

Farm Girl

by Joanne Meusburger

Editor's note: In the last Palimpsest, Joanne Wilson Meusburger shared such rural childhood experiences as performing skits at the community hall and transforming a hog shed into a playhouse. Part 2 recounts more of her 1940s childhood in Sac County.

Part 2

SUMMER WAS THE BUSIEST TIME on our farm. At times our driveway resembled Main Street on Saturday night, and I'm sure our phone was a cause of complaint to the neighbors on our party line. Besides our big two-story house, there was the bungalow where Grandma and Grandpa Wilson lived and the little house provided for our hired man, Wayne Weltzheimer, and his family. The three houses formed a sort of triangle with sidewalks connecting them. You can imagine the good roller skating this provided. We were the envy of the neighborhood kids.

Besides the three houses and the farm buildings, there was a big warehouse and office where my parents, Ronald and Ida Wilson, ran a hybrid seed corn business. Trucks drove up to load and unload corn, and dealers and customers arrived to transact their business. There were also huge semi-trucks that hauled cattle, hogs, and sheep to or from market, as well as an assortment of tractors, wagons, cultivators, plows, mowers, and pickups. On any one day, these might be ours or a neighbor's who had stopped in to exchange help with the harvest, borrow something, or merely chat for awhile. The farms I knew in Iowa were not isolated or lonely places.

We planted hundreds of acres of land in corn

The author (right) as a child, with sister Ruth and father Ronald Wilson on their farm near Lytton, Iowa.

(some of this land was leased from neighbors). Growing hybrid seed corn requires "detasseling," which was, for me, the climax of the summer's activities. Every field of hybrid corn has male and female rows. In order for the female rows to be cross-pollinated, the tassels from each cornstalk in the female rows must be pulled out, so that when the wind blows, only the pollen from the male tassels will be able to reach the female rows.

The tassels must be pulled at the height of their growth, within about a two-week period. If 99 percent of the tassels were not pulled by the deadline, the entire field would be condemned by the state inspectors. Therefore, detasseling meant long hours and hard work. To process all these acres, my father employed about five hundred detassellers.

The workers were mostly town kids who were free for the summer and wanted to earn money for new clothes or a second-hand car. Working steadily for two weeks, they could earn about a hundred dollars, which was good money in the 1940s. At age sixteen or seventeen, one could advance to crew leader and do even better. (On our farm, both boys and girls served as crew leaders; I think my Dad pioneered as an equal-opportunity employer.) Although my sister, Ruth, and I were still much too young in the early 1940s to meet the five foot two, age twelve requirements, we would get caught up in the excitement. (When we did finally qualify, however, we found it much less glamorous.)

The first morning of the season, the trucks arrived from town about 6:00 A.M., loaded with yelling, singing detassellers. They jumped down, wearing every sort of old apparel. Because the early morning dew is so heavy, pushing through a row of wet leaves is like being hit in the face with a cold towel, so most



of the group wore jeans and sweatshirts. Underneath, however, were shorts, halters, and thin shirts. Throughout the day, as the sun dried the leaves and the temperature climbed toward one hundred, clothing would be shed onto fence posts or left in the middle of the row (teenagers thought that one of the big compensations of detasseling was getting a tan). There were always good intentions of collecting the clothes on the way back through the field, but continually looking up for the tassels made it easy to walk right over the discarded clothes. There was always a huge business in Lost and Found.

Upon arrival that first day, the new recruits were told to sit in the driveway in front of the warehouse for an orientation lecture. Ruth and I always managed to sneak down close to listen and look over the new group and to predict who would be weeded out at the start. There were always a few who couldn't reach the height requirement in spite of the cowboy boots and straw hats which they hoped might get them by. These forlorn souls were invited to return the next year, but I always was embarrassed for them. After their rejection, they still had to sit through the lecture and watch the others take off for the fields before the truck driver was ready to give them a ride back into town.

The man who supervised this work for years was Malcolm Rogers, our school superintendent in Lytton. This gave him added authority to begin with, but his manner and methods were imposing enough. He launched the orientation by naming penalties for apple-picking, smoking in the barn, breaking windows, throwing a fellow worker into the cattle tank, and sitting down to rest in the middle of a corn row. Any time-outs were to be taken at the end of the row, under the time-conscious eye of the lead worker.

Time schedules, wages, the correct method of pulling a tassel, and crew assignments were discussed, but the major emphasis was upon discipline — what could and couldn't be done. Mr. Rogers didn't fool around with tactful dis-

missals or "resignations." The offender was given a short, to-the-point lecture in front of everyone which ended with the words "Start walking!" It set a very impressive example. Those who hadn't believed his admonitions had time to regret it on the four-and-a-half-mile walk to town.

If Mr. Rogers suspected that someone was getting lazy on the job, he would follow the detasseler down the row, picking the tassels that were missed. When he caught up with the offender, probably having a smoke at the other end, Mr. Rogers would dump the bunch of tassels on the offender's lap and order that the tassels be carried the half-mile back, while picking the return row. To assure a fast pace, Mr. Rogers followed every step of the way.

After Ruth and I watched the crews go off to the fields, we began to anticipate their return for lunch. We had a huge front lawn where they were allowed to eat, although many ate in the grove across the driveway. Most were content to eat and then lie in the shade until the back-to-work call. But there were always a few "rip-snorters," as Grandpa called them. They climbed trees, stole the girls' lunches, and launched into all types of horseplay. It kept Ruth and me busy darting from room to room in the house watching them.

Because of their endless energy, the mischievous ones were usually the best detassellers. Charlie Downs, for example, could clean a half-mile row of corn in fifteen minutes each way. He was always laughing and joking and could keep up the morale of his crew even on an eleven-hour day of rainy weather. He was always playing pranks, but they were harmless and could be overlooked with an occasional warning. One noon hour, however, Ruth and I observed an especially rambunctious game of football. With a banana for a ball, Charlie went streaking for a touchdown, yelling and whooping all the way. Then he stopped in mid-air, as though suspended in a slow-motion instant replay. The clothesline had caught him right in the mouth, knocking out four front teeth. When he returned the next year, he had new bridgework and was a bit more subdued.

Our afternoons up at the house would be relatively quiet. Once in a while a detasseler or

The author's mother, Ida Willcutt Wilson, cross-pollinates seed corn in a test plot on their Sac County farm. The teenagers hired in the summer to detassel the corn provided interest and antics aplenty for youngsters Joanne and Ruth.

two would be overcome by the heat or cut a bare foot on a rock. Then Mother would fix them up and Daddy would take them into town. If it was near quitting time, they would lie down in the shade to wait.

Unless the tassels were really popping and overtime was necessary, the crews came straggling in about 5:00 P.M. Tired, dirty, and sunburned, they would climb in the trucks. It was usually a pretty quiet ride unless it was payday, when, by tradition, they would yell and holler.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CYNTHIA MOORE

On the last day of the season, Daddy always bought a truckload of watermelons and took the whole group down to the lake to swim. That ended the excitement for another year, and things quieted down until harvest time.

RUTH AND I APPROACHED THE NAMING of our farm pets very scientifically. Following the birth of a new litter of kittens, we would spend hours observing their individual characteristics so that we could name them appropriately. Columbus and Magellan explored every cranny of their barn quarters. Puffball curled her fluffy body into a contented ball to nap. Spitfire arched his back and crackled like hot grease in a skillet whenever he was approached. Then there was Midnight, who was as black as his name implied and just as late for supper.

When I was very young, Ruth did most of the naming. Then one day I announced that I would name one of the new kittens. It was a showdown, but I won. I picked up a little white kitten and named it Pinky, "because she has a pink nose." Ruth argued that it was a highly unoriginal name, but my mind was made up. Pinky turned out to be the sole survivor of that litter and the mother of most of the future generations.

At least twice a year, Pinky's rotund appearance would alert us that our nursemaid assistance would soon be needed. Finally the day would arrive when Pinky would not answer any of our calls, and then we would set out to look for the new family. Usually we found them in the haymow of the barn, the newborn kittens groping blindly about. We would hurry off to tell Mother and to bring back a saucer of milk for proud Pinky.

