

The Road by Home

Harrison County, Iowa,
in the 1920s

by Mary Wear Briggs

IN THE 1920s, when I was six or seven, the road past our Harrison County farmhouse was dirt. Plum bushes grew along the bank, providing me a secret hiding place, a cool, shaded playhouse in the summer. Wild roses scrambled up the bank, their mass of fragile, pink flowers hiding their strong, thorny ancestry. Clumps of blue spiderwort fought for space in the green sod. These roadsides were my "hands-on" natural science lesson. In the early spring I watched in the prairie grass on the roadside by our pasture corner for the first lavender pasqueflowers, in summer for the ripening chokecherries. I dug in the high road bank for shells, bones, and layers of black charcoal from an earlier time.

Coughing, sputtering Model Ts crept up our south hill, then gained speed to vanish down the hill on the north. Squawking chickens ran helter-skelter into, under, or in front of the cars. At times, foolish ones ended with a flutter and kick by the side of the road. This unrolling panorama of western Iowa, with the personalities who stopped by, was my education — and my entertainment. In many ways, the road by our house showed me the world.

In Iowa paved roads and blacktops were unknown. Even travelers on the great Lincoln



Frank and Nora Wear with children Walter, Francis, Mary (the author), and Loyola by their 1923 Model T.

Highway, twenty miles to the west, were greeted by six inches of pulverized dust in the summer; in the spring, by axle-deep mire. (It wasn't paved until 1929.) When it rained on our country road, especially in the spring, the wheel tracks deepened into ruts. Drivers struggled to keep their wheels balanced on the high ground between the ruts and the side of the road. Four-foot-deep washouts encroached into our narrow road, running jagged ditches from side to side for "city slickers" (as Pop called them) to jolt into, breaking an axle. Grinding the gears, neighbors pushed their own cars out of the mud. Many times our Sunday company abandoned their mired-down car down on the hill, arrived at the door barefoot, covered with mud, carrying their shoes and stockings.

Winter roads were usually too rutty or filled with snow for cars to travel. Sleigh runners were added to buggies or spring wagons, and horses hitched up. Deep drifts were left to melt unless the farmers shoveled their way out. If the draws filled with snow, sometimes a neighboring farmer cut the fences so the team and bobsled could make its way easily across the windswept fields to get flour for bread, kerosene for lamps, or coal for heating stoves.

On this Harrison County road — now graveled and graded — hoboes and peddlers, farmers and bootleggers, gypsies and circuses passed by the Wear farm, offering entertainment and a worldly education to a watchful seven-year-old.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

When winters were severe, the farmers kept their cattle and horses fenced in near the barnyard and cattle barns, far from the open gates and cut fences.

If anyone unluckily got stuck in the snow or mud, my brothers, Walter and Francis, pulled them out with logchain and mules. Handshakes were exchanged with neighbors. Strangers sometimes offered fifty cents or a dollar.

When we went to the Harrison County Fair in Missouri Valley, my father, Frank Wear, liked to take a route through the hills. He complained that the cars went too fast on the Lincoln Highway (the maximum speed was thirty-five miles per hour, and ten miles for trucks). But one year the Boyer River bridge washed out, and we had to take the Lincoln Highway. The county fair was a popular event, so the highway was crowded with cars. Dust was so heavy we were unable to see what was ahead. Everyone rode in open touring cars (celluloid side curtains were only used in winter). When we arrived at the fair, our sweaty faces were smiling mud pies. My mom, Nora Wear, had to wash our faces, ears, and necks, brush my long braids, and redo my sister Loyola's long curls.

OLD CANVAS-COVERED TRUCKS appeared on our road in the spring, with fish laid out on ice chunks in the back. In those days the uncontrolled Missouri River periodically flooded out on the "flats," leaving ponds of wriggling fish for easy taking by seine or net. Mom loved fresh fish, perhaps a taste left from her Irish ancestry, at Dungarvin by the sea. The only fish we knew during the year was canned salmon or dried salted cod, so the fish peddlers were always welcome. Mom liked bass and bluegill, but probably settled for catfish and carp when the supply was low.

