

*you'll
have
to
hurry!*

Grandfather Benjamin Pickford often came to stay with us for several weeks at a time after we were settled at the new farm. Like most grandfathers when it comes to their grandsons, he spent a good deal of time with me. Though he was then well past 70 years old, he was an active man and liked nothing better than to go for long

walks with me about the fields and along the winding cow paths in the creek pasture.

We especially liked to set out of a pleasant summer afternoon for an entrancing thicket of wild plum trees that grew on the steep hillside above the lily pond a half mile or so from the house. Here the cattle, in search of a juicy bite of grass or a bit of green foliage had worn steep paths in and out among the trees. Grandfather and I would clamber about these paths pretending that we were mountain climbers and explorers. Often we could not stand upright without clinging tightly to the roots and branches about us, lest we slip and go tumbling toward the lily pond.

When we tired of this little game, we would sit panting in some shady spot where the grass grew soft and rankly, and talk of the many things that an old man and a very young boy can always find to talk about. Later on, as the sun slanted down in the west and the dull croak of the frogs among the lily pads began to grow louder, we would saunter toward home, hand in hand — though now and then I had to break away for a minute examination of a pocket gopher's mound or a meadow lark's nest.

At the supper table that night, if my mother asked us where we had been, Grandfather and I smiled at each other and said, "Oh, just out walking." We did not want her to know about our plum thicket and lily pond.

The happy days my grandfather and I spent together had to come to an end of course. One day sadness crept in, touching us all, when we learned that Grandfather

Benjamin, visiting then at my aunt's home, would not recover from pneumonia. I wonder that even after half a century the memory of a hurried drive through darkness and a slashing rainstorm to reach his bedside stands out so clearly. I wonder too, why it was that I was permitted, a few days later, to stand at the edge of his open grave in the little cemetery at Rock Falls, even while the sexton tumbled the first clods down upon the coffin. What a heartless way to tell a broken-hearted kid that his beloved companion of sunny summer days had gone away.

It was a good thing for me that during the busy years that followed on our quarter section in Lime Creek Township my Uncle Theodore Wilkinson was often with us. There were many new buildings needed on the place. A barn, a granary, a cattle shed, a machine shed, a chicken house, and some of the upstairs rooms in the house still had to be finished. Uncle Thee, as we always called him, was an expert carpenter, and a happy and good-natured companion to a lonely youngster like me. I was fascinated not only by the way he could fashion playthings out of odd bits of wood, but also by his trilling birdlike whistling. I tried for years to imitate this whistling but never could.

When the job of carpentering was completed, and my uncle had nothing else to do at the moment, he liked to hop on a train and, as he put it, "Go out west." As a matter of fact, I think he never went much farther than the Dakotas in those days, but that seemed a tremendous distance to us at home. He liked to tell,

upon returning, of having been in places like Fargo and Belle Fourche and Bismark, and how, if you didn't make the right connections, you had to "lay over" a certain number of hours in this or that town. That "lay over" business had me puzzled when I was very small. I didn't see why you couldn't stand up or walk around while you were waiting. After a while I learned what he really meant.

Now, nearly fifty years later, Uncle Thee is still adept with the hammer, the saw, the plane and the level, though he is past 80 years old. Not long ago, when I was in Mason City, I called his home by telephone. I wanted to reminisce with him about the old days in Cerro Gordo County. But his son, Frank, told me, "Oh, Dad left at seven o'clock for some carpenter job out in the country." What a lucky man! Though he's had his full share of the sorrows of this world he bears them lightly.

His thick curly hair that was so unruly when he was a young man is still there though the gray hairs far outnumber the black. When I finally got to see him, he didn't know me for an instant. Then, as he grasped my hand he exclaimed, with a quiet twinkle in his eye, "Gol, I thought you was some big attorney or some-thin'." I have spent many happy times with this uncle of mine.

