

*uncle*

*thee*

Our family was in a state of pleasant and subdued excitement one quiet August evening in 1900. The Wilkinsons were throwing a party — only we didn't call it "throwing" then — our first since we had arrived at the new farm in Lime Creek Township. There had been a rush of preparation all day, getting sandwiches ready, icing fancy little cakes and making ice

cream. Making ice cream was quite a trick in itself, for the ice had to be brought out from Mason City carefully wrapped in gunnysacks lest it melt down before we got it home.

Naturally we hoped to make a good impression on the neighbors, most of whom we knew pretty well by this time, but whom we had never entertained before. We hoped, too, that they would all come. Invitations had gone out several days previously, delivered in person by my father and mother, for there were yet no telephones nor rural mail routes. We knew one thing—there would be no parking problem. Most of the guests would arrive on foot. None of them had to come over a mile or so, and who wanted to bother with hitching up a smelly, sweaty horse when you could just as well walk it in ten or fifteen minutes. One's shoes might get a bit dusty, but it was easy to polish them up with a flick of a handkerchief before turning in at the host's front gate.

We waited for our guests in the gentle flutter of anticipation you always have when looking forward to a long-planned evening you hope will go well. While we watched, the long shadows of the sun crept eastward as, "Now deep in ocean sank the lamp of light, and drew behind the cloudy veil of night." Only there wasn't any ocean for the sun to sink into—just the willow grove on the Carmany farm west of us. Then we saw the first of the guests approaching, some from the east and some from the west. No youngsters had been invited so my job was mainly keeping out from

underfoot. I did have a vantage point back of the kitchen door where I could observe what went on without being seen.

It was a sedate affair, or at least it seemed so to an eight-year-old boy. What impressed me most was the splendor of attire of two of the male guests, Mr. Wheaton, who lived a mile east of us, and elderly Mr. Hanson, our nearest neighbor to the west. Both displayed enormous white shirt fronts, very stiffly starched, as large indeed, as were ever worn with white tie and tails, only each man wore an ordinary suit. With Mr. Wheaton's expanse of shirt front went a stiff white stand-up collar and a black bow tie. I thought he was just about the best dressed man I had ever seen. Mr. Hanson's shirt bosom was just as glistening, and his collar just as spotless, but he had a distinct advantage over Mr. Wheaton because of wearing a full beard. Carefully combed and brushed, it fell neatly down over the spot where a bow tie would ordinarily be found, and it was well on into the evening before any of us noticed that Mr. Hanson had, indeed, come without any tie at all. Always after that we referred to this party as the party of the shirt fronts, with considerable merriment concerning the gentleman who figured he needed no tie.

It was likely during the following holiday season that my father, mother and I went to a Christmas party at Mr. Wheaton's home. A program had been arranged by someone, and while I am not sure, I still have a sneaking suspicion that I was supposed to re-

cite that famous poem by Eugene Field, "Jes 'Fore Christmas." You remember, of course, the familiar lines of this well known story in rhyme, "Father calls me William, Sister calls me Will, Mother calls me Willie — but the fellers call me Bill." And every stanza ending with, "But jes 'fore Christmas I'm as good as I can be." Anyway my Dad stood up before the assembled guests and read the piece while I cowered beside my mother with a bad case of stage fright.

Ordinarily everyone was extremely well behaved at these country parties. There was one exception, however. When I was around fifteen years old we invited the neighborhood kids to our place one evening for the usual round of games and refreshments. For some reason or other there was bad feeling between two of the boys who came. Probably some girl's affection was involved. One of these boys was Walter Page, who later married Ina Pearce and in a few years met a tragic end when he was crushed to death by a steam shovel at a gravel pit. The name of the other boy has gotten away from me, but he was a newcomer in the neighborhood.

As the evening's fun went on these two kids got to calling one another unpleasant names. Finally one of them invited the other out into the road to "settle things." Here is where the rest of us should have stepped in and stopped the trouble, but, little animals that we were, we tingled with excitement over the prospect of seeing a real fight. We gathered in a tight circle in the dusty moonlit roadway while the two



boys went after each other. The Page boy was definitely fighting out of his class and was soon getting his head rubbed into the dirt. Some of the girls who had been fearfully watching the battle ran to tell my mother what was happening. She went into action fast. Ordinarily the mildest kind of a person, she was quickly in complete command of the situation. She ordered the combatants to her presence immediately, and in superb and artistic language gave them one of the most thorough tongue-lashings I have ever heard. In no uncertain terms she gave them to understand that they could leave for their respective homes at once. They did so. The party didn't amount to much after that.

In the winter time there were dances at somebody's home about every Saturday night. The square dance and the waltz were extremely popular about 1905. Now, nearly 50 years later, the square dance is again giving entertainment to a lot of people. The girl who taught me to waltz was Anna Tietjen, a handsome, willowy blonde who lived on one of the best farms in the county, about two miles northwest of us. She was a superb dancer, but I was so clumsy and bashful I made hard work of the waltz for both of us. She was patient with me and so I learned, after a fashion at least, though it took the practice I got later at college to make waltzing a real pleasure.

