

*these*  
*were*  
*our*  
*neighbors*

A neighborhood courtesy that I am afraid is too often neglected today is that of calling on newcomers who arrive to live on nearby farms. It may have been neglected 50 years ago too. I am not sure. But I do know that my father and mother, my mother especially, were particular about this little act of welcome and friendship. Mother always said it was only the courteous thing

to do, and of course it was. Many times, on a Sunday afternoon, perhaps when I had been able to persuade my father to engage in a game of catch with me, Mother would appear at the door and say, "Wendell, we should go and call on those folks who just moved in up the road a piece." Father immediately agreed and went to harness a horse and hitch it to the single buggy. I used to wonder if sometimes he would not have rather kept on playing ball. But he and mother drove away for an hour or two, returning in time to do the Sunday evening chores. Some of the new neighbors returned these calls, some did not. But certainly my folks did their part.

One lady who did return calls was Anna Moule, who lived with her folks a quarter of a mile east of us, the same folks from whom Dad borrowed the seeder every spring. She was a school teacher, tall, spare, not handsome, but friendly, smiling often and displaying then an extraordinary mouthful of very white teeth. She visited by the hour with my mother, and while of course they talked of many things as I played about near them it always seemed to me that their conversation revolved principally around "bulbs" and when to set them out and when to take them in from the garden. They were forever exchanging "slips" and comparing notes on how this or that plant had turned out. Both of them seemed to have what we now call "green thumbs." Mother's windows were always packed full of plants of many varieties, none of which I ever could learn to identify with certainty, except geraniums. Anna knew them all though, and while I doubt whether either she or my

mother ever went in for calling them by their scientific names they loved the plants almost like children and they certainly knew how to make them grow. Anna taught in several of our nearby district schools for many years, returning every summer to the little farm near ours. I think she must have been a most welcome visitor in our home those long, quiet, rather lonely afternoons when she arrived, walking unhurriedly along the dusty road with a packet of "slips" or a new "bulb" or two.

Anna's father and mother were John Moule, an elderly Englishman, and his Swedish wife. Occasionally they came to call on us, always on foot, with John walking about 20 feet ahead of his wife. We all thought this funny, and rather rude. As a matter of fact it wasn't rudeness at all. Many years later I learned they were simply following an old custom that had developed when there were only footpaths wide enough for one person. Further, in the days when danger from Indians or wild animals lay along these paths, the man always went ahead, his musket loaded, ready for trouble.

Whenever we saw the Moules coming my mother began to worry about being able to understand Mrs. Moule who spoke very broken English. This fact did not dismay the little Swedish lady at all for she chattered continuously and animatedly, with Mother rather anxiously nodding her head and saying "Yes, yes" and "Well, well" in an effort to be polite. Incidentally, one afternoon when ripe water melons were in season and I had developed an almost overpowering hankering for one, Mrs. Moule had no difficulty in making me under-

stand that she most emphatically desired me to get the hell out of their patch. Fortunately the melons were quite a distance out in one of their fields, and I don't think she knew for sure who I was. No doubt she had her suspicions.

On the farm north of the Moules lived the K. K. Prescotts. The "K.K." stood for "Kimball Kemble" and I thought this remarkable, though it was no more so than my father's first and middle names, "Wendell Waldo." We always called Mr. Prescott "K.K." What I remember most about him is that he was an enthusiastic and expert checker player, and, I believe, usually able to beat my father, himself no slouch at the game. Many times I watched them play, silently intent on their game, moving deliberately, then suddenly bursting out in loud laughter as one or the other of them cornered his opponent.

Mrs. Prescott was quite a stylish person, with a decided eastern accent. She persisted in calling me "Herbie," pronouncing it "Huhbie." I didn't like this and once told her, to my mother's intense embarrassment, "My name isn't Herbie, it's Herbert." Instead of offending it seemed to tickle her for she grabbed me and laughingly gave me a big hug and kiss. This procedure left me on rather uncertain ground, and I had no more to say.

