

## The First Four Years

In the spring of 1888, a young couple began life together on a hundred-acre rented farm in Madison County. This farm, on which John and Agnes McNamara started their arduous career, was "improved" by an unpainted four-room house, with neither porches nor shade, surrounded by a wire fence, with no gate. Persons were obliged to crawl under the wire to go in or out. The house was located in the field, off the main road. There was a well with a windlass to draw up water, at such times as there was any to draw; and a small shed, built of native lumber and roofed with poles and slough grass, that served as a stable and granary. There were no other outbuildings for any convenience whatever.

The bride had what was considered in those days many nice things to go toward furnishing a home — such as a rag carpet, home-made rugs, a feather bed, pillows, quilts, comforters, bed spreads, sheets, pillow cases, table cloths and napkins, towels, dishes, hand-painted pictures, and many articles of fancy work. She had dreams of an ideal home with vines at the windows and flower beds in the dooryard, but was doomed to



bitter disappointment, for the young husband suddenly evinced a dislike for "weeds" as he termed the flowers. And so the hogs roamed the doorway and rooted up the flower beds. The vegetable garden and potato patch were located in the corn field (no hogs admitted), about a quarter of a mile away.

A "hired man" was not employed during the first summer. Fourteen cows were milked, and the calves fed by hand. Skim milk, warmed with half new milk, was given to the calves. The milk had to be carried quite a distance to the house. As there was neither cellar nor cave, the wife set two barrels part way in the ground and banked earth around them to serve in lieu of a milk tank. A few stray boards nailed together served as a lid. The milk was kept in tall tin cans placed in the barrels. The water around the milk cans in the barrels was changed as required, according to the weather. The task of drawing the water, dipping the stale water out, carrying it to the hogs, and refilling the barrels was no picnic on hot days. The cream was sold to a creamery, a man calling for it once or twice a week. The butter was hung in the well.

Household facilities were meager and not the best. The second-hand cook stove was slow in getting hot on top and in the oven, so slow in fact that the bread had to be turned upside down to



finish baking. The heating stove was cracked and therefore not very safe to leave fire in overnight. On cold winter mornings, the bread, meat, and all foods would be frozen almost solid, and it would sometimes be almost noon before the house got warm enough for comfort. At such times breakfast, when things were sufficiently thawed out, was eaten on a small table in the living room by the heating stove. When the well went dry in the winter, snow, if there was any, was put in a barrel in the kitchen to melt. This supplied water for household use. By harvest time the stove wood usually began to get scarce. Inasmuch as the cooking had to be done on the range, corn-cobs were used with a little wood, which meant more work.

The living room adjoining the kitchen was used as a family sleeping room. In hot weather the heat from the cook stove, especially when there was bread baking or extra cooking, made it very uncomfortable. To keep the flies out, mosquito netting was tacked over the windows and over one of the two doorways not used as an entrance. The other door sported a warped screen door, adorned with netting tacked over the badly delapidated screen wire.

In the fall the potatoes were put down in a hole in the ground, with poles laid across and a layer



of slough grass and earth piled on top. At intervals the "potato hole" was opened and a few taken out for use. It was not safe to get very many at a time, as they were apt to freeze in the house. There was little or no milk during the winter months. Butter churned early in the winter was sometimes packed in an unused room upstairs. If the weather was cold, this kept for quite a while, and was better than none.

There was no fruit to use on the table or to can. Soap, yeast, and vinegar were home products. Green coffee was browned and ground at home; pepper was bought in the grain and ground in the coffee mill; dry bread was run through the mill to take out the taste of the pepper. Sugar was bought, fifty cents' worth at a time, for general use — a dollar's worth for harvest and threshing. Starch was used for the best clothes, cuffs, collars, and shirt bosoms. As there was little demand for these things, the starch bill was not very high. For the everyday things and the sunbonnets homemade flour starch was used. A good deal of the sewing was done by hand: this included shirts, underwear, and dresses. Long seams and hems were done on a neighbor's sewing machine.