Life on the farm in the late 1890's was not all plowing and cultivating, harvesting, and digging the rocks — niggerheads, we called them — out of the fields where they sometimes bounced the walking plow out of the furrow to the great disgust of my father or the hired

man, usually with disastrous results to the plow itself.

A forerunner, no doubt, of the later-day carnivals and special festivals that are now common, was the "Street Fair" which ran for a full week in Mason City. I think the year must have been 1899, for the catch phrase of the Fair was "You'll have to hurry!" which everyone yelled at everybody else, for the reason, I suppose, that if you didn't watch out the old Nineteenth Century would be over and done with before you knew it. I've never heard any other reason for the rather catchy phrase, though there may have been one.

My father, mother and I were at the Fair at least once every day. We considered this quite an accomplishment, for we were not in the habit of leaving the farm more than once a week, when we went to town on Saturday to do our "trading." Prizes had been offered by the merchants for the best exhibits of farm produce, and my father won first on potatoes he had raised, due, for one thing, to the fact that he had the foresight to carefully wash the dirt off them. None of the other potato exhibitors, apparently, had thought of this.

The Mason City streets were lined with booths built out on the sidewalks after the manner of an oriental bazaar. There were vaudeville acts, too, out in the streets, but the only entertainment feature of this week-long event that I distinctly remember was an iron-barred cage in which was confined a terrifying-looking creature labelled "The Wild Man From Borneo." He was probably no wilder than I was, but the sight of him, and the blood curdling clatter he set up when he shook

the bars of his cage and screamed what were supposed to be jungle screams, nearly scared the pants off me. I did not know then that such things were usually faked, and though my folks assured me that the fellow was harmless, I wouldn't have touched him with even an eleven foot pole.

The playboys of that time carried about with them a mischievous little apparatus consisting of a small rubber ball fastened to one end of an elastic string about six feet long. The stunt was to conceal the ball and string in your hand. The free end of the string was looped around one of the fingers. Then when you saw some unsuspecting acquaintance with his back turned to you, it was more fun than anything to throw the ball at his head. Of course the ball bounced back fast, and you immediately concealed it again in your hand, pretending to be interested in something else. I craved one of these gadgets intensely, but I remember I didn't get one until the last night of the Fair and just as we were ready to go home. I was much disappointed, but a big dish of vanilla ice cream, at what was probably Vermilya's Cafe, made me feel much better. This was the first ice cream I had ever had away from home, and I thought as my father, mother and I sat around the white-topped table, we were certainly throwing our money around.

No summer was quite complete without at least one trip on the "excursion train" to Clear Lake. The electric railway between Mason City and the famous resort town ten miles to the west had been recently completed. I don't know whether the designers of the

passenger coaches of that era did it on purpose or not, but they had come up with a seating arrangement that just suited us kids. The cars did not have solidly built sides but only a sort of heavy wire screen railing along the outside of the rows of seats, so that the wind whipped thrillingly at your legs as the train swept along. Usually we got aboard at the corner of the City Park, boosting our heavy lunch baskets up the steps ahead of us. Then as we rumbled slowly down Main Street (now Federal), we looked snootily down on the less fortunate human beings along the sidewalks who were not going to go on this joyful journey.

As the train drew past the edge of the city, we would pick up speed and roll breathlessly by cornfields that crowded almost up to the track. There might be a short pause midway to the lake at the little village of Emery, a sort of division point — if you could call it that — of the railroad. Then the arrival at our long-anticipated destination, with the lake shimmering in the morning sun and stretching far off toward the western horizon. A sailboat might be slanting before the breeze. A little steamboat might be pushing its stubby nose through the blue water, while its funnel belched smoke and cinders over the passengers clinging to its tiny deck. Who wanted to stop to eat dinner in the City Park when there was so much to see? Usually there was quite a group of us — uncles, aunts and cousins — and while the women folks calmly spread tablecloths on the ground and started setting out eatables, and the men talked of crops and hogs and cattle, we youngsters took

a lot of admonishing, "Now set down and eat your dinner right and don't be running off down to the water, you'll get drowned sure."