After about a week of careful observation, we would discover that the kittens' eyes were opening. Mother would fix a solution of boric acid, and we would proceed to wash their eyes very gently with cotton balls. This was supposed to prevent any infection. I don't think our kitten mortality rate was any lower because of this, but we considered it a necessary procedure.

When the kittens were big enough to be weaned, we doctored up milk with cod liver oil and served it in individual jar lids. Dipping a finger in the milk, we would let them lick it with their tiny rough tongues. The ones slowest to learn sometimes had to have their faces dunked. When they had survived the outrage and licked clean their whiskers, they caught on fast.

Our faithful dog, Bowser, had been born on my first birthday. Our hired man had tagged him "Bowser," and the dependable old name stuck. Bowser didn't have any careful breeding or training. He made his own bed in the barn and lived off the scraps from the table and the rabbits and rats he caught. You couldn't drag him inside the house because he knew he didn't belong there. Once when he smelled a skunk under our back porch, however, he dived in after it and fought to the bitter end, even though it made him too sick to eat the steak Mother offered him as a reward. He would bark menacingly at strangers but allow us to dress him in doll clothes or hitch him up to a wagon.

Bowser could outrun any dog in the neighborhood, with only his three legs against their four. He had acquired this handicap when he was about a year and a half. Trying to get through a fence, he had tangled himself in the barbed wire, tearing the flesh on his right hind leg and suspending himself head downward

with that leg firmly caught. The next morning a salesman traveling down the road spotted his plight, freed him, and took him to the next farm. The cold temperature had frozen the torn and broken leg, and almost all life was gone from his limp body. Our neighbor identified him and brought him home. Mother made a soft bed in the basement and poured beaten eggs and warm soup down his throat. The vet arrived to treat his wounds, but the leg was too badly splintered to be set.

Not for a moment did we believe that Bowser would die. Under our watchful care, he slowly regained strength until at last he could stand up and hobble about, dragging the withered, lifeless leg behind him. It was about as useful as an old stick caught in the wheel of a wagon, but we didn't know what to do about it.

Then one day our hired man offered the simple solution. Taking hold of the brittle limb, he broke it off clean with one crack. Bowser didn't even yelp. Instead he looked gratefully up at his old friend, took the leg in his mouth, and hobbled solemnly off to bury it. Before long he had learned to shift his weight to three legs. He could run as fast as ever and was the equal of any neighborhood dog when it came to catching rats or rounding up sheep. We almost forgot that he had ever had four legs. He lived to be seventeen, an old age for a dog.

When I was small, we had twenty-two milk cows besides the beef cattle and hogs that were raised for market. During World War II, we had to sell most of them because our hired man was gone and help was scarce. I remember my father and grandpa milking those cows until 10:00 at night, all by hand, of course. Sometimes I would go down to keep them company, balancing on the one-legged milk stool as they did. Grandpa liked to have me sing to him, but it usually excited the old bull penned up in the back of the barn, and I would have to stop. Sometimes Daddy would squirt some milk into a cup for me. He always was careful to give Bowser and the kittens some, too.

As we grew older, it became our ambition to raise a calf to show for 4-H at the county fair. Daddy warned us that the responsibility would include feeding and caring for it, but to us that seemed like a small price compared to the fantasy of leading the grand champion calf past



Three-legged Bowser strikes a profile with Joanne, her mother, and "hired girl" Helen Weltzheimer.

the cheering crowds in the grandstand.

At last a new calf was born, on the Fourth of July, and Daddy said she was ours. We named her "Independence," later shortened to "Pendy." We fed her, taught her to drink from a pail, and combed her short hair with a curry comb to make it shine. In a few weeks, however, the novelty wore off and we began to look for excuses to get out of these chores. Daddy was not to be fooled. We had agreed to the bargain, and now we would have to stick with it.

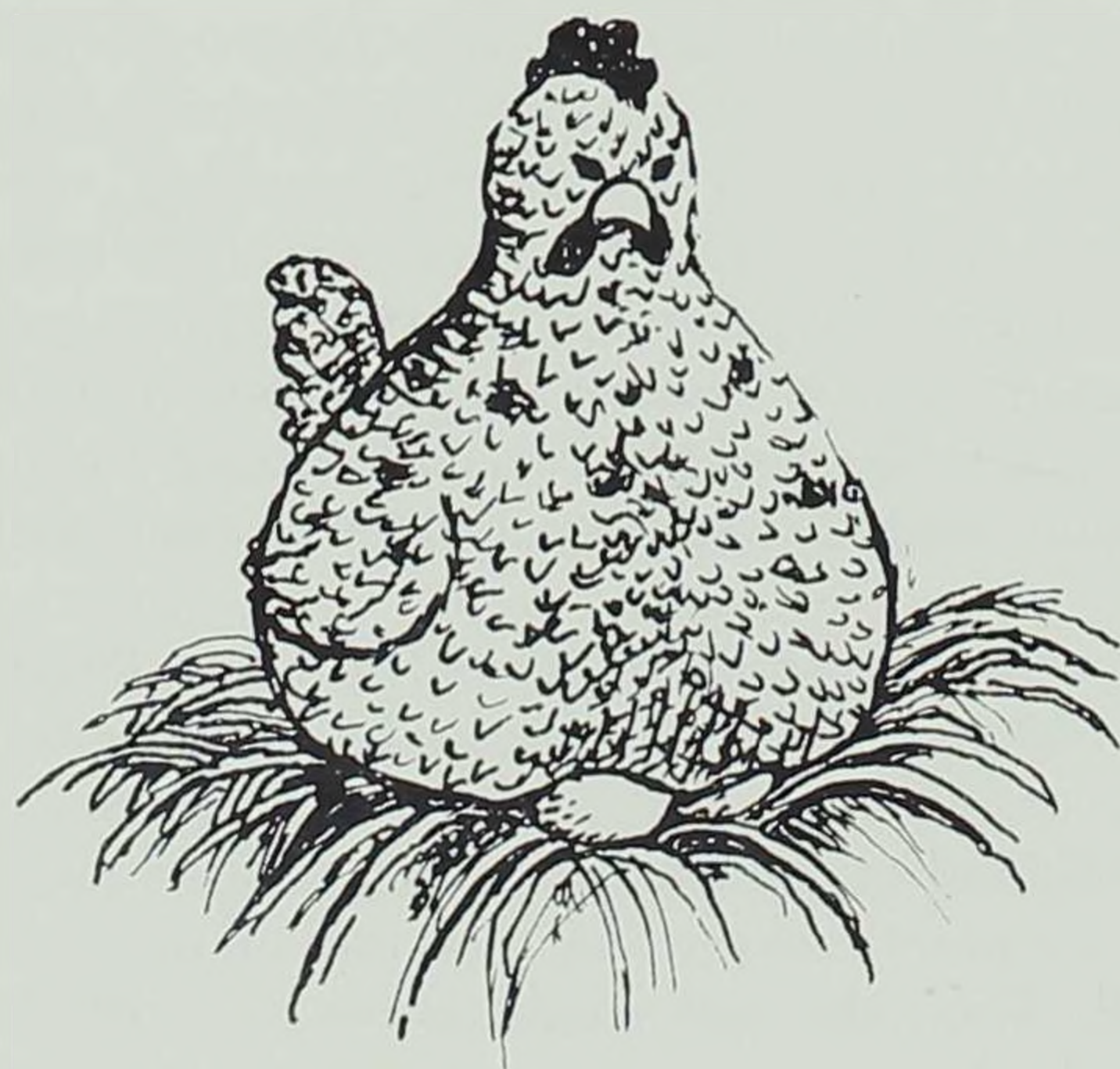
The picture brightened a little when Pendy was old enough to train to be led on a halter. This seemed like a step toward our dream of grandstand glory. Daddy made a rope halter, and we practiced putting it on and off over her head. Then she was ready to be brought out into the barnyard.

Daddy showed us how to hold the halter rope up close to the side of her head so that we could control her movements. Being a well-known livestock judge himself, there was no one better qualified to teach us the fine points of showmanship, but we were not destined to learn.

