A Prairie Boyhood

Emmetsburg, a pleasant little town in northwestern Iowa, was a nice place to be born in 1889. It was a lively town that grew in population from 1,584 in 1890 to 2,361 in 1900. By the time I was old enough to look around and take cognizance of my surroundings, Emmetsburg seemed to have been there forever. All traces of pioneer days and the hardships suffered, so few years ago, had been wiped out.

Emmetsburg was much like any other midwestern community, with wide streets of hard-packed dirt (except during the spring rains), broad lawns, big porches with swings suspended from chains, and a great air of solidity and continuity. The houses were monstrosities of Victorian bad taste, but nobody knew it. We seldom saw an Indian, except as an occasional beggar at the back door, and then they were dressed and acted like white tramps, of whom there were a good many. The housewives were afraid of both groups and reluctantly gave them food to get rid of them.

At the age of ten or eleven I saw what must have been one of the very last covered wagons heading west. It was drawn by a pair of huge oxen with their heads down as they strained on

through the mud. The canvas top was smaller than those we see nowadays in the movies and was stretched tightly over a series of semicircular hoops. The flaps in the rear were fastened open, and a woman and a half-grown girl were looking out from the dark interior. A man was leading the oxen, and two or three other men and a boy of my own age were on horseback, driving a few cows. They all looked poor and dejected, but I was thrilled by the sight of them.

Iowa by 1890 was a network (8,412 miles) of railroad branches, so many that a large proportion were soon bankrupt. Towns henceforth would be established only on a railroad line or in its path. New communities were created according to a simple rule: they had to be numerous enough so that the great majority of farmers could drive to town with a team and wagon and get home the same night to feed the stock. Usually, the farmer's wife accompanied him and guarded the vehicle while he was doing his errands. Nobody thought of providing for the comfort of these poor women, who sat stoically on the high wagon seat, hour after hour, without complaint. In most places it was many years before it occurred to the towns to construct rest rooms for them.

Perhaps a few words about my family background is in order. None of my forbears was in Iowa at the time of the Spirit Lake Massacre in 1857. If they had been, presumably they would

have taken it in stride. Both my father's and my mother's families had been fighting Indians off and on in New England since the seventeenth century.

For some years after I had grown up I believed, on the basis of incorrect information, that the Blivens were of Dutch descent. I could see in myself what are commonly believed to be Dutch characteristics—stubbornness, candor, and a rough integrity. Then I learned that my family had come from Wales, and promptly my mental picture of myself changed—I was now volatile, emotional, and intuitive. All of this was of course ridiculous. I am in the eighth generation of the Bliven family in America, and my genetic inheritance from the first of the line is only one two-hundred-and-fifty-sixth of the total.

There seems little doubt about the Welsh origin of my father's family. The name, under various spellings, Blevin, Bleddyn, et cetera, is familiar in Welsh records back to the eleventh century. There was a Welsh ruler named Bleddyn who, at the time of the Norman invasion, held precarious control of the area between Chester (near Liverpool) and Machynlleth, sixty miles to the southwest on Cardigan Bay. Jessie Weston, in her book about the legend of the Holy Grail, says that a Welshman of that name was responsible for passing on to the Normans the whole mass of the tales about King Arthur, the Round Table, Lancelot, and Guinevere. The Bleddyn just mentioned

survived the conquest by nine years and could have been the teller of tales. So, indeed, could any of his immediate descendants, who continued to hold their district in Wales for some little time. Naturally, the American Blivens have always claimed King Bleddyn as an ancestor, but for nine generations, nobody, so far is I know, has ever tried to trace any actual connection.

The firm family records begin with an Edward Bliven who came from the British Isles in 1684, landed at Oyster Bay, Long Island, and after a few years moved to Westerly, Rhode Island, where the family lived for several generations. The old cemeteries of the town have the graves of a number of Blivens, causing my small son to remark once, when we walked among the headstones, that it was obviously unhealthy to have this name.

About the year 1700, the family lived in its own blockhouse near the center of the town, which was surrounded by a high stockade. One stormy night a squaw came, asking for shelter, and was allowed to stay. A male member of the family was suspicious, however, armed himself with an axe, and stayed up all night to watch. Sure enough, in the middle of the night the squaw arose, tiptoed to the barred gate, and opened it for the braves waiting outside. The watching Bliven gave the alarm, and, aided by other members of the family, beat off the Indians, and closed the gate again.

There was a second Edward Bliven, and then

a third, who bore arms in the Revolution, first as "Captain of the Alarm Men" of Westerly, and then as a captain in the regular forces. His son, Arnold, and his brother, Major John Bliven also served. The family luck was not very good. Edward was captured early and was held on one of two British prison ships, the *Jersey,* lying in New York harbor. Like many others, he died of mistreatment on the ship. There is a monument in Brooklyn to these victims. His brother, John, was captured by the British at the battle of Oriskany, which was preliminary to the great American victory at Saratoga. John died of wounds received at that time.

Five generations of Blivens lived in New England, mostly in Westerly. Then my grandfather, Albert Bliven, moved west to Michigan, married, and settled in the little community of Blissfield, not far from Detroit. My father, Charles Franklin Bliven, was born there in 1850. Both his parents died when he was very young, of the great curse of those years—tuberculosis.

My mother's family, the Ormsbys, also arrived from England. The first members appeared in Saco, Maine, in 1641. Presumably they came from Lincolnshire, where the name is common, and is supposed to derive from the family motto, "In Arms Be." As with the Blivens, no one in ten generations, as far as I know, has been sufficiently interested to go back to Saco.

The fifth generation of Ormsbys in America produced a soldier in the Revolution, Nathaniel Ormsby, who, like Major John Bliven, was killed in the Saratoga campaign. The Ormsbys lived in various parts of New England for almost two centuries. Some of them were for many years in Norwich, Connecticut, only about twenty miles from Westerly, where the Blivens lived.

In 1839 my grandfather, Lysander Ormsby, moved to Deerfield, Michigan, where my mother, Lilla Cordelia, was born in 1859. The town was so near Blissfield, and both were so small, that she must have known from an early age the orphan boy, Charles Franklin Bliven, nine years older than herself, who was being brought up by an uncle. He had a rough childhood, being forced to do hard farm work while much too young.

My parents seldom talked of their early days when I was growing up, and I did not have wit enough to ask them for facts they would have been glad to report. I remember my father once told me how, as a boy, weighing very little, he forded fast-flowing streams by carrying a heavy stone that helped prevent his being swept away. Once, when he was a little older, he came face to face with a bear in the woods. They both scuttled away in opposite directions.

My father had almost no formal education, but he was an incessant reader. I never heard him make a slip in grammar, or exhibit the least gau-

cherie in manners. He was a handsome man, better looking than my mother, whom I resemble.

Of her early days, I know only that mother attended a female seminary, where she learned to play the piano. Lysander Ormsby was one of the leading citizens of Deerfield—not wealthy but universally liked and respected. The town probably felt that Lilla Cordelia married beneath her station when, in 1876, she cast her lot with a penniless twenty-six-year-old orphan. But they were in love, as they were for the rest of their lives. Michigan, in 1876, was close enough to the frontier to make differences in social status comparatively unimportant.

My mother had two older brothers, both of whom fought for the Union in the Civil War, which broke out when she was two and father eleven. Both brothers did well under fire; one of them was with Sherman on his march to the sea. Demobilized and back home, they suffered from soldiers' restlessness, and within a few years my Uncle Alvin headed west. How he hit upon Emmetsburg, I do not know, but he did, and soon sent for his brother, Edwin. Both were there when Old Town, on the bank of the Des Moines River, was succeeded by Staketown, on the empty prairie a couple of miles away. Both decided promptly to be bankers, not farmers. They started a bank and presently, a mortgage and loan company. Where they got the necessary capital I never learned.

Both brothers had left brides behind in Michigan, and as soon as possible, they sent for them. The wives arrived by stagecoach from the railhead and tactfully concealed their shock at the sharp contrast between the miserable little town they saw and the glowing portraits of a coming metropolis their husbands had described in letters.

My parents, who were married in 1876, went on their honeymoon to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. They marveled at the new scientific wonders displayed there — the telephone, the Westinghouse airbrake, and the novel barbed wire that was destined to end the bloody wars between the sheep- and cattlemen on the western plains. They returned to Deerfield, where my sister, Maude, was born in 1879. Some time later, my two uncles persuaded their sister and her husband to settle in Emmetsburg. I came along ten years after my sister, so that both of us were brought up like only children—a fact that I believe had an important effect on our character development.

It has become a platitude to point out that the world has changed more since I was born than it had in all its previous history. To anticipate a little, I remember when there were only a dozen or so telephones in Emmetsburg and you told Central the name of the person you wanted to speak to. When I was ten, electric lights in the home were still a rare novelty, though arc lights were

used for street illumination. Every few weeks somebody had to climb a ladder to push the carbon points closer together as the tips were burned.

My boyhood saw the beginning of many things that are commonplace today. The town's first phonograph belonged to one of my uncles. It had the big horn, the fragile wax cylinder, and the handle to wind up the spring, that are well-remembered today. Humorous monologues were more popular than music. The favorite with us, as it was everywhere, was "Cohen on the Telephone."

The town's first automobile was, I believe, a Winton, purchased by one of my rich cousins. The high tonneau of the Winton was entered by a short flight of steps in the middle of the rear. I remember the delicious terror of moving at such a height, and at twenty miles an hour, along the dusty roads. Most of the horses we met went into a panic; my cousin would pull off the road, stop the car, get out, and lead the frightened animal past.

Our first motion picture was not *The Great Train Robbery,* which I never saw until it had become a treasured antique. To Emmetsburg came a traveling lecturer with a set of films which he narrated while cranking the projector. Folding chairs were set up in the Masonic Hall, located upstairs over the drugstore, and a thrilled audience saw such incredible spectacles as a train approaching down a track, looking as though it were about to leap off the screen, acrobats performing,

and as a grand climax, a picture of Niagara Rapids. The narrator told us that the night before he had shown his pictures in Algona, and that someone in the audience said: "That certainly *looks* like water; *golly,* that looks like water; *gosh,* it *is* water." No doubt this was a standard joke told every night and attributed to some nearby community.

