

A black and white photograph of a two-story house with a porch, a horse, and a cow in a rural setting. The house is light-colored with a gabled roof and a small dormer window. The porch has a decorative railing. A horse is standing in the foreground, and a cow is partially visible to the right. The scene is framed by a decorative border.

A Road through Summer
by James Hearst

The end of May, the last day of school, we walked home a little drunk with freedom. Our first declaration of independence was to take off our shoes and walk home barefooted. We scuffed in the deep dust of the road, crying out when our tender feet stepped on a stone or we stubbed a toe against a rut. Three of us, brothers, Jim and Bob and Chuck. A whole summer of vacation stretched ahead of us like a wide field with no horizon, a lake of infinitude, time always the present moment. The three months seemed to have no end, intoxicated as we were with this release from the school year.

A row of mailboxes stood on the main road where we turned off on our crossroad toward home. We looked, but our box was empty; someone had been to town and picked up the mail. Usually we would stick the mail through the bib in our overalls so we wouldn't have to carry it, it left both hands free. But today we were spared that chore.

The crossroad slanted down to a cement culvert and then sloped up past the big maple grove to the houses. Grandfather had chosen the top of the slope to build on. We could see clear to Waterloo and the smoke from the John Deere foundries.

At either end of the culvert there were pools of water, dotted with long, soggy grass stems. We stopped to examine them. Sometimes we would see a water snake — thin, whiplike, alert for insects — that wove its way swiftly into the culvert when we stirred it with a stick. Today when we looked we saw no snake so we paddled with our bare feet in the water. We stooped and saw a school of tadpoles darting around in the grass. We poked at them for a while but finally I, being the oldest, said, "We better go on home and get at the chores."

We were always hungry when we came

home from school. That day, Mother had baked gingerbread, and we each had a piece and a glass of milk. Then Chuck went to feed the chickens and hunt the eggs. Bob and I went to the barn to fill the mangers with hay and the feed boxes with ears of corn. We gave old Queen ground corn because her teeth were all worn out. Then I jumped on Beauty to go for the cows, and Bob carried swill for the pigs. Vacation or no vacation, the chores had to be done.

Summer settled in with hot, humid days. Everybody said it was good for the corn. The family owned eighty acres of land a mile and a half west of the main farm. The east fence ran right along the side of the schoolyard. A creek ran through it, and the land was mostly in grass for pasture. All the cows and calves, except for a couple of milk cows, stayed in the pasture all summer. Every week I rode over on horseback to count the cows and calves, to see that none were sick or having trouble calving. The heifers hadn't had their calves yet.

One day I stopped to visit with Nels Madsen, who lived across the road from the eighty. Nels said, "Herman and I dammed up a pond in your pasture and we've got a swimming hole eight feet deep at one end. We have a diving board too. Do you think your father would care?"

"Naw, he won't care. How did you make the dam?"

"We cut sods and laid them up like a wall, then put boards against them and braced them with fence posts."

"Will it hold?"

"Has so far. Good place to swim."

When I brought the news home, my brothers could hardly wait to try out the new swimming hole. There were few places for farm boys to swim in those days. The river was five miles away and it took almost an hour to get there with a horse and buggy.

The sand pit was almost as far, and it was forbidden territory since Andrew Anderson drowned there. Old John Mommer, who owned it, had NO SWIMMING signs stuck all over. He had a mean dog, too, and he kept an eye on the place.

Our cousin, James McAlvin, who was my age, came to spend the summer with us and help on the farm. We called him Cavo. He got his nickname from Chuck's inability, when he was small, to pronounce the name "McAlvin." Chuck said, "McCavo." We shortened it to just Cavo. It was an easy way to keep the two Jameses separate. Cavo had a fertile mind. "Let's hitch Trix to the coaster wagon," he said, "and make fish poles, and all go over to the crick."

Trix was one of the ponies, a good-natured but mischievous little animal. We had a big coaster wagon; it would haul three cans of cream. We removed the tongue and fastened a singletree in its place. Trix was too small for the driving harness, so we made her a breast collar and tugs from some discarded harness in the tool shed. A pair of old hitching straps were long enough for the lines, and she had a riding bridle.

We cut thin maple branches for fish poles. Chuck invented a reel. He found one of Mother's empty spools, put a tenpenny spike through the hole in the spool, and drove the nail into his pole. It was a large spool, one used for holding yarn. Then Chuck bent a small nail into a crank, which he fastened to the edge of the spool. It worked fine. We all imitated it. We dug some white maggots out of the manure pile for bait and put them in a tin can.

There was just barely room on the wagon for four of us. I sat in front and drove, my feet braced on the singletree. Bob was next and then Chuck, they carried the fish poles. Cavo sat at the back and held the bait. He had the most exciting seat; any sudden jerk of the wagon and he fell off.