Sometimes we were invited to the Prescotts' for supper. We always had wonderful food there, and Mrs. Prescott brought out her best glassware and china. There were enormous layer cakes served on one of those

glass cake dishes — the kind that stands up on a glass leg about ten inches tall, so that it made a mouth-watering centerpiece for the table. There was also a beautiful glass caster for holding the salt and pepper shakers and the vinegar cruet. Perhaps it held other condiments too. No doubt the meat and the potatoes that Mrs. Prescott served us were just as good as the cake — but cake is what a youngster remembers. It never took long after supper for the checker board to appear.

One thing that the Prescotts had hanging on the wall of their dining room made a great impression on me. It was a picture of a ship under full sail. No matter where you stood in the room the ship appeared to be coming right at you. One evening K.K.'s son, Norman, took a kerosene lamp in his hand and had us follow him from one end of the room to the other, keeping our eyes on the ship. I thought the thing must be loose in the frame the way it apparently kept turning toward us, but, of course, it was only an unusual optical illusion.

I got pretty well acquainted one winter with Henry Siewertsen (pronounced Seeversen) who lived about three miles east of us. One day Henry was driving to town with a team hitched to a lumber wagon. The roads were muddy and the going slow and heavy. Just as he got to our place one of his mares became sick and could go no further. Hurriedly the team was unhitched and put in our barn where the sick animal was given the double stall in the southeast corner. The veterinarian was called and pronounced the trouble azoturia. Most

farmers call it "Azztereeyah." It's a paralysis of the kidneys brought on by too much exertion or too fast driving after the animal has been standing idle in the barn for a few days on full feed, and is sometimes referred to as "Monday morning sickness." The paralysis usually affects the whole body of the animal in a short time if treatment is not prompt.

The poor mare soon went down and never got up again, though she lived in agony for several days. I remember the veterinarian telling Henry emphatically, "Now, you've got to take her water from her, her kidneys are paralyzed." Henry, being a mild and easy-going sort of person, didn't think he could. Doc told him he had to or he pretty soon wouldn't have any horse, and maybe he wouldn't anyway. The veterinarian had to get to other calls of course, and couldn't stay at our place all the time. I think Henry did try, rather timidly, to help the poor mare's kidneys, but without much success. I was goggle-eyed at the procedure, and decided, for a few days at least, that I must learn to be a veterinarian.

I was going to High School at the time and studying German. Henry, who spoke German fluently, was the son of Paul Siewertsen, a well-known farmer who grew up in Germany. Evenings Henry and I would sit in the stall beside the suffering mare, wondering whether she was going to pull through or not. It gave me a good chance to practice my German. I would say, indicating the mare, "Das ist ein Pferd." (That is a horse.) Henry would reply, "Ja, das ist ein krankes Pferd." (Yes, that

is a sick horse.) And so on. My evenings were most interesting as long as that poor animal lived. After that experience I could always remember to cut down the feed of idle horses or else turn them out to pasture so they would be sure to take exercise.

On their father's farm a quarter of a mile west of ours lived the Hanson boys, Louie, John and Hans, big rugged fellows, whose folks had come from Sweden. All three of them were several years older than I. There was a fairly deep swimming hole under the old wooden bridge across the creek that ran through our farm and the Hansons'. Hans was locally famous for being the only young fellow in the neighborhood with nerve enough to dive head first off the top rail of the bridge. None of us had ever heard of a swimming suit. If a horse and buggy came along during a swimming session we simply ducked under the bridge out of sight.

John Hanson's great accomplishment was in being able to imitate perfectly the cooing of pigeons as you might hear them fluttering and fussing on the ridgepole of the barn during the mating season. We all thought this was very remarkable, and we got him to do it for us as often as he would.