We never had a movie house while I lived in Emmetsburg. A theater was finally built, in which touring companies occasionally played one-night stands. The first that I remember was a romantic comedy along the lines of *The Prisoner of Zenda.* No experience with drama in later life ever equaled the thrill of my first contact with live, professional actors.

From time to time a traveling medicine show came to town and performed in a vacant lot near the corner of Main Street and Broadway. I remember one pitchman, a large, placid gentleman, who, of course, called himself "doctor." He sold soap as well as bottled medicine, and to prove its purity he calmly sliced off a good-sized hunk of a bar and ate it. I assume it was not real soap, but how this trick was performed, I still do not know. My chief admiration went to the perspiring young man, the doctor's assistant, who set up the platform and the kerosene torches, sang songs during the preliminary warmup, accompanying himself on the banjo, did a trombone solo, walked on his

hands, did back flips, and sold bottles of medicine at the end of the show, making change with great dexterity, and as far as I know, with complete honesty.

Once a year, the circus came to town and performed in a vacant lot a block from our house. It traveled by road, in a series of huge red-and-gold wagons, drawn by two, four, or sometimes six horses. When they arrived, usually about four o'clock in the morning, hardy, small boys were at the grounds to greet them and to listen to the occasional growls of wild animals from inside some of the boarded-up wagons. I never got a chance at the traditional task of carrying water to the elephants but my family always managed to scare up the price of admission. Since I lived so near, I saw the morning parade assemble for its journey through town and break up after its return.

Almost as exciting as the circus was the tent show of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which played Emmetsburg now and then. For the scene in which Eliza is pursued by bloodhounds, the show carried several huge mastiffs — far more terrifying than real bloodhounds would have been. To my amazement, "Topsy" turned out to have gone to school with my mother in Deerfield, and she came to supper at our house. I was dumbfounded to find that the incredibly energetic, fourteen-year-old, kinky-haired, black-faced Topsy was a quiet white woman in her middle fifties, the wife of the owner

of the show. I began to realize that the theater is a place of illusion.

My uncles acted generously toward the Blivens. They gave my parents a farm, 160 acres of good land near the lakeshore. My father was a competent, hard-working farmer, who raised wheat, corn, and oats. He had a dairy herd of sound Jersey stock, and a few fierce breeding bulls. These dangerous animals could be managed only by means of a six-foot pole with a snap on one end which engaged a ring in the bull's nose. Occasionally one of them got out of control. My father and a hired man were both gored on separate occasions, but neither very seriously. One of my earliest memories is the thrill of looking through the heavy barred gate at one of these monsters, who seemed constantly furious for reasons I did not comprehend.

Elderly people are notorious for looking back on their childhood as a golden age, and their memories are subject to heavy discount for this reason. Yet there is a formidable list of problems existing today that were unknown at the turn of the century, when I was eleven—overpopulation, destruction of natural resources, pollution of air and water, and the Cold War with its threat of atomic annihilation of all mankind. To be sure, there are also areas in which great progress has been made in the past sixty or seventy years, progress that should be included in any balance sheet of our

times. However, I am not trying to write a balance sheet but to recall the distant past.

In those days nobody had ever heard of the population explosion. While there was already crowding in some other parts of the world, such as India, we did not know it. Only a little to the west of us, the prairie and the high plains stood open and empty. Public and private agencies were working hard to persuade settlers to come.

American cities were not yet decaying at the heart. There were dreadful slums in the biggest ones, but the people who lived there usually agreed that the Lord had ordered things this way and accepted their lot with resignation. The richer part of the community built a few settlement houses, indulged in a little charity work—especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas—and otherwise ignored the subject. As successive waves of immigrants of various racial stocks came from the Old World, they were faced with economic hurdles and frequently made the butt of nationality jokes—at which theater audiences laughed with no inner sense of guilt.

Members of these races joined in poking fun at their own foibles. There were famous German, Italian, and Jewish comedians who carefully cultivated their native accents. For many years, traveling minstrel shows were highly popular, composed almost entirely of white men in black face, imitating the Negro accent and basing their hu-

mor largely on the stereotypes of Negro laziness, addiction to fried chicken, and so on.

The minstrel shows faded out and were succeeded by Negro comedians—real or synthetic—using the same type of material. Although slavery had been abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation almost forty years earlier, most Negroes still lived in the South. I cannot remember one member of this race in Emmetsburg in 1900.

It is true that there seemed always to be some war going on somewhere in the world, but these were small-scale conflicts, far from the peace of the broad and quiet Iowa prairie. Nobody even discussed the possibility that there might some day be another great conflict like our own Civil War, whose survivors still put on their blue or gray uniforms and marched in annual celebrations.

In no country, so far as I know, was there any Socialist movement of more than negligible importance. Reports occasionally came of political assassinations in some part of Europe, usually Russia, and usually the work of Anarchists, a sect that was already caricatured as bewhiskered individuals carrying smoking, grapefruit-size bombs. We had just barely heard of the Fabian Socialists of England, of Marx and Engels, and of the Paris Commune. The affair of the Chicago Anarchists in 1886 must have made news in Emmetsburg, but it was all forgotten by the turn of the century. I remember the stir made by the assassination of

President William McKinley when I was eleven, but I do not recall anyone saying that the man who killed him, Leon Czolgosz, was an Anarchist.

The emergence of scientific know-how that marked the Twentieth Century was just beginning. The principle of atomic radiation had been discovered by Becquerel when I was six. Nobody dreamed either of its coming usefulness as a medical tool or, of course, of the horrors of atom and hydrogen bombs. Nobody had enough vision to foresee a time, only fifty years away, when the world would be split between two economic and political systems intent on destroying the other.

There was practically no juvenile delinquency in Emmetsburg, perhaps because in our non-affluent society nobody ever had cause to complain that he "had nothing to do." All children did some work from the age of ten or so. On the farm the boys helped with the outdoor chores, and the girls learned the details of cooking and sewing, and aided their mothers. On Halloween high-spirited boys tipped over a few privies or hoisted a buggy to a roof. Usually the culprits were quickly identified and compelled to undo their damage. "Trick or treat" had not yet reached Iowa. The younger children stayed home and went to bed or attended early parties at which they bobbed for apples and pulled taffy. Jack-o'-lanterns carved from pumpkins and comic masks were a part of every Halloween.

Palo Alto County had gone dry by local option many years earlier. Until I left home at eighteen, I had never seen a saloon, a drunken man in the street, or any kind of alcoholic beverage served on a dinner table—or for that matter, anywhere else.

Unless there were goings on of which I was ignorant, we were still in the grip of the Puritan tradition as to sex. When my friends and I were turning adolescent, Freud's doctrines, which were eventually to crumble the foundations of so much of our philosophy, were still unheard of. So was birth control and the whole idea of "planned parenthood." I can remember only one girl in my generation who "got into trouble," and if there were shotgun marriages I did not know of them.

Discipline in school was good; rarely did anybody need to be sent to the principal's office, the only form of punishment employed. The principal was a mild-mannered man whose small daughter grew up to be editor of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. How he handled disciplinary problems I do not know, for neither I nor any of my close friends was ever sent to him.

In my case, my passion for reading kept me from getting into any serious mischief. I was never punished physically, and I was not unique in this respect. My mother objected to my reading at the dinner table and once, goaded beyond endurance, she marched me to the bathroom and locked me in. But she had overlooked the book

under my arm, and I promptly sat down and went on reading. Twenty minutes later, perhaps alarmed by my silence, she came and unlocked the door and announced through it, "Bruce, you can come out now." My reply became a family joke: "Thank you, mother, I don't care to."

I do not know how my classmates and I compared in scholarship with children elsewhere. I do know that in the first grade we memorized the alphabet and went on to pronounce syllables by phonics (a word not yet in use). I am told nowadays that the situation could not have been as good as I remember. My recollection is that every child in town could soon read, with little or no trouble. Nobody, to my knowledge, dropped out of school, though the farm boys might be absent for a week or two now and then, to help with the spring plowing or at harvest time.

The greatest annual excitement of my early boyhood was the arrival of the threshing machine and its crew. The huge contraption was drawn along the road by its own steam engine, like a locomotive miraculously escaped from the railroad, belching smoke and moving at a steady four or five miles an hour amid an uproar like doomsday. Its steel wheels were cleated for better traction and made broad to conquer the quagmires of mud sometimes encountered along the dirt roads. It was the first self-propelled vehicle I had ever seen, and like the bulls, it induced an unforgettable alarm.

Our house was on the edge of town, close enough to the farm to permit the threshing machine to function in the yard near our own huge barn. It was a small operation by today's standards, half a dozen men, only two or three of whom came with the rig; the others were local. The engine and the threshing machine were now connected by a long, wide, endless belt. Team after team drove up with shocks of grain. Into the hopper went the bundles amid a fearful roar, and out came the grain in a golden stream, while the strawstack reached higher and higher, seemingly to the sky.

The air was full of dust; the men shouted to one another or to their horses above the noise. When the rig shut down for noon dinner, the silence was so sudden and so deep it was startling.

Threshing was thirsty work, and the men drank water, when they could snatch a moment, from gallon crockery jugs. They followed a set, time-honored ritual, by first removing the big cork, picking up the jug in one hand, swinging it to the shoulder, and lowering it to an almost horizontal position. Only a greenhorn would use both hands to bring the jug up to the level of his face.

The noon dinner was a hasty but epochal feast. All morning my mother and the hired girl worked furiously in the kitchen preparing vast platters of meat, mashed potatoes, baked beans, two or three other vegetables, apple and pumpkin pies and, of

course, big tin pots of coffee. The men sat around a sawhorse table and ate ravenously. There was little time for conversation. The threshers were deeply sunburned except their foreheads which, when they took off their hats, were a clammy white. Next day the rig and its crew moved on to another job and I felt that a holiday was over.

Not only did my uncles give my father a farm, they found a job for him in their new mortgage and loan company, at the staggering salary of $200 a month, more money than he had ever seen. Father worked the farm in his spare time, with the aid of a hired man. He was now able to build a comfortable house. In addition to the barn, there was a huge lawn, a vegetable garden, and a chickenhouse and yard. The barn included a carriage house big enough for three or four vehicles, box stalls for several horses, and a tack room, which Iowans sensibly called "the harness room." Upstairs there was a trunk room and a big haymow. The former, when I was ten or twelve, contained old trunks full of discarded clothing, some of it fancy-dress costumes. There was a wide ledge about six feet above the floor at one end. Naturally, my playmates and I improvised plays and acted them out on this stage, wearing such parts of the discarded clothing as we could manage. Our audience was usually one or two younger children, or nobody at all.

