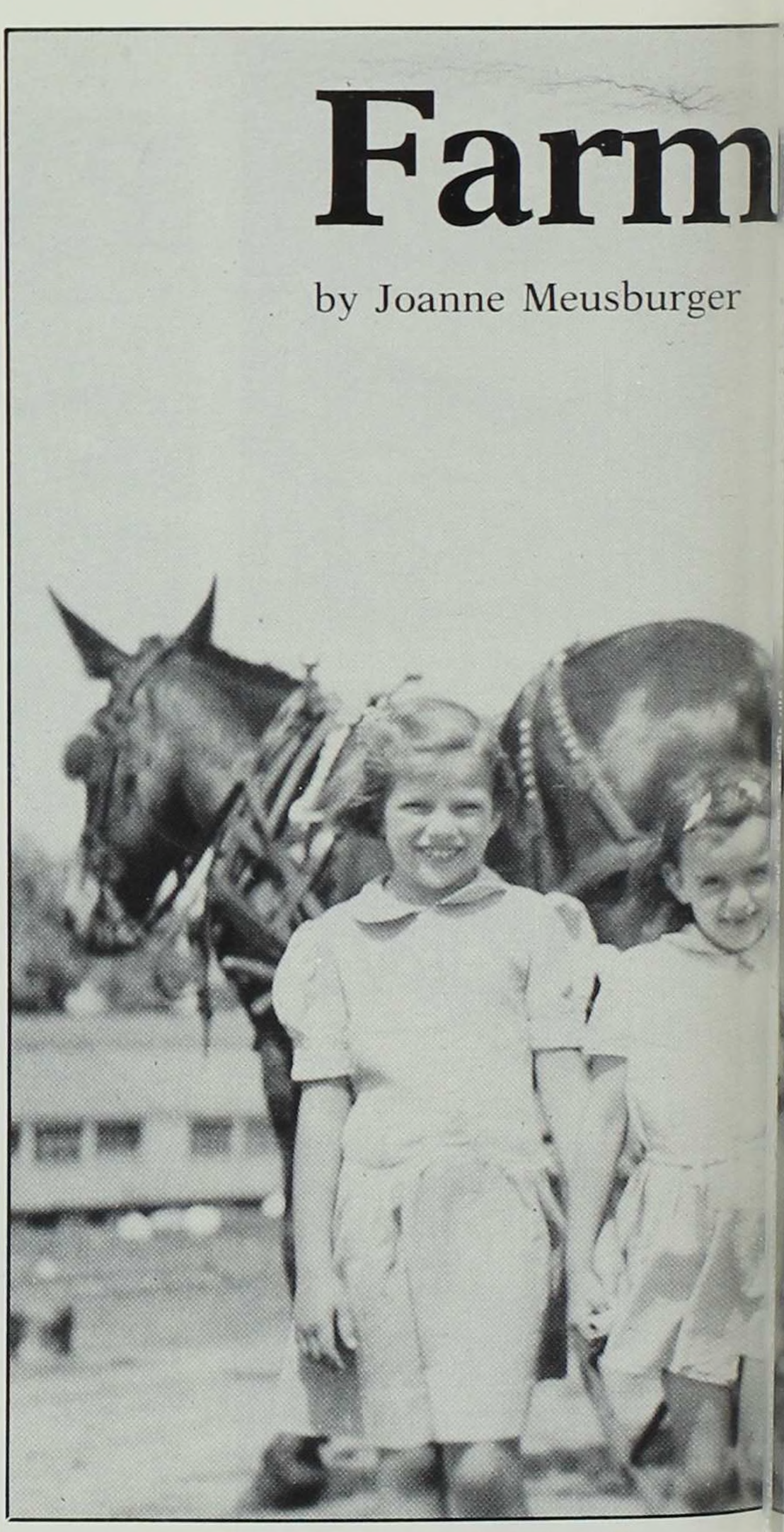
Part 1

OUR FARM HAD BEEN in the family for three generations. It was an average farm in size, as farms go, covering 240 acres of western Iowa's Corn Belt in Sac County. My father and grandfather farmed together, raising a variety of grain crops and livestock. My father, Ronald Wilson, was a grower-producer of Pfister hybrid corn, necessitating a large warehouse for storage of the bagged seed and an office to handle sales. Besides the other usual farm buildings, there was the original frame house where my grandparents had lived when they first homesteaded the place at the turn of the century and where the hired man later resided; the large farmhouse where I lived with my parents and sister; and the smaller frame bungalow which my grandparents had built and moved into when my father and mother got married.

Growing up, I disliked being called a "farm girl." Even though I loved the lifestyle, I perceived it to be a less sophisticated frame of reference than if I had grown up in the city. As time went by, however, people asked me, "What was it like to grow up on a farm?" Sometimes I detected both curiosity and envy. Perhaps it now recalls a simpler, more innocent time when life moved more slowly and values were more clearly defined.

That doesn't mean life was boring. There was always plenty to do on a farm, but if an activity didn't present itself, my sister, Ruth, invented one.

The winter I was a baby — 1935/36 — was one of the hardest winters in Iowa history. By "hardest," most midwesterners mean that there was so much snow and bad weather that it was hard to get anywhere or do anything. Growing up, I heard tales about that winter — the snowbanks piled as high as the attic window in front of Grandma's house, and the snowplows that pushed through the roads and shoved the snow into banks as high as the telephone wires. That sounds exaggerated but Mother took pictures to prove it. The one of my



The author as a child (left) and friends, July 1943.