The next day Daddy went away on a business

trip for the seed corn company. Ruth and I grabbed the chance to prove we could do it all on our own. Ruth held onto the halter rope near Pendency's head, but when she stepped out of the barn she was not prepared for Pendency's tug for freedom. Ruth managed to hold on to the end of the rope, but too much slack now stretched between her hands and Pendency's jerking head. The calf was now in control, pulling Ruth behind her. I finally caught hold of the end of the rope behind Ruth. Our combined weights provided an anchor around which Pendency bounded in an endless circle on the other end of the taut rope. The world revolved as we pivoted around and around.

Up by the house, old Mr. Smythe, the community handyman, was painting the fence. Still clutching the handle of his paint can, he rushed to our aid and somehow managed to grab Pendency's halter with his free hand. When our spinning heads cleared, we found ourselves speckled with paint, but none the worse for it. We weren't interested in any more lessons from Daddy, and we were sad but relieved when Pendency was sold — before the fair.



We were not too fond of gathering eggs either, because a few old biddies always remained on their nests and pecked at our arms when we reached under them for eggs. We tried to protect ourselves by placing one foot against their necks while slipping one hand underneath. Ironically, it was a hen that ended

my egg-hunting days. Mother had shut two old "setting" hens in the old chicken house where we also kept our bicycles. One day as I opened the door, one of the old hens made a bid for freedom. Feeling responsible I chased after her.

It happened to be a very dry year and the ragweed behind the chicken house was waist high. Just a few yards into those weeds, and I came stumbling out with eyes streaming, face puffed, sneeze following sneeze. I had just been introduced to hay fever. It was such a bad attack that the doctor was called to ease my breathing and reduce the swelling in my sinuses. Tests proved me to be allergic to dust, chicken feathers, rose petals, pollen from most flowers, oak leaves, and animal fur. To this day I can walk in the back door and tell if Mother has a vase of dahlias in the house.

The old hen in the ragweed was just the climax to years of kitten stroking, flower gathering, egg hunting, and field strolling. Surely Ruth and I had stirred up plenty of dust the time we swept down the cobwebs and washed the windows in the barn to make it more pleasant for the cows and our kittens. But this time my resistance had finally been broken.

EVERY YEAR WE LOOKED FORWARD to the county fair. Around the first of August, the fair entry handbook would arrive in the mail, announcing the rules and prizes for cornbread, cutwork, watermelons, and hundreds of other entries. The weekly *Sac Sun* would announce the events. Pictures of daredevil stock car racers, trapeze artists, and comedy teams would spark the sale of grandstand tickets, and clubs and organizations would plan exhibits and set up committees for lunch stands. During the weeks before the fair, we would be most concerned with preparing our entries to meet the handbook specifications.

It had all started the very first year that Mother and Daddy were married. Daddy had been appointed to the fair committee in charge of promoting entries for the culinary department. To set a good example, he entered Mother's name in every one of the classifica-

tions. There must have been fifteen or twenty, ranging from cornbread to strawberry preserves and angel food cake.

A bride for two months, Mother protested, "I've never made a cornbread in my life!"

"There's always a first time for everything," Daddy replied, "I'll find you a fail-proof recipe."

He explained his predicament to a husband whose wife's cornbread had won many ribbons in previous years, and the husband asked his wife for the recipe. Feeling sorry for the poor novice, his generous wife revealed the secret ingredients. With no time left to practice, Mother turned out a batch of cornbread that placed first. The owner of the recipe placed third.

Not all of Mother's entries did that well, but she came home with several blue ribbons, and a family tradition was begun. Thereafter, baked and canned goods were standard entries, as well as flower arrangements, "fancy-work," and homemade garments. Daddy also entered the vegetable and livestock classifications until his expertise as a judge in these departments required the withdrawal of his own entries.

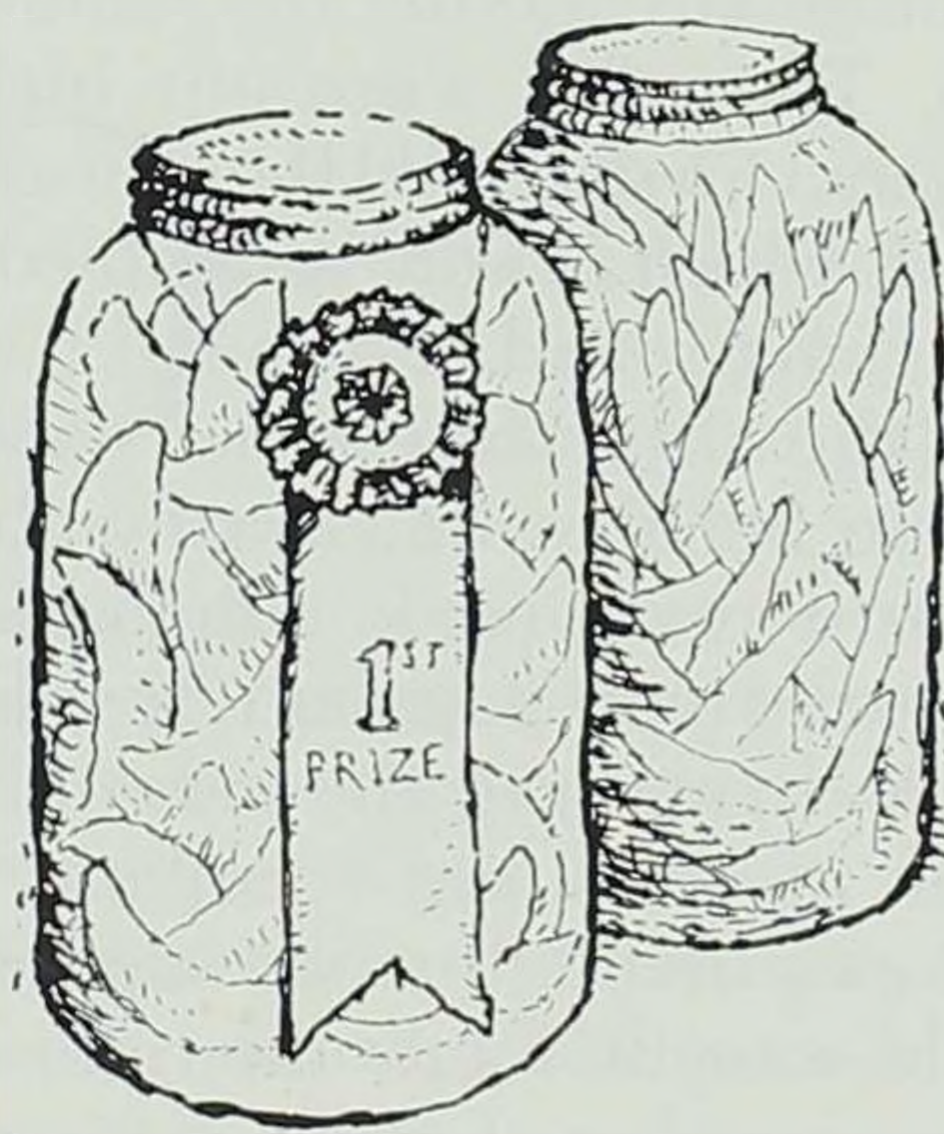
When Ruth and I were old enough, we spruced up our charm collections and knitting efforts to enter in the hobby section and baked cakes to enter in the junior division. Most of the activity centered around the last day before the entry deadline. The baking had to be put off until then to insure freshness because, of course, we had no freezer in those years. Sometimes Mother, Ruth, and I would all be stirring up something different in the kitchen. If a cake fell or a pie crust looked too tough, the process had to be repeated. It was usually 10:00 or 11:00 P.M. before everything was lined up on the kitchen table, wrapped in cellophane and identified with the appropriate entry tags.

The next morning, every item was carried carefully to the car and transported to the fairgrounds. While Mother set our entries out on display, Ruth and I went on tour. Stakes were being driven for commercial tents, stoves were being assembled for the church women's food stands, and the glamorous midway was slowly taking form.

Before we were old enough to take an inter-

est in the judge's comments, we spent every minute on the midway, returning to the exhibit hall only long enough to see what ribbons we had won when the judging was finished. The attractions on the midway were reasonably priced in those days, but we were not permitted to operate on unlimited budgets. Half of the fun was in carefully watching and appraising each ride or concession before deciding where to spend our nickels and dimes.