In the haymow, small boys would climb the ex-

posed studs and make a daring leap onto the hay below while small girls watched admiringly. My father loved gadgets. He installed a hayfork which came down outside one end of the barn, picked up a great mouthful of hay from a wagon, and carried it up and through a big double door. The fork traveled on a steel track under the ridge-pole and released its load at any desired point.

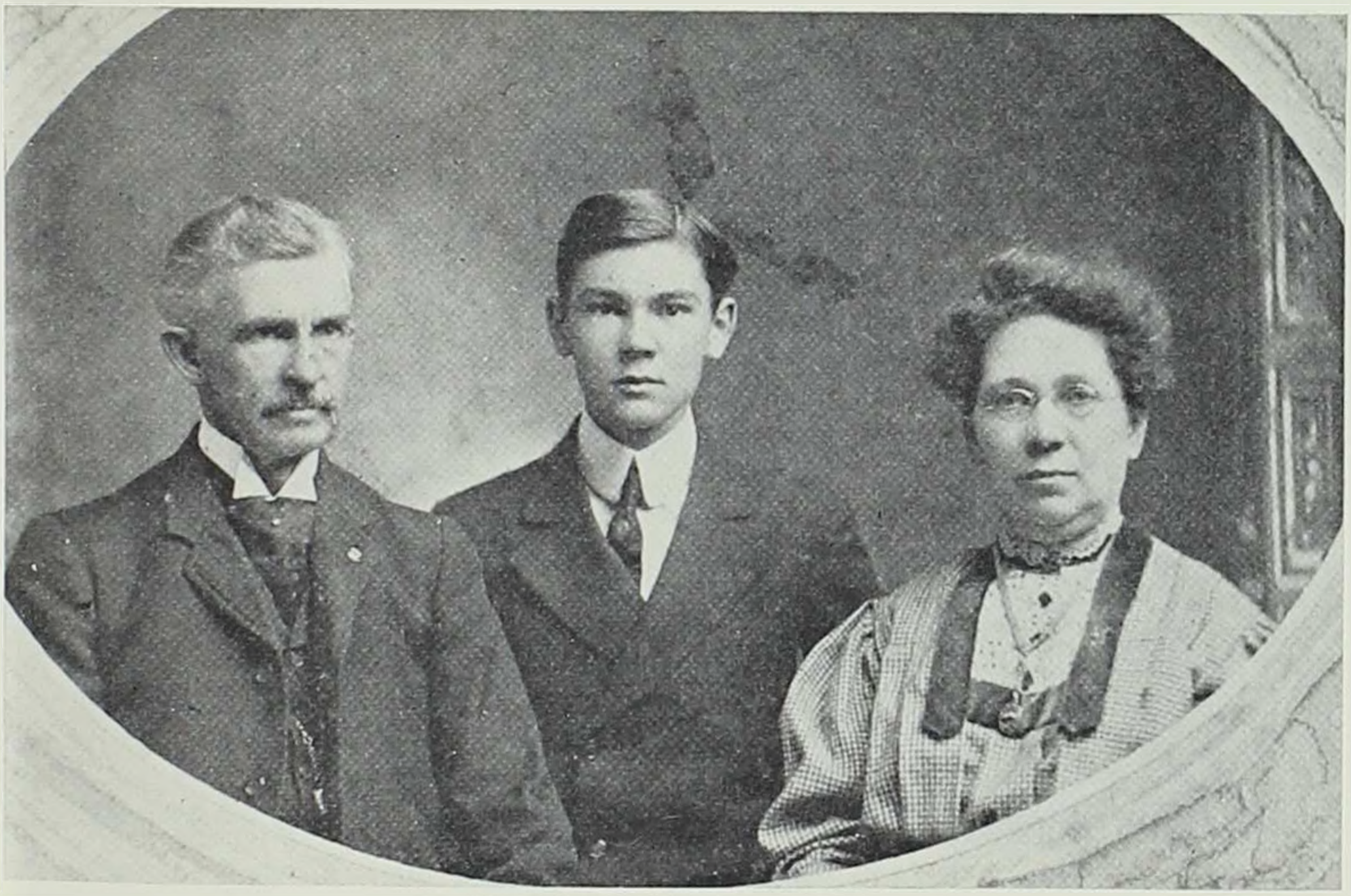
On the day I was born my father, by way of celebration, planted a tiny Colorado blue spruce in the middle of the largest sweep of our lawn. When I was old enough to understand, I was told that it was just my age. It was one of the most beautiful specimens of its kind I have ever seen, and it grew mightily. The neighbors, and eventually the whole town, came to know it as "Bruce's tree." On one of my rare visits back home in later years, a local paper published a photograph of me standing beside it and recounted the story. To this day, the sight of a Colorado blue spruce anywhere arrests my immediate attention and recalls nostalgic memories. I am not superstitious, but I used to wonder which of us, the tree or I, would outlive the other. When I was about sixty a letter from Emmetsburg, which I received in New York, reported that a blight had struck "my tree" and it had to be cut down. I felt I had lost a friend.

There was a gay social life in Emmetsburg in the early days. Though Iowans were far from

prosperous in the twenty years, 1873-1893, my family was doing well. The mortgage and loan company was prosperous; the future looked bright.

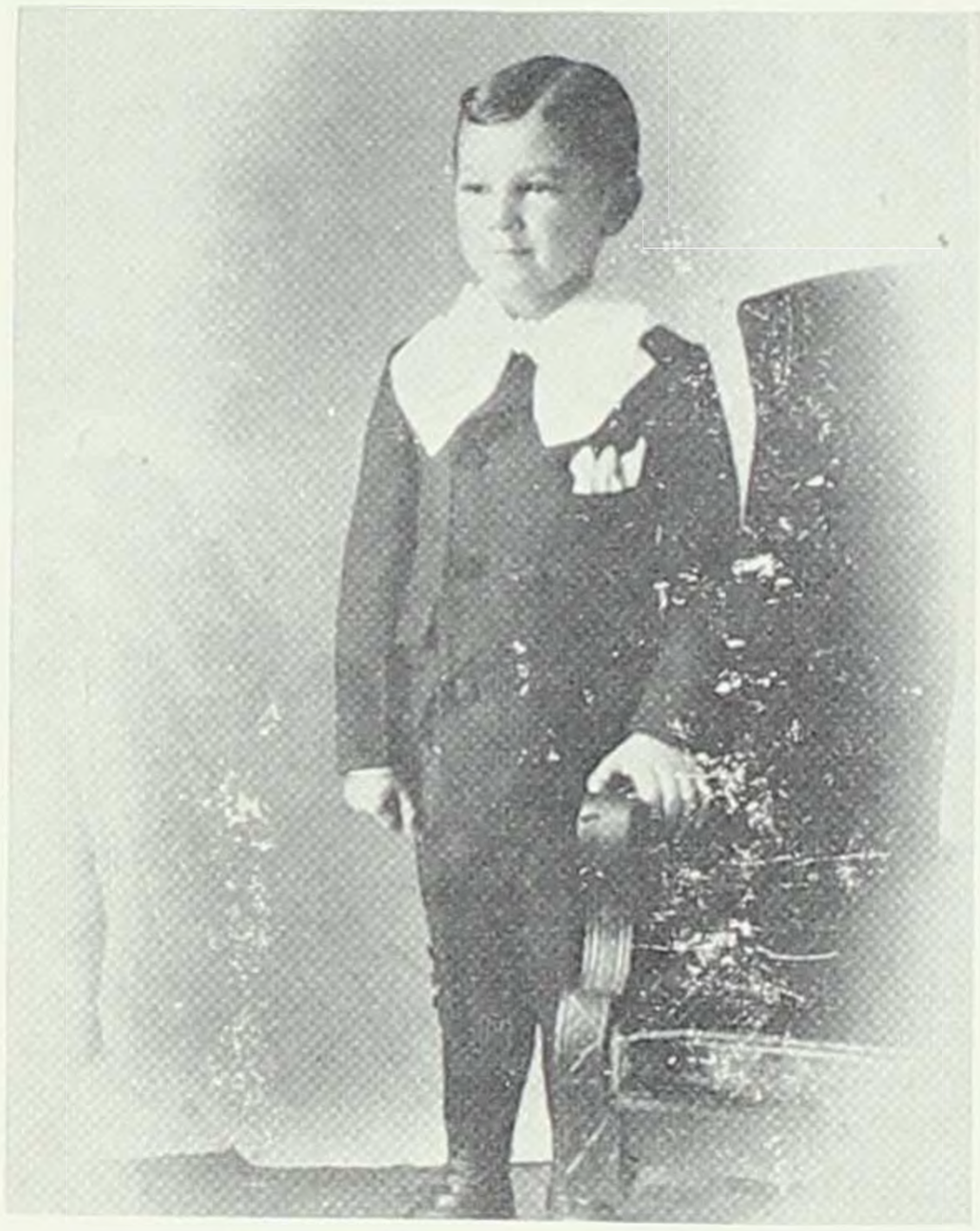
We had a hired girl and a hired man, our table was laden with food, and my parents entertained and were entertained. In winter my father drove a matched pair of horses, drawing a sleigh with flowers painted on the dashboard, and a big heavy buffalo robe for warmth. It could get terribly cold in Emmetsburg, the temperature was often in the minus twenties and once got down to forty below. In summer the same horses pulled a two-seater surrey with a fringed top like the one celebrated in *Oklahoma*. We always had a dog or two, pointers and setters, and they went with the family on Sunday drives, ranging freely through the fields on either side until they were tired, when they trotted sedately behind. Another of my early memories is leaning over the rear of the surrey, watching the road shoot backward from the wheels, making me pleasurably dizzy.

Social life in those days included lawn suppers in summer, with Japanese lanterns tied in the trees, and card tables set out on the grass for the diners. In winter there were bobsled rides in a wagon equipped with runners, with plenty of hay and half a dozen buffalo robes. Christmas, Decoration Day, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving were celebrated in Emmetsburg as they were all over America.

