



*board, room and washing*

No doubt nearly every farm family in Cerro Gordo County must at sometime or other have employed one or more "hired men." I never liked that term for it seemed to imply that the person hired was in some way definitely inferior to his employer. As a matter of fact this was often not the case at all for the hired man might be a neighbor's son, or a youngster learning about farm-

ing during school vacation, or an older man such as I shall describe a little later on.

In some sections of the country the men who are employed on farms are called "hands." We once entertained a visitor from Indiana, who, upon observing our current employee at work around the place, inquired in his delightful Hoosier dialect, "Is that there your hard hand?" It took us a while to figure out that "hard" was just his way of pronouncing "hired." In the South they call them "field hands," while in the great wheat growing states of the West they are "harvest hands." In the Southwest a good man around a cattle ranch will be a "top hand."

The more elaborate farms may add a bit of swank by stating that they are paying wages to a herdsman, or a foreman, or even a superintendent. The modern day worker on a farm is likely to arrive at, say, seven o'clock in the morning, driving his own car which is often just about as late a model as his employer's. He will work till six in the evening, and then, if he is not furnished a house on the boss's farm, will drive back to his apartment in town. It's a pretty good arrangement all round.

In the late nineties or the early 1900's nearly all the hired men were single. We took them in almost as one of the family. Their wages included board, room and washing. Washing their clothes, I mean, not the men. They worked whatever hours were necessary, though I can't say they always did so without a certain amount of griping. It would be going too far to state each and every one of them was a model of deportment, content

to perform his employer's every wish, and, like the boys in the famous Light Brigade, "Their's not to reason why."

I don't care to say much about some of the men we had working for us. Edwin, to whom we paid the magnificent wage of \$8 a month, was one of these. His principal talent was telling dirty stories. Jimmy, the ex-prize fighter, was another. He had what he called a "callyflower" ear, a permanent reminder of the days he had spent with a touring troupe of athletes which included the great wrestler of his day, Farmer Burns. Yet another was a gangling character whom we nicknamed "Colonel" because for a long time he declined to tell us what his first name was. Finally, his resistance broken, he hung his head and admitted, "It's Sylvester." We couldn't much blame him for his reluctance.

As long as he could ride a corn plow or do something equally easy, Sylvester did well enough for us, but when it came time to shock grain he stood the gaff for about half a day and then approached us with the demand, "Gimme my timel" We were disgusted with him, of course, for pulling out when we needed him most, and told him so. Somewhere along in his no doubt mottled past he had acquired a stock of French words. At least they sounded French. So he merely shrugged, retorted in his foreign-sounding lingo, picked up his valise and started down the dusty road to town. We never saw him again.

Three men who worked for us do stand out against the sometimes dim background of the past. One was

Alfred Moule, the lanky, slow-moving, drawling, dependable son of John Moule, our neighbor to the east. Wages then were about a dollar a day, plus dinner and supper. He would come walking in our gate about seven o'clock each morning, and then he and my father would discuss the day's work ahead of them. When evening came and we all sat at the supper table, Dad would ask him if he could come back the next day, and his answer was invariably, "Guess so," unless the next day happened to be the opening of the fishing season. That was a special day for Alfred, not to be violated by anything as prosaic as farm work, as he headed for the Lime Creek River, where the catfish and the crappies might be biting. I always wished I could go with him but was never permitted to. Probably Alfred would not have been keen to have me tagging along anyway.

After his one-day fling Alfred would come back to us. Sundays and holidays were good enough for fishing from then on. He should have lived about a generation or so earlier, when men lived in reasonable comfort by simply hunting and fishing. In deerskin shirt and leggings with plenty of fringes at the seams, in a coonskin cap, and with a rifle in the crook of his arm, Alfred would have looked the typical frontiersman, and would, I think, have been extremely happy at it. He was somehow out of place behind a walking plow or with a pitchfork in his hand. Perhaps this was the reason he did not often smile, not even when I was able to pester him, after supper was done, into playing tag with me as far as our front gate. When I got his tag I shouted it out,



but when he got mine he merely dead-panned, "I got your'n."