After we had bolted our food we sometimes got a steamboat ride, if our folks happened to be feeling a bit liberal that day. Often, though, a rowboat ride close to the shore had to do. We never thought of going swimming for most of us had never seen a bathing suit, let alone owned one. Mostly, it was enough to just watch, wide-eyed, the pleasant panorama of water and shore and sky that spread itself before us and which was so different from our own fields and meadows and long vistas of prairie grass at home.

The excursion train was always ready for the return trip long before we were. We used to wish it would break down, and we would have to stay over night at, say, some place like the Outing Club. We didn't know then, of course, that the Club was a privately owned and operated group of cottages, but we thought the name sounded nice and we would have a good time if we could stay there.

Back at Mason City our teams and buggies had to be retrieved at the livery stable, the empty lunch baskets stowed under the seats of the surrey or the democrat wagon, cheerful good-byes shouted back and forth, and then came the jog homeward, pleasantly sleepy, under the stars.

The winters were rugged in Cerro Gordo County. In our newly built prairie home the only heat we had came from the cookstove in the kitchen which had an

enormous and never-ending appetite for corn-cobs and wood, and from the fat-bellied heating stove that was set up every fall in the living room — "sitting room" we called it then. When I was very young my mother used to come to the little northeast room upstairs to wake and get me dressed, and her favorite expression when the weather was especially frigid was, "Its chill-ay-ly!"

When we went to town in the winter time, it meant a tiresome, cold trip in the bobsled or the swell-backed cutter that had three sleigh bells on the under side of the tongue. They made a rather puny sound compared with the jangling strings of bells some of the neighbors had. My own particular peeve was the red shawl I was made to wear over my head on such trips to the city. I protested plenty, but it never did any good. My morale wasn't helped any when the town kids caught sight of me and bawled various derisive remarks.

On the better side of winter time was the coasting in our pasture, which was quite hilly. There were some bogs at the bottom of the best hill which gave one a delightful bouncing at the end of a slide. Occasionally there was skating on the creek, but as a rule the ice was drifted under a lot of snow or what ice there was would be scaly and unsafe because the water underneath kept running the year round. My first skates were a pair that belonged to my mother, but they were definitely unsuccessful because they had no clamps for fastening securely to the shoes.

That creek in the pasture came very near ending my career when I was six years old. One day a neighbor boy

named Roy Carmany and I were having fun keeping sticks afloat in the water, which was then just about up to its banks following a heavy spring rain. I stepped a little too close to the edge while trying to keep a stick floating downstream, and the next I knew I was three feet under water. I had my eyes wide open and can still remember how the water looked above my head. I came right up, of course, and grabbed wildly for the bank. Fortunately, I got hold of some grass or weeds that had solid roots and pulled myself out as quickly as I had fallen in. The water was about six feet deep there, and I wouldn't have done so well if the swift current had swept me away from the bank. I had on a wide straw hat with a fancy ribbon on it, and I still see it floating gaily on downstream. My friend ran for home when he saw me fall in. He was too scared to yell for help from our fathers who were fixing fence not far away. Mother was not too pleased when I arrived home thoroughly soaked.

Years later when trying desperately to swim in the college pool at Iowa State, I told the coach of my experience in the creek. He said it probably accounted for some of my fear of the water.

When our barn was still only the lean-to on the west side, it was struck by lightning during an early morning thunderstorm. I was still snugly in bed when the crashing bolt hit. Dad and the hired man were doing chores in the barn when they saw the storm coming. They ran for the house, and the lightning struck just before they got there. One of them felt a shock on his

head and the other felt it on a heel, but neither was hurt. The lightning knocked down one of our horses that the hired man had been currying only seconds before. Several boards at the southeast corner of the barn were splintered, but no fire was started. The neighbors said it must have been "a cold bolt." I was much impressed when I climbed up in the haymow to see the damage. It was as if some wrathful, mysterious giant had taken a poke at our little man-made structure.