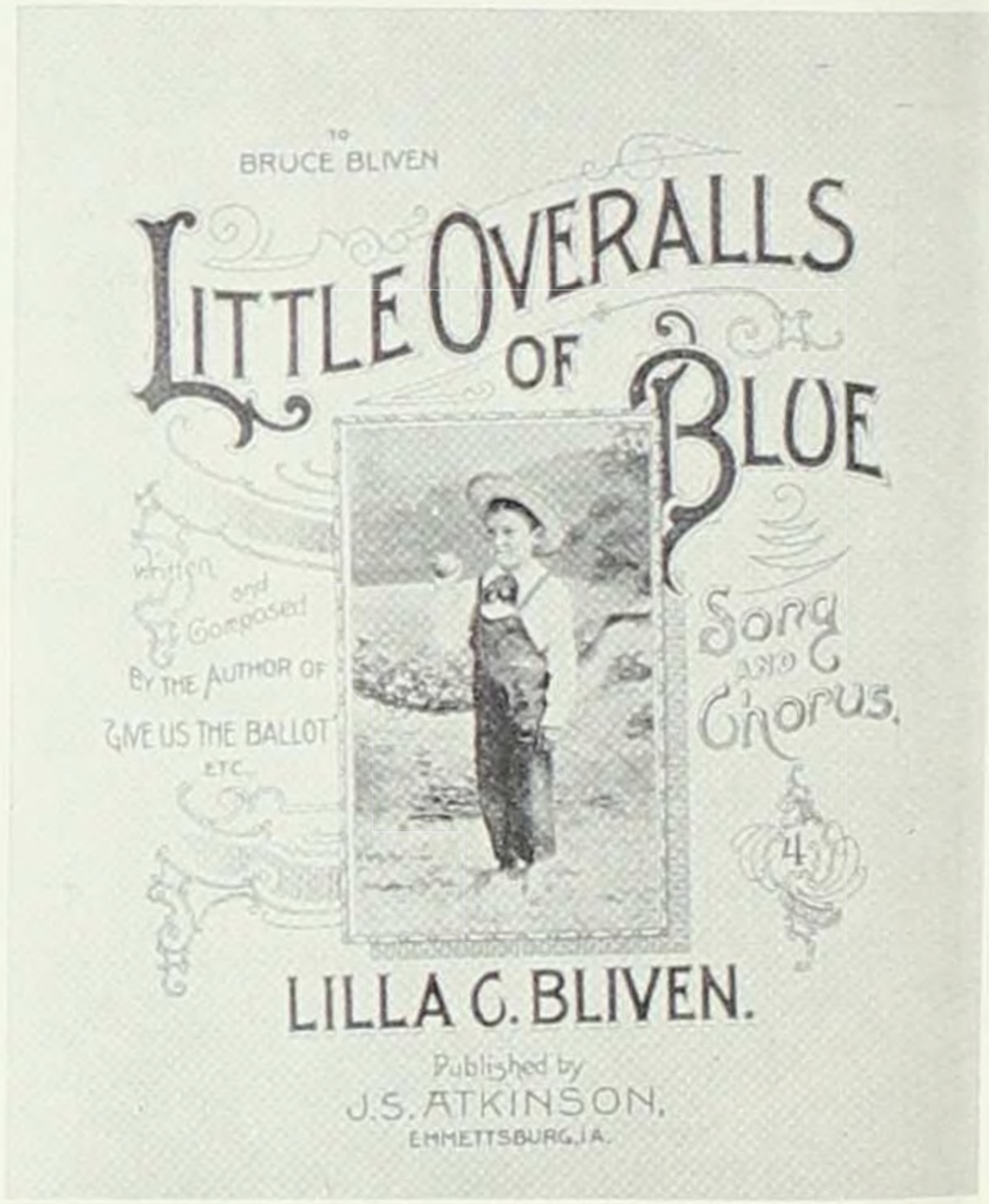


The Bliven Family in 1904.
Charles Franklin Bliven, Bruce Bliven, Lilla Ormsby Bliven

This is the red brick house in which Bruce Bliven was born in Emmetsburg. It was the home of Alvin Ormsby, a maternal uncle.



Bruce Bliven — age nine.



Bruce posed for this song, composed and written by his mother.

The Bliven home in Emmetsburg. Bruce poses with his sister and mother.

apple

apple

a A

arm

arm

ball

ball

b B

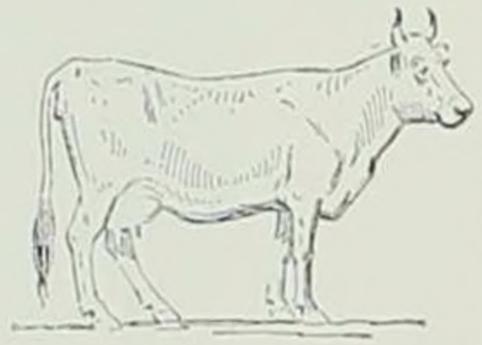
bat

bat

cat

cat

c C



cow

cow

doll

doll

d D

drum

drum

ear

ear

e E

eye

eye

foot

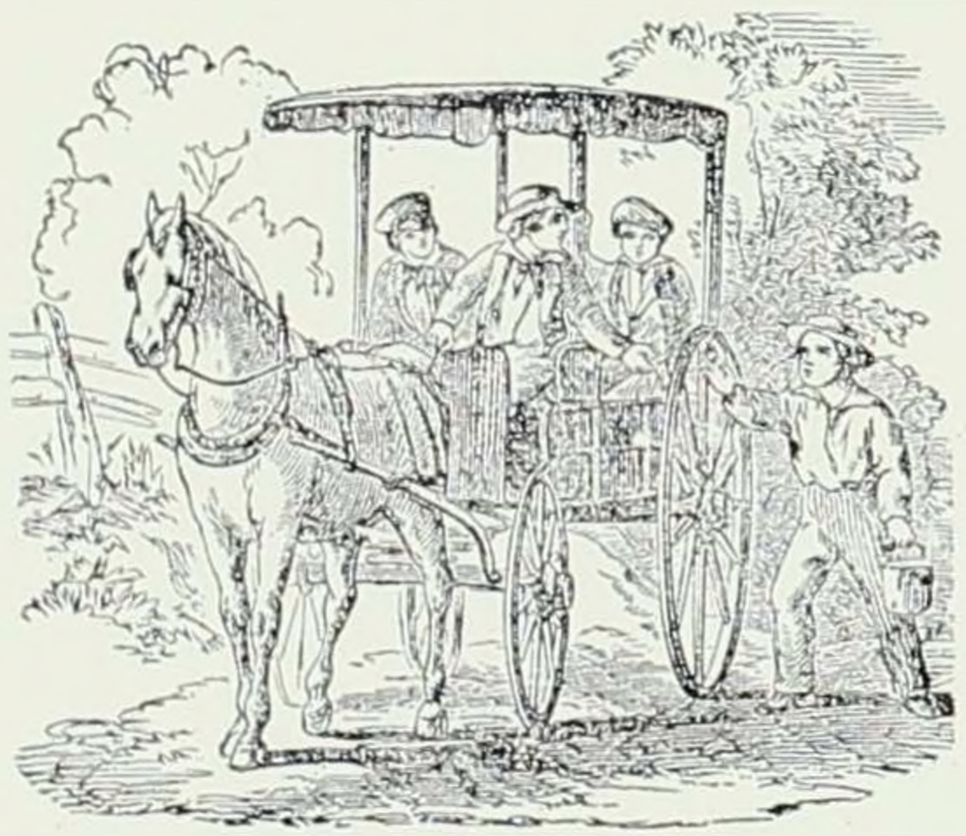
foot

f F

fan

fan

From *The Baldwin Primer*, American Book Company, 1899.



LESSON III.

ADDITION TABLE, — PART III.

5	and	1	are 6	5	and	7	are 12
5	and	2	are 7	5	and	8	are 13
5	and	3	are 8	5	and	9	are 14
5	and	4	are 9	5	and	10	are 15
5	and	5	are 10	5	and	11	are 16
5	and	6	are 11	5	and	12	are 17

6	and	1	are 7	6	and	7	are 13
6	and	2	are 8	6	and	8	are 14
6	and	3	are 9	6	and	9	are 15
6	and	4	are 10	6	and	10	are 16
6	and	5	are 11	6	and	11	are 17
6	and	6	are 12	6	and	12	are 18

SUBTRACTION.

LESSON I.

Subtraction means taking a less number or quantity from a greater; thus,

1. 1 pear taken from 2 pears leaves 1 pear.

2. 1 ball taken from 3 balls leaves 2 balls.

3. 2 eggs taken from 4 eggs leave 2 eggs.

From *Child's First Book of Arithmetic*, Bailey & Noyes, 1873.

one two three four five old

This is one,

and these are two;

And there are three
little birds for you.

Two and two make
four, you see;

Now there are five
on the old tree.

Phonetic Exercise

ăn	ĕn	ĭn
t an	t en	t in
f an	f en	f in
p an	p en	p in

ball	we	us	throw
let	go	if	down

"Look, Henry! See my new ball! Will you go down to the meadow with me this morning?"

"Yes. Let us go down there and play ball. We can take my black dog with us. If we do not catch the ball, he will run and find it."

"Let me throw the ball to you. Catch it, if you can. Now throw it back to me."

ă	ā	ĭ	ī	ŭ	ū
fat	fate	fin	fine	cub	cube
hat	hate	pin	pine	cut	cute

From *Graded Literature Readers*, Merrill, 1899.

REBECCA

Of Sunnybrook Farm

BY

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

THE GARDEN *of* ALLAH

By ROBERT HICHENS

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN WITH THE FAN," "FELIX," "TONGUES OF CONSCIENCE," ETC.