Most of us preferred the square dance in those days. It took four couples to make a "set." Our footwork, unlike that of the waltz, could be pretty much free style,

just so we bobbed and shuffled in time to the music. And, by the way, the "music" was usually furnished by just one fiddle, and the same tune was played over and over all evening. Sometimes the fiddler had an accompanist on an organ, or very rarely, on a piano. For hardly anyone was well-to-do enough to own a piano then.

But the real star of the square dance was the caller, who stood usually in a doorway between the rooms where the dancing was going on, and called out the various movements that the square dancers were to perform. A good caller always received some pay, as did the fiddler, and if folks knew that a caller everyone liked was going to be at a dance, it meant a bigger, happier crowd. Invitations to a dance invariably told who was going to "call." One of the best in our neighborhood was old Bill Lloyd, who "worked around" for different farmers. He was always good, but when slightly drunk, he was very, very good at calling.

Depending on the size of the house where the dance was being held, the number of square dance couples on the floor at one time would be either four, eight, or twelve. Each four couples would form a square at the start of a set, with each lady at the right of her gentleman partner. Then as the music began, the caller might start out in a sing-song rhythm something like this: "Salute your pardners, right 'n left, all join hands and circle to the left; alleyman left; grand right 'n left; back to yer pardners 'n do-se-do; first couple out to the right 'n four hands round; ladies do-se-do and the

gents you know; chase the rabbit 'n chase the squirrel, chase the pretty girl roun' the world." This went on until each of the four couples had gone "out to the right." There were endless variations of these calls, with many added to suit the individual whims of the caller, all performed with a continual stamping and shuffling of the dancers' feet in time to the music, until the caller finally wore himself down and directed everyone to "promenade all to the hole in the wall," which meant that the set was over. The most graceful square dancer I ever saw was Dennis O'Donnell. His feet never missed a beat, and with his beaming red Irish face, his flowing white mustache and his courtly manner of bowing to his partners, he was a model of rhythm for the rest of us.

There were almost no automobiles in the country then so that everyone who went to a neighborhood party or dance either walked, rode horseback, or drove a horse and buggy in the summer time or a cutter or bobsled in winter. Most of the young fellows owned horses and buggies, much as the youngsters acquire some kind of a car now. Rubber-tired buggies were fairly common, though the tires were not pneumatic but simply rims of hard rubber instead of the usual steel. The more daring show-offs went in for shiny black or bright red buggies with spindle-back seats and no tops. The sensible boys stuck to the more conventional buggy which had a top that could be raised or lowered depending on the weather. There were side curtains to be attached if a heavy shower



came along. Always there had to be a fancy fringed lap-robe to keep the dust off one's sharply creased trousers and to keep the chill night air away from the girl friend's knees.

Many of the driving horses were fairly fast trotters or pacers, and more than one impromptu race took place on those dusty country lanes. I never acquired a horse and buggy of my own. Just improvident, I guess. But at an age when most young men had these things I went off to high school and then to college, so there never was quite enough cash to go around. I often stood and watched with envy while some of my friends flashed by with their fast-stepping horses, harness polished and sparkling in the sun, fancy fly-nets rippling in the wind — some of those deluxe fly-nets even had cute little pockets that fit over the ears of the horse, with flaunting tassels bobbing at the end of each one. Beside these aesthetic marvels the present day squirrel-tail flying from a radiator cap is a mediocre gesture indeed. Of course there was always one of Dad's horses for me to drive and a buggy of a sort. But I couldn't take much pride in them for they were strictly utilitarian, while I craved something a little more showy.

On one occasion, however, I did go to considerable effort to make the single buggy that we had look more presentable. The reason for this outburst of energy on my part was that Ringling Brothers circus was coming to town, and I had a date for it with one of the neighbor girls named Osa Whitney. The old buggy



was pretty shabby, and I was ashamed of it but saw no way to get anything better. So I got some red paint for the wheels, black paint for the body and a can of black top-dressing for the top. I wonder how many hours I spent on that vehicle when I should have been doing more useful work around the farm. But it did look pretty well when I got through with it. I was given permission to drive Romeo, one of my father's black horses, on circus day, and with the old single harness shined up with oil and our fanciest lap-robe tucked about my knees I thought I looked fairly snappy as I drove into Osa's yard about twelve-thirty in the afternoon. She came out dressed in a fluffy white gown, a big picture hat, and long white gloves that came to her elbows. I have no recollection of what I was wearing but very likely my suit was a medium-priced model from "Patton Brothers—The Bell Clothiers—A Child Buys As Cheaply From Us As A Man."

We got to town without a runaway or an upset. I didn't know much about where the circus lot was located, but I did know I had to find a place to tie my horse while we saw the show. The only place I knew of was the long chain hitch rack around the Central school grounds downtown. Finally we found a spot where Romeo could be safely tied. Then we started out to look for the circus. It turned out to be in the north end of town, in what was then called the Brice and Ong addition. I'll bet I walked poor Osa 3 or 4 miles going to and coming from that circus. The chances are that the fluffy gown didn't look so good by late afternoon.

