

# The Growing-Up Years

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## Memories of Farm and Town Life

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*by Everett Ludley*

**I**T WAS A BITTER cold day in late February 1911 when my family and I moved to a new farm. I was sure I would freeze my ears off as we rode the ten miles in the slow-moving bobsled. Only the thought of the warm, new home sustained me. This was the year before I was to enter the first grade. My ears were tender in the cold, and my cap with earlappers didn't fit snugly because it was a hand-me-down from my older brother. The snorting horses were eager to move as fast as they could to keep warm, but the sled was heavily loaded with the dining room stove and some furniture.

My parents, three siblings, and I were all excited about this new farm near Manchester, Iowa, because it had better land and a better set of buildings than our farm down by Ryan. The "new" house had been freshly painted the summer before. There was gingerbread trim around the front and back porches, which were screened in. The dining room had a bay window on the south with many pieces of stained glass across the top section. Mother would keep plants in that window in the winter time. Her pride was a Christmas cactus which she had brought from her parents' home in Rockton, Illinois. Her mother's mother had brought it from England.

The house had several features designed for gracious living by early twentieth-century farm standards. (Sister Dorothy referred to it as "the mansion.") One was the gas plant in the cellar, which fueled the gas jets in the four bedrooms and kitchen and the glass chandeliers in the dining room and parlor. The gas could also be used for cooking, thus keeping the kitchen cooler in the summer.

Another modern convenience was the sepa-

rate bathroom just off the kitchen. It took only a few steps to carry hot water from the kitchen range to the tub for the Saturday night bath. The metal tub was enameled white on the inside and green on the outside. A smooth hardwood rim gave it a touch of elegance. It stood on legs, and the drain was a rubber hose leading through a hole in the floor to the outside. In the winter, however, the bathroom was so cold that we had to resort to the old round washtub in front of the kitchen stove.

My father had bought Mother a Woodrow washer and a roller-wringer, both set up in the woodshed and powered by a Stover gasoline engine. In the winter a small woodstove heated the wash water and the shed. On washday, pairs of long underwear that had frozen on the clothesline outside were carried in like cord wood to stand up in a corner until they dried.

**D**AD AND MOTHER both loved the land, but farming continued to be a challenge. Dad was partially handicapped by a twisted ankle from a childhood injury. He wore an L-shaped iron brace on his shoe. The long arm of the "L" was strapped to his leg. He walked with a hobble and must have been in pain on many occasions. But he never complained and always kept up with the neighbors in field work. Yet on top of that he suffered from asthma.

During severe attacks he would come to the house to "smoke" asthma powder. He would pour about a teaspoonful of powder into the lid of the red square can it came in, light the powder, and inhale the smoke. Several minutes later he would be ready to go back to work





COURTESY THE AUTHOR

**Farmers huddle to keep warm at the Ludley's farm sale.**

again. But at the end of a frustrating week during corn husking in 1916, he and Mother decided the work had become too strenuous for him. They decided to rent the farm to a young Swedish couple, sell the machinery, and move into town. So we prepared for the farm sale.

I remember some of the words on our sale bill that winter: "Free Lunch at Noon," set in bold type. This notice often appeared on farm sale bills during the early part of this century, and it was one way of assuring a good attendance, even in near-zero weather. I also remember "Banty" Hopkins, the auctioneer. His red face, gravelly voice, and raunchy humor entertained the crowd and coaxed the top dollar for livestock and machinery.

After an hour or more of chanting, Banty announced that lunch was ready at the house. I had stayed out of school to help hand out the lunch bags to the multitude swarming around the sunny side of the house. The white bags contained a bun filled with a generous slice of ham or pork, home-grown apples, and a doughnut. There was always one man who came to every sale and was the first in line for lunch, and also the last. Several large coffee boilers (two borrowed from the neighbors) were filled to the brim. We served the coffee in tin cups that burned lips unless one waited for the coffee to cool down. That didn't take long on a winter day in Iowa.

**W**E MOVED to Manchester in time for me to enter the second semester of the sixth grade. It was a frightening experience to transfer from a one-room country school to a graded city system. One pupil across the aisle said to me the first day, "You probably won't pass." That didn't help any.