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Not all the winters were that famous, but it did seem as though we had more snow when I was little than Iowa does now. Maybe it was because those were the days before good roads,

Girl

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

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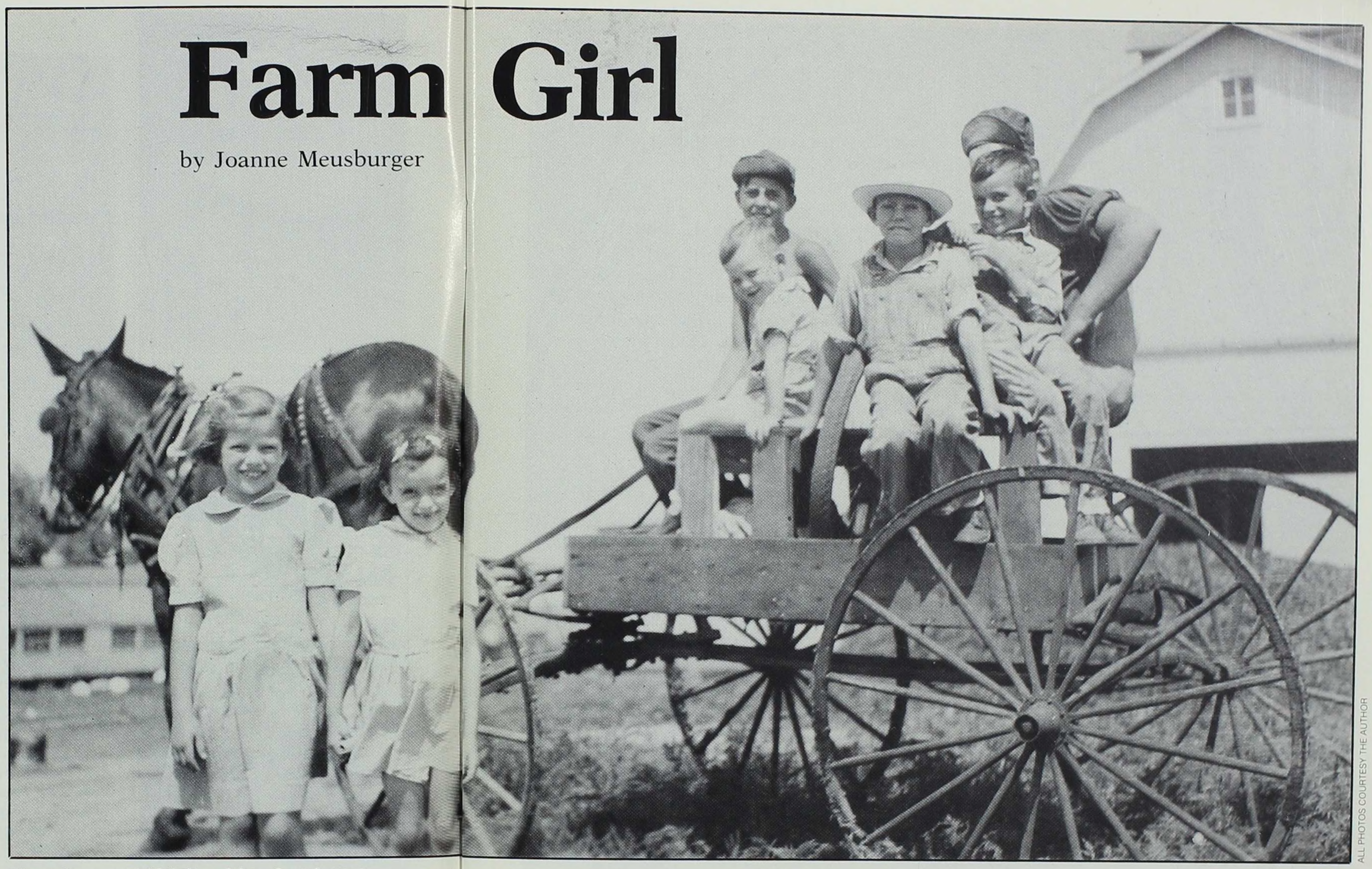
Since we lived four miles from Lytton, where we attended a consolidated school, the first thing we would do was to turn on the radio and listen to the "no-school" announcements. Ours was usually one of the last to be announced because the blizzard never looked as bad in town, so the superintendent of schools would first make a dry run with one of the buses into the country before he called the radio station.

There would also be a "line ring" for those who weren't listening to the radio. The telephone operator would ring one continuous ring on the party line and everyone would pick up their receivers to hear "There will be no school

Farm Girl

by Joanne Meusburger



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Snow may have hindered 1940s school bus drivers, but to a child it was the material of which fairylands were made.

at Lytton today." In the worst of storms, the electricity would go out or the telephone lines would be down, and we just took it for granted that the school would be closed.

After a blizzard had stopped, Ruth and I bundled into our snowsuits and were allowed to play outside. In those fleece-lined bulky pants, jackets, and hoods, we were ready to face anything. First of all, we explored our snow fairylands. There was always the area down by the tire swing where the evergreen boughs were pulled down toward the ground under the weight of the snow. The swing would be covered with ice and icicles, and the whole picture would have a still, breath-taking quality after the fury of the storm.

After this first excursion, we were ready to enjoy the mountains of snow in every sense. We had seen it — now we would smell, taste, hear, and feel it. Some people say it is impossible to smell snow. However, I will always associate that clear, crisp air that makes your nose tingle, with new-fallen snow. Cold weather without snow is never quite the same.

With the new snow crunching under our overshoes, we would pretend we were explorers in an arctic land. Highstepping through the steep drifts, our feet would break the snow softly and then crunch at the depth of our footprints as our weight packed the snow into the firmer interior of the drift. At first, we were content just to crisscross the unblemished surface. Then we would give in to the impulse to roll in the snow, fling it about, and really explore it.

Mother would vainly warn us, "Try not to get wet!" First there would be the very explainable accident of falling down. Once wet, there was no sense in not making a thorough job of it. Snow angels came next. To create these beauties, it is necessary to stand erect and fall straight over backwards. Otherwise there will be an unangel-like depression in the vicinity of the waistline. With the impression of the body and head accomplished, all one has to do is sweep the arms back and forth at the sides to make wings. The final trick is to stand up without ruining the angel's figure or giving it oversized feet. We usually had to attempt several before we were satisfied.