The state fair followed our county fair by a week or two. If the farm work schedule allowed it, we traveled the 130 miles to Des Moines. Iowa's state fair is even bigger than the one pictured in the movie by the same name. Mother couldn't leave us on our own there, so we accompanied her and Daddy to see the exhibits and then they took us to the midway.



Mother never came home from the fair without some newfangled gadget that was going to be the handiest thing she had ever owned. She would make her discovery at one of the little booths where the salesperson was peeling a potato, dicing carrots, stippling beans, and shredding cabbage — all with lightning speed and the aid of a magic utensil — one to a customer, a dollar apiece.

Frankly, the fast chatter would have us all as convinced as Mother, but after a couple of experiments at home, during which it usually took more time to assemble the utensil than anything else, the old paring knife and potato peeler would reappear, and the new purchase would not be mentioned or seen again.

When the fairs were finally over for most

folks, they continued in our backyard at home. We would begin our preparations by hanging two blankets over the clothesline. Fastened at the top with clothes pins and held apart at the ground level with bricks weighing down the edges, the Methodist Ladies' Stand was in business — as soon as Mother made the lemonade.

Next we assembled the livestock show. The kittens were adorned with ribbons around their necks, and Bowser had flowers bedecking his collar. A couple of prize chickens were eventually cornered and placed in slatted egg crates for viewing. At last the midway rides were set up, the ticket stand opened, and the purchasers began to "step right up and see the sights."

Since it took both Ruth and me to operate the rides, the neighbor children we invited soon found themselves serving the lemonade to themselves. The rides were our biggest attraction anyway. First of all, there was the merry-go-round, which closely resembled our coaster wagon going round and round a tree. Then there was the tilt-a-whirl, which doubled as the bag swing being swung crazily about. The regular board swing made a grand ferris wheel. Probably the most popular ride was the loop-o-plane. By wrapping the sides of the hammock over its reclining occupant, and swinging the ropes tied to the two supporting trees, we would actually rotate the rider with only the average number of spills.

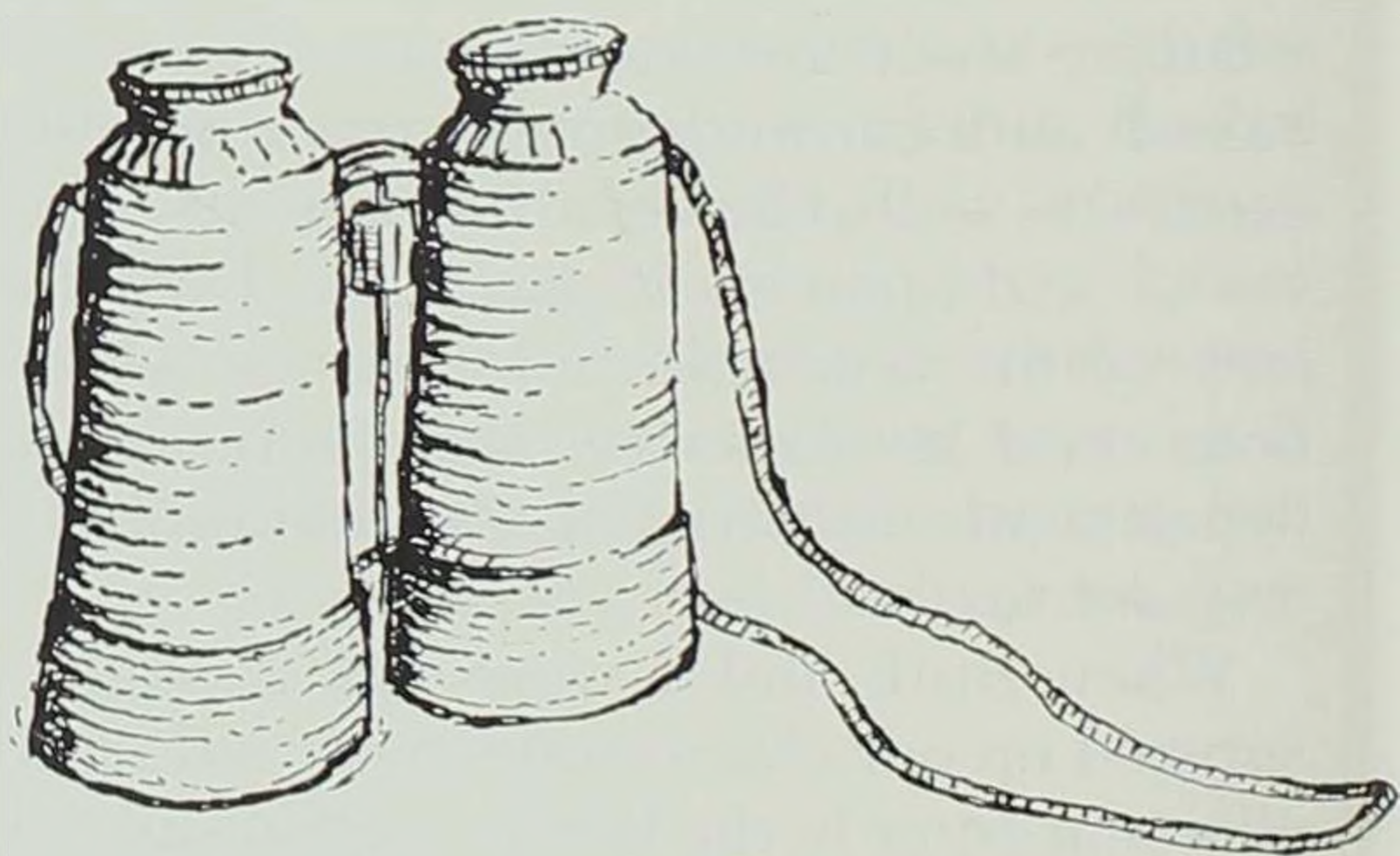
Once the lemonade was gone, the hammock was broken, and the livestock had escaped, fair time was over . . . for that year.

MY SISTER AND I BELONGED to many clubs, organized and disbanded as the need arose or faded. There was the "Anti-Sister Club" which my neighbor, Eleanor Waggett, and I formed to protest the way our sisters chose to ignore us. The "Be Brave Club" also boasted Eleanor and myself as members and was organized after a shared parental spanking over some misdemeanor. That club even went so far as to have two by-laws: (1) Do not cry when spanked; and (2) Notify the other member immediately. The first rule was some-

times broken, but we rigidly adhered to the second. The sympathy was comforting.

Ruth and I were charter members (and the only members) of our first club with official records. It began as a spy game. That year a new concrete feeding floor was being poured in the lower barnyard. We could watch the activity from a perfect hiding place — several rows of bales of straw, stacked alongside the fence. A tunnel through the stacks and several knotholes in the fence provided a view of the barnyard. It became our occupation to observe the workers without being observed by them. In our vivid imaginations, they became an enemy detail building an airstrip. We borrowed a pair of field glasses from Daddy and, at this point, our purpose became twofold.

The family also used those field glasses for



bird-watching on our impromptu picnics. Therefore, while we were spying upon the workers, it occurred to us that we might also be good Junior Birdsmen. Indeed, we had just received our badges from the Audubon Society the previous week, having sent in our boxtops for membership. Thus our club became a combined espionage and bird-watching society. Offices were divided between us. Ruth became president, treasurer, and watchwoman — meaning that she always used the field glasses first. I was vice-president, secretary, and flag bearer. We obtained the small American flag which Mother placed in the window box each Fourth of July and we carried it with us into the tunnel. We said the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the national anthem before our other activities began.

If the workers were taking a break, or if the birds weren't flying that day, we might

lengthen the program by singing another song or reciting a poem or two. Each proceeding was carefully recorded in my secretary's notebook. Our spy ring was never detected, but it disbanded with the completion of the feeding floor.

One spring when school was out, Mother suggested that I round up some of my neighborhood friends and start a sewing circle. We could meet at our various homes and work on embroidery or quilt blocks.

The idea caught on and four nine-year-olds attended the organizational meeting. That worked out fine for election of a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. Eleanor was elected secretary. When the president called upon her at the second meeting, she stood and reported that the previous meeting had lasted twelve minutes. We were horrified at her ignorance, but she was really only disappointed to learn she would have to use a pencil to record the "minutes" instead of her new watch.

