

*kill kare,
barney oldfield,
and the
diving girls*

One of the really great contributions to Cerro Gordo County culture and entertainment during the first decade of the twentieth century was the Y.M.C.A. lecture course sponsored by a group of Mason City folks. This was not all lectures by any means, but instead was a series of about half-a-dozen numbers which often included magicians, impersonators, quar-

tettes, orchestras, poets and writers of national reputation, as well as the serious talks by lecturers. We could buy season tickets every fall which admitted us to the events held about once a month through the winter. We always bought two tickets. My father and I would go to some of the entertainments, and my father and mother attended the rest. There was always a humorist or two included in the series, and these were the ones I tried to talk my folks into letting me attend.

At first the various numbers were held in either the Congregational or the Methodist churches. Later they were presented from the stage of the Wilson — now Cecil — Theatre. What a treat it was, after driving three or four miles to town on a frosty winter night and turning our horses over to a hostler at the livery stable, to walk the few blocks to the theatre and be at once transported into another world of bright lights, soft carpets, music, and gay, handsomely-dressed men and women. In the boxes near the stage sat the elite of Mason City. Probably they were the ones who had to make up the deficit if the season did not show a profit. Across the stage before us as we waited expectantly for the show to go on, hung the great curtain, conspicuously lettered "asbestos" and displaying the picture of a lone Indian riding his pony down a rocky trail and shading his eyes with one hand as he gazed out over a vast canyon. I wonder what the Indian was supposed to be looking for. Bad white men, probably. The word "asbestos" was to reassure everyone against

fire, for we were all a little uneasy in a theatre because of the horrible Iroquois Theatre tragedy in Chicago that had taken so many lives only a few years before.

Presently the curtain would rise slowly and majestically, and the evening's entertainment would begin. Once it was Strickland Gillilan, the poet and lecturer, who wrote "Off Ag'in, On Ag'in, Gone Ag'in, Finnegan." Of course, he recited it for us that night. I wish I could recall some of the others who appeared on that stage. It seemed to us who were so hungry for these things that the talent was the best in the world, though probably it was not. I was certain that I wanted to be a traveling Y.M.C.A. entertainer when I grew up. From where I sat that looked like a perfect career.

How I hated to have an evening at the theatre come to an end. The night would be frostier than ever when we came out, struggling into our winter caps and overcoats. Our horses at the livery stable would be led out for us from their stalls back along the dim alleyways of the big old frame barn. The thunderous "clop-clopping" of their hoofs on the wooden floors of the carriage-storage part of the stable was a sound I have never heard anywhere else except at the Chicago International, where the fancy gaited saddle and driving horses move out to the main arena over wood planking.

The horses would be chilly and anxious to get home. Our livery fee of perhaps thirty-five cents would be paid. We would pull our robes and blankets about us to keep out the biting air, and in our sled, cutter or

buggy, depending on the state of the roads — and they were usually in quite a state — we swung out of the stable doors into the quiet streets, across the deserted tracks of the old Iowa Central, down the lime kiln hill, across the clattering Lime Creek bridge, past Dr. Marston's bungalow snuggled back of its manicured shrubbery, and on to the country road leading home.

My head might still be buzzing with the lilting music of a stringed quartette doing "My Old Kentucky Home." Or nearly aching in an attempt to figure out how that magician had made those cards appear out of thin air. Or I might still be giggling over the jokes and antics of a black-faced impersonator. School, milking cows, hauling in corn fodder and turning the cream separator were all far, far away on such nights.

The summer-time cousin of the Y.M.C.A. lecture course was the Chautauqua. This usually came along in August and lasted for a week, with entertainment of some sort every afternoon and night. Here again we got both culture and fun furnished us. It was all the more interesting because a stage and plank seats were set up under a huge tent located sometimes in the school yard, sometimes in a vacant lot near the main part of town. The talent was much the same as that booked for the winter courses. Again, we always had tickets for my Dad and mother were great hands for anything of this sort. Those plank seats got extremely hard after a couple of hours of sitting, but we were immensely grateful to the Redpath-Vawter people who thought up the idea of the Chautauqua in the first

place, and sent their advance men around to the middle-western towns to get guarantees of enough money to make the series a sure bet for the promoters. Lots of people brought tents, groceries and cooking equipment and camped for the whole week near the show. They made it their summer vacation. I always wished we could do that, but of course, such frivolity was out of the question when we lived only a little more than three miles away. Can you imagine a modern family spending a vacation like that? I should say not. But it was great stuff then.