STURDY AND STRONG

OR

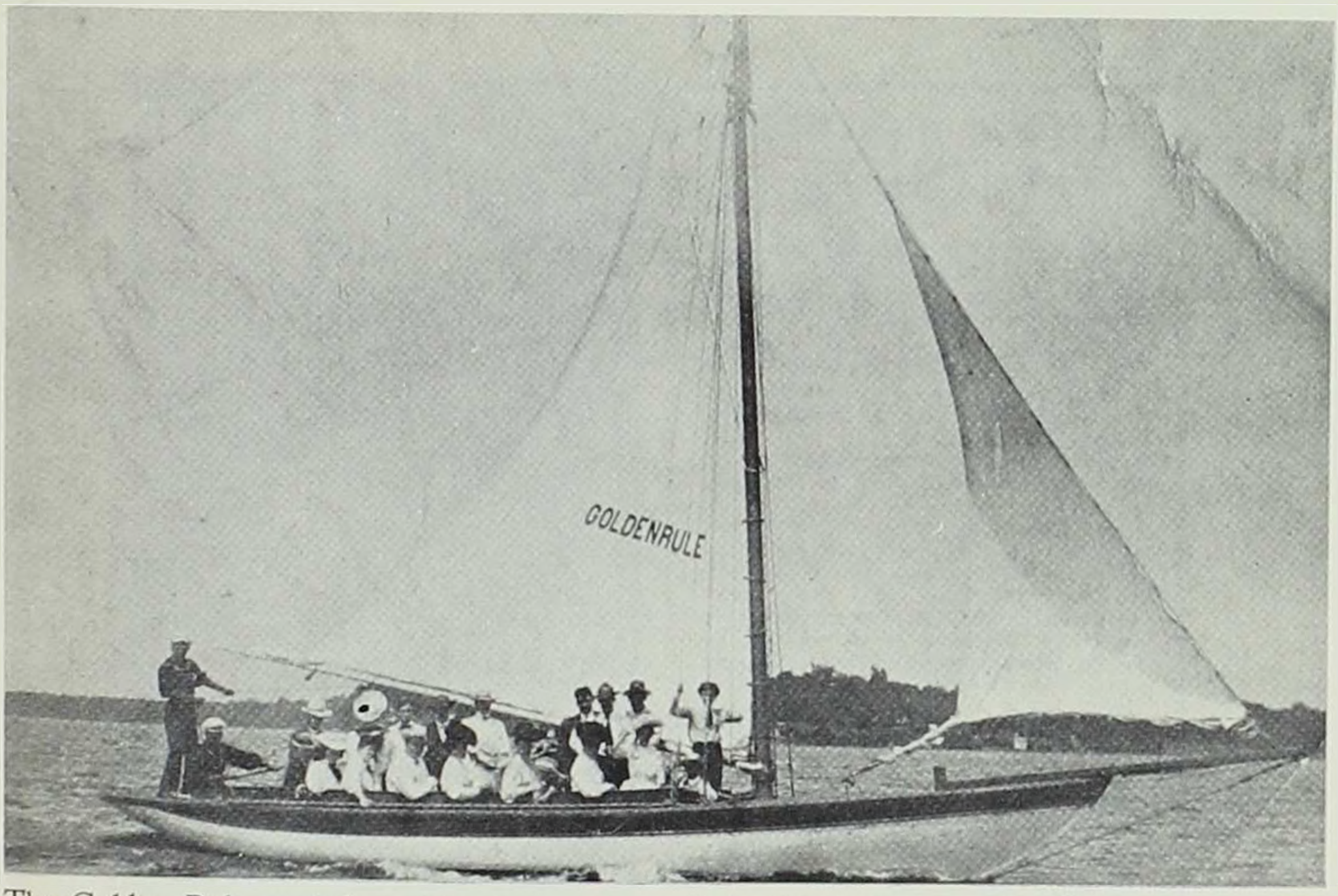
HOW GEORGE ANDREWS MADE HIS WAY.

BY

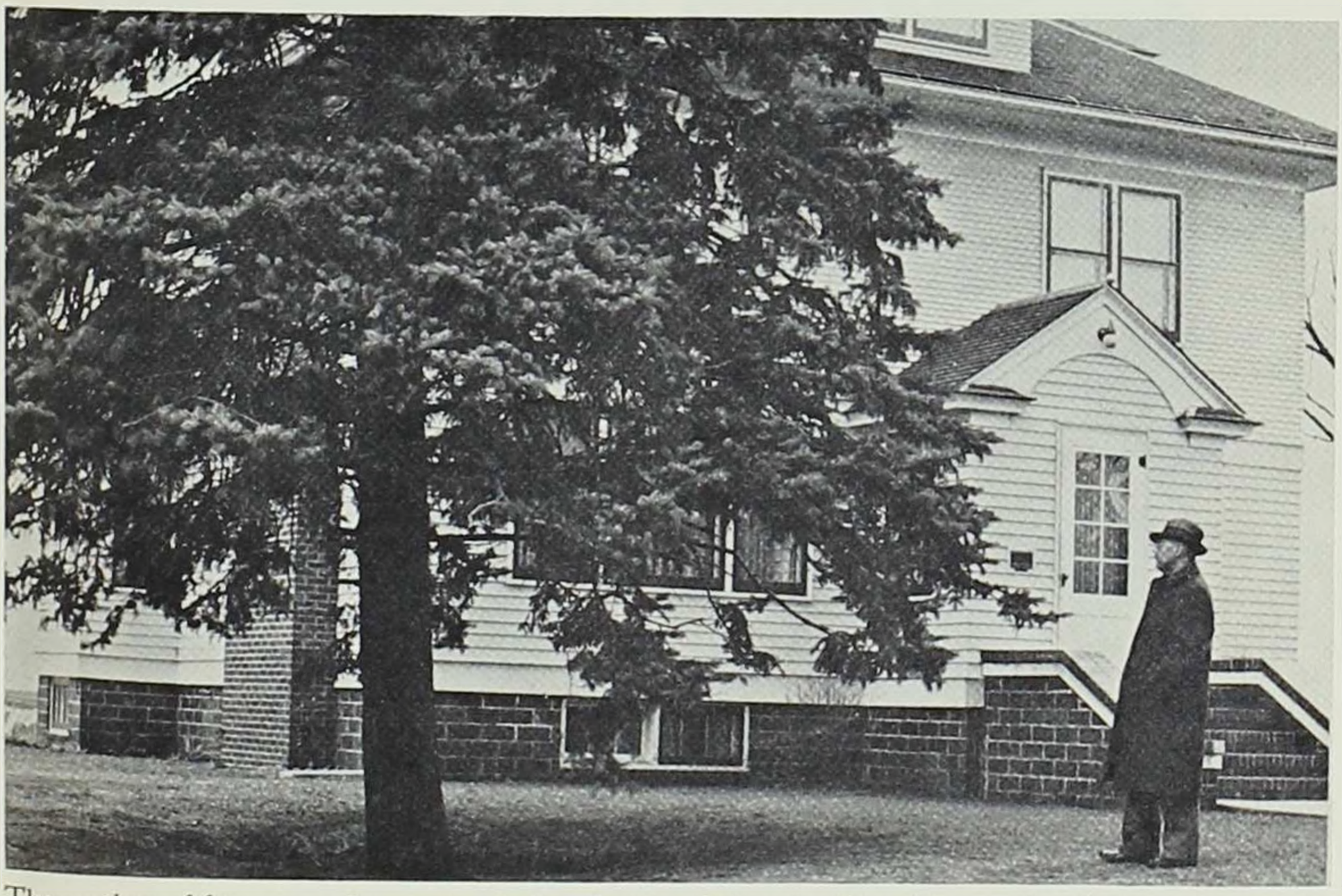
G. A. HENTY

AUTHOR OF "THE YOUNG CARTHAGINIAN," "WITH CLIVE IN INDIA," "IN FREEDOM'S CAUSE," "THE LION OF THE NORTH," "WITH WOLFE IN CANADA," "FACING DEATH," ETC.

Some of the books Bruce Bliven read as a boy.



The *Golden Rule* carried paying passengers on Lake Okoboji more than 60 years ago. The author, at 16 years, stands aft.



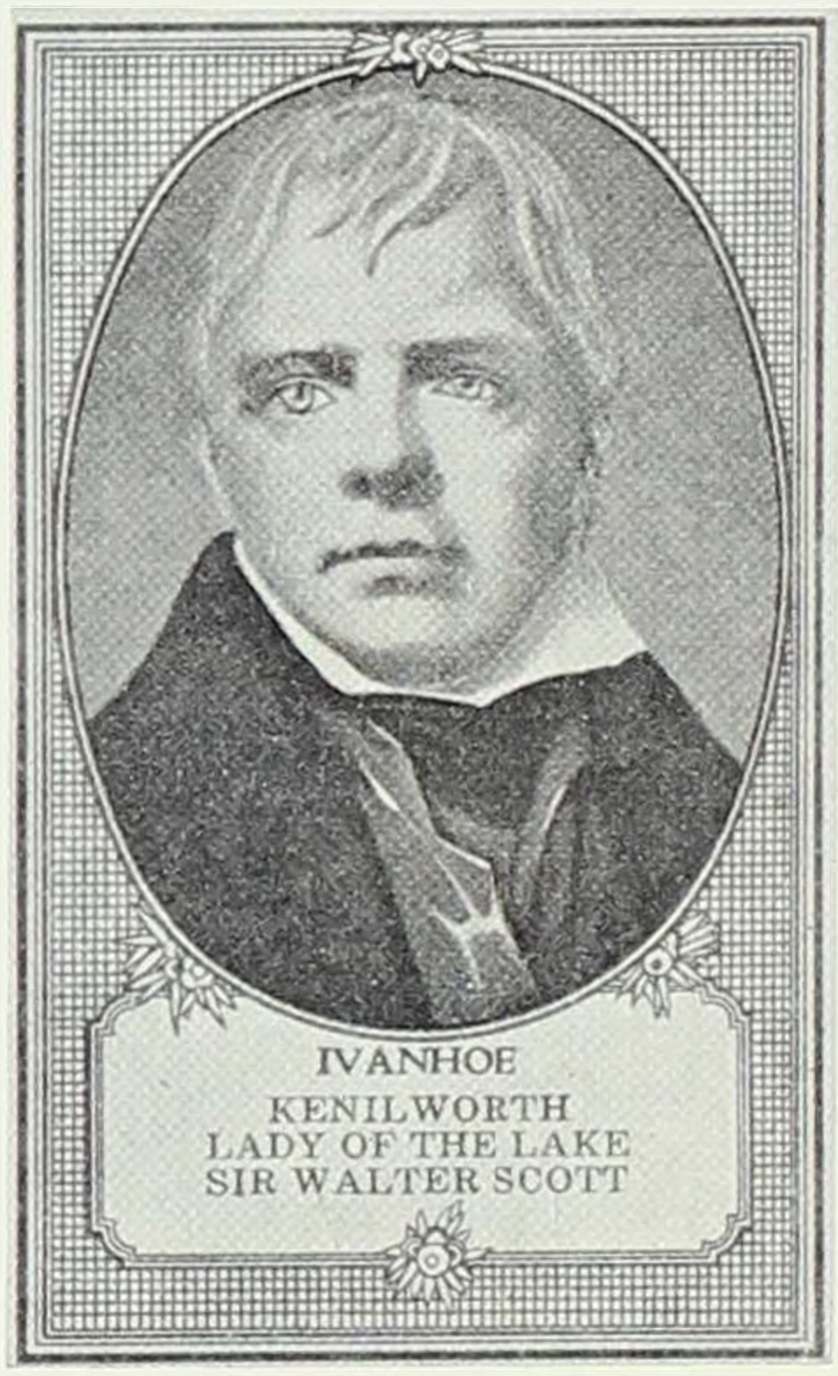
The author, fifty years later, stands beside the Colorado Blue Spruce his father planted the day Bruce was born in Emmetsburg.