The other officers performed quite efficiently. The treasurer collected a penny each meeting and hoarded the fund so carefully that we didn't spend any of it until years later when we were all in high school together and used the money to buy movie tickets at a club reunion. I was vice-president, so I could only hope for the president's absence. She was always there, however, to boss things quite effectively. After our business meeting, the sewing part of the afternoon might last an hour at the longest. After tangling the thread for the tenth time, we would spend the rest of our time playing outdoors.

As we grew older, this same group evolved into a bicycle club. With sack lunches, we would set off on the country roads to find a good picnic spot. It was on such an excursion that we decided to explore an old abandoned storm cave on one of the member's farms. It was a windy, gloomy fall day, and we were a little leery about descending the decaying wooden stairs to the dark entrance.

Maybe it was the squeaking of the old door on its rusty hinges, or the rustling of dead leaves and debris scattered by the wind, or simply our nerves and imagination that made us turn and flee. Mounting our bicycles and

churning off down the road, we were convinced that the old storm cave was haunted.

Of course no one believed us, but we formed the Madame Spook Club anyway. We returned to the spot often, but couldn't bring ourselves to reenter the cave. Finally the mother of one of the girls, tired of our wild tales, accompanied us to the cave to prove how harmless it was. As we followed at a safe distance, she flung back the door to reveal the not-so-mysterious contents. Frankly, we were disappointed, but we soon rallied to agree that it would make a perfect club house.

We swept the debris into a mound in the center and covered it with a sheet anchored down with bricks. A sign bore the inscription "Here lies Madame Spook." After a long bicycle ride, it was a perfect spot to eat our lunch.

OUR MOST LASTING AND WORTHWHILE club experiences were in 4-H. Each year we focused on a different field of emphasis, in the three-year rotation of clothing, foods, and home furnishings. The deadline for projects was the county fair, where each item would be judged and placed in the blue, red, or white division. The blue-ribbon items were then judged again to pick out the state fair entries. This was a 4-H member's ultimate goal.

When I finally turned ten, in 1945, and thus could join as a junior member, the senior members were already models of domestic efficiency in my eyes. The day came, however, when I had my own 4-H projects and gave my own demonstrations. In keeping with the food unit that year, my friend Eleanor and I were chosen as the club demonstration team. Barely qualifying in the senior division at thirteen years of age, we were urged to pick a simple topic. We decided upon sack lunches. Our title was "Nifty Nutrients for Noontime," a tongue-twister which had us shaken from the start.

Although we had practiced for weeks, in our stage fright at the fair, automation took over. Our menu consisted of roast beef and lettuce sandwiches, tomato soup, carrot and celery sticks, a peach, and a brownie. No one ever

packed a faster lunch. My partner handed me a butter knife to cut the roast beef, and I never knew the difference. The bread was slapped together with the dexterity of a fry cook, the carrots splintered neatly ahead of the knife, and waxed paper ripped off the roll and encased the contents in nothing flat!

The judge's decision was a red ribbon with the criticism that the demonstration was too short. She didn't know that it had been rehearsed to be twice as long.



In 1945 Joanne joined 4-H. By 1951 she had gained the leadership skills to serve as county president.

Another year I decided to completely redo my bedroom in keeping with the home furnishings unit. Mother thought the project was too ambitious, but I insisted.

From the day school was out in May until the middle of August, I made curtains, slipcovered a chair, fashioned a dressing table from orange crates, and refinished a walnut chest and mirror. My Grandmother Wilson had given the chest to me, and the walnut finish lay hidden under many coats of thick varnish. Working in the basement, I scraped and sanded endlessly until my work was gradually rewarded as I uncovered the beautiful grain and ornate trimmings of the original piece.

As fair time approached, Mother prodded me to get everything completed. This role earned her the title of S.D. ("Slave Driver"). Ruth, who by then had already graduated from

4-H work, was B.O. ("Bored Onlooker"), and I was S.F. ("Suffering Female"). The work, which might have become drudgery toward the end, was lightened as we entered into the spirit of these roles.

At last everything was in readiness and the fair was still three weeks away. Mother decided it would be good for me to detassel corn that year since I had been indoors so much that summer. I always tanned easily, but this year my skin was not conditioned to the summer sun, and I wound up under a doctor's care with a second-degree sunburn infected with corn poisoning. Although I missed the judging, I was jubilant over the news of several blue ribbons and three state fair entries.

Other club interests included Methodist Youth Fellowship, Future Homemakers of America, and Junior Auxiliary. If Mother wasn't transporting us to or from a meeting, she was baking a cake for a bake sale or helping with posters for an election campaign.

Our local chapter of the Junior Auxiliary, sponsored by the Women's Auxiliary of the American Legion, convened in the back of Heuter's Drug Store in Lytton. Clara Heuter was the adviser. Since the refreshments were ice cream sundaes, we heartily approved of her position.

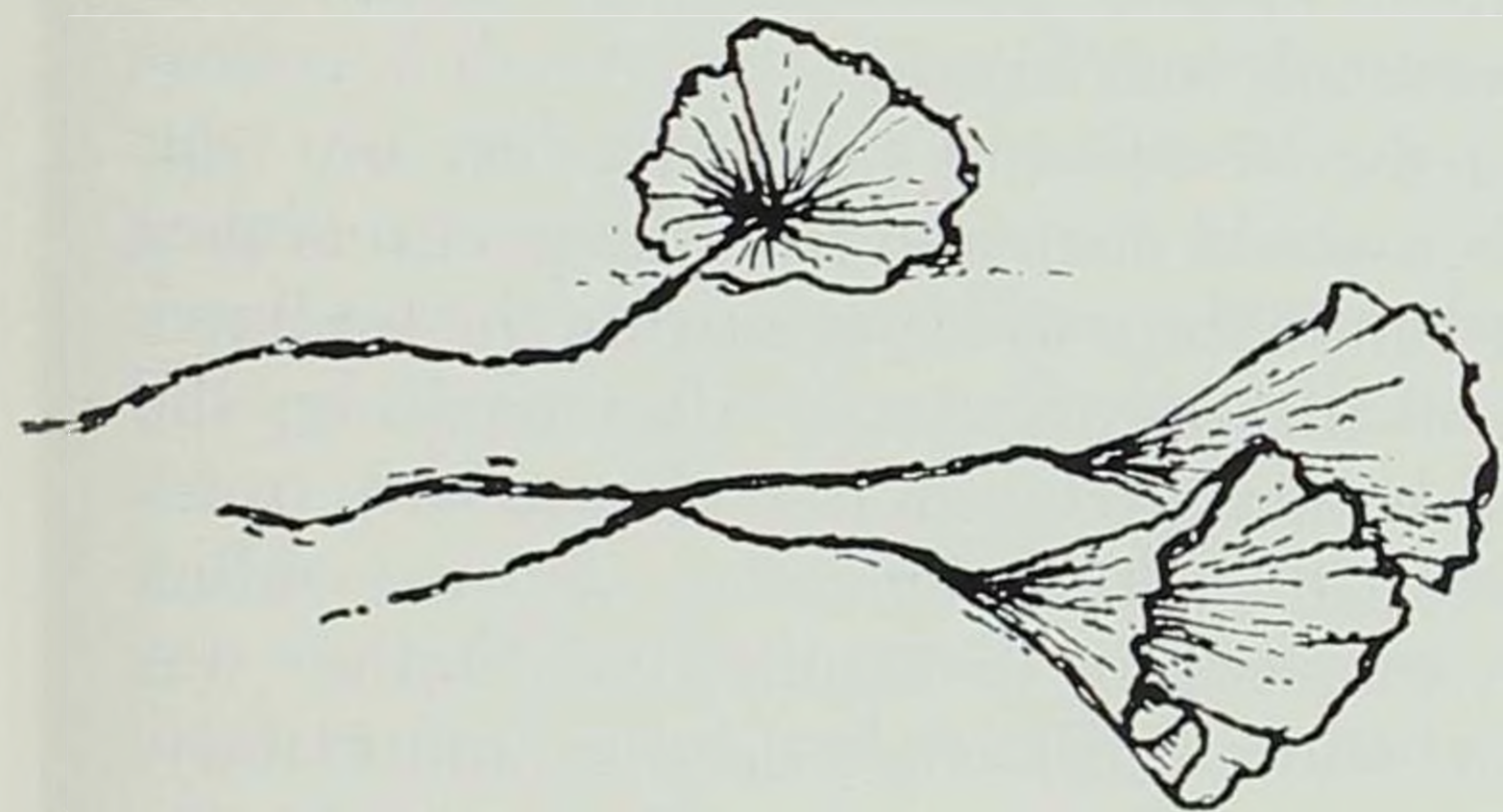
At the beginning of each meeting, we pledged allegiance to the flag and then remained standing to recite an impressive preamble, which included my favorite passage—a reference to our duties to the "classes and the masses." I had never heard a more poetic phrase.