As I recall it she was rather quiet on the way home. She was probably good and mad. I was always so petrified in the presence of a girl that I was uneasy most of the time trying to think of something to say to her. But I guess the circus was as good as it always is, and in the excitement of watching the "Slide For Life," "The Aerial Marconios," the elephants and the clowns I probably forgot my self-consciousness and enjoyed the day anyway.

I think my folks had a pretty good idea that I was taking Osa that day though I had told them nothing about it, for when I got home they kept slyly asking me whether anyone went with me, whether I sat alone and so on. For the life of me I can't understand now why I didn't tell them all about my date. My own children never showed any hesitancy in discussing their dates with their mother and me.

The best pal I ever had when it came to going to the circus was my Uncle Theodore Wilkinson, whom we called Uncle Thee. He was a bachelor until middle age, and often worked at our place during the summer doing carpenter work and repairing of various kinds. Nobody was ever more ready than he to knock off work and go to town on circus day, and invariably he took me along, to my great delight. We went for the whole day, too. First, the parade in the forenoon, which gave us a peek at the stupendous wonders awaiting us in the afternoon and night shows, split our ears with blasts from the steam calliope and warned us to "hold your horses, the elephants are coming!" Then

dinner at Vermilya's Cafe costing as much as 25 or 30 cents for all I could eat, before the long walk to the circus lot in "The Addition," with me fairly tingling with excitement and anticipation every step of the way. Finally we'd get to the Big Top itself after the tour of the animal tent. I always wished I could go right back for the evening performance, but of course, I never could. For hours after I got home I could hear that circus music in my ears, and there was the almost overpowering desire to run away and become a bare-back rider or a clown. But does anyone ever go to the circus without feeling that way? For days afterward I would be trying to balance pitchforks on my chin or to walk the top of a tight-board fence. Probably Uncle Thee never knew what a stimulant these events were to the lively imagination of his small nephew.

My uncle also took me to the first stage show I ever saw. It was "Tillie Olson" at the old Wilson Theatre. We drove to town one summer evening, put our horse and buggy in the livery barn—the warning sign of which read "Not Responsible For Whips And Robes"—and got some good seats for the show. Probably it was poor comedy, but I thought it wonderful. I remember two gags from it. In one scene, Tillie Olson, who was supposed to be a slow-witted Swedish hired girl, was told to go and fetch a box of good matches. Soon she was back, lighting each match or trying to as she came down stage, and saying "Dot bane a good one," or "Dot bane a bum one," depending on whether they lit or not. She explained that was the only



way she could tell whether it was a box of "good matches." Pretty awful. The other gag showed a scene in a hotel lobby. People in the cast were sitting around visiting idly. Every minute or so a man rushed in with a drinking glass in his hand, filled it at a water cooler and rushed out again. This happened three or four times to build up the gag. Finally it occurred to someone to ask him what he was up to. He explained loudly and indignantly, "There's a fire up in my room!" I used this alleged joke nearly 40 years afterward in a home town minstrel show, and it still got a laugh.

Nearly every summer there was some building or remodeling to do on our farm, and I looked forward eagerly to Uncle Thee's coming to help, for he livened things considerably for me. There would be a new hog house to build, the barn to shingle or paint, and it seemed to me that we were constantly fixing over our house. One year the big front porch was put on. Another time a second story was added over the kitchen, which meant the passing of the old flat tin roof thereon and the end of the terrifying racket every rainstorm made on that roof. If hail fell the noise was so deafening it drove us all to some other part of the house. It seemed the hailstones must surely batter their way through onto the kitchen floor. Another project was the building of a back porch, which contained, wonder of wonders, an inside toilet which connected in some mysterious manner with a septic tank out east of the house near the garden. At first we didn't exactly trust that toilet to work all the time, so we left the old

outdoor structure standing for a year or two out by the lilac bushes, just in case.

There was a water system to be put in another time, and later on a hot water heating plant. All of this meant feeding extra men, for workmen did not dash back to town for meals then as they do now, and my mother must have gotten pretty tired of it. I know now that my father wanted to get these things done so her work would be easier, for she had to work hard and her health was not the best, though we kids did not realize it at the time.

With Uncle Thee and other workmen around, my days on the farm were not so lonely and monotonous. If there was brick-laying or plastering to do George Duff of Rock Falls would come to take care of it. I loved the kidding that went on between him and my uncle. Duff was a big, dark-complexioned man with snapping black eyes and a fierce mustache. Now and then he cut loose with bursts of mock oratory, the only bit of which I can remember was when he told Uncle Thee with appropriate and dramatic gestures that unless my uncle sawed a certain board a certain way there would be "Wars and famines and pestilences!" He loved to catch my uncle making some mistake in carpentering and often boomed out, "By God, Thee, you've cut that damn board off twice and it's still too short!"