With our backsides pretty well dampened, we would proceed to work on the front. If the snow was good and wet, we could make snowmen or throw snowballs. We would each make a bushel basket of snowballs and then proceed to have a war, using the snowballs as grenades. The battlefronts would be either side of a huge drift which always climbed up one side of our back fence and slid down the other. I would diligently stockpile as many snowballs as Ruth, but when the signal was given to "THROW," the differences in our size, strength, and ability to aim would result in a bombardment that forced me to use my arms as a shield rather than to hurl the sad specimens which lay crumbled in my basket.

Mother, having been through this before, would finally "Yoo-hoo" for us to come in. Mother's "yoo-hoo" could be heard almost anywhere on our 240 acres and she knew it. It was not to be ignored. Still, by the time she had swept off the caked snow on my snowsuit and pried the icy muffler from my face, it took a good fifteen minutes in front of the oven door to thaw me out.

Since the countryside was quite flat, there weren't many ready-made hills for sliding and sledding. About the only thing available to us was the mound which formed over the roof of the storm cellar. The drawback here was that the ground beside it was flat, so that once our sled had traveled the short distance down the side and off the concrete edge, it was likely to fall with a plop into the drift which so deceivingly sloped toward the fence.

Our best hope was for the weather to stay cold so that the snow would settle instead of melt. Then one of the high drifts in the garden might become firm enough to hold our weight. For this purpose, nothing worked better than a deep, shiny grain shovel. Straddling the base and gripping the wooden handle to use as a rudder, we could gather enough momentum to glide for quite a distance after reaching flat ground. The smooth surface of the metal would slip and slide this way and that, swinging us about and sometimes turning us completely around.

Sometimes when the snow had thawed a bit, the weather then turned cold, and ice ponds would form. By getting a good running start in a pair of leather-soled shoes, one could travel

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CYNTHIA MOORE

most of the way across the pond without the benefit of blades.

One day Mother decided to join in this fun. I had gone with her to gather the eggs. As we crossed the barnyard Mother set down the pail and eyed the fair-sized pond which had formed there. "Let's try it!" she exclaimed. I needed no prodding, so off we sailed. When I skidded to a halt on the opposite side, I found that Mother was no longer beside me. Instead, she sat in the middle of the ice with one foot twisted beneath her.

Two days later the swelling had gone down enough to have x-rays and the broken bone was set. Mother said something about "slipping on the ice" and Grandma said something about "acting one's age," and I loyally kept my mouth shut. A week later we found the pail of eggs where she had set it down. I guess the blow to her ego hurt most of all.

MY GRANDMOTHER WILSON had a great repertoire of poetry. She was the grandmother who lived next door to us on the farm, and I can remember sitting spellbound while she recited "A Leak in the Dike" or "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." My father inherited this gift and entertained us on long trips by singing songs and recalling poems passed down by memory. We begged to hear them again and again, so that in time we learned them ourselves.

We also had favorite storybooks which we liked to have read to us. One of our favorite series were the Becky and Benny stories which appeared monthly in the *Country Gentleman* magazine. Grandma cut them out and pasted them over the pages of an old book. We asked to have them read so many times that eventually we had the words memorized and could repeat a story verbatim, even knowing when to turn the page. Ruth made her first stage appearance at age three, sitting on Grandma's lap to "read" a story to the audience.

We were never shy about performing in front of others. If asked to be on the program for a community gathering, we would spend hours planning a skit or rehearsing a duet. Usually our theatrical aspirations were realized on the stage of our local community hall.

That structure was a small converted church which had been purchased from the Presbyterians and moved out to Cedar Township from Lytton when a new church had been built. It sat solidly on its stone foundation surrounded by a fence enclosing a few feet of grass on each side, beyond which cornfields stretched in three directions. Actually, there was a cornfield in front of it, too, but that was separated by the road. It was here that township members gathered for elections, Farm Bureau meetings, the annual Neighbors' Club Christmas program, and 4-H socials.

Inside, rows of screwed-down theatre seats faced a fair-sized stage. A canvas mural attached to the wall made a permanent backdrop for the platform. It displayed a pastoral scene of a winding road that wandered off in the distance bordered by myriads of flowers and very leafy trees. A wicker chair and couch, donated by someone, served as props in front of it.

To either side of the stage were the wings which also served as dressing rooms. In one of these rooms were the ropes which let down the front curtain. The ropes came across the ceiling on a pulley device and dropped down into the dressing room where they were wound around a peg on the wall. Because of its antiquity and habit of lowering itself unevenly, this curtain was used only for drama productions. Then it

took a strong adult to handle its heavy weight and unpredictable movements.

The entire curtain was rolled onto one long roller which stretched across the width of the stage. As each foot of the canvas came into view, the advertisements of various merchants were revealed. Some of the establishments were still in business and others were already outdated. In the center of the curtain, another country scene appeared. This time there was a stream and a log cabin among the flowers and trees.