Our chance to fulfill this obligation came on "Poppy Day," when we sold crepe-paper poppies to benefit disabled veterans. With patriotic fervor, we donned our official blue and gold satin caps and capes and climbed into cars to be driven to nearby Yetter. Since it was a tiny town with no Junior Auxiliary of its own, we were to canvass it that day and then return to Lytton to sell poppies to the farmers coming into town for Saturday night shopping.

Working in pairs, we thrived on strong competition. But my partner and I were growing discouraged by the lack of purchasers on the streets. The women doing their weekly shopping in the grocery store had already been

approached by other teams, and the younger set in the drugstore booths didn't provide large contributions.

Then my partner came up with an idea that



sounded like a gold mine. Tiny's Pool Hall was fully occupied and in an obliging mood. In no time, the poppies disappeared and the cigar box of money rapidly filled. It was the first and last time I ever entered the place, but I was too thrilled with our success to take note of my surroundings.

When we left, we made a beeline for headquarters to report our all-time high in poppy sales. Mrs. Heuter was at first elated with our achievement — and then horrified at the source. We couldn't very well return the money, but she was as reluctant to include it in the proceeds as if we had robbed a bank.

Back home, Ruth was humiliated and Mother was shocked. Daddy remarked, "Well, it left the men with that much less to spend on beer!" But Mother saw little humor in the situation.

Our auxiliary received a certificate for "outstanding patriotic contribution," but it was anticlimactic. Thereafter, my duties to the "classes and the masses" were more clearly defined.

MY GRANDMOTHER WILL-CUTT came to live with us during the winters and spent the summers in her little house in Schaller, a small town about twenty miles from

where we lived. I had nicknamed her "Grossmutter" to distinguish her from Grandma Wilson, who lived on our farm. Grossmutter was the kind of person you could nickname. She looked at least ten years younger than her age and stayed that way by keeping active and being a good sport.

Our earliest travels alone were on the train which ran between our town and hers. Mother would instruct the conductor to watch out for us. We waited impatiently for the train to leave the station so that we could imagine ourselves on the grandest journey possible.

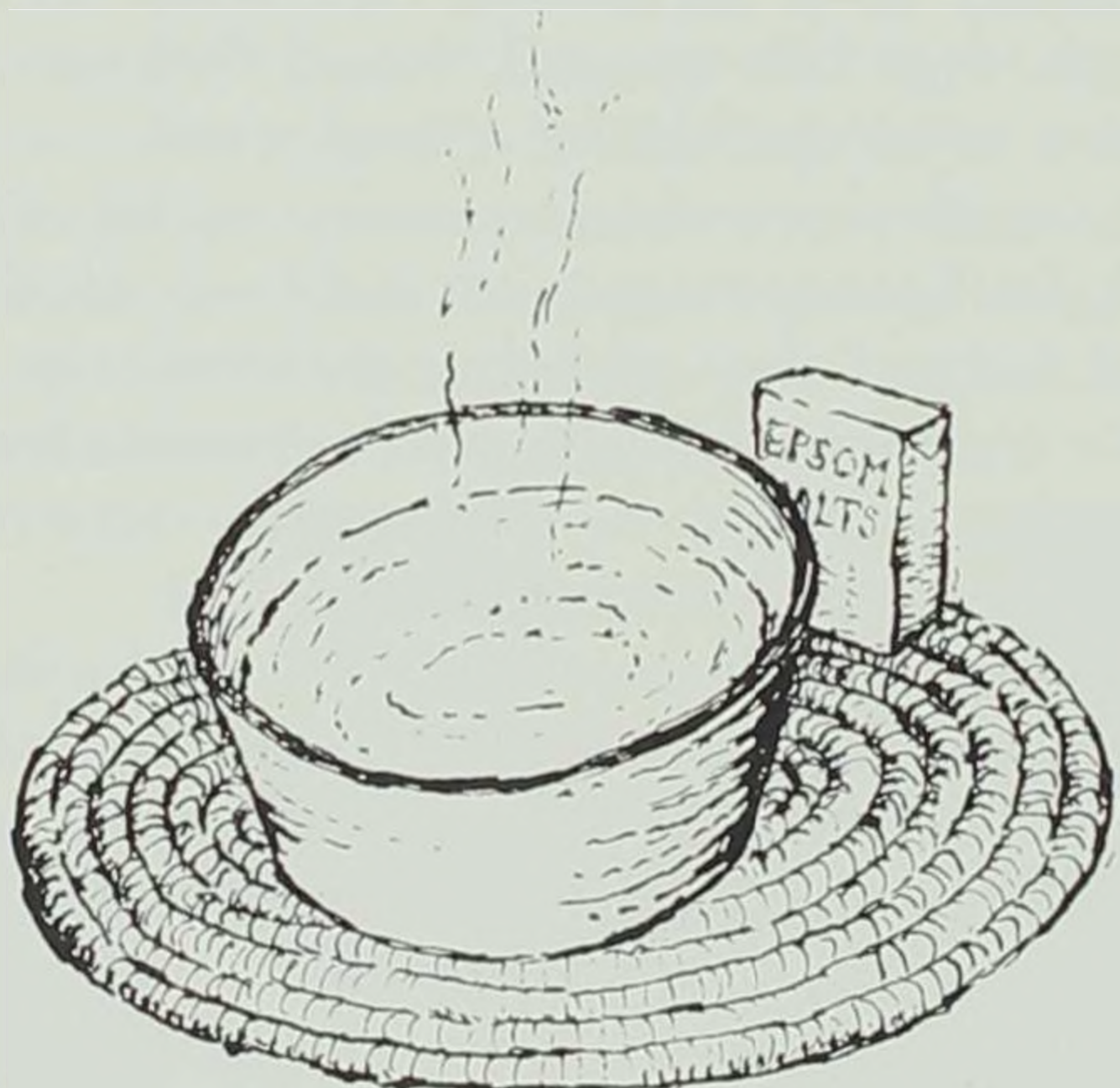
Grossmutter's house was a one-and-a-half-story frame house with a screened-in side porch. We loved the odd-shaped rooms and the big backyard. Except for wiping dishes and going after the mail, Grossmutter had few chores for us. We were free to sit under the big walnut trees, playing with the dolls Mother owned when she was a girl. We also loved to go to the nearby park and slide down the slide that was so big that it had two humps instead of one. At night, we slept on the big old horsehair sofa, which collapsed into a bed.

Grossmutter was never a sports enthusiast. My father played quite a bit of baseball in his younger days. Never having seen a game, Grossmutter agreed to watch him pitch. After watching without comment for some time, she turned to Mother, "I don't see why everyone thinks Ronald is so good. He never throws the ball so the poor fellow can hit it."

Sometimes she would be in the room when Daddy was trying to listen to a ball game on the radio. Just as crucial plays or scores were being announced, she would make a comment, and he would miss the announcement. Then, before Daddy could gather his patience to answer her, she would leave the room saying, "Never mind, I can't stand all this racket anyway."

Although she could be exasperating, we looked forward to her winter visits. She loved Chinese Checkers and Canasta, and we could often manage to stay up past our bedtimes to finish a game. As we played, she loved to soak her feet in the white enamel foot tub Mother hauled up from the basement and filled with Epsom salts and water as hot as could be tolerated. With the tub occupying so much space

under the table, it wouldn't take long before all pairs of feet would be in it. It was very cozy and relaxing on a cold winter night.