I was miserable that first day at recess time. It was cold and I hovered near the building, afraid to venture out to join in the games. I heard someone refer to me as a "country kid." That didn't help any either. In those days that expression branded one as odd and subject to snide remarks. Finally a couple of boys came over, asked my name, and invited me to join their group. I declined their invitation, but they had made me feel good. They were a grade ahead of me so I didn't see much of them, but I never forgot them.

Although my homeroom teacher was friendly and helped me adjust and feel more at ease, some of the "itinerant" teachers didn't seem to care. When the music teacher came into the room, I wanted to hide under my desk. We had to do a lot of "tra-la-la's" and "do-re-mi's," which I thought were silly. I didn't mind singing real words in a group because I could be drowned out by the others. The final exam in music was the most painful experience of all. Each student had to stand up and sing one verse of a song. It had something to do with a



linden tree. When my turn came, I stood up beside my desk and just read the words in a sing-song monotone. The red-haired girl in front snickered during my performance. She was laughing so much that she did poorly when it was her turn. I wanted to hate her, but I couldn't because I had a crush on her.

Our new house in Manchester was a disappointment compared to the farmhouse. It was next to the last house on the south side of East Main Street just beyond the water mains and sewers. One redeeming feature was the electric lights in each room. They were single bulbs hanging on a cord from the center of the ceiling. The house had seven rooms and two paths out back. One path led to the outhouse and the other to the well. The house was heated with a stove in the dining room and the range in the kitchen. Oftentimes in the winter, frost would form on the walls of the upstairs bedrooms. A shed for wood and coal was attached to the kitchen. There was a chicken house and a barn on the back of the lot for the chickens and the fresh cow we had brought with us. In the summer her milk would be cooled with one luxury of town life—ice delivered to the door.

Mother soon traded in her upright piano for a new Superba phonograph. It must have broken her heart to part with the piano. It had been in her family since her childhood. But she was the only one who could play it. None of her children showed any evidence of musical ability. Trading in the piano was the only way my

folks felt that they could afford to yield to the pleadings of their teen-age children: "Let's get a phonograph. Everybody else has one!" It was a beautiful oak console. Dad did manage to get the dealer to throw in a couple of extra records. Mother selected "Beautiful Ohio" and "Wonderful Words of Life." The teenagers chose dance music by the Ted Lewis Jazz Band. Dad didn't get a choice; he just paid the bill.

SEVERAL PIONEER FEATURES on the streets of Manchester were beginning to disappear or change as the horseless carriage arrived — and tractors soon after. Hennesey's Livery Stable was converted to a car agency. Billie Burk's Blacksmith Shop became a machine shop. In both, the smell of horse manure was replaced by the smell of oil and grease. Some called it "progress."

Dad's job depended on such progress. He had bought out a dray line from a man who wanted to retire. The "equipment" consisted of one horse, one wagon, and one sledwagon, all three items in constant need of repair. They should have been retired too. Much of the draying business had been hauling trunks of samples for traveling salesmen from the depot across town to the show rooms at the Clarence House. But after World War I ended, the dray line served different customers. A restlessness seemed to have set in. Some people were moving to other towns to take new jobs. Some were moving to different houses in the same town. Some farmers were moving into town to let their sons run the family farm, often on a share basis.

This created a lot of moving jobs. To meet the growing need for faster service, Dad first converted our Model T passenger car to a truck. Then he bought a Republic truck — may its flat wheels rest in peace! The wheels were equipped with solid hard rubber tires — "no air inner tubes to go flat," the salesman had said. It wasn't too rough riding at first. But as time went by, and the rubber wore down toward the steel rims, it became like a lumber wagon with an engine up front.

Eventually my folks decided that they were ready to return to the farm. Now at the age of fifteen, I remained in town and boarded with a

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An unidentified driver waits to taxi traveling salesmen between Manchester's depot and the Clarence House hotel, in background. The author's father ran a dray line, which transported their suitcases and trunks.



private family. By this point in my life, I prided myself on the several jobs I had had. As a farm kid, I had sold religious pictures and bluing papers to the neighbors. (The bluing paper was put in the rinse water on wash day to keep the clothes white; strong laundry soaps tended to give the clothes a sickly yellow color.) In Manchester my first town job was selling *Liberty Magazine* at the railroad station to the traveling salesmen on the five daily passenger trains. I also delivered telegrams, weeded gardens and mowed lawns, cleaned Dr. Davis's dental office, and tended the public library's furnace. At the Hughes Dry Goods Store, I operated the little button-covering machine for women who wanted their buttons to match their dress fabric.