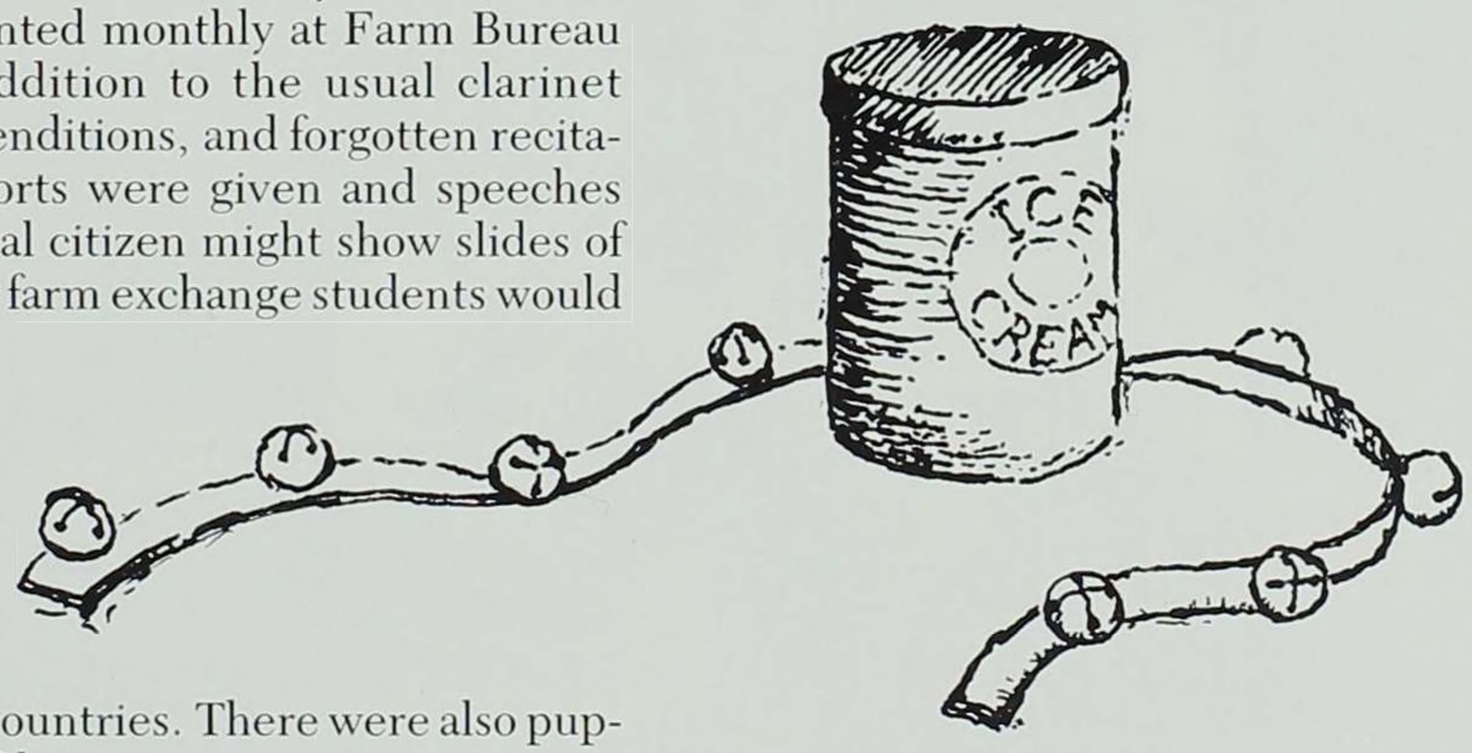
Very seldom did the curtain reach the bottom in one smooth trip. Amid the squeaks and rattles and the muffled gasps of the rope handler, it would come down a few inches, slip down on one end, retreat back towards the ceiling, roll a few feet more, and then plunge down the rest of the way. The upward ascent simply reversed the ordeal.

Under that curtain, a variety of entertainment was presented monthly at Farm Bureau meetings. In addition to the usual clarinet solos, soprano renditions, and forgotten recitations, book reports were given and speeches delivered. A local citizen might show slides of recent travels or farm exchange students would tell about their countries. There were also puppet shows and Christmas pageants.

Even before our stage debuts, Ruth and I had been entertaining captive audiences. When Mother and Daddy were entertaining guests at home, the adults would politely applaud a fifteen-minute performance which had kept all the offspring occupied during a two-hour rehearsal. (No one considered hiring baby-sitters but simply brought the children along.) Invariably these productions would begin with a vocal rendition of the "Three Old Maids of Lynn" or a piano version of "Canadian Capers." Then there would be the recitation of a poem or two, climaxed by the staging of a play.

Sometimes the script was supplied by stories from *Jack and Jill* magazine, but often they were original compositions. Once I learned all the speaking parts and songs of the operetta Ruth was in at school so we could give our own version. When one of the cast came down with measles two days before the school performance, I was rushed in to replace her after Ruth proudly informed the harried director that I knew the part. I was much younger than the other actors, but Ruth had coached me well.

When I was four years old and Ruth was eight, we entertained the audience with our rhythm band. Ruth and I played all of the instruments, accompanied by Mother at the piano. They ranged from beans rattling in a round ice cream carton, or coffee can lids with handles clapped together, to drums converted from inner tubes, and sleigh bells fastened to bands around our wrists. We would choose a



song like "Jingle Bells" and work each sound into its appointed place. When I see drummers in a band today, with four or five different contraptions to operate at once, I appreciate their skill.

MY FIRST DOLL was a cotton-stuffed cloth cutie with a painted cardboard face. I spotted her in the window of the five-and-ten-cent store. On each trip to town, I would head

Joanne and Ruth Wilson cradle part of their playtime population — two dolls and a cooperative kitten.

for the window and was broken-hearted one day to find her gone. Naturally Mother had been the purchaser and two weeks later we were reunited under the Christmas tree.

There were many more dolls over the years. Most of them were rubber and could survive daily bathings. I had one well-scrubbed doll, Elsie, who became completely colorless from washing. After her daily dunking, I would leave her to dry in the hammock of the roller towel in the washroom. Invariably, she would fall out on her head when Daddy unsuspectingly dried his hands for dinner.

We had no gorgeous bride dolls, and only one with hair. This one exception had been given to me by a kind lady who shared my hospital room when I had my appendix out. It was the only red-haired doll I had ever seen, and I thought she was beautiful, but she was to lead a lonely existence because she could not stand up to the wear and tear of everyday doll family life.

Besides our real dolls, we had hundreds of the paper variety. Some came from regular paper doll books but others we cut from the comic section of the Sunday paper where they were printed every week. Since these had limited wardrobes, we spent hours designing clothes out of wallpaper samples. Each character was carefully stored between two pages of an old copy of *Good Housekeeping*.