WHILE I WAS QUITE YOUNG, we didn't take many long trips. Then, after the Great Depression, World War II followed with gas rationing and speed limits of thirty-five miles per hour. I wasn't a very good traveler anyway. On even short trips, I constantly asked, "How much longer?"

Our first long trip was to the Ozarks. Mother was very systematic about traveling. For days before we left, she would label bottles, mark clothes, and lay out the items to take. When everything was packed, the house had to be thoroughly cleaned and phone calls made to delegate farm chores. Ruth and I always held our breath during this phase of preparations because this was the time when Mother would most likely decide that her obligations just wouldn't allow her to leave. Once she was assured that things could go on without her, she was as excited as we were to be off.

With plans to leave early the next morning, we would be sent to bed, to whisper in wide-awake excitement. Everything would be packed in the car except for the picnic lunch, which had been planned to help on expenses the first day.

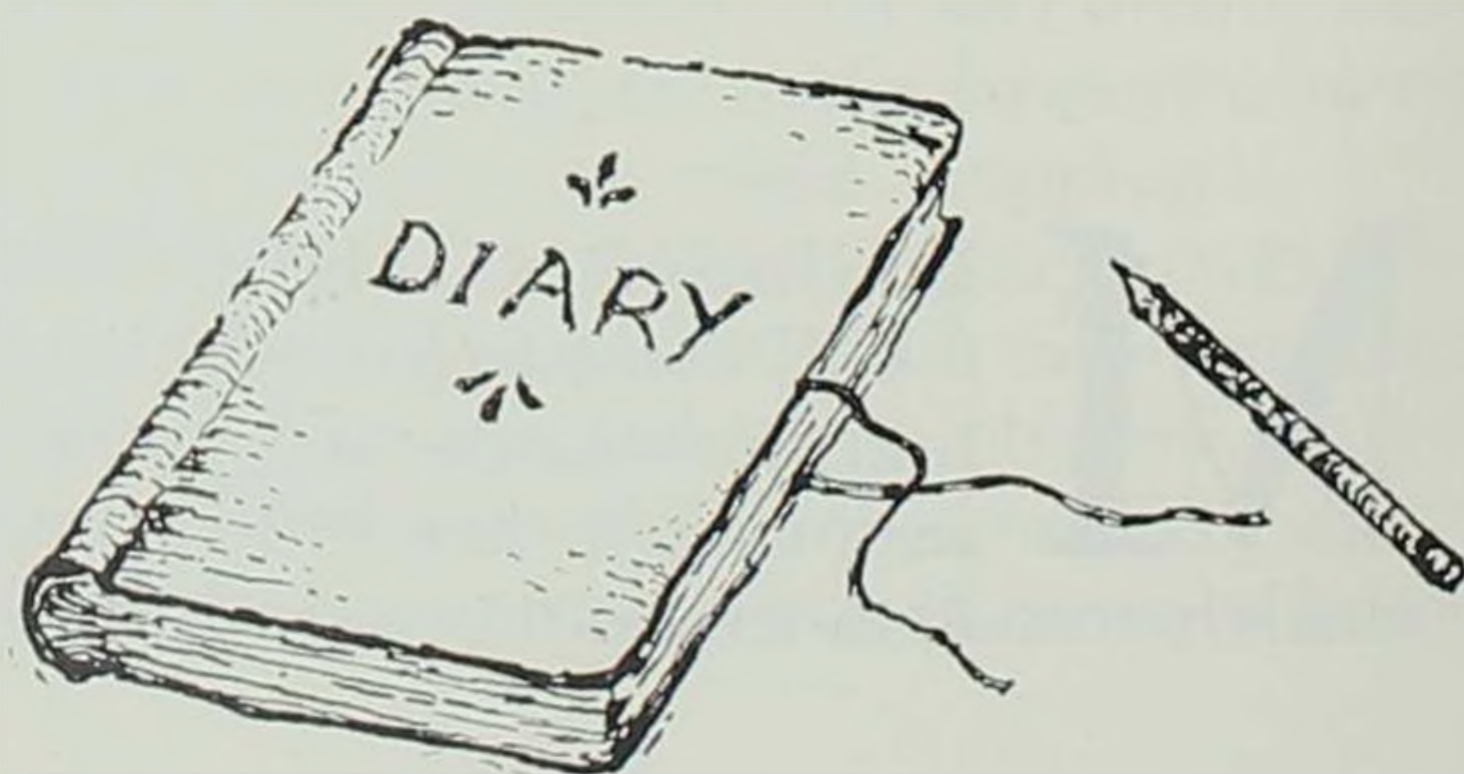
So that she wouldn't forget the lunch, Mother would hang her purse on the refriger-

ator door. She believed that the best way to remember things was to put something out of place. This accounted for the kitchen wastebasket sitting in the middle of the dining room, Daddy's rubbers perching on the piano keyboard, or a roll of tape sticking onto the bathroom mirror. To Mother, the method was not unusual, just logical.

For the first two or three days on any trip, Mother would doze and fall asleep a great deal of the time. She was experiencing the let-down from all the preparations. After napping, she would be irritated with herself and with us for all she had missed. One day we were riding along somewhere in Minnesota. Mother was asleep, Ruth and I were dozing, and Daddy, who never got sleepy at the wheel, was driving steadily along. Suddenly, Mother sat bolt upright and shouted, "Stop the car!" Daddy swung off the highway and had barely stopped when Mother was out of the car, racing up the steep embankment which ran along the side of the road. We stared in amazement as she climbed to the top and proceeded to do vigorous calisthenics in full view of curious passersby. Then she calmly walked back to the car, got in, and told Daddy to drive on.

When we demanded an explanation, she burst out laughing. She explained that she was tired of being sleepy and missing the scenery, so she had decided to do something drastic to wake herself up. Such impulsive actions were not unusual for her.

Our family had a passion for roadside historical markers. Flat, barren land became much more romantic when we could imagine Indian skirmishes there or Redcoats hiding behind bushes and trees. We frequently turned off the main route to follow small signs leading to waterfalls or beautiful rock formations. We kept diaries of each day's events and wrote in them every night. Trips were not measured in



miles covered, but in impressions and experiences gained and shared.

Regardless of the occasion, Mother believed in detailed explanations. She would give a bellhop an itinerary of our trip to justify the number of suitcases, or discuss insomnia with the waitress when refusing coffee. We girls protested that her explanations were unnecessary and embarrassing, but she insisted that people are more interested in helping when they know why you are doing certain things. Indeed, the people on which she inflicted this theory seldom seemed to mind. The waitress was soon relating the effect of coffee on *her* nerves, and Mother listened with interest. Our lunch might be delayed, but Mother had a new acquaintance.

An incident occurred which made us appreciate this trait in its absence. We were about to come back through Canadian customs into the United States. Knowing that we would be asked certain questions, we begged Mother to give only brief answers. We felt it should be a dignified occasion.

Yet I must admit that while traveling, we weren't particularly concerned with dignified appearances. Since this was before the days of air-conditioned cars, we would naturally have the windows rolled down, and through dusty areas I would wear the gauze mask Mother had made to prevent my hay fever attacks. Mother wore a net to protect her hair from the wind, and we all wore sunglasses. Being a practical person, Mother wore an old pair of Army surplus sunglasses which fit over her prescription lenses. They had a tendency to slip down, so she kept her head cocked to keep them on her nose.

When the border guard signaled us to stop, Mother peered at him from under the hair net and the two pairs of glasses. He routinely checked the car and then proceeded with the questions. He asked each of us where we were born and our ages. Mother was last to reply. For once her trait of overstatement pulled a complete switch. Omitting the state in which it was located, she remembered only the name of the small Iowa town where she had been born, and blurted, "Pocahontas."

Taken aback by her strange appearance and single utterance, the puzzled guard stepped

away from the car and silently motioned us on. Ruth and I anticipated sirens, but a backward glance revealed only the guard standing in the middle of the highway, staring after us. It made us wonder about the efficiency of border procedures.