Louie loved to hunt, and one day, as he walked into our yard with his rifle under his arm, he suggested I go with him. He said there were a lot of gophers down in the pasture that should be killed. All I would have to do, he told me, would be to bring a pail and carry water from the creek to pour into the gopher holes until the disagreeable little creatures struggled up for air,

soaked and gasping. Meanwhile he would sit with the rifle trained on the hole, ready to pick a gopher off as soon as one appeared. This somewhat one-sided division of labor seemed eminently fair to me however, and I enthusiastically proposed to my father and mother that I set out with Louie at once. You can imagine the answer I got — an emphatic “No!” They wanted the gophers killed all right, but they did not warm to the idea of me standing over the gopher hole, bucket in hand, in line with Louie’s rifle. I was disgusted over having to stay home. Louie went on and presently I heard the crack of his rifle down among the hills in the pasture.

When the Hanson boys got older, Hans and Louie moved away, while John took over the running of the home place. One year he hired a man whom most everyone spoke of as being a little “off,” though he was a good enough worker around the farm. This fellow’s folks were old friends of ours and had lived not far from the old Pickford farm where I was born. One day this character appeared at our place looking pretty scared and with one of his hands wrapped up in a handkerchief. It seems he and John had gotten into a rather heated argument over wages or hours or something, and in the scuffle which followed the hired man got one of his fingers in his employer’s mouth, figuring, no doubt, to do considerable damage in that locality. John immediately countered by clamping down hard with his strong Swedish teeth, and the finger was decidedly the worse for wear.

My folks were not at all keen about mixing in the affair in any way, but the man, as I have said, was from a family which had been old friends of my mother's, so there wasn't much to do but bandage up the damaged finger — I saw the teeth marks on it — and then my Dad took the fellow to town.

This irritated John considerably, and for a year or two he would not speak to any of us. This was an awkward situation, with our farms only a quarter of a mile apart and with the men thrown together at threshing time and at other neighborhood gatherings. Once as my father and I were driving to town we met John on the road. Dad said, "I'm going to speak to him anyway," and called out "Hello, John." John merely looked the other way and drove on. Some months later, however, to our pleasure and surprise, John came to our house one evening — we were having a neighborhood party — and said that he couldn't see much sense in such close neighbors being on the outs. My father agreed with him at once, and they sat on the kitchen table and talked things over and were always good friends after that.

There were many other neighbors, some of whom spent their entire lives in Lime Creek Township, while others came and stayed a year or two or three and moved on, as renters always have. There was Simon Pearce, his wife and his family of four daughters, Gladys, Ina, Lulu and Etta. Simon was a carefree farmer. If his calves broke out on the road or into the cornfield, he sold the calves rather than fix the fence. Once I went on

horseback to help him drive some of those calves to the stockyards at Rock Falls. It took us over half a day, and when we got back he handed me thirty-five cents. I was perfectly satisfied with this and thought I had been well paid.

But nobody ever got on the job earlier than Simon did at threshing time. He was up before dawn, getting the milking done, harnessing his team, rushing through his breakfast, and as a friend of mine once expressed it, "Running around like the head of a chicken cut off!" He'd go by our place with his team and rack while we were still at the breakfast table. Finally he and his family moved to town where he hauled sand and gravel for many years.

There was Peter Jensen, one of the best farmers around, who had us all worried for weeks while he lay in bed with a terrible case of blood poisoning in his arm. The first topic of conversation among the neighbors was whether Pete was going to lose that arm. Everyone had a horror of amputations. It seemed almost as bad as dying. But Pete was lucky, for Nature and a skillful doctor finally won. Pete was positively the best grain stacker in the neighborhood. I have told how the stack had to be drawn in gradually above the "bulge." Pete's stacks looked as if they might have been carved out of the golden bundles of grain, as they stood in stately "settings" of perhaps a dozen stacks all told, for he always raised a lot of oats and other small grain. When threshing time came and the pitchers clambered to the peak of each stack ready to toss the bundles down

to the self-feeder of the separator, it seemed almost shameful to disturb those well sculptured works of a good farmer who must indeed have had a bit of the artist in him.

There was Boy Hansen, who had no other interesting characteristic about him, for me at least, except that unusual first name.