Churning was done in a dash churn. The wooden dasher, with holes in it to facilitate the churning, and the wooden milk pails, the cedar



"water bucket" with the brass hoops, the steel knives and forks, and the "tin ware" had to be scoured pretty often.

House cleaning meant whitewashing the walls, scouring the unpainted woodwork, washing windows and bed clothes, emptying, washing, and refilling the straw bed ticks, taking up the rag carpet, beating the dust out of it, scrubbing the floor, and putting the carpet down again with fresh straw under it. Sometimes the carpet had to be washed. In that case it was ripped apart and washed on the wash-board, a strip at a time, and wrung or squeezed dry by hand. There was no such luxury as a wringer.

In rainy weather, with no grass or walks in the yard, and a soft pine floor in the kitchen, the task of household cleanliness was almost insuperable. Clothes were cleaned by washing on a wash-board. To save setting posts, the clothes-line was strung to trees, not by any chance near the house. In two years, when the well was dry, water had to be hauled from a spring about half a mile away. Very often there was none on hand to wash with, so it fell to the wife, with a candy bucket on one arm and a milk can on the other, to hie to a well in the pasture, *down* hill, *going*, but *up* hill, *coming back*. One summer, when there was only "hauled" water to use, the morning milk was hung down in



the well in a large milk can till evening when it was drawn up and skimmed. The night's milking was then hung down, and so on alternately. The cream, butter, and a jug of drinking water also had their places in the improvised "refrigerator".

Chickens were raised in the dooryard. Old salt barrels, turned on their sides, were poor excuses for coops, for they did not turn water very well. Crows, groundhogs, and wet weather took their toll. Poultry raising was neither a profitable business, nor a bed of roses.

It was also the wife's task to water the calves and colts shut in the shed at weaning time, water the sows with the little pigs, and milk the cows, as all this would have made the men late getting at their field work. Besides these barnyard chores, three hearty meals were cooked and served. In the middle of the forenoon a lunch was prepared and taken to the men in the field.

When the first baby came, the mother proved her ability as a carpenter by making a cradle with rockers out of a dry-goods box. Later when a high chair was needed an old straight chair, minus the back, with an inverted box nailed to the seat, and another box with one side removed, fastened to the inverted one and padded on the inside, supplied the want.

The mode of conveyance was a lumber wagon.



Even in this clumsy equipage trips were few. The chief trading point, Winterset, to which the wife went about twice a year, was about nine miles distant. These were no pleasure jaunts either in hot or cold weather. The roads in those days were not what they are now. Groceries could be bought at the small town of Patterson three or four miles away.

No newspapers or magazines were taken. With the exception of a Bible, a dictionary, and a few school books, the only reading matter that found its way into this home in the first years was an occasional borrowed book.

Early rising was the order of the day. One summer the family rose at 3:00 A. M., as water had to be hauled, and things made ready for the day's work, inside and out.

The landlord furnished no improvements, and so the tenants, at their own expense, undertook to dig a well. A "water witch" was called to locate the proper place. This he did by carrying a witch-hazel twig which was supposed to turn in his hand when he reached the right location. The well was dug and dynamited down about thirty feet, as I remember, but no water was found. It was filled up to within a few feet of the top and made into a cave with a roof of poles and slough grass. The dirt steps carved out of the clay were like a tobog-



gan slide when it rained, because the door, a poor piece of carpentry without hinges, leaked badly. Imagine the pleasure of sliding down after cream and butter on rainy days. The life of this cave was of short duration, as the walls and steps soon degenerated into something like a burrow, and the dollar paid to the "water witch" was a total loss.

Another memorable experience was keeping the top on the hay stack. On windy days, when the head of the house went to the field or elsewhere, the wife was warned not to "let the top blow off the hay stack". She usually carried rails from the fence and, by propping them along the sides and against the top, managed to keep it from blowing away. The tops were supposed to be weighted down with ropes made of hay and fastened to heavy pieces of wood, but sometimes this was neglected.

The first four years of farm life were the hardest. But the young couple prospered and eventually owned hundreds of acres of land in Madison County. They enjoyed a home with modern conveniences all the more for their early hardships.

AGNES MCNAMARA