RULES FOR THE GAME OF
AUTHORS

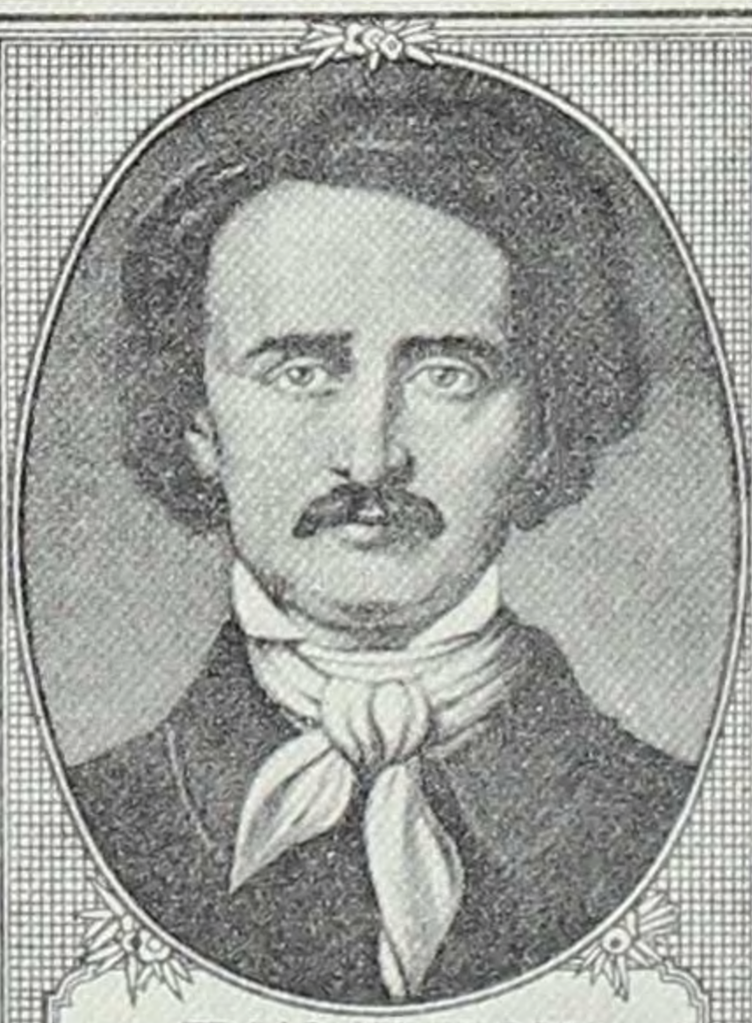
There are 44 cards to this game, 11 books of 4 each. The object is to obtain complete books by calling for cards from other players.

Shuffle the deck and deal 4 cards, one at each round, face down, to each player, placing remainder of deck face down in center of table. Player at dealer's left begins by calling on any other player for a card that will help him to complete a book of which he holds one or more cards. If the player called upon has the desired card he gives it to the caller, who continues calling until he fails. The caller then draws a card from top of deck. If he draws the card he called for, he again starts calling from players until unsuccessful, when he again draws from the deck. When he fails to draw the correct card from the deck the turn passes to the player at left—and so on.

When a player gets a complete book he lays it aside; and when all the cards have been gathered into books the game ends. The player having the most books wins.



IVANHOE
KENILWORTH
LADY OF THE LAKE
SIR WALTER SCOTT



EDGAR ALLAN POE
THE BELLS
THE RAVEN
THE GOLD BUG

THE PATHFINDER
THE DEERSLAYER
JAMES FENIMORE COOPER
THE SPY

Authors—one of the many games Bruce Bliven played while growing up.

Much of the social activity centered around the churches. One of my uncles was Episcopalian, the other Methodist. My parents plumped for Methodism, although I never knew why. Our church frowned on drinking, smoking, dancing, the theater, and card playing. My parents did not drink, my father did not smoke, and I do not remember their dancing, but they cheerfully ignored the other taboos. My mother staged amateur operettas among the town's young people, doing almost all the work herself, including playing the piano at the single performance. The Blivens belonged to a whist club that met regularly during the winter at the houses of the members in turn. Play continued until about eleven o'clock, when ice cream, cake, and coffee were served.

My mother was something of a poet, writing doggerel verses for every public occasion and many private ones. Her poems were invariably printed in one of the local weeklies. She also wrote songs, words and music. One of them, *Little Overalls of Blue,* was printed, I assume by some vanity publisher, with my photograph on the cover as a ten-year-old, wearing overalls and a broad-rimmed hat, and throwing a rubber ball in an impossibly awkward gesture. When I protested that no boy ever threw like that, I was overruled on the ground that "it makes a better picture that way."

One of my earliest vivid memories is my parents' return from the Columbian Exposition in

Chicago in 1893 when I was not quite four. I remember the greeting from my parents and my fourteen-year-old sister, who had gone along. The hired girl, who had been left in charge of me, was hovering in the background, and there was a huge square trunk deposited by the expressman on the lawn near the front door. But most of all I remember the miraculous present I got—a rubber ball attached to an elastic cord so that I could bounce it and it would return into my hand.

The trip to Chicago must have been the last wholly carefree moment my parents were ever to have. The Panic of 1893 was on, and a little later in the year the mortgage and loan company closed its doors. It had overextended itself, lending money on farms not only in Iowa but far out into the Dakotas. When the market for farm produce dwindled and prices dropped, the mortgages had to be foreclosed but the farms could rarely be sold for the sum of the loan.

My two uncles managed to escape with their personal fortunes intact. Indeed, they became richer by buying up quantities of land at forced sales, recognizing that eventually prices were bound to rise. My father had no capital, only his $200 a month, which he spent as fast as he got it. He was in no way responsible for the debacle, but the harsh recriminations of the townspeople, some of whom had bought stock in the enterprise, extended to everybody connected with the company.

My two uncles shrugged it off, but my father developed what would now be called a psychosomatic malady. Thenceforth, he was unable to endure working indoors at a desk. He still had the farm, but a farm was more a liability than an asset, and he sold it off, a few acres at a time, for money to live on. He was a wonderful person, loved by all who knew him, and he could do almost everything, but among the exceptions were making and saving money.

Gone now was the spirited team that pulled the surrey, gone were the hired girl and the hired man, gone were the costume parties and the suppers on the lawn with Japanese lanterns. My father started a small dairy. He bought a milk wagon, on each side of which was a beautiful painting of a pretty milkmaid leading a Jersey cow. This bold venture failed. He installed a dozen hives of bees and tried to sell honey, but everybody either had bees or did not like honey. From time to time father got a little work in a general store, but the wage was small and employment uncertain.

Over the years, my mother did what she could to come to the rescue. She sold toilet and cosmetic supplies to her friends. While these included almost everybody north of the tracks and a few from the south side, they did not buy many beauty preparations. She acted, with little success, as subscription agent for forthcoming books. Some of these were sets of classic authors, while others

were journalistic enterprises. When an important event came along, like the death of Queen Victoria or the Mt. Peleé disaster, a Chicago publisher would put together with fantastic speed a dummy volume, with a few sample pages of text and pictures. Copies of this were rushed to hundreds of agents in small towns, who then showed them to possible buyers. The agents promised delivery of the completed books within a few weeks, and this was in fact accomplished, with a speed equaled only by the mediocrity of the product. Very few in Emmetsburg wanted such books.

My mother by now was doing all her own housework, and hating every minute of it. She was so interested in public affairs—local and national—that she begrudged the time spent on routine tasks. The uncles helped us intermittently for a while, but in a few years one had died and the other (and both their families) had moved to Southern California.

If you had to be poor, a small midwestern town was a good place to live in the 1890's. Even when things were at their worst, we always had a cow or two, pigs for slaughter, and chickens. We had a big vegetable garden, apple trees, grapevines, and did not need much cash income. Transportation was a necessity, and instead of the surrey we now had a basket phaeton. Our fat and lazy old horse, Chubb, was a town character.

Many other people were about as poor as we

were, and there was complete social equality. My parents kept up a brave front; I do not believe my mother ever uttered a word of recrimination as to my father's neurosis about office work. Only once in my life did I come upon her crying quietly alone, at a particularly difficult moment. The memory still hurts.

From an early age, reading was my chief passion. Our town had no public library, and books were hard to come by. In their grand days, my parents had accumulated richly bound volumes of *The Century* for ten or twelve years, ending in 1892, and I read and reread these. I remember chiefly the almost endless reminiscences of Civil War generals and the story illustrations of E. W. Kemble, a famous illustrator of that day, who also worked on some of Mark Twain's books. He was a master at portraying violent action.

The Methodist Sunday School had a small library of stories for young people which were designed to inculcate the highest moral principles. I read them all. Friends of mine tipped me off that the Congregational Sunday School had a similar library. Temporarily, I became a Congregational child and went through that collection as well. A friend of the family gave me a tear-jerking story translated from the French, *Remi, the Boy Wanderer,* by Hector Malot. There was a wretched British series of dime novels about Jack Harkaway, and I accumulated half a dozen of them. I

was also addicted to the books of G. A. Henty, which told many bits of history painlessly by having some teen-age boy involved in them. For some unknown reason, my family had acquired G. Stanley Hall's big book, *Adolescence,* and I had waded through it before I myself had entered my teens.