The Hearst children: (clockwise, from the top) Louise, James, Charles, and Robert (courtesy the author)

There was one hazard. If the wagon wasn't pulled all the time and the tugs kept tight, it rolled up on Trix's heels and she would kick back right in my face. So we solved the problem by driving her at a dead run the mile and a half to the pasture. Away we went, Trix galloping furiously, neck and tail stretched out, heels kicking up gravel in my face, the wagon careening from side to side, four boys hanging on as best they could, whooping and yelling.

One of the neighbors told Father, "You ought to put a stop to it, Charlie. Those boys will kill themselves." But we never did.

When we reached the pasture, we turned Trix loose and settled down to fish along the creek in the pools where the creekbed

curved. We caught shiners, once in a while a bullhead, all small. When we had about twenty on a line, we hung it in the water and went to the swimming hole.

It was bigger than we had hoped, about ten feet across and twenty feet long. Near the dam it was deep, over our heads. We pulled off shirts and overalls and jumped in.

There was a diving board just as Nels said. We dove and swam and splashed for at least an hour. The pond had a mud bottom. It also had bloodsuckers. When we climbed out we searched each other's bodies for them. Usually we found them between our toes, sometimes fat and swollen. We pulled them off, dressed, caught Trix, and galloped for home, trailing our fish behind us.

We cleaned the minnows and Mother fried them and we thought they tasted wonderful.

We were old enough to help shock oats. Father sowed early oats that had short straw, and the bundles were light and easy to handle. One of our neighbors, Nels Johnson, sowed late oats with long straw. He was from Denmark and stubborn about neatness and order. He even swept his dooryard with a broom. It was a pleasure to see his fields of oats when his three boys finished shocking them. Each oat shock stood straight like a little house, each one capped with a bundle broken over it like the slanting sides of a roof. They all looked exactly alike. We tried and tried but we never could make our shocks look like the Johnsons' shocks.

One day Bob found a bumblebee nest. Bumblebees nest underground. There is one hole for entrance and exit, and the honey is stored underneath the surface. Bob said the honey that bumblebees make is sweeter than that of honeybees. We were eager to try it. Bob piled straw over the hole and touched a match to it. Almost immediately the bumblebees started swarming out, shooting up into the air, then leveling off for parts unknown.

When we thought they were all gone, we kicked the ashes away and dug into the ground. The honey is stored in little sacs, not in honeycombs the way honeybees do. Each one is about the size of a little fingernail. We dug them out and ate them. Bob was right, the honey tasted sweeter than ordinary honey. Some of the sacs had the bodies of young bees in them. We tried to avoid eating these, but we probably got a bit of protein with our dessert. We did this whenever we found a bumblebee nest. We never seemed to be stung, but our faces were smeared with honey and ashes.

One of our jobs was to water the horses left in the barn during evening chores. We had a pony stallion named King that we had borrowed for the summer to breed our pony mares. He was a feisty little horse, always looking for a chance to cause trouble.

Our first declaration of independence was to take off our shoes and walk home barefooted.

One evening Cavo came running to me in distress. "I took King to water," he said, "and he broke away from me and ran down the road!"

I nodded. "I should have warned you to watch out for him. While you stand there relaxed as he drinks, he will suddenly jerk away and run out toward the road."

Then I added, "If I catch on quickly enough, I hang on to the halter rope and lie down and let him drag me. He gives up after he's dragged me a few yards, too much work. I get pretty dirty, though. I'll go catch him."

I hurried to the barn and slipped a riding bridle on Dot. She was a large pony or small horse, part Arabian. I jumped on her back



(courtesy the author)

and galloped down the road. About a half mile away I saw King off on the roadside eating grass. The minute King saw me coming, the little stud began to run. But I crowded him against the fence; Dot was twice his size. Then King, aware of the closeness of the mare, commenced to snort. Dot laid back her ears and struck at him.

I slapped her neck. "Let him alone, I'll fix him." I jumped down and grabbed King's halter rope. I tied the reins over Dot's neck, slapped her on the rump, and said, "Go home." She trotted off down the road.

Then I turned to King. "You ornery little cuss! Wait until I find a stick." I saw a mulberry tree about two feet high growing in the fence row. Birds eat mulberries, but the seeds don't digest and they fall out in the droppings as the birds sit on fence posts. There seemed to be mulberry trees in every

fence row.

I pulled it up by the roots and jumped on King's back. I held the halter rope in one hand, the switch in the other. I slashed King across the rump. The little stallion stood on his hind feet and squealed his anger. Keeping a tight grip on the rope to keep from sliding off backward, I whacked him across the ears. That brought him down to four legs in a hurry. He headed for home at a gallop and home we went, me whipping him all the way.

Cavo asked, "Will he behave now?"