By now, as a senior in high school, I had landed a steady job. I worked as a clerk for W. H. "Bill" Lafferty in his grocery store. "Staple and Fancy Groceries" was painted on the two large windows on either side of the store's entrance. From one of these windows, we clerks could see several blocks down to the side street to where Bill lived. Bill usually arrived at the store about an hour after opening time. The three clerks took turns opening the store at six A.M. in the summer and seven in the winter. We could see when Bill left his house, smoking his morning cigar. He walked with a middle-aged saunter, pausing occasionally to tip his hat to an approaching lady while removing the cigar from his mouth.

Before entering the store he would inspect the bushel baskets of apples, potatoes, and other produce that the opening clerk had carried out. After making a few minor adjustments, he would come inside and walk slowly to his office space behind the racks that held the caddies of cookies and crackers. After carefully removing his suit jacket and hanging it neatly, he would put on his brown cardigan sweater. He always wore a white shirt and a black string tie (except on St. Patrick's Day, when the tie was green).

When he was satisfied that everything was ship-shape and ready for business, he would leave the store for his regular morning shave at Arduser's barbershop, where he had his own personalized shaving mug and brush, with his name in gold letters. (Most prominent citizens



had this status symbol. The barber kept them in a sanitary glass case.)

Fresh from his morning shave, Bill Lafferty cut the figure of a well-built man with only a slight suggestion of a pot belly. With his brown wavy hair, blue eyes and ruddy cheeks, he was a handsome Irishman, and a good man to work for — except on a few occasions.

I remember two such occasions. One winter morning the clerk who was to open the store apparently overslept. Lafferty could see from





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his house that the store was not open because the big window shade was still down. So he came down before his usual time and opened up himself. The rest of the day he grumbled that he "had been in business thirty years and still had to open his own store." That was *almost* the only time I saw him ruffled.

The other time was in the summer when the town merchants decided to stay open on Wednesday nights for farmers, who couldn't afford to leave their field work in the day. Bill

"A handsome Irishman and a good man to work for," grocer Bill Lafferty (second from right) and his domain, c. 1930.

had asked his clerks to work an extra four hours a week without additional pay. I told Bill that I usually had other plans for Wednesday nights. He was an easy-going person and probably remembered that he had been young once. He said that if I had a date or something on a particular Wednesday, I could be excused that night. So I made it a point to have a date for the



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next two Wednesday nights. When the third Wednesday night approached, he told me — in plain Irish — that I had better show up. I did.

**S**ATURDAY NIGHT was another “farmers’ night” in the summer. The sidewalks and stores were packed with people milling around, comparing notes on the crops and neighborhood gossip. At the store the early evening rush lasted until about nine o’clock. Then there was a lull until about eleven o’clock when the second show at the Plaza Theater let out. Then we were rushed again for the next half hour. At first I thought that it was inconsiderate of these late shoppers. Why couldn’t they shop before the second show so that we could close earlier? But the answer was simple and reasonable. Most cars at that time were not enclosed and had no trunks. People had no way of locking up their groceries while they were at the show.

Every customer had the individual attention of a clerk. When a customer asked for a particular item, the clerk could find it with lightning speed once the lay-out of the store had been memorized. If a customer wanted just a few things, the clerk would tally the prices on a paper bag. Longer lists or “charges” would be itemized on a carbon pad. For delivery, an extra ten cents was charged.

We sold a lot of 49-pound bags of flour,

**Manchester streets were busier on summer “Farmers’ Nights,” when rural families came into town.**

bushels of apples, and 100-pound sacks of sugar, especially during canning season. Chocolate Cream Coffee was a big seller, although McCarthy’s Elite Cafe down the street preferred Chase and Sanborn’s. As we used the big red electric grinder, the aroma of freshly ground coffee spread throughout the store. We kept dill pickles, sauerkraut, and lard in barrels. Some customers would bring in gallon pails to be filled with lard. Eggs were sold in paper sacks. Our eggs were farm-fresh, brought in 30-dozen crates to be traded for groceries. Before selling them at a profit of two cents per dozen, the clerks candled them. The “candling machine” consisted of a small electric bulb inside a tin can with two holes the size of a half dollar. By holding the eggs up to the holes, the candler could see if the egg was “all clear.” Dark spots would indicate that the farmer’s wife had slipped in an oldie — perhaps to get even for the bad apple she found in last week’s purchase.