We also had a scrapbook which we made into apartments for these dolls. A blank page was divided into two parts — an upstairs and a downstairs. Furnishings were cut from pages of the mail-order catalog and pasted into place. We might furnish a den with golf clubs and fishing tackle for a bachelor or give a kitchen and a pink-ruffled boudoir to a domestic type. Once there was even a fairy who merited bushes and flowers from the seed catalog and a $19 birdbath set in the middle of her garden paradise.

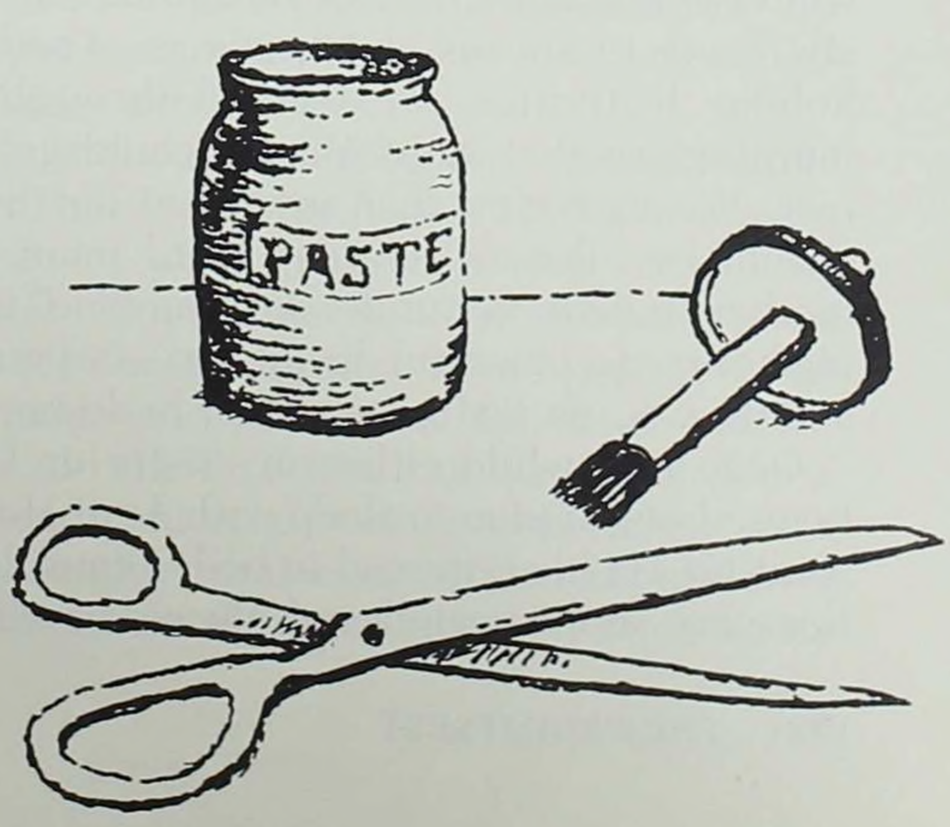
Dolls and playhouses go together, of course. Ruth and I had several different playhouses that I can recall. Our first was in the evergreen trees that bordered the road along the edge of the grove. Under the low-hanging branches forming cool, shady rooms with pine-needle carpets, a kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bath took shape in our imaginations. We salvaged discarded mirrors and lamps, and we made beds and tables out of wooden crates. Stumps became coffee tables and the lowest branches made pantry shelves. With the basic ingredients at hand, we made dozens of mud pies decorated with pine cones and pink nitrogen fertilizer scooped from the open fertilizer sacks in the barn. Mother never threw away a can or carton that would look realistic on our shelves. To this day she opens cans from the bottom from force of habit, as if she was still saving them for us.

When snow and cold weather forced us inside, we found an empty corner in the seed corn warehouse. Empty packing crates made good store counters for bakery goods and canned food displays. Mother and Grandma were occasional "customers" or we bought from each other. When we got tired of that, we could always play "hide and seek" among the piled bags of corn.

Then there was the beauty shop and drugstore in the orchard. Prescriptions were mixed and new hairdos created. One day a haircut was included for one of the neighbor girls and the shop was closed.

Probably our most elaborate playhouse was in an abandoned hog shed. Mother scrubbed it out with lye water and then gave us permission to move in. Built of wood, it had two rooms measuring about four by nine feet each, with doors to let in the light and a slanting roof which was too low for adults but high enough for pigs and children.

We threw ourselves into a frenzy of domesticity. Feed sacks became door curtains and orange crates formed cupboards. We hung



magazine pictures on the walls and fashioned a board sidewalk leading up to the playhouse. Daddy contributed grass seed, which we planted around the house, and flower seeds, which were planted in neat rows behind it.

Just as our garden patch was beginning to boast green sprouts, an extra litter of pigs demanded that the shed be moved back to the hog lot. I think Daddy was as sorry as we were when the curtains came down and the boxes were dragged out.

BECAUSE MY FATHER was an only child and my mother had only one sister, Ruth and I were left with only one aunt and no first cousins. I suppose this was regrettable in some ways, but we were always glad to be my aunt's only nieces.

When I was still quite small, I nicknamed her "Aunt Ha Ha" because she laughed at my baby antics. Indeed the name fit her warm smile and gracious personality.

To us, Aunt Ha Ha represented Culture and Sophistication with capital letters. First of all, she lived in Chicago, a city we connected with wickedness and excitement. Second, she was a math teacher and had even taught a couple of radio's "Quiz Kids." Third, she lived in an apartment and had a circle of interesting friends. All of these factors combined to make her an enchanting hostess or guest, whichever the case might be.

We saw her about twice a year, during winter and summer school vacations. She usually came to see us at Christmas. Amid the holiday festivities, we tiptoed through the mornings so that Aunt Ha Ha could get her rest. We marveled that anyone at our house should be allowed to sleep until noon. My mother could never understand anyone "wasting hours of a beautiful day in bed" and was up at 6:00 A.M. no matter what her bedtime.