Ralph Boothroyd, dark-haired, handsome, a glamour boy if there ever was one, came to work for us three different summers. He was the son of John Boothroyd who lived in Mason City. Ralph was reasonably well aware of his own good looks for every now and then he would say to me, "Wish I had been born rich instead of so darn good-looking!" He was a good worker and was paid about \$27.50 per month for the summer, plus the usual board, room and washing. These vacation times were great fun for me, for Ralph, unlike Alfred, was ready as soon as the chores were done for a game of catch or a session of playing tag, with me chasing him around the yard and over the fences until we both dropped to the ground exhausted.

One thing that added greatly to Ralph's glamour, in my opinion at least, was the fact that during the school year he went away to *college*. This seemed to make him thoroughly a man of the world, and I lived in hope that someday I, too, might travel afar like Ralph and have thrilling experiences to tell my younger friends. Actually the college that Ralph went to was little Cornell College at Mount Vernon, Iowa, a most excellent school, but not the huge institution that I pictured from Ralph's description of it. I often drove through that town many years later and had always to smile to myself at the recollection of what I thought the place must be like, back in 1903.

Ralph was a member of the class of '06. Often while

he and I were out in the fields on our farm he would cut loose with the booming college yell, "Rah! Rah! Rix!, Rah! Rah! Rix!, We're the Class of Naught-ee Six!" I was greatly impressed by this, and learned as he did, to despise the class ahead of his, which, he told me, had the unpardonable nerve to go about the campus shouting, "Eat 'em alivel, Eat 'em alivel, Cornell! Cornell! Nineteen-five!" I was sure that the '05's must be a bunch of bums.

Ralph let me in on a little secret about his college course. It seems he was enrolled as a divinity student, mainly because such potential preachers were not charged tuition. He confided in me that he had no intention of becoming a minister, though he delighted in sending me into hysterics with mock sermons, delivered with immense gravity as we rode to and from the fields on a rack of hay or a load of manure.

It was about 1909 when "Mister" Strickson came to work for us. Ordinarily we did not use such formality in speaking to or about our hired men. But this man's personality seemed to warrant it. He showed up at the farm one day when we badly needed help, and my father hired him for, I believe, \$1.50 a day, plus the usual extras. He was probably about 40 years old, though he seemed much older to me then. A smallish man, very neat in appearance, and quite intelligent, he even had with him a book of Herbert Spencer's to read, and did the unheard-of thing of carrying a kerosene lamp to his room to read by before he went to sleep.

Now and then he gave us a glimpse or two into his

past. He had been a potato grower in Colorado, a "super" or bit player and a scenery shifter in the theatre, and a restaurant operator. He told us that the only money he ever made in the restaurant business was when he ran an establishment called for some reason that he overlooked explaining to us, "The Second-Class." Those jobs sounded more interesting to me than the drudgery of hoeing corn or pitching hay, and I asked him one day if he didn't get tired of such work. He thought a bit and then said, "No, one job's just the same as another to me. I figure it's all work and somebody's got to do it." A queer fellow, indeed, I thought, for while I liked some jobs around the farm I thoroughly despised others. From remarks this unusual man dropped occasionally we felt that he must have had some unlucky breaks in life or had a weakness of judgment somewhere that found him working by the day for common wages. Or could he have been a writer or a research professor studying how we farmers of 1909 lived? We never knew, and when the harvest season was over and we no longer needed him we were genuinely sorry to have Mister Strickson leave.

## QUITTING TIME

*The last round turned—the sweating team slows down,  
And from his seat a weary driver climbs;  
Long shadows point the way to coming night,  
And down the lane a distant cow bell chimes.*

*The neckyoke dropped — the clanking tugs unhooked—  
The leaders swing off toward the barnyard gate;  
They know that oats and hay and welcome rest  
Are things that horses can anticipate.*

*A crimson sky—a gentle southwest breeze—  
Tomorrow night this field will all be done.  
A pale new moon sends word of pleasant days;  
And up the lane the cows come, one by one.*

*The team unharnessed, milking done and then  
What magic in that welcome supper call!  
A pipe, a paper, childrens' laughter—yes,  
This world is pretty decent after all.*

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