Among our “fancy” items was lutefisk. It was stored during the summer in a dry place. As the holidays approached, the dry slabs were dusted off, and an attempt was made to make them respectable looking. We hung them outside every day in the hopes of attracting the attention of some of the Scandinavians in Man-



chester. Each day as I hung them out I wondered how they could be made edible and what in the world they tasted like. (I waited fifty years for the answer, when some Swedish friends had us over for a holiday supper. Uff da! I could have waited another fifty years.)

The limburg cheese was kept in a space halfway down the elevator behind a piece of loose limestone in the foundation. Bread from the local McKeag and Hall & Turner bakeries sold for eight to ten cents per loaf. On Saturdays we received a large box of whole wheat bread from a Dubuque bakery. I enjoyed inhaling deeply as I unpacked the loaves. They were always sold out by noon. Saturday was also fresh vegetable day, when we opened crates of head lettuce, celery and, once in a while, cauliflower. They came by rail from a wholesale house in Dubuque. People raised their own radishes, onions, peas, and string beans, or bought them directly from neighbors.

**M**Y JOB at Lafferty's gave me opportunities to observe the adult world, which I would soon enter, as I followed the routine of opening and closing the store. We opened early to accommodate farmers (who were waiting for the dew to dry on the hay) and railroad workers. A couple of burly railroad men came by every morning for their daily supplies. One always wanted Horseshoe Chewing Tobacco, and the other wanted Copenhagen Snuff — "snoose" he called it. (Along the windy tracks it was easier to chew than to smoke, if one remembered not to spit into the wind.) One morning a well-dressed stranger came in and bought three bottles of vanilla extract. I watched him as he took them to the alley and drank all three. I looked at the label of a bottle still on the shelf and realized for the first time that vanilla has a strong alcohol content.

At closing time we clerks had to count the receipts in the cash register drawer and turn them in to Bill. We kept out ten dollars in change to start the next day. This change was put into a small bag and hidden on a shelf behind the Clabber Girl baking powder cans. (No self-respecting burglar would think of looking there.) The empty drawers of the cash register were always left open so would-be robbers

would not damage them. National Cash Registers were not cheap even then.

Occasionally, about a half hour before closing time, several of Bill's cronies would gather in the backroom for a bit of bootleg. They insisted that Bill join them, and he often did. However, he seldom showed the effects of it. One day something went wrong. The quality of bootleg "alkie" for spiking soft drinks was not always the best. On this occasion one crony got sick, and another, who surely weighed three hundred pounds, passed out. The third friend hauled them down on the freight elevator and out the back door.

Bill was in great misery. He sat at his desk with his head resting in his hands. The head clerk was off that day so I took over. I counted the money from each drawer, made notes, put everything into a bag, and took it to Bill. He was too sick to speak, but I could tell by his Irish blue eyes as he looked at me that he was grateful. He managed to open the safe to put in the bag of money. Then he waved his hand as if to say, "Go home now, Lud, I'll be O.K."

**M**ORE THAN HALF a century later on a hot afternoon, I found myself standing in front of the building where I had done some "growing up." There was nothing on the windows to indicate that this was once the place in which to buy staple and fancy groceries. In fact, the windows were decorated in such a way that I couldn't see in. I decided to have a look inside.

I gazed around at the beautiful mahogany paneling on the walls and ceiling. The invigorating aroma of freshly ground coffee had been replaced by the stale smell of malt. The bartender asked me what I'd have. "Pepsi, please," I answered her.

A bit later I headed south out of town, towards the "home farm," where my brother and sister-in-law live. Driving past familiar landmarks of my boyhood, I considered all the changes I had experienced in those early years — growing up on a farm, moving into town, working at an array of jobs. I was grateful now that I had learned to work hard when I was young. Since then it has seemed to come natural. □