I shook my head. "Not him, the switch was too small to hurt him." Then in fairness I added, "He needs exercise. He just stands in the stall all day. No wonder he wants to run. If he were a little bigger, I'd ride him after the cows. The trouble is, he's so stubborn you can't make him do anything he doesn't want to do."

One day Father had to go away for an all-day meeting. He said, "If you boys will haul twelve loads of manure for the day, you can quit."

As soon as he was gone I asked our neighbor, Fred Bast, if we could borrow his manure spreader. I drove a team down to get it. Bob, Chuck, and Cavo brought in four more horses from the pasture and harnessed them. Now we had two spreaders. While Chuck drove the loaded one out to the field to spread the load, Bob and Cavo and I loaded the other spreader. By noon we had hauled our twelve loads. After dinner we hitched Tom (our long-legged driving horse) to the buggy, picked a small pail of Whitney crab apples, gathered our fish poles, and drove to Norris' Siding, where the Cedar River formed a backwater along the railroad tracks. It was a four-mile drive, but we were in no hurry, we had the afternoon to spend.

Chuck caught a carp, Bob a snapping turtle, Cavo a sucker, and I just drowned worms. This small catch did not concern us,

we splurged in our idleness. We went swimming, but the bottom was muddy and squishy and we didn't stay in long.

On our way home we crossed the bridge that arches over the Illinois Central tracks. We heard a train whistle, so we stopped in the middle of the bridge and waited. A locomotive hove into sight around a curve, hauling a long train of swaying, banging freight cars.

We waved and the engineer tooted the whistle. We spotted a brakeman walking on top of the cars. As soon as he came within range we threw apples at him. He caught one, held it in his gloved hand and smiled. The conductor stood on the rear platform of

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the caboose as it whizzed past. We all threw apples at him, too, but the train went faster than we could throw, and the apples all fell short. But he took off his cap and bowed. We yelled and slapped each other on the back. We got home in time for chores. It had been a wonderful afternoon.

One night late in July a thunderstorm rolled in and poured out rain in bucketsful. The next morning in the sunshine everything glistened and sparkled. Mother's hollyhocks lay on the ground, flat as if they had been tramped on. Even the grass was beaten down. Bob said, “Let's go look at the crick, I'll bet it's on a tear.”

We rounded up four ponies and rode over to the pasture. Father wanted us to check the cows and calves to see if any had been struck by lightning. One of us hopped off and

opened the gate and we all rode through.

Bob was right, the creek was on a tear. Out of its bank, about five yards wide, it came downstream in a flood. In the middle, the swift current even made waves as it flowed past. The dam at the swimming hole was washed out and the fence into Miller's pasture hung by a strand of barbed wire. Oat shocks and boards bobbed past as if sucked into a whirlpool. It was an awesome sight.

We must have been out of our minds to decide to go swimming. But the temptation of adventure proved too strong. Bob jumped in first. The current caught him, turned him upside down, rolled him over and over. He yelled for help. Cavo leaped in, grabbed Bob by the arm, and swam with him to the bank ten rods downstream.

Then Chuck waded in, but before he could turn back the rush of water pulled him under, and when he came to the surface his face showed fright. He couldn't yell, his mouth was full of water. He started to go down again. I dove in and reached him, pulling him up by the hair.

“Take it easy!” I yelled. “Don't fight me!” And I made it to the bank pulling Chuck with me. We four boys stood there, half drowned and thoroughly scared. Cavo and I, older and stronger, felt helpless before this rush of water.

I pointed. “Look how close we are to the barbed wire fence. We could have been hung up on that if we hadn't got out when we did.” We looked and shivered. We put on our clothes and rode home, sober, glad to be home.

Both Chuck and I had our birthdays the first part of August, and Mother decided we should celebrate them. “We have worked hard this summer and we need a holiday,” she said. “Let's go on a picnic.”

Father shook his head. “No picnic now,” he said, “we must finish threshing first.”

But he didn't know Mother, or else he had

forgotten her determination when she had made up her mind. She said in a firm voice, "Something always comes first to crowd out a holiday. I don't intend to let it happen this time."

As soon as Father and the hired men had rattled out of the yard with hayracks and grain wagon, Mother made her plans.

"Today is Chuck's birthday, and we are all going to Cedar River Park for a picnic. There is a bathhouse there and life guards, and we can all go swimming in the river."

It was nine miles from the farm to Cedar River Park, just beyond Sans Souci, close to Waterloo. The question was how to get there. Our driving horse, old Tom, was lame and out to pasture. Mother said, "James, find a horse we can hitch to the buggy."

I wondered what in the world I would do.

We laughed when we looked down into the bandwagon and saw that none of the bandsmen had pants on.

But then the spirit of Mother's decision excited me. I said, "Jean is in the barn, but she has never been driven single or hitched to a buggy." Jean was a big, iron-gray draft mare.