During that first decade of the twentieth century, when we were so eagerly attending the lectures, the concerts, and the humorous skits and sketches the Y.M.C.A. and the Chautauqua people brought us, something new was stirring in Cerro Gordo County. This seemed to occur almost simultaneously in several localities. Farm people, exposed at too long intervals to a bit of culture and entertainment, felt the urge to create something of their own. They wanted something more than just a party, a dance, an occasional "shivaree," or a box social. And so rural clubs began to appear, organized and run by the farmers themselves, their wives and their families. Most of them met about once a month, sometimes to attempt to settle, or at least to argue, affairs of local, national, or even international importance. Sometimes they gathered just to have fun, to blow off steam as it were, and it was often surprising indeed to see how hitherto unsuspected talent of one kind or another came to the surface at these neighborhood meetings.

If I speak mostly of one special club it is because I saw it at its birth, watched it grow, and sort of grew up with it. In any farm community the families who become best acquainted with one another are those who "change work" at threshing or silo-filling time. So it was perfectly natural that six of these families became the charter members of the club organized at a meeting in our home in December, 1910. Present were the Elmer Herseys, the Dennis O'Donnells, the Ed Fitzgeralds, the Simon Pearces, the Jim Devoy's, and, of course, our own family.

My mother was elected to be the first president, and Mrs. Hersey, who is now Mrs. Bernard Manley of Mason City, the first secretary, since they were the two who had perhaps been most active in promoting this new idea. It was decided then to hold meetings once a month, rotating these gatherings in order at the homes of the six members. Next we debated on what to call ourselves. There were many suggestions, but it fell to Alta Gallagher, then the teacher of the Falls Township school that I have mentioned before and who then boarded with the Herseys, to come up with the name that struck everyone as being just right and which has persisted to this day, the "Kill Kare Klub."

You might think from that name we were interested only in fun and frivolous goings-on at our meetings. We had plenty of that, of course, but there was nearly always a serious discussion of some sort, a paper that someone had put a lot of work into, or perhaps a debate. We didn't know much about parliamentary rules or procedure, but we went ahead anyway and if

somebody got "out of order" we didn't worry about it. Once there was a lively debate over which type of farming was better, livestock or grain farming. As it happened, Elmer Hersey was assigned to defend grain farming and argued spiritedly over what a thrill it was to sit on a grain binder at harvest time and watch the machine kick off the bundles while you thought, "There's fifty cents, fifty cents, fifty cents, every time a golden bundle comes out." We rather thought his heart wasn't in it, however, for he raised a lot of hogs himself each year. But he made the debate a lively one.

My sister, Florence Dean, recalls my mother particularly liked to drill the young girls, of whom there were several in the club, in rather intricate marching formations performed to music — the girls carried banners proclaiming "Kill Kare Klub."

Everyone in the club lived on a dirt road at that time. This meant watching out for a sudden shower, for if we had risked driving to the club meeting in an automobile, which was a new thing then, we were likely to be stranded away from home overnight, if not longer. One evening our family had arrived at the Chamberlains, later members of the club, in our rakish and shiny 1911 Abbott Detroit, when the Herses pulled in with their equally stunning new Colby. A dark cloud hung threateningly in the west as we left home, but we did want to drive that new car. In an hour or so the dull rumble of thunder and jagged flashes of lighting along the western horizon gave notice in no uncertain terms that a downpour was

imminent. My father and Elmer dashed for those new cars, cranked the engines hurriedly, and drove home, returning later, each with a sedate team and surrey which reassured us, as the rain finally came splashing down, that we would get safely home, "What matter how the night behaved."

I must tell you about the masquerade party we had one Halloween. This party was the idea of Mrs. Hersey, as gay and lively a woman as could be met in a long time, and it was held at her home. When all the guests had arrived, in self-designed costumes they hoped would conceal their identities for a short while at least, they found nearly all the furniture moved out of the house. Corn shocks had been moved in and golden pumpkins peeped out at us from dark and spooky corners. It seems to me there was a goblin or two floating about, and from the depths of a closet came the occasional rattle of something, which, we assured the squealing younger feminine guests, could be nothing but the bones of a long forgotten skeleton. That night we did, indeed, kill "Kare," and the cider flowed like — well, like cider. We all wore masks, of course, during the early part of the evening, but my father had come up with an idea which went still further as a disguise. Somewhere on our farm he had found a huge yellow pumpkin, from which he removed the bottom and the insides. Then he cut holes in its side as you would for a jack-o-lantern, and slipped the whole thing over his head. Nobody could guess who he was, but everyone had fun thumping the pump-

kin and making derisive remarks about how hollow-headed the thing was. Loretta O'Donnell, a vivacious little Irish girl about my age, declared he was Paul Fitzgerald, a youngster she was currently quite interested in, and proceeded to sit on his lap whenever the opportunity offered. This delighted my mother, brother, sister and me, who were in on the secret, for my father was ordinarily rather a dignified sort of person. We waited in great anticipation for the unmasking later in the evening, and when the pumpkin came off Dad's head Loretta gasped and fled blushing out of the room. It was late indeed, and the harvest moon hung high in the sky that night before we bobbed for the last apple, drank the rest of the cider, and drove down the quiet country roads toward home.