I can see that I am exaggerating the paucity of reading matter at this time. My Uncle Alvin's library, in which I was permitted to browse, had complete sets of Dickens, Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson. I read them all straight through, going back to reread my favorites. My parents belonged to an informal book club whose members took turns buying the best sellers of the day, which were then passed around.

My memory, refreshed by Alice Hackett's *Sixty Years of Best Sellers,* tells me that while in high school I read *The Crossing,* by Winston Churchill, the American novelist, not the British statesman; *Beverly of Graustark,* by George Barr McCutcheon; *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm,* by Kate Douglas Wiggin; *The Garden of Allah,* by Robert Hichens; *The House of Mirth,* by Edith Wharton; *The Jungle,* by Upton Sinclair; and *The Spoilers,* by Rex Beach. Almost none of these books are read today, except *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.*

Somehow I got hold of Jerome K. Jerome's now almost forgotten *Three Men in a Boat,* which I thought and still think was a very funny book. I

was enthralled by Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills,* quite unaware, at fifteen or sixteen, of the jingoism that was to cause some people to look askance at him many years later.

I never saw the *St. Nicholas* magazine; my paper was *The Youth's Companion,* which not only provided quantities of highly moral reading matter, but also premiums for peddling subscriptions to your friends. I never wanted anything so much as those premiums, pictured and described in a catalogue that I wore to tatters. I hounded my uncles and cousins into subscribing and won a sled, the only one I ever had.

My family read two local papers, the *Palo Alto Tribune* and the *Emmetsburg Democrat*. We took the weekly edition of a Chicago paper, I believe *The Inter-Ocean*. We should have read one of the excellent Des Moines papers, but the rail connections from Chicago were better and its paper came through faster.

Through my reading, I had acquired a vocabulary of some hundreds of words that nobody in Emmetsburg had ever spoken in my presence; the result, English being the illogical language it is, was that I mispronounced a large proportion of these. It took me years, after I had gone to college, to get them all straight, if indeed I ever have.

I assume it was my mother's example that got me interested in writing. At ten or eleven I won essay contests for children held by *The Woman's*

Home Companion and *Success Magazine;* the rewards, aside from the thrill of seeing what I had written printed in national magazines, were books. I received as prizes Ida Tarbell's *Life of Lincoln* and Captain Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World*. I must have read the latter forty or fifty times in the next half century.

In high school I started a paper. If my memory is correct, I wrote almost all of it myself, and I know I solicited all the advertising which made it financially possible. I also helped see it through the press in the job-printing department of one of the local weeklies. I learned to set type from the case; sixty-five years later I can still feel the "stick" held in my left hand, my right picking up the individual characters, and my thumb checking the little notch which told me each was right side up. I never became good enough to be of much use to the professionals who set most of the type, made up the forms, and ran off the copies on a job press for me. The paper lasted four or five issues.

One of my friends and I invented a variation on thieves' jargon, as countless other children have done before and since. Ours consisted of removing the first letter or diphthong from a word and adding it at the end, followed by a meaningless "iker" or "aker," intended to confuse any eavesdropper. Thus "this is the way to do it" became "isthiker siker ethuker aywiker otoker odoker tiker." With practice we developed lightning

speed and were able to tell each other secrets with impunity in front of our friends. A triumph came when the telephone operator, who listened in, reported that Willie Morling and Bruce Bliven were talking Russian or something over the wire.

Our accomplishment became a wonderful morale builder for us. Neither of us had much physical prowess; Willie was lame, and I had flat feet and poor eyesight. I wore glasses from the age of seven or eight. Being athletic was, naturally, the chief characteristic of any importance among the children. To be bright in school was tolerated, if you were not stuck up about it. The fact that we could talk this gibberish and understand each other was the solitary status symbol either of us had.

Our family finances never got any better while I was growing up, but there was no suggestion that I should drop out of school and go to work. Indeed there were no jobs available to an adolescent in the small town that would have been of any real assistance. On one occasion, when I was about twelve, my mother popped some popcorn and told me to peddle it at a sandlot baseball game near our home. I did so, but I was so shy it was torture, and my mother could see that the few pennies I earned were not worth the misery.

On another occasion I caught a huge and beautiful butterfly. A neighbor of ours was an amateur lepidopterist, and my mother, who must have been

really desperate that day, suggested I see whether he would buy it for twenty-five or fifty cents. I hated the errand; I wanted to give him the butterfly, as man to man. When he refused to pay anything at all, it was with a great feeling of relief that I made him a present of it and went home happily to tell my mother, with a clear conscience, that the sale had fallen through.

One of the uncles had a summer cottage on West Okoboji, and for years it was loaned to us for a few weeks each summer, if no closer members of the family wanted it. Iowa roads follow the section lines. It was about forty miles from Emmetsburg to the lake, and my father and I made the journey with Chubb and the phaeton, while my mother took the train. We started about four a.m., so as to give the horse time to rest during the journey. The prairie was beautiful at that hour, so quiet and so fresh. Wherever the sod was unbroken, it was thick with dandelions, wild roses, and Indian paintbrush. When the sun rose, meadow larks saluted it and if there was any wind, the telephone wires hummed, sliding up and down a few notes of the scale with the variations in the breeze.

Sometimes the road dipped down through a slough, with a few yards of thick mud, and on rare occasions we got stuck. When this happened, my father, swearing very mildly under his breath, took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his

trousers, and got out into the muck. While I held the reins and urged old Chubb on, my father pushed from behind and got us across to the higher ground. These episodes were alarming, but pleasurable too, at least in retrospect. My father and I were Men without Women, undergoing strictly masculine adventures.

Nearly half a century later, when I was back home for a brief visit, my host at a dinner party discussed what to do for the evening's entertainment. They decided to drive to Okoboji and back, and we did. Only I saw on the old dirt road paralleling the modern highway the ghost of an ancient white horse, a basket phaeton, and an anxious man and boy who had started before dawn and hoped to reach the lake by dark.

Another of the rare times my father and I were alone together was when we went hunting —an excursion of a few hours along the lakeshore, or on our own farm property, while we still had some. Most of all I remember the times we went looking for small game, with heavy snow on the ground. It was a world of almost intolerable whiteness, the sun a smudged blur in the sky. I had a BB gun, a smaller imitation of my father's rifle, and I looked around fiercely for any prey as we tramped along on crusted snow or on frozen puddles, where the ice was flawed in every direction, with tips of vegetation visible beneath the surface. I cannot remember that we ever killed

anything, but we did a lot of walking, no talking, and came home in contented comradeship.

By the turn of the century, the prairie was dotted with groves of cottonwoods and willows, usually planted just north of the farm houses as a windbreak. In town there were many buildings and trees to lessen the force of a storm. Oldtimers told us that these were much less formidable than they had been thirty years earlier, but even so, our three or four blizzards each winter were terrifying. In the midst of one of them, my father left the house in late afternoon to feed and water the stock in the barn, a hundred yards away. The heavy snowfall was swirled in all directions by the full gale that was blowing. With every landmark obliterated, father got confused even on this short journey and wandered back and forth for a long quarter of an hour, until he caught a glimpse of the lighted kerosene lamp in our kitchen.

The children of my day were a hardy lot. In my case, school was about a mile's walk from our house, and I cannot remember more than half a dozen winter storms bad enough to keep me home. On very snowy days, I took my lunch, in an old lard pail with a wire handle. Otherwise I walked back and forth four times a day.

In winter we skated on the lake. There was only one iceboat, but a number of children, including myself, had skate sails. We got the thrill of

skimming along under windpower watching out for the tips of weeds sticking up through the ice, which could send you sprawling.

We had no "old swimming hole" for summer use by half-grown boys. The lake was unpleasantly muddy and weedy, and the river was several miles away, with transportation rarely available. My family swam daily during our visits to Okoboji and that was all.

Children do not appreciate natural beauty, or at least, my generation did not, except for an occasional sensational sunset or a rainbow. It was not until many years later that I began to appreciate the wonderful great sweep of the gently rolling prairie, the mass of wild flowers in summer, the pristine whiteness of a winter day.

Normally, as I have noted, the rising generation in Emmetsburg was kept reasonably busy with odd jobs after school. We had no organized athletics, though we played Run-Sheep-Run, One-Old-Cat, and rudimentary football. There were never enough boys at one spot at one time for two teams of nine or eleven. Winter evenings we played checkers, dominoes, crokinole, Authors, another card game called Flinch, and, doubtless, others I have forgotten. On mild Sunday afternoons we walked down to the Milwaukee station to see the trains from Chicago come in. We had, of course, no movies, no radio, no television, no cars, for aimless driving around, but I cannot re-

member ever feeling the restless malaise of the spirit that seems so conspicuous in the younger generation in the 1960's.

In the long hot summers, we lived under the threat of tornadoes, which we called cyclones. Like most other people, we had a cyclone cellar a few rods from the house, with a flight of wooden steps going down into a space of forty or fifty square feet, the roof of heavy sod, the room deep enough to let us stand upright. I cannot remember that we ever actually took refuge in it. Part of each year it was used to store root vegetables. I do remember, on at least one occasion, seeing a cyclone passing a few miles away, from southwest to northeast, with its long, slender, evil funnel disappearing at the top into a roiled black cloud. On another occasion we drove out into the country to see a farm house that had been destroyed. It was almost perfectly flat, like a heap of trash that had been carefully smoothed out over a large area.

Though I was kept in school in spite of the family poverty, when I was old enough I usually had a job in the summer at West Okoboji. One year I was employed by a "steam laundry" in the nearby town of Spirit Lake, picking up and returning linen for fifteen or twenty nearby cottagers. Another year I peddled *The Saturday Evening Post*. I had to buy my copies, but I got a credit if I tore off and sent in the covers of the unsold ones; I can still remember a few of the cover

drawings, done by one of the Leyendecker brothers, popular artists of the day, as well as back-cover advertisements for Uneeda Biscuit, a boy dressed in bright yellow Down East oilskins—to emphasize the fact that the crackers did not get damp in the package.