Our two horses of that time were named Kit and Doll. I don't remember which one was hit by the lightning, but she soon recovered anyway. Kit was an easy-going gray mare, definitely on the lazy side. Doll was a nervous, high-headed animal that would have been more at home at a steeple chase than on a farm. She irritated my father no end. I used to wonder why he didn't use some swear words on her like most of the neighbors did with their horses. But he never did. "Con-sarn you!" was the limit of his vocabulary at such times. At least when I was around.

Later we acquired a fairly ancient mare called Nellie, who soon got the heaves so badly that she was never much good. I wonder if some sharp horse trader covered up those heaves just before we got her. Many times I felt very sorry for her as she gasped for breath somewhat as a person with asthma does. Other horses we owned soon after were Prince and Major. We raised Prince from a colt. We had another nice colt about the same age and the same color and expected to have a nicely matched team when they were old enough to break to

drive. One morning we came out to the barn to find this other colt lying in helpless agony in his stall. A bull had broken loose during the night and gored it so terribly that it had to be killed. A farm tragedy like that can give you a lump in the throat for days.

Most farm horses have dull, uninteresting names. But this was not so with two horses that we had later on. We bought them from Uncle Rufus Wilkinson, who had named one Romeo and the other Frisco. Uncle Rufus was good at thinking up unusual names for animals. He was fond of horses and dogs — dogs especially. He could train his dogs to do tricks too, and whenever we went to Grandfather Wilkinson's farm for Sunday dinner, we counted on an animal act or two by way of entertainment after we staggered away from Grandmother's marvelous table. Romeo and Frisco, while not matched in color, made a snappy looking team when hitched to the shiny surrey that replaced the high-wheeled open buggy.

A common happening on the farm in those days was a "runaway." Horses rarely saw a train or anything of that kind and were easily frightened. It is a most terrifying experience to be in a vehicle dragged by a runaway team. When I was perhaps five or six years old my two aunts from Rock Falls, Jessie and Mabel Wilkinson, picked up my mother and me to drive with them to Mason City. They were driving a team of what I remember as bay horses, though they may have been some other color. They were hitched to what we called a two-seated spring wagon, or high-wheeled buggy. It had no top.

We got to town all right and were about to go under a railroad viaduct on what we used to call the north way to the city. Just then a train came roaring along the right of way high above our heads. I couldn't much blame that team for instantly reversing their direction.

The buggy turned upside down, dumping us all into the dusty street, while the horses dashed madly back in the direction from which we had come with only the tongue of the buggy still attached to them. A basket of eggs that we were taking to market was well distributed over me. I remember peering through a dripping mass of yolks and broken shells at the team which was disappearing around a curve in the road. None of us was hurt in the upset, but I do seem to recall that Aunt Mabel sustained a broken garter. Some men who were working on the road a half a mile or so away finally caught the frightened horses, saw that our buggy was repaired and put back together again, and assured us we could safely drive on our way.

Another time one of the Heinold girls was driving past our place with a team hitched to a single buggy. I was mowing our lawn and the sound startled the horses, and away they went down the road to the west. They were down to John Hanson's hill and over the creek bridge while I stood trembling in our yard feeling that this runaway was my fault. The girl stayed with the outfit, and as far as I can remember, got the team stopped finally without much damage.

It is amazing how much speed a terrified horse can develop. We used to have arguments over what kind of a bit would hold a horse if it got frightened. The

general conclusion was that no matter what kind of a bit was used it didn't do much good in a runaway. There was a bit called the Jay-eye-see that was supposed to be pretty wicked, and there were, of course, many others that were jointed or had chains and levers of various kinds to pry a stubborn animal's mouth open when he got a notion to set his teeth on the bit and run.