Once in a while either my sister or I was granted permission to sleep with Aunt Ha Ha. Aunt Ha Ha liked to read in bed. I considered this very sophisticated and always brought a book along to do likewise. As the minutes went by and I became sleepy, I forced myself to lie absolutely still so that she wouldn't be distracted from her book and notice how late it was. When at last she did notice, she would exclaim, "My goodness! Your mother will scold if she finds out how late I've kept you up!" It was a delicious conspiracy we shared.

At 7:00 A.M., however, Mother would be standing by the bed whispering, "Time to get up. Don't wake Aunt Ha Ha." I would be back

A visit from Aunt Ha Ha (Gladys Willcutt, center) calls for a three-generation photograph. In the wintertime, the children's maternal grandmother, Mabel Willcutt (left) lived with the Wilsons. Ida Willcutt Wilson stands to the right of young daughters Ruth and Joanne.

in the world of early risers, not daring to reveal our night-owl activities, except to a jealous sister.

Aunt Ha Ha obligingly toured our latest projects, watched the play we had rehearsed for her benefit, and read aloud to us from our favorite books. Indeed she was the originator of most of our childhood library. Among her acquaintances, she knew several children's authors so that some of our books were personally autographed. We developed into avid readers, filling cards from the library and reading Mother's Literary Guild books before she had a chance to read them herself.

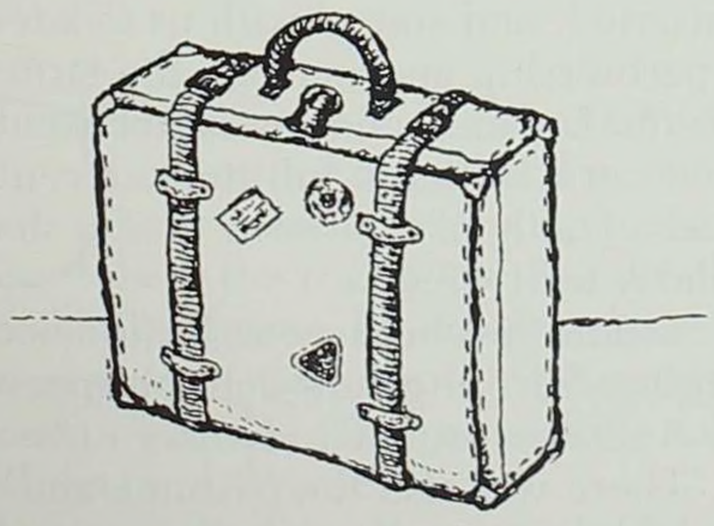
Our rare visits to Chicago were great occasions. We were caught up in a whirl of trips to the Museum of Science and Industry, rides on the Marshall Field's escalators, tours of sidewalk art shows and Chinatown mysteries, and swims in Lake Michigan. At her apartment, we were fascinated with the Murphy bed which disappeared into the wall.

I especially recall the night we went "night-clubbing." I'm sure no one called it "night-clubbing" then or Mother would never have consented, but we always remembered it as exactly that. My aunt was dating a very charming man-about-town at the time, and he suggested that we should see Chicago at night.

No one ever looked more tall, dark, and handsome to a ten-year-old than he did to me that night as he arrived to be our escort. Our first stop was a German beer garden. I have been in beer gardens since that were a travesty of the name in comparison to my childhood impression of this romantic place. It had a grass carpet to rival any golf green, gaily colored umbrellas, roaming musicians, and waitresses dressed in Old World costumes. I absorbed every detail so that it is as vivid to me today as it was then.

When we reluctantly left this exciting adventure, fully expecting to be driven home, we found ourselves next in a quaint place called "The Blue Danube." Here I was introduced to my first live orchestra, Bohemian costumes, and yogurt. Years later Greenwich Village was to make little impression on me in comparison. Somehow I felt I had already "lived."

I don't recall going to other places that night although to this day Ruth and I insist that there were many more. Mother denies this, and I'm sure she is right. Like sleeping late, visits to two such "doubtful" establishments would be quite a concession for Mother to make, even to her only sister. Mother, you'll remember, did not believe in "wasting time."



AS WITH MOST CHILDREN, the year was "calendared" not so much by months as by holidays. We looked forward to each one with much anticipation and preparation.

New Year's Eve was the one night of the year when we were allowed to stay up past midnight. Mother would pop corn, and we would sit around playing "Old Maid" and "Authors." About 10:00 P.M. Mother would serve ice cream, and we would turn on the radio to Times Square to listen to the celebration. By midnight the grape juice toast to the new year was almost anticlimactic.

Other holidays had their own special significance. There was May Basket Day. For weeks, Ruth and I would construct new baskets or remodel old ones. As we lined the baskets up on cookie sheets, Mother would pop corn and bake fudge and divinity to fill them and we would add the final touch of lilac sprig. Since our friends and neighbors were spread out over a considerable rural area, Mother chauffeured us in the car, making ten or twelve stops for us

to deliver twenty or thirty baskets. She would wait at the end of the lane while we would sneak up to the back door of each farmhouse and deposit the basket on the step, calling "May Basket!" to announce its presence. Then we would race back to the idling car before we were caught, running slower if we wanted to be kissed!

Oddly enough, Memorial Day was one of the biggest holidays of our year. This was because of the Memorial Day Parade in which we took part. The parade formed at the Courthouse Square in Sac City and wound through the business district, across the bridge, and down the road to the cemetery. There, at the monument to the war dead, the ceremonies were held.

I first participated in the mile hike to the cemetery at four years of age, joining Ruth as one of the flower girls. Our instructions were to drop half of our flowers over the bridge on the way to the cemetery in memory of the sailors, and lay the other half on the monument in tribute to the soldier heroes. Carried away by the crowds and stirring band music, I flung my entire bouquet over the bridge railing — only to have it land ingloriously on one of the bridge supports rather than float majestically around the bend in the river with the other floral tributes. My tears were lessened when Ruth hastily gave me part of her remaining bunch to lay on the soldier's grave.