In the fall along came Ernest Stebens, who in addition to running his good-sized farm, had time to look after a big orchard, and when apple-picking time arrived we looked for him and his single buggy on which he loaded several baskets of the Wealthies, the Whitney Crabs, the Patten's Greenings and the Hass apples that his trees seemed to bear nearly every year in abundance. He peddled these out on the way to town, and if he had any left by the time he reached Mason City, I suppose the grocers there traded him flour and sugar for them. As I recall it, the Hass apples were only fair in quality; the Greenings were all right for cooking, but if you wanted a tasty morsel for eating, a Wealthy or a Whitney were hard to beat. Like some of the old makes of machinery, these varieties of apples have had to give way to newer, better ones, and are now almost forgotten.

Two miles north of us lived the Prescotts, Lou and his wife, Cora, and their handsome daughters, Fern and Gertrude, who were among my best friends at the country school. You would not have called their farm a good one in those days for the buildings were old, unpainted, and not in very good repair, and the land

dipped here and there in gentle swales where the wild grass grew tall and rank. But it was an enchanting place to visit on a summer Sunday afternoon or a moonlit evening, for the rambling ancient barns and sheds were perfect for an exciting game of hide and seek. The girls were lively, and important indeed was the fact that they nearly always had two or three Shetland ponies around. Lou had taught his daughters to ride like cow-girls, which they did with verve and abandon, to the dismay of us boys who often fell ungracefully from the ponies' backs. A boy at the age of ten or twelve is not always sure which is the greater attraction, a girl or a pony, but in this case I am quite positive the girls had the edge.

Lou himself did not care too much for farming, but he loved horses. We liked to stand at a respectful distance and watch him hitch his spanking team of sorrel driving horses, perfectly matched and with silver manes and tails, to a canopy-top surrey. With their heads check-reined high they made a sparkling turnout. Sometimes he drove his girls to school with this team, and if I happened to be footing it along the road in the same direction, he never failed to pick me up, slowing down with a flourish while I climbed in the surrey, then shaking the sorrels into a smooth fast trot with a flick of the lines. A ride like that on a dewy spring morning was pleasant indeed.

We used to sort of turn up our noses when we passed a certain farm that lay between our own and Mason City. A lot of it was swamp land, some of it was thickly covered with timber, and much of the rest consisted

of gravelly knolls that refused to produce satisfactory crops. It was owned by as pleasant and amiable a young farmer as you would want to meet. I thought he was also one of the handsomest, and he had a name that was glamour itself, Ulysses Grant McGowan. You just couldn't ignore a man like that. Everybody liked him, but, well, why didn't he get rid of that farm and acquire one that would raise 80 bushels of corn to the acre and tons of lush hay? It was too bad, we thought, for one with his life ahead of him to waste his time on such an unpromising piece of land. Everybody said his place might have suited the Indians fine, and the story went that in centuries long gone the Lime Creek River — now the Winnebago — had its main channel through the farm but had changed its mind and course and left a great swamp that resisted all efforts to drain it.

But we had to eat our words. Under those gravelly knolls there turned out to be a treasure of sand and gravel, a discovery that was perfectly timed, as it happened, to coincide with the vast production of Portland cement in Mason City as well as elsewhere. Before many years towering structures appeared on this farm to handle the screening of gravel. The railroad that bisected the land — another disadvantage, we had thought — installed extra trackage to accomodate the gondola cars that were shunted alongside the screening plant. Huge trucks came and went all day long over a road that led to the plant past the edge of one of the smaller fields on the farm. Grant, as everyone called him then and as they still do, did not have to bother

much with farming. Gravel was big business, and we who had once been critical of the acres that lay near the swamp and the densely growing timber had to admit they were rich indeed.

What is true of nearly every farm neighborhood was true of ours, in that the most fascinating stories and incidents had best not be told, at least not until another generation has come and gone. The frantic midnight search of a distraught father and mother for an eloping couple; the sudden rush of hoofbeats mingled with loud, angry shouts along our quiet country road in the small hours before dawn; what happened when young couples strolled slowly home after a late country dance; a sensational murder case; the mysterious shot that seemed to come from nowhere — and fortunately missed its mark — all these and more had better be left to lie quietly until the leaves of memory have covered them gently and time has pressed busily on its way.