In spring and fall the scrap-iron man, the junk man, and the rag man also pulled in our lane, offering to buy old iron or any junk we might have. The Raleigh and Watkins men showed their spices, flavorings, patent medicines, and a popular salve. Advertised as "Good for man or beast," this salve became the cure-all for our scratches and cuts. An extra can was kept on a shelf in the barn for the tears and sores on the horses' flesh, and for cracked teats on the milk cows.

Wagons (moving general stores) laden with dry goods, pins and needles, long black stockings, pots and pans, and yard goods drew Mom

to the road. Some peddlers came on foot. After a few years of walking with his pack on his back, one of these peddlers set up a store in our hometown of Persia. (Until recently the store was managed by the third generation.)

The front yard fence became my "three-penny seat" as the circus wagons crawled past to set up the yearly one-ring show in a pasture near the next town. As I watched, an elephant, show dogs, perhaps a tiger or lion, and beautiful horses tethered to colorful sideshow wagons slowly disappeared over our hill.

Gypsies in their long, black wagons — later in black, expensive cars — one following the other, mysteriously appeared on our front road. I stayed back and peered around the house as they rode by.

ALL PASSING AGENTS and roamers soon became Pop's friends. He invited them in for a meal, unannounced. They slept in our house, in the hay mow, or in their cars — then disappeared in the morning. Many times Mom had

only the simplest of food to go around: fried potatoes, boiled eggs, a two-quart jar of canned tomatoes, and, from the pantry crock, "float" (a kind of pudding, submerged in thick cream and sugar). One evening an itinerant sign painter painted lovely flowers and mottoes such as "There is No Place Like Home" and "Home Sweet Home" on old remnants of wallpaper as four curious children watched. We kept those paintings on the wall for years, and played games saying the mottoes backwards. Some storytellers, in the shadow of the aladdin lamp, told about herding sheep on the high plains of Wyoming, or of visiting the Cripple Creek mines or far-off California.

Pop, easy prey in the spring for the traveling nursery man, dreamed of his orchard hanging with fruit. Most of his purchases became blighted hopes, unbearing trees. The four Delicious apple trees and the peach trees blossomed beautifully, then gave up and rested for the summer. We had one faithful sour cherry; the two sweet cherries refused to bear. One wonderful Wealthy kept us in pies and applesauce. Oblivious to the orchard on the north, our self-seeding apricots spread along the garden fence, faithfully filling two-quart



Peddlers selling medicines, extracts, and spices traveled country roads to find customers, as did other itinerants.



Neighbors sharing summer field work took relief in cold lemonade and ample lunches, prepared by farm women and carried down country roads and across fields by farm kids. Above, cutting and binding grain on the Wear farm, 1918.

canning jars for us and buckets given freely to the neighbors.

Often hoboes from the Milwaukee railroad in the valley climbed our hill. They came in rags. In winter they wore thin, worn coats, one on top of another, with many layers of pants. Their feet were padded with straw and newspapers, then wrapped in burlap sacks and rope. They usually showed up shortly after the noon meal. Mom kept a well-scrubbed aluminum plate for their serving. The plate was filled with whatever we had left from dinner: meat, potatoes and gravy, vegetables, milk, even the last piece of homemade pie. They waited patiently on the steps, saying very little. Only their eyes lit up when we brought out the food. None were turned away, even during depression years when all we had to give was bacon gravy on homemade bread and fried eggs. We were never afraid of these men, just curious. My mother called them "the poor souls."

Pop was always drawn to the road by the passing horse traders leading wild horses from the West. He always favored foxy horses and had bought a pair of broncos, Dan and Pat, back when he delivered mail before he and Mom married. Now his heavy work team was Belgian sorrels, Bob and Mike.

On the road, farmers gathered together and drove their cattle to waiting railroad cars in town. Our collie, Ballie, would run back and forth along the front yard fence, yapping and growling, protecting our gate. Pop sent us to the house as the riders whistled and yo-ed the cattle down the rutted road. Country children learned early to respect the bulls and the mother cows with young calves.