It was not many years before there were so many rural clubs in Cerro Gordo County it seemed a good idea to form a county-wide organization. This was finally done at a banquet sponsored by Charlie Barber, secretary of the North Iowa Fair. Every summer after that the clubs got together for a picnic, usually in East Park in Mason City, where each contributed a number to an afternoon program. At first there was no band shell, stage or even any seats for the audience, but we discovered a pretty good natural amphitheater at one spot in the park, and the various acts were presented there.

Our county agent at that time was Pat O'Donnell, a genial and capable Irishman. The Farm Bureau had been newly organized, a struggling infant that was

a far cry from the present smooth running and powerful organization. The Kill Kare outfit decided one summer to present a skit at the East Park affair which would be a sort of plug for Pat and the Farm Bureau. It was proposed to show a farm neighborhood that was not getting along too well — farmers scrapping among themselves, crops not doing well, and things generally going haywire. We had parked Charlie Kiser's car back of a screen at the rear of the stage, with Roy Kiser at the wheel. We proposed to have County Agent Pat "O'Flanagan" arrive with a flourish as the motor of the car roared to a halt, with Roy leaping out of the car and dashing onto the stage in impersonation of the real agent. Everything, after Pat's arrival, would, of course, be lovely for the hapless farmers.

The motor of the car was supposed to be idling as quietly as possible backstage while we built up the scene before the audience. But something went wrong. Roy may have forgotten to start the car, or maybe those of us on the stage didn't quarrel loudly enough for him to get his cue. And when the moment arrived for some actor to announce loudly and dramatically, "Pat O'Flanagan arrives in his car!" the motor wasn't even running. There was an awkward pause on-stage while Roy cranked frantically at the engine, which suddenly caught hold with a deafening roar, more like an airplane warming up than the smooth purr of a motor-car. When Roy finally bounded on stage, redfaced and breathless, the audience was delighted at our chagrin

and applauded more happily than they likely would have, had everything gone according to plan.

The story of the Kill Kare Klub could be duplicated by many of the other rural groups that were started at about the same time. Several of them still meet regularly, as they have been doing for going on half a century. But there are a lot of other things to do now. Roads are better, cars are faster and far more comfortable, and there's more money to spend for outside entertainment. The rural club was a training ground, a minor league, so to speak, for many who went on to become prominent and even famous, not only in agriculture but in other fields. Those friendly neighborhood gatherings were, and, to a certain extent, still are an important part of country life as we have known it during the first 50 years of the twentieth century.

Hardly anyone who lived in Cerro Gordo County and went to the North Iowa Fair during its early struggling years could have missed knowing or at least hearing of Charlie Barber, the immensely popular, extremely capable secretary of the Fair for many years. A slender, slightly-stooped little man, with a high, penetrating voice, snapping brown eyes, and a sort of perpetually-harassed look, he seemed always to be going some place in a hurry. As Fair time drew near he began to appear still more harassed, and hurry just a little bit faster. For several years my father was superintendent of the building we called Floral Hall, where there were exhibits of corn, grain and vegetables, and some-

times quite elaborate displays created by the rural clubs from products their members had produced. This meant many conferences with Charlie about location of the exhibits and decorating the building. I liked to watch Charlie getting his way — which he usually did — without offending anyone.

The stuff in Floral Hall was all right of course, but at the age of 15, I was much more interested in the entertainment features the amiable secretary of the Fair lined up for us each year. It was the era of auto polo, that slashing, crashing game played every afternoon and evening on the race track in front of the grandstand by several rugged young men with reckless disregard for the antiquated carcasses of the stripped-down Ford cars they drove. The cars often pitched and rolled wildly under the impact of the game, but the young men, certainly a hardy breed, rarely got hurt.

It was the era, too, of Ethel Dare and the Great Locklear, who appeared suddenly in the skies before us on the days called for by their contracts, and looped, wing-walked and changed planes in mid-air in rickety crates no self-respecting pilot would set foot in today. Those shaky old biplanes are museum pieces now. That is, the few which survived the early days of barnstorming are now resting in museums. These great and courageous pioneers of aviation did their stuff for us, then swooped low in front of the grandstand, waved a friendly hand at us from the maze of struts, bamboo and piano wire in which they sat, and were off to their next job miles away. For all we knew they might have

come from another world, and we scarcely dared to believe that they were ordinary mortals like us.