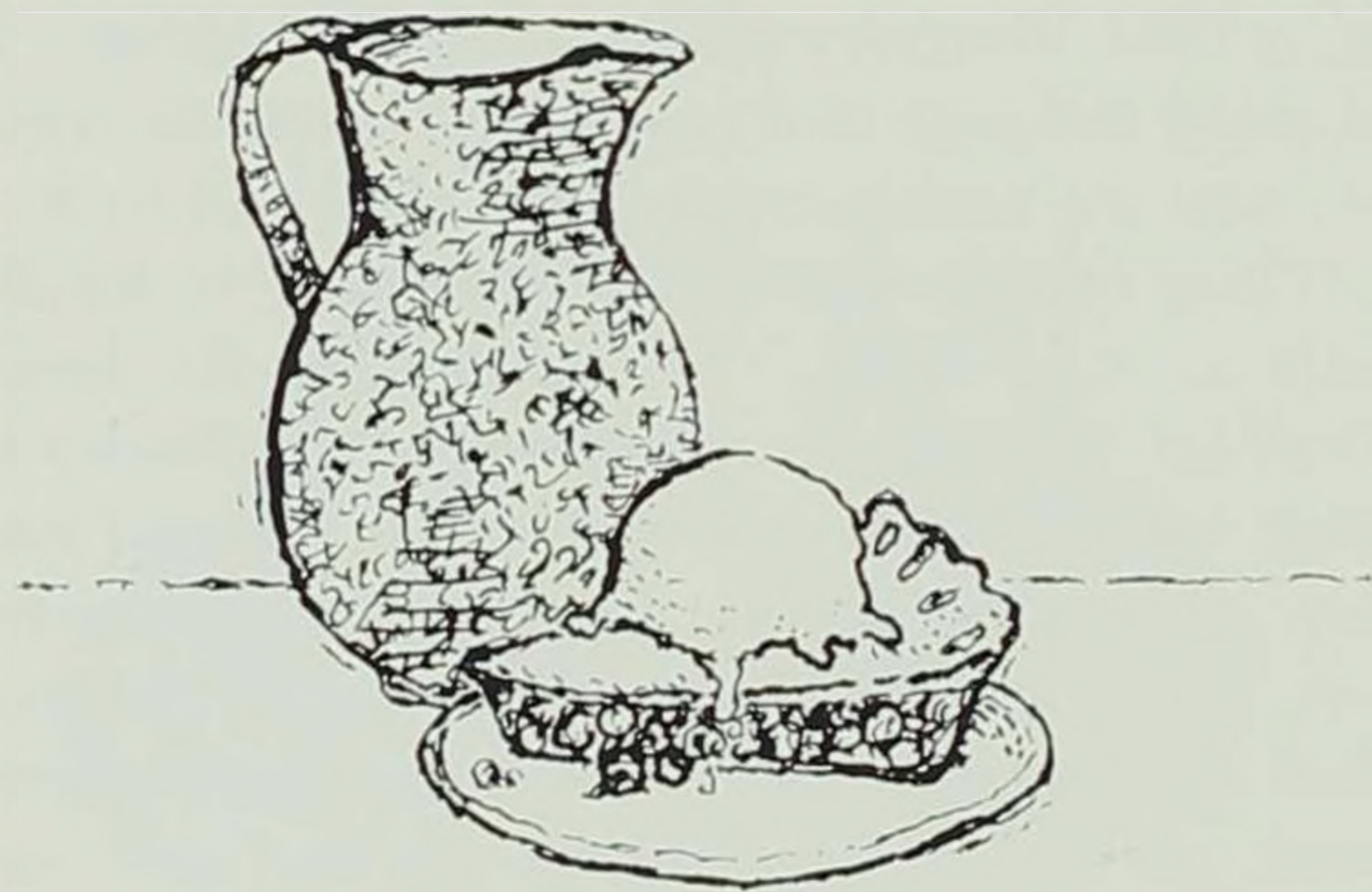
During most of our travels, we had the same car, a 1941 Mercury christened "Old Merc." It got good mileage and seldom gave us any trouble, and we had become very attached to it.

When Daddy deemed it necessary to finally trade in "Old Merc," he didn't have the heart to tell us. Instead he arranged for the dealer to bring out the new car and drive the old one away. The ruse failed. Looking out the window, we recognized the dealer and guessed what that meant. To my father's disappointment, no one hurried out to see the new car. And as we watched "Old Merc" pull gallantly out of the driveway, even Mother had tears in her eyes.

WE ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD to threshing time so that we could "wait on tables." Just as the neighboring men went together to make up a "threshing run," so did the women team up to prepare and serve the meals. On our threshing run we served only dinner and an afternoon lunch. Some other runs served a morning lunch and supper besides, but the women in our neighborhood decided that that was overdoing it. It would be 9:00 A.M. by the time the men finished their own morning chores at home and arrived to start threshing. They would barely get started before the mid-morning lunch at 10:30. As Mother and the other women had concluded, this "shot most of the work for the morning" and then it took just that much longer to get finished and move on to the next farm. There was no point in serving them supper because they could "just as well go on home to eat." The supper business was mostly a carryover from the days when it took a long time to get home with a team and wagon. Our women were ready to bring things up to date.

All morning would be spent preparing the dinner. There were pyramids of sweet corn and fresh biscuits with butter and honey. At least

two kinds of meat were served, including fish if it was Friday. There were also mounds of mashed or boiled potatoes and gravy. Pie and ice cream would round out a typical menu. Of course, there were always gallons of coffee, lemonade, and iced tea.



Right about noon the men would come in to wash up. Early that morning, Mother would have sent Ruth and me to the attic to bring down the "threshing mirror." It was a wavy-featured old relic which had outlived its household use and was now relegated to this function. Mother would hang it on a nail hammered into a large oak tree in the backyard. Under the mirror she would hang a dish containing a large-sized comb. A few feet away would be a long table with two basins for water and dishes of soap. Standing at the end of the table were ten-gallon milk cans full of water.

The men would line up, pour some water in a basin, wet their hands to lather up soap, and scrub their faces, ears, and arms up to their rolled sleeves. Throwing out the water in the basin to be ready for the next man, they would grope for the roller towel to dry the soapy water out of their eyes. Then they would move over to the mirror to run the comb through their hair and sit down in the shade to wait for the dinner call.

When the signal came, there would be laughing and joking, but the line of men would grow silent as it shuffled past the women in the kitchen and filed into the dining room. After Daddy had given grace, the food was brought in and the talk and laughter resumed.

When I was still little, I worked in the kitchen refilling bread and butter plates, envying the lucky older girls who were allowed to

take in the pitchers and serving dishes and ask each thresher if he would like more iced tea or lemonade. The boys on the threshing run glanced at them shyly, and the girls paused just a little longer at their plates.

When the last crumbs of pie crust had disappeared, the foreman of the crew, Lou Neuring, gave the signal to leave the table. Hanging on our dining room wall was a picture of a dog chasing a rabbit into its burrow. The eternal mystery was whether or not the rabbit escaped. Admittedly fascinated by the picture, Lou would stand up saying, "Well, if we don't get back to work, that hound just might catch that poor rabbit." We always waited for him to say it, and he never let us down.

Then it was our turn to eat, before facing the waiting piles of dirty dishes. By the time they were washed, it was time to take the afternoon lunch to the field.

While the women spread out the sandwiches, cake, and iced tea on the tail gate of the pickup truck, Ruth and I would climb up on the wagon into which the kernels of grain were being poured out of the big funnel on the threshing machine. Sticking our bare feet into the cool oats, we would feel the oats moving and settling as the wagon steadily filled.

Sometimes Daddy would let us ride out to the field on one of the empty hay racks and return on top of a mountain of yellow shocks. We were never allowed near the new straw-stack, however, because dirt and chaff filled the air around it and there was always the danger of an upturned pitchfork or a hole in the loose straw into which we might fall. The stacker had the worst job of all as he arranged the new straw sent his direction by the huge blower which arched its neck above the growing mound.

We were always sad when the old black threshing machine left our farm to go on to the next. Pulling the whistle to signal good-bye, Fred Schwartz, its proud owner, drove out of the driveway to rumble on up the road. In a few years, the combine was invented and threshing dinners became a thing of the past. □

