



journey to lime creek township

On the twenty-second day of September, 1892, a young farmer's wife was feeling decidedly uncomfortable. She had, indeed, been feeling that way for what seemed to her entirely too long. Her name had been Ellen Pickford. Now it was Mrs. Wendell Wilkinson.

The reason for her acute discomfort was me. I was

taking my time — so they told me afterward. Too doggone much time.

I had given notice in no uncertain terms several hours earlier that my arrival was imminent. But a tendency to dawdle — a trait that was to crop up many times during my later sojourn in this world — was making everyone in the little one-story house on the old Pickford farm a few miles northwest of Nora Springs, Iowa, pretty uneasy over the way things were going.

Finally old Doctor Smith of Mason City arrived. He didn't fool around. Presently I gulped my first breath of Cerro Gordo County autumn air, and I presume, let out a series of protesting squawks. Doc Smith probably said he'd better be starting on that eight mile drive back to Mason City with his horse and buggy, and left me to make out as best I could with the female relatives who had gathered around for the occasion. I have an idea that my Grandmother Jane Wilkinson was on hand at the time of my birth, for, I recall that she was there when my sister Florence was born, and again when my brother Roger came along.

For some reason, which has never been explained to my satisfaction, they decided to call me Herbert Ellery Wilkinson. Where that middle name came from is an unsolved mystery. The only other fellow I know of with a name like that is Ellery Queen, the mystery story writer. That isn't his real name either. I wish I could run across him some day and ask him where he found the name. I might feel easier in my mind. Wouldn't it be horrible if he should tell me — if our meeting ever

occurred — that he had seen my full name somewhere and had swiped part of it? My brother, Roger, always says he never can remember what my middle name is until he happens to remember it rhymes with celery.

I was looking through an old history textbook of mine the other day, one that I had when I was 10 years old. On the flyleaf I had written my full name. Below it I had written "Nom-de-plume, Louis Conning." That's what I wished my name was then. It was the prettiest I could think of. I don't believe it sounds so pretty now. In fact, it sounds lousy. So I'll just keep the one my folks started me out with.

I'm pretty well convinced that I must have given my mother a rough time and my father a good scare when I was born, for they didn't get up courage to have the next baby, Florence, for seven years. Of course it could have been that I was a disgusting little brat after I got old enough to get around on my own power, and my folks may have thought, "Well if that's the way they're going to be, Heaven help us if we have any more of 'em." I have tried to convince myself that the foregoing could not possibly have been the case. Yet I recall uneasily Grandmother Wilkinson speaking to me pretty sharply one day, "Don't be so sassyl" No doubt I had been shooting off my little mouth.

It appears that my father, mother and I continued to live in that one-story farmhouse until I was about thirty months old. Uncle Rufus Pickford lived with us. He was the youngest of my mother's brothers. But the farm was small, only about 100 acres. Uncle Rufus was about

to get married and expected to bring his bride there to live. My father had taken a fling at carpentering — he learned the trade well too — but he was smart enough to see that there wasn't much future in it for him. So it was definitely our move.

Some years before this, a quarter section of land in Lime Creek Township had taken my father's eye. He used to walk across it whenever he went on foot from his father's home near Rock Falls on his way to the circus, or perhaps to Teachers' Institute at Mason City. It was a nine-mile walk but he thought nothing of it. I don't think much of it either. I'd howl my head off if I had to walk half a mile today. He often said to me in later years, "I always liked that farm. It laid just right, most of it sloping gently to the south; it had running water on it, and it was fairly close to Mason City. I was sure Mason City would be quite a place someday."

He resolved to buy that farm. The chance finally came about the time we were going to have to leave the old Pickford homestead. The price was \$35 an acre. My father said he'd take it. The sellers, not expecting to be snapped up so quickly, backed down on their asking price and upped it a dollar an acre to \$36. They thought Dad would back out. He didn't. He said he'd take it anyway. But he was probably pretty disgusted over having to pay \$160 more than the original price.

There wasn't a building on the place except an old wreck of a cattle shed down in what came to be our creek pasture. Neither was there a fence worthy of the name. But there was a lot of good rich dirt on that 160

acres, and the prairie grass grew knee high to a man on horseback — and the little creek ran full and clear the year round. The prairie chicken, the jack rabbit and the meadow lark knew there was food and shelter and safety in the pleasant swales of this gently sloping land.

One blustery day in the spring — the year was 1895 — my father tied our high-wheeled buggy on behind a wagon with a hay-rack on it. My mother and I climbed in the buggy, and we were on our way to the new farm. It is almost certain that the roads were bad that day. They always were in the spring, either frozen into icy ruts or heavy with mud. My father, standing on the hay-rack, looked back frequently to see whether we were coming along all right. My mother, always an anxious person, held onto me tightly with one hand while the other one gripped the buggy seat. I'll bet it took us at least a couple of hours to travel the four miles to our new quarter section.

It must have been a rather desolate place. I have no recollection of how it looked then, of course. My father and my Uncle Theodore Wilkinson had worked there several months, getting a house and a shed-type barn built. There wasn't a tree or a bush of any kind nearby. Only the open prairie where a few small cultivated fields had struggled to push back the wild grass that grew so rankly in the spring and now lay thick and brown waiting for the summer's warmth to come again.

So here it was that we stopped that day and a new Iowa home began. This farm was to bloom under my father's and my mother's careful and expert hands into

a place of comfort and beauty and abundance. Here my sister and my brother were born, and here I was to bring my bride many years later. Here was to be a pleasant place of flowers, evergreens and shrubs of many kinds, an apple orchard, and a walnut grove. My father loved trees — too well, I sometimes thought on days when I had to clear away dead branches or stumps, or was sent with the old red bucksaw to cut up stove wood for the kitchen range.

Here was to be a place for comfortable living, with a furnace and running water and a wide veranda on which we kids invented our own game called "Keep Off The Porch." Farm buildings and silos were to appear as they became needed. Fences were to line the roads and run up and down the hills in the creek pasture, where there was a lovely lily pond at the foot of a steep slope. There was going to be good coasting in the winter time in that pasture too, and in the summer time there was even a spot near the lily pond where you could strip off your clothes and paddle in the sparkling ripples of the little creek.

But we didn't know all these things that cold day in March, 1895. Father and Mother were thinking more of getting a fire started in that new house, bedding down the horses in the lean-to stable, and no doubt, keeping me out from under foot while they moved our few belongings into what was to be our home for many many years.