One year the Fair advertised that the most breath-taking, heart-stopping stunt of all time would take place before our eyes. Two railroad locomotives were to meet head-on in a collision that might well blow the whole infield into the next county. People were warned to stay way, way back from the giants of the track which would rush madly at each other at a certain hour on a certain day. It was even intimated that perhaps the only really safe place to observe this world-shaking event would be from the roof of the old frame icehouse across the street from the Fairgrounds, where, with a borrowed spyglass at your eye, you might watch with little or no risk to health and happiness.

The appointed day came. Most of us decided we would risk sitting in the grandstand after all. We had to see this thing even if it meant losing an eye or a leg. The locomotives were in place, at opposite ends of the infield, where they steamed noisily and glared balefully at each other. Two brave men had been assigned to open the throttles and start these leviathans of the right-of-way down the track toward their crashing climax. The fateful hour arrived. Each locomotive whistle screeched defiance of the other. The great wheels started to revolve, and the lumbering giants picked up speed. The engineers leaped from their cabs and tore madly for protective ditches lest they be blown to kingdom come. Meantime, we gripped our seats, not daring to breathe. The onrushing engines, whistle

cords tied down, steam domes pouring forth venom, bore down on each other. Two seconds — one second — it was all over. We still lived and breathed, and the locomotives were still there. They had not blown into a billion pieces as we had hoped they would. In fact, after the first impact, they bounced back, then settled rather cozily together, steamed gently, and seemed to say, "Well folks, that's it." We waited around hopefully for a few minutes, thinking that at least one of them might blow up. Nothing happened. I was disgusted and told the fellow sitting next to me that I guessed I'd go back over to Floral Hall.

A great, almost legendary figure of the dirt race tracks of his day was Barney Oldfield, billed quite modestly in the advance advertising of the Fair as "Barney Oldfield and his Golden Submarine!" This nautical description meant simply that the racing car in which Barney would appear was ultra streamlined, covered with gilt paint, and could go round a half-mile track like the very dickens. Complications arose for some of us on the day this event was to be presented at the Fairgrounds. Our "ring" had not finished with the shock threshing, and it was unthinkable that the work should be stopped for Barney Oldfield or anybody else. I've forgotten which neighbor we were helping, but several of us, all about my age, drove in the yard with our teams and racks rather sulkily that morning, wondering why the job couldn't be called off for just a few hours.

Things turned out better for us than we expected.

About ten-thirty a few low scudding clouds dropped a gentle shower of rain on the field where we were working. The separator ground to a halt for the grain had to be dry to thresh well. Without waiting to see how long the rain was going to last, every one of us made for home, clattering along at a fast trot if our wagons happened to be empty, and one or two with their racks loaded with bundles simply unhitched hastily, jumped on the "off" horse or the "near" horse, whichever one rode the best, and cantered happily away. We were going to see Barney Oldfield, rain or shine, and the hell with the threshing.

By noon we were waiting at the grandstand, ready to buy our tickets. But the most delightful thing of all was the way the sun broke forth after the rain clouds had disappeared far off to the southeast. At one o'clock the track was almost dusty, and when at two p.m., the Golden Submarine rolled down the stretch before us, and Barney, cigar clamped tightly in a corner of his mouth, leaned out to wave to us, we marvelled at our good luck. We were entranced at the skill with which he skidded the Submarine smoothly around the turns. It was long afterward that I learned Barney claimed to have been the first to discover the simple trick of turning the front wheels of a racing car in the direction of the skid.

The next morning we all went back and finished up that threshing job. But I thought the neighbor concerned was just a bit cool toward us. Likely he wondered why we didn't show up the afternoon before

when the sun came out and dried the grain in no time. He didn't say so, but I've wondered if he didn't sneak in himself for a look at the Golden Submarine.

It occurred to me one season along toward Fair time that I might make myself a little spending money by getting some sort of job at the grounds. It didn't matter much what kind of a job, just so I could be around and perhaps bask a little in the glamour and excitement of the place. I spoke to Charlie Barber about it. He said, "Sure, come in on opening day, and we'll have something for you to do."