BAREFOOT WITH LONG BRAIDS hanging down my back, I would trudge down the dusty road to the field at haying time. Mom always cooked special dishes for the six or eight neighbors that traded work with my dad. It became my job to carry the mid-morning and mid-afternoon lunches to the men in the hayfield. I enjoyed the walks, as I watched for bob-o-links, meadow larks, and bluebirds. Grapevines hung down the banks giving me a chance for a free-hand swing. While the men worked their way toward me, I waited under a grove of cottonwood trees, listening to the leaves whispering and rustling like gentle rain — a cooling sound on a hot day. When the men stopped to eat the sandwiches and cakes or pies, their red bandanna handkerchiefs flashed as they swabbed their sweaty foreheads. Under a tree or in the shade of the hay bundles, the men stored a brown and white crockery water jug, plugged with a corncob. They all drank from the same jug — probably mixing various brands of chewing tobacco as they swallowed. They always appreciated the fresh-squeezed lemonade I brought them. Despite their joshing around, I knew making hay was hot, hard work.

SOME NIGHTS our road carried fear. The Ku Klux Klan was revived in the 1920s in the Midwest. Its activities were directed against blacks, Jews, Catholics, and foreigners. Hooded, all in white, they marched down Main Street in our town, then burned their crosses on neighbors' hills. Pop's stories built vivid pictures of the

event. Being the head of a Catholic family, he stewed for months, fretting because some of them were his neighbors. I had nightmares of crosses burning in our yard, or blazing across the road. This notice in the *Harrison County Democrat* on December 24, 1925, did little to alleviate my fear:

HARRISON COUNTY KU KLUX KLAN NO. 53
extends the season's greeting to each
and every one and wishes you
A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR

Thieves parked on our hill one night, then climbed through the fence, crossed the orchard, and stole Mom's young Plymouth Rock fryers from the chicken house. (Imagine someone bothering to steal chickens now!) Chickens were unidentifiable so they could be sold alive in any town. The thieves probably made five dollars for their night's work.

On Saturday afternoon in winter, or Saturday nights in summer, we recognized each neighbor in the caravan headed for town. We also noticed which neighbor stayed in town past chore time and which came home weaving from side to side on our road. Mom never went to town, partly because of Pop's ultimatum, "Children don't belong in town running the streets." Then, too, women had no place to visit or wait for their men. They never went into pool halls, bars, harness shops, or garages where men could hang out. Willards, the grocery and dry goods store, had little room for gossiping, so Mom stayed home, and we with her. She did her visiting by telephone on our party line.

Bootleggers, on warm summer evenings, quietly toured back and forth on our road in their shiny black cars with a "hootch" chest on the back. They followed dances, carnivals, and picnics up and down the valley. We learned from Pop to identify them all, as we sat on the front porch steps or on a blanket on the lawn.

When Pop knew prohibition would become law, he took the afternoon train to Omaha, and bought two or three wooden cases of beer and a case of whiskey. (He also thought prohibition would soon be over.) During those prohibition days, Pop tried each year, to Mom's consternation, to brew beer in the cellar — sometimes

fairly successfully. Other times we would hear the explosions as the bottles shot the caps off.

DURING MY GRADE school years, the road was my route to the Leland Grove country school. I walked the mile and three quarters down into the valley. One of my teachers there loved to dance and had won a Charleston contest. During noon hour she would teach the various steps to me. I spent hours practicing them at home on our hardwood dining room floor.

I was not old enough to dance in public dance halls, but my folks usually attended celebrations in our neighboring towns, and then I could at least watch the dances at the open-air pavilions. On those dance nights, I knew where the bootleggers were parked by the steady stream of dancers out of the hall into the darkness. There, shocked, I saw my first stumbling, drunken woman, held up by her men friends. With silk hose fashionably rolled below her knees, her wobbling legs were pointed in different directions, and her red, high-heeled pumps turned and twisted in the grass. Inside the band played and the dance crowd sang, "Barney Google with His Goo, Goo, Googly Eyes."

In our Model T late in the night, we returned home from these celebrations to a hot, stuffy house. Loyola and I slept together upstairs, under the eaves, in a poorly ventilated room. Often we grabbed a quilt, descended the stairs, and spread it on the floor by the front door, in hopes a breeze might find us. I would prop up my head in my hands, elbows on the hard wooden floor, and look out through the screen door into the night. The coons in the orchard hoo-ed. Down in the pasture hollow their friends answered. Fireflies danced and courted around the spirea bush. The empty road rested, streaked with shadows in the quiet night. □