When I was six years old, Ruth and I were asked to recite "In Flanders Fields" and "The Soldier's Reply." This was on the Memorial Day following Pearl Harbor. As I memorized the words, Mother carefully explained their meaning.

That day, we took our places at the head of the flower girls. We marched down the beautiful tree-lined archway which led to the monument. The twenty-one gun salute contrasted with the calm and serenity of the quiet graves and shaded roadways. When the last strains of "Taps" had died away and the answering echo had rung back from its station on a nearby hill, we recited the words, slowly and clearly as Mother had drilled us. I was old enough to understand the meaning of the words, and that year I walked the mile back with the rest of the procession.

Our observance of Halloween was a family affair. Living in the country, we couldn't walk door to door to trick or treat, although I did try it once. I was four years old and decided on my own to cut holes in a sheet for eyes, and tiptoe in the dark to peer into Grandma's kitchen window and tap on the pane. She was standing right in front of it, lost in thought over the dishpan, and she jumped so violently that *she* scared *me*. I jumped off the back steps and ran pell-mell, pulling the sheet awry so that it shut off my view through the holes and resulted in a headlong sprawl through our own kitchen door. It was hard to convince me that the ghost in the night had been me.

On Halloween night, each member of the family would choose a costume from the dress-up box in the attic. (This included my grandparents and Helen and Wayne, of course. Helen and Wayne were our "hired man" and "hired girl." In storybook fashion, they fell in love, married, and stayed with us to later buy into a partnership and manage the farm after my grandfather died and my father went into the seed corn business full-time. Eventually they had a family of their own to also share in our holiday festivities.)

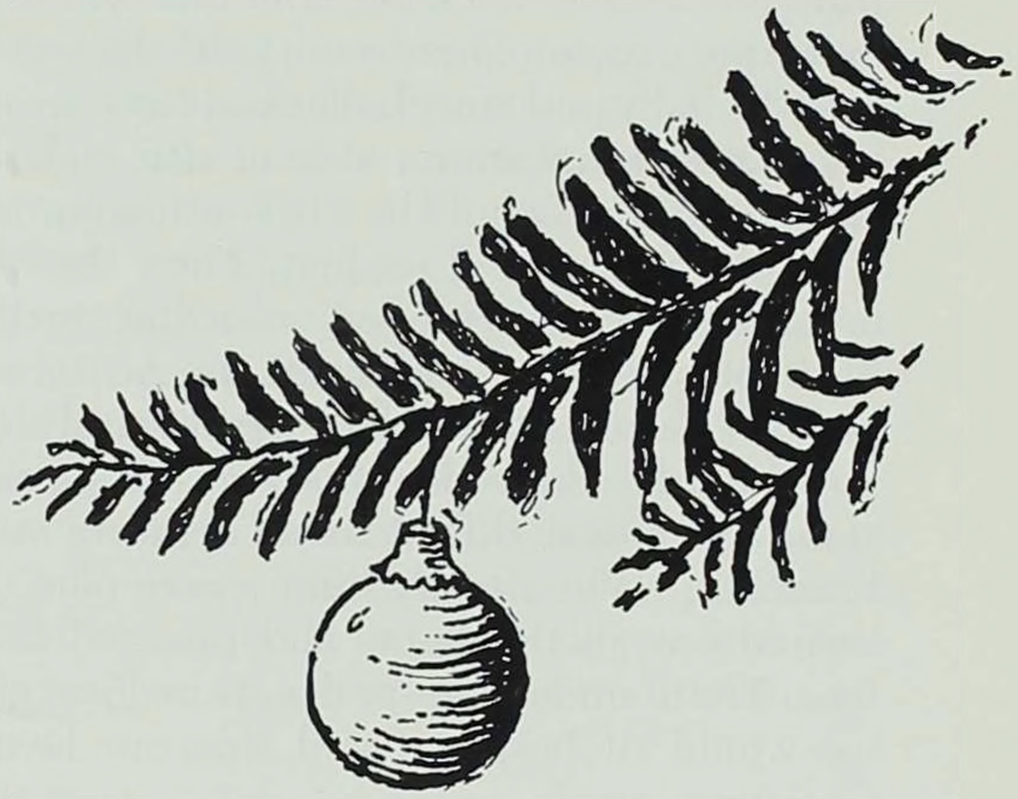
The costume box held a wonderful selection, accumulated from grade-school operettas, minstrel shows, and Christmas entertainments. There was also the costume and mask Daddy had worn as the girl singer in a mock wedding; the riding outfit Mother bought when she taught school in Idaho; the long,

bustled dresses Grandma wore in the Gay Nineties; and the kimonos Aunt Ha Ha brought us from Chinatown. Each year when we opened the lid, the trunk seemed as magical and mysterious as a pirate's treasure chest.

When everyone was appropriately dressed, we had a style show, complete with dramatizations. For example, Mother and Daddy might team up to act out Maggie and Jiggs, complete with rolling pin. It was always so much fun that we would go back to the attic to reappear in three or four different costumes before we ran out of ideas.

We did make one other attempt at "trick or treat." Dressed in black, with black stocking masks, we allowed Mother to paint our hands and arms with luminous paint, guaranteed on the label to wash right off. Mother took us in the car to the neighbor's house, where everyone was conveniently seated at the supper table. Mother turned off the headlights and engine and coasted into the driveway so that we could sneak up to the window screeching and waving our bodiless arms. To our delight, the victims registered the proper horror and they were only too glad to ward off any more scares by inviting us in for milk and cookies.

It turned out to be an expensive venture, however, as the luminous paint was not washable after all. We didn't mind, but Mother and a turpentine rag had other ideas. Instead of arms without bodies, we were soon convinced that we were about to have bodies without arms.



CHRISTMAS WAS ALWAYS A momentous occasion. For one thing, there were many people around to share the traditions. Besides the four in our family, there were my grandparents living next door, "Grossmutter" (Grandmother Willcutt), Aunt Ha Ha visiting from Chicago, and Helen and Wayne.