Another thrilling runaway occurred when my father decided to hitch up two colts. We got them fastened to the wagon without too much trouble, but they were uneasy and had wicked gleams in their eyes. The outfit was headed east just by our old chicken house. Dad got in the wagon, grabbed the lines, and I jumped back from the horses' heads. They started like sprinters at the crack of the gun and headed for a big wooden gate that led to the hog pasture, which they took like high hurdlers. The wagon knocked the gate to kindling wood. They tore at a mad gallop through another narrow gate that led to a ten acre field. Dad's hat blew off as he slid down in the wagon box with his feet braced against the front, sawing away on the lines. He might as well have been trying to hold back the 20th Century Limited. The team circled that field as fast as it could go, staying just inside the fences. All I could see of my father was his head bobbing up and down above the top of the double box that was on the wagon. Finally the terrified colts wore themselves out and slowed down. Then Dad got up from his hard seat and lashed the horses until they were all in. They had absolutely no more run left as we unhitched them.

It may have been only a coincidence, but a few days later one of the local horse traders appeared at our place and inquired innocently if we had any young horses to sell or trade. The two colts that we had hitched so confidently to the wagon in anticipation of a dignified and leisurely jaunt through the fields on a pleasant spring day were decidedly unpopular with us just then. The rural underground had got the word through to the trader that he could probably make himself a good deal if he dropped in to see my father. It worked out exactly that way. After a couple of hours or so of haggling, at which the horse trader was far more adept than my father, the colts were led away, dancing along in sprightly fashion behind the trader's buggy and kicking up their heels at us in a contemptuous good-bye.

My mother was greatly relieved when we acquired a sedate and elderly team of mares to replace the fiery geldings that had circled the ten acre lot with such abandon. She had a high regard for my father's ability as a carpenter and a farmer but was outspokenly critical, with considerable justification it must be admitted, of his aptness for horse-trading. I was presently to understand why she especially did not want to be riding just at that particular time behind a pair of horses that would just as soon run away as not.

A mile to the north of us, on the farm later owned by Elmer Hersey, lived an amply-built, kindly, middle-aged lady named Mrs. Lyman Leach. She was an extremely welcome visitor in the farm homes nearby for she was the official midwife for the neighborhood. When

the order was given in a household, "Get Mrs. Leach!" it meant someone was about ready to have a baby.

One February afternoon my Dad came driving into our yard with Mrs. Leach sitting beside him in the buggy. I was seven years old then. I thought it was going to be nice indeed to have company and she seemed to make herself right at home. Of course I saw nothing unusual in her visit, though I knew my mother had not been feeling well that day. I had been a bit concerned over this and had asked her whether I might do something to "amuse" her. She replied that she might play a game of Halma (Chinese checkers) with me. We did play a game or two, but I have often wondered since how she could have concentrated at all on what we were doing. That night my sister, Florence, was born and the reason for Mrs. Leach's visit was clear even to me.

That last statement, I am going to have to admit, is not strictly true. The next morning I was ushered in to see my new sister, but when I made some mild inquiry as to how she had gotten there, I was given some evasive answers. I rather think the old gag was pulled on me about the Doctor bringing her in his satchel. It took me quite a while to find out the truth.

Many years later, the night my son, Jack, was born there was the usual tension and excitement around the house. Someone, not me, had told my oldest son, Dean, the Doctor was bringing a baby in his satchel. This didn't seem to make sense to the young lad, although he was only six and a half at the time. I was trying to get him to sleep, for it was nearly midnight, but he was ex-

tremely curious about what was going to happen. He asked me, if what he had been told was true. No believer myself in trying to fool youngsters, I explained to him as best I could how babies were born. This appeared to satisfy him perfectly, and he immediately turned over and went to sleep. I was pleased with myself. After Jack was born an hour or two later, I was more pleased with myself.