For two high school years, I spent my summers acting as crew on a sailboat that carried passengers commercially. For fifty cents each we would take a party of twenty or thirty people for a sail of an hour or two from Arnold's Park, where the one-day excursion trains brought their crowds; or we could be chartered at a fixed fee for a moonlight sail. Captain Lewis, who owned and sailed *The Golden Rule,* was a practicing dentist in Ottumwa, Iowa, who had hay fever and preferred to spend the summer on the water. He could not have made much money with his boat, but he did not care. He paid me the satisfactory wage of $10 a month, plus board and room, and supplied my sailor's blue uniforms, complete with a big square collar and a horrible number of buttons on the trousers. My duties were to help people on and off the boat, collect fares, tie up and cast off at docks ("Three half hitches will hold the devil," he told me.), trim the jib sheet and, rarely, have the thrill of taking the helm.

A few times, fouled halyards or some other problem required me to climb the mast, and I recall the excitement of swinging far to leeward

while the boat was running close-hauled, looking down at the deck so suddenly diminished in size, and seeing from this fresh angle the modest "bone in her teeth" at the bow.

Captain Lewis was an intelligent and literate man. Like me, he was devoted to reading, and when we were sailing with no passengers, we engaged in animated discussions of the popular novels of the day. Sometimes we went on quietly with these conversations even with passengers on board. If these were readers, which did not seem to happen very often, they would exchange startled glances, having taken it for granted that the captain and the crew of a commercial sailboat would be able to communicate only in grunts.

On a few occasions we were caught out in the middle of the lake by sudden, violent windstorms, and I learned how people acted in unexpected peril. Most of them behaved well, but I remember one woman who in terror let her baby slip from her lap to the floor of the cockpit alongside the centerboard box, where it lay with the rain beating down on it. Another time, four big stalwart men panicked and were less than useless as Captain Lewis and I got the sails down and the anchor out. It did not hold, and we were driven ashore on a pebbly beach, with little damage.

I had only one personal mishap in two summers. One dark night, in a mild breeze, I was walking aft along the deck when the mainsail jibed and

knocked me overboard, the boat sailing off into the darkness. I was wearing heavy oxfords and a blue jacket, and since it was half a mile to shore, I was frightened. But Captain Lewis came about at once, found me in two or three minutes, and threw me a line. You may be sure I made the most of this adventure when I returned to high school in the fall.

When I was in high school my father and I carried on a running joke for a long time. Its basis was the idea that Women Talk Too Much, and that we should occasionally try to get away to some small, deserted island. But instead, the whole family began to dream of migrating to California, away from Iowa's bitter winters, and—I now suspect—away from the debacle of the mortgage and loan company. We sent to various towns for Chamber of Commerce "literature," and for some reason I have forgotten, we settled on Auburn, then a decaying foothill town north of Sacramento. When we finally did go west, we ended up, like almost all Iowans, in the Los Angeles area. None of us has ever seen Auburn, but for many months it represented a shining hope.

I was sent to the Methodist Sunday School from an early age, and without being consulted as to whether I wanted to go. I do not remember much about it, with one exception. When I was very young, our teacher repeatedly showed us a large, vertical, colored poster called something

like—*The Drunkard's Downfall*—a series of pictures zigzagging down the sheet. At the top left the protagonist, not yet an alcoholic, was a handsome young man, living in a nice house, with a pretty, well-dressed wife and two cute children, the boy a year older than the girl, as he ought to be. In the second scene, a little down the sheet and to the right, he is persuaded against his better judgment to take one drink at a party. In successive zigzag scenes he becomes a compulsive imbiber, and loses his job, home, and family. In the last scene, the wretch lies in rags in the gutter, clutching an empty bottle. He now wore whiskers —not neat ones like those of President Grant— but wild and unkempt. It is obvious that if the poster had been a little longer we should have seen him in a pauper's grave.

This drawing made such an impression on me that seventy years later I can still recall most of it. It is interesting to note that all my life I have never been able to take more than one drink without getting slightly nauseated. Even that single drink results in no pleasurable sensation—only a slight dizziness and a tendency to talk in long, complicated sentences.

At about fourteen, soon after my voice had changed, I found myself to my astonishment singing tenor in the Methodist choir. The merit that acquired this honor for me was a simple one—nobody else was available. My voice was medi-

ocre, but I could read music and could refrain from giggling at inappropriate times.

Actually, I should have preferred to spend the period of the church service in the small room behind the pipe organ, where my friend, Charlie Milham, pumped the bellows by hand. Charlie had a wonderful collection of old magazines—mostly *The Argosy*—and on at least one occasion he got so engrossed in reading that he did not hear the buzzer telling him to start pumping. An embarassing gap in the church service resulted.

The director of the choir was a young man who seemed older than he was because of premature baldness. He also sang tenor. When we did anything more ambitious than to lead the congregation in hymns, the choir director always picked out a work that included a tenor solo. I knew I was not good enough for solos, and did not really want to sing one; nevertheless, I was jealous.

The Methodists rarely held revival meetings. I remember only one instance during my three years or so in the choir but that experience was memorable. This was a special imported preacher famous for his ability to get repentant sinners to rise and come forward to "the mourners' bench" —the first row of pews, left vacant for this purpose. Here they would be talked to, in a state of hysterical emotion, by the revivalist, by our own minister, or by one or two especially helpful elder members of the congregation.

The revival meetings went on every night for a week, and at the climax of each session, after a sermon led by the revivalist, all possible pressure was put on. He would chant over and over, at once the hypnotizer and the hypnotized, "Come to the 'mourners' bench'—come all ye who are weary and heavy-laden—come lay your burdens at the foot of the Cross," and much more of the same. Throughout his words, we in the choir sang softly and repeatedly as an obbligato in the background, the last stanza of an old Methodist revival hymn:

Almost persuaded,
Harvest is past.
Almost persuaded,
Doom comes at last.
Almost cannot avail;
Almost is but to fail;
Sad, sad, that bitter wail,
Almost, but lost.

Some of the congregation, smugly sure that they were among the saved, sang softly with us. One by one, a few others who believed they were in a state of sin would come down and kneel by the altar, or sit in the first row of pews, where they could be encouraged, *sotto voce,* by one of the little group waiting to receive them.

Nowadays it is fashionable to say that most of these highly emotional conversions are only temporary. At that time we all knew of a few chronic

repeaters who came forward whenever there was an opportunity. But in general, the church and the whole community thought the revival meeting was a fine idea. The revivalist traveled a circuit, appearing in one town after another, in the fashion exemplified by such famous pulpit orators as Billy Sunday, and years later by Billy Graham.

I did not feel strongly involved in these proceedings; I thought I was doing my bit by standing in the choir loft each night and joining in the singing of "Almost Persuaded." I was shocked one day, however, when our resident minister stopped me on the street and said, "Bruce, when are you coming down to the 'mourners' bench?'" It had seemed to me that the members of the choir would not be expected to perform this rite. The choir loft was up a flight of steep steps behind the pulpit and, if I had dropped my hymnal and climbed down, what would become of my duet with Gretchen Schroeder, which was a part of most meetings? I stammered out that I would think about it—and managed to escape.

My dilemma was solved in a way I could never have expected. Only a few days later, the electrifying news ran around the town that our pastor had deserted his family and eloped with the wife of a leading member of the congregation! This was by far the most dramatic event of my boyhood years, far outdistancing the time my Uncle Ed's barn, only a block from our house, burned

down, killing several valuable horses. A new pastor was hastily brought in and there was no more discussion of having Bruce climb down from the choir loft to the "mourners' bench."

Year by year, the boy grew older. In spite of our poverty, mine was a happy childhood. I can not remember that I ever had a crush on a teacher, but at fifteen I was half in love, simultaneously or in quick succession, with some of my classmates—Gretchen, Lucy, Ruby, Jessie, and others whose names I have forgotten, though I remember their shining, soap and water faces. A shy boy, I adored them from a distance.

A few small triumphs of those years stand out. At about sixteen, I starred in an operetta put on by my mother, of which I remember only that I wore a white naval uniform, like Lieutenant Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly;* I am sure I got the part by nepotism, though in fact, bad as I was as an actor or singer, I recall no other boy in town who was any better. I won a countywide oratorical contest with a speech I wrote and memorized, in praise of the sturdy inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley. A few short stories of mine were printed in one of the town newspapers—at the prompting, I am sure, of my mother—and got me more attention locally than did the prize-winning essays in national magazines, which very few saw.

As my senior year in high school came to an end, the family began to discuss whether college

was possible for me, and if so, which one. I was notified, out of a clear sky, that I had won a tuition scholarship at Cornell College, Mount Vernon.

Then came the wonderful news that my Cousin Scott, Uncle Alvin's son, would help see me through some university, to the extent of $40 a month—a fortune! Though there was a little talk of Harvard, it vanished almost at once in favor of Stanford, in California. The ostensible reason was that my health seemed a little frail. I had frequent tonsilitis and was underweight, and the family doctor agreed that the mild climate of Palo Alto would be good for me.

But the real reason was the one already mentioned: My family, like practically everybody else in Iowa, yearned to move to the Golden West. There was in those years, as there has been ever since, a tremendous migration to California from the Middle West. With Bruce in Palo Alto the move would be easier and simpler for my parents.

In those days college entrance was far from being the ordeal it is today. Application was made to Stanford, my high school records were forwarded, and word came that I was accepted. There was only one hitch. American History was then required for admission, Emmetsburg High School had no such course, and I would have to pass an entrance examination in this subject. To anticipate a little, I bought a history of the United States, read it on the train, and was one of a

minority who passed the American history test.

The family was at Okoboji at the beginning of August, when it was time for me to leave on the first long train journey of my life. Father returned to Emmetsburg to help me with the final preparations. We crossed the lake by steamer to Arnolds' Park, leaving mother trying not to cry as she stood and waved on the pier. I was too excited to cry.

Father and I came down by train and stayed overnight in our house, strangely quiet with only "the men" there. We packed my suitcases for the trip, cooked our meals, and in late afternoon of the second day walked together to the Rock Island depot, only two or three blocks away. Though hardly a word had been spoken, I never felt closer to my father than I did in those twenty-four hours. As we heard the southbound train coming past the water tower, at the narrowest point on the lake, he made a very short speech, which he had clearly been rehearsing in his mind. "Take care of your health," he said, "and improve your opportunities."

I said I would, and he helped lift my suitcases to the platform of the day coach that was to carry me to my connection with the San Francisco train. As we began to move, I went out to the rear platform to wave goodbye. Father waved back, a small and lonely figure among the gathering shadows. The train rounded a slight curve, and I went in and sat down. I had left home.

BRUCE BLIVEN