Christmas shopping began early. Ruth and I were given fifty cents each to buy gifts for those on our lists. It took us a long time in the "dime store" to find just the right powder puff for Mother, red bandana handkerchief for Daddy, and pocket comb for Grandpa, but we were not offered adult guidance unless we asked for it. Neither were we asked to divulge the secrets of our purchases. We wrapped the packages behind closed doors, and no one laughed if the wrapping didn't quite fit.

Aunt Ha Ha shut herself in her bedroom to wrap her presents. We missed her company, but the beautiful packages that emerged were worth the wait. Mother always reused paper kept from previous occasions and pressed ribbons to be used again too, but Aunt Ha Ha started fresh each year with gorgeous metallic wrappings pleated over neat white boxes bearing the names of Chicago stores and huge bows created especially for that one special package. She always called us to help her carry the gifts down to the tree, never scolding when we shook or squeezed them.

The Christmas tree created a great deal of bustle. Daddy was the undisputed purchaser because he was a good judge of the texture of the tree and could tell if it would last through New Year's Day without too much shedding. Ruth and I always argued for a taller tree than the one he bought, but his choice would look quite lofty by the time it was elevated in its pail of sand.

Decorating the tree took an entire evening. First Daddy would string on the lights while

Ruth and I stood back and told him where the bare spots were. Then we would dig out the colored balls and tinsel. They always seemed brand new to us after a year of attic isolation. Each year there would be a new ornament, and it would be fastened on first. Then the other ornaments were arranged according to their best color schemes and locations. At last each piece of tinsel had to be laid on separately. (We never tolerated the slip-shod way some people stand back and throw tinsel strands at the branches.) When everything was in place, we turned out all the lights and plugged in the tree. Then, under the spell of its magical glow, we would sit beside it and sing our favorite Christmas carols.

As Christmas Eve drew near, the packages piled up under the tree and spilled out behind neighboring chairs. There were packages from everyone, to everyone. One year we tried drawing names, but Daddy bought presents for everyone anyway, labeled with crazy things like "Merry Christmas Eve" and "Happy December 25th." We all felt so guilty to be getting his presents without giving any back that the next year we went back to our old habits.

Christmas Eve would begin with the church service. Most of the family usually had a part in the Christmas program. Daddy led the songs, Mother supervised her Sunday School class, and Ruth and I took part in various pageants, choirs, and tableaux.

The services weren't over until 9:00 P.M. or so, but we were just beginning. When we returned home, Mother would gather chairs in the living room and Daddy would take up his position as official Santa Claus. Ruth and I would hunt up the small bells we wore around our necks to designate us as Santa's helpers.

One at a time, Daddy would pick up the packages and read off the names. Taking turns, Ruth and I would deliver the package to its owner who would have the attention of everyone else. After the "Ohs" and "Ahs," the gift would be passed around the circle for all to have a closer look. Then another name was called off. This process took a long time, but we would never have dreamed of opening more than one package at once. Watching others open the surprise so carefully chosen was just as much fun as receiving one. At last when the tree was bare of presents, everyone would arrange the gifts in piles for viewing and then mill around and exclaim over them.

Then Mother would announce that it was time for us to hang our stockings. This was accomplished at the newel post on the second floor landing of the stairway since we didn't have a fireplace. Having only small ankle and knee socks of our own, we had long since talked Mother out of some old silk hose, which floated enticingly from the tacks that secured them.

I would vow to stay awake to listen for Santa's reindeer but the excitement usually had been too much. One time I did hear a noise in the hall and tiptoed to the door. It was only Mother pausing by our stockings with a large basket. I assumed she was bringing up her gifts to put away and was surprised to see how much I startled her. She shooed me off to bed and took the basket back downstairs with her. That was very unusual since Mother never made an unnecessary trip upstairs or forgot to put away the things she had brought up.

The first one awake in the morning would call the others, pull her stocking off the post — tack and all — and race down to the living room to investigate its contents. The transparency of the stocking would make us all the more excited because we could see all the riches at once, but we never pulled out more than one object at a time.

There would be one larger gift peeking out at the top. It might be a new doll, a music box, or a mouth organ. At the very bottom of the stocking, in the toe, was an inevitable corncob to remind us that there was always room to become better girls.

One year during World War II, our stockings hung surprisingly limp. A note inside explained that since materials were scarce and his workers were off helping to fight the war, Santa was donating all of his toys to the war orphans that year. We were disappointed at first, but Daddy showed us the thank-you letter from the Red Cross, and we knew the good feeling that the true spirit of Christmas brings — perhaps more vividly than at any other Christmas I can remember.

On Christmas Day we usually attended a family reunion. Mother would get up at 4:00 A.M.

to put the turkey in the oven. By 7:00, we would be awakened to its delicious smell wafting up the stairs. By this time, Mother would be fixing the salad, rolls, or whatever else she was taking to the family dinner.

We were always the first to arrive at the designated relative's house. The others would come trailing in for a couple of hours, so that by the time everyone was ready to eat, we were starved.

Meanwhile, the men had been smoking and visiting, and the women had been working in the kitchen, nibbling a bit behind our backs as bowl covers were removed, salads unmolded, and rolls reheated. We kids had just been standing around, torturing ourselves with the sight of the table. Since we hadn't seen most of these distant cousins for a year, the ice wasn't broken until after we had eaten. After the turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes, cranberry ice, and hot rolls had been topped off with chocolate cake and homemade ice cream, we went off to the attic or the barn to play "hide and seek" or "Monopoly."

It was late when we headed home and we were tired out from playing hard, so Ruth would go to sleep on the back seat of the car and I would curl up on the wide rear shelf. I preferred the shelf because of the night expanse of stars and snowy fields that the view provided. Climbing into bed, we were sleepy and content, another season of familiar traditions completed. □

[Part 2 will appear in the Spring 1988 Palimpsest.]