"You hitch her up," Mother said, "I will drive her."

So we hitched Jean with the driving harness, leather flynets and all. We backed her into the buggy shafts. She was an amiable, docile horse, but she must have felt bewildered in her new position. Mother said, "Louise and Charles and I will go in the buggy and take the picnic things. Cavo, you and Bob and Jim can ride horseback."

Mother and Louise made deviled eggs and

sandwiches. The birthday cake had already been baked. At last we were ready to start.

What a cavalcade! Jean, her broad beam and heavy legs looking a bit naked in the driving harness, ambled along with the buggy. Bob rode Dot — half pony, half horse — Cavo rode Trix, and he had his work cut out for him. The hair on Trix's back was slippery as grease. She would gallop steadily as if she meant to go someplace, then suddenly stop and put her neck down and Cavo would slide off down her neck. We all rode bareback; our Western-style saddles were too big for the ponies.

I rode Brownie, a three-year-old that had not been ridden before. In size she was about halfway between Trix and Dot. She didn't like the bit in her mouth, and she backed and pranced but didn't try to throw me.

I said to Jim McAlvin after we had laughed at his tumbles over Trix's head, "Cavo, take a stick and give Trix a good belt across the rump. She knows she is being Miss Smarty Pants." That straightened her out, and we had no more trouble.

Father said he wished he had had a picture of us. Big, clumsy Jean hitched to the top buggy, we three boys on various-sized ponies following behind. It must have been a sight. But we arrived. We tied the horses to the hitch rack. We had brought a rope to tie around Trix's neck. She had the knack of slipping off a bridle or halter.

We carried the baskets to the picnic table, and Mother and Louise spread newspapers on it and set out the food. We were hungry, and the lemonade, ham sandwiches, deviled eggs, and birthday cake hit the spot. There were pickles, too, and apple butter. After we cleaned up, we went to the bath house and bought ice cream cones from the food counter there. We rented a couple of rooms and we all put on swim suits, even Mother, and went in the water.

When three o'clock came, Mother said we

better start for home. It would take almost two hours and we had to be back in time for chores. It was one of the best birthday parties we ever had. We owed it to Mother, who showed us how to improvise to meet a difficult situation. When we told Father he looked at Mother and said, "Katherine, you do beat the Dutch."

Came the middle of August and the Ringling Brothers Circus arrived in Waterloo. Aunt Clara, Cavo's mother, asked us to come to Waterloo to spend the night, so we could get up early the next morning to watch the circus unload. Counting Cavo's sister, Helen, that made six of us young folk, so we boys slept on the floor of the McAlvin living room.

The alarm clock sounded at four-thirty. We got up at five o'clock in the summer on the farm, but here in town it seemed an ungodly hour to get up, put on our clothes, and stumble outdoors. Aunt Clara drove us to the siding in their Chalmers automobile. This was a real treat for us. Uncle Gregg slept late because, being a doctor, he was called out so often at night.

The air was gray, misty, chilly. It made me feel melancholy. It felt more like fall than summer. The days were shorter, too. It reminded me that vacation was almost over. How had it gone by so quickly? It bothered me to have all those days, the whole summer, disappear before I had time to enjoy it all.

Then, appearing out of the mist, I saw a fancy circus wagon pulled by six horses, and behind it an elephant pushing with its head. I forgot my feelings. This was the circus, I could even smell it, and excitement rose in me.

The parade marched down Fourth Street, so we went up to Uncle Gregg's office on the sixth floor of the L & J Bank Building and watched from there. It was nice to be out of the crowds on the curbs and be able to see, and it was pleasant to be out of the sun on

such a hot day. We laughed when we looked down into the bandwagon and saw that none of the bandsmen had pants on. They wore their fancy red and yellow coats and ornamental caps, but they knew they were so high above the street no one could see if they had pants on or not. They never thought of people looking down from office buildings, and they were trying to keep cool. It was a long parade, with a steam calliope blasting away at the end of it.

After lunch we all went to the circus. We enjoyed it, but it was kind of an anticlimax after watching the circus unload and the parade. We went back to the McAlvins before we started for home. Uncle Gregg brought some ice cream and we ate that before we left.

Cavo stayed home. He didn't come back with us. We knew then that summer was almost gone. A few more days of freedom and then school would begin. It seemed too sad to think about. We boys did our chores, ate supper, and went out and lay on the lawn. We lay there until it was time to go to bed. We didn't say anything, we didn't need to. We knew it had all gone — summer, vacation — gone into the past and all we could do now would be to remember it. □

PROTEST

Now as imperceptibly
As evening closing into night,
As a young heart growing old
Is the wheatfield's sturdy green
Shading into harvest gold.

The beauty of the color is
Not the thing which I protest,
Gold is good when green is done —
But the summer in the sheaves
Marks a season gone.

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