I found Charlie stretched full length on a hard wooden bench in his cluttered little office under the grandstand the day I reported for work. He explained that if he could just relax that way for a few minutes after his lunch, he could go on the rest of the day and the evening at full speed. I inquired what I was to do. "Go on over to the Midway and take tickets for the Diving Girls show," he told me. This was somewhat different from what I had had in mind, for I had sort of expected that I might be delegated as a kind of glorified assistant to Charlie, with authority, perhaps, to announce the next harness race, or to chauffeur a car labelled "Official," or at least to wear a big star and stand at the gate to the race track shaking my head sternly at the folks who wanted to cross over to the infield.

However, I proceeded meekly over to the carnival stand and presented myself to the man who appeared to be in charge of the Diving Girls. A typical "carny,"

he didn't even bother to ask me, "Are you with it?" He could see plainly enough that I wasn't, and after giving me a hard stare, he jerked his bullet-shaped, derby-hatted head in the direction of the doorway to the tent behind him and growled something out of the corner of his mouth that seemed to indicate that I was to get over there and go to work. The early-afternoon crowds were just beginning to surge curiously along the Midway, pausing to stare at the garish canvas fronts of the sideshows. Old Bullet-head, with a scowling glance in my direction to see that I was in the proper place to take tickets, was watching the crowd carefully, getting ready to start "spieling." In a minute or so he stepped back to the door of the tent and bawled "Bally," pronouncing it with the "a" as in the word "cat" and the accent on the first syllable.

Presently the "bally" appeared, consisting of a stoutish woman well past middle age, and a half dozen assorted girls, none of them very shapely. All of them were wearing rather dirty bathrobes which they proceeded to shed in what I presume they hoped was a tantalizing manner, to reveal bathing suits in not much better condition than were the bathrobes. As they lined up at the front of the platform before the tent they went into a somewhat listless dance, and broke into the chorus of a song which seemed to revolve mainly around something that happened "Down among'st the sugar, all round the sugar, down among'st the sugar cane." Bullet-head clanged loudly on a gong as the song ended and started rasping out his exhortation to

the crowd, which by then was quite sizable, to "step right up boys — see Cora Beckwith and the Diving Girls — and the Diving Girls — see them swim — see them splash — see them dive — the show starts in just a moment!"

It was then that I first saw the "shill" in operation. Two or three roustabouts who travelled with the carnival and whose main job was putting up the tents and then tearing them down at the end of Fair week would mingle with the crowd out in front of the platform. As the spieler reached what they considered the peak of his frenzied appeal the shills would worm through the crowd to get near the platform, reach in their pockets as if getting out their money, pretend to hand it to the ticket seller who was adept at appearing to sell them tickets, and then make me a party to the deception by pretending to hand me something they did not have at all. Strangely enough, this bit of crude crowd psychology often worked. The bally skipped back inside the door of the tent just as if the show was ready to begin.

It was Bullet-head's job to decide when there were enough persons inside the tent to start the show. If only a few suckers were caught the first time, he yelled "Bally!" again and the same procedure started all over. Sometimes it took three or four trips out front by Cora and the Girls before the spieler was satisfied. A sharp-eyed friend of mine, George Barrett, who was in several of my classes at school, saw how the shills operated and figured quite correctly that I wouldn't make a scene

and stop him at the tent door for the ticket which he didn't have. I was rather uneasy over this and the deception did not escape Bullet-head, who bawled at me to "Get them tickets!" Even Cora, who happened to be watching at the time, used some very unlady-like language addressed directly to me. I wonder how many of the Midway shows George got into that same way.

Before the week was over the job on the Diving Girls show got tiresome indeed. Even the spieler at a nearby show who begged and entreated the crowds to come inside his tent and see "Robertuh! Robertuh! She eats MUD! She eats MUD! You'll never believe it till you see it!" could get nothing more than a bored yawn out of me. But I amused myself during the long hours at the tent door when there was little to do by improvising spiels of my own, one of which went something like this, "Ladeez an' gennelmun, we have on the inside of this tent the most uproarious, notorious conglomeration of amalgamated wonders ever seen on this side of the Mississippi — they were found on the isle of 'Frisco, jumping from branch to branch, from tree to tree, from precipice to precipice, living upon mushrooms and shingle nails and defying all the efforts of man to capture them. Think of it, ladeez an' gennelmun, fifteen minutes of laughter, of entertainment, of education, all for ten cents, the tenth part of a dollah!" Long after the Fair was over and I was back on the farm, perhaps riding the sulky plow on the long rounds of a stubble field on a lazy autumn afternoon, I startled my sleepy horses and many a

quietly-nesting meadowlark with the raucous shouts of a carnival barker. And once, thirty years afterward, I actually used that spiel in a home-town vaudeville show. People asked me where I had learned it. I didn't tell them about the Diving Girls. During all the time I took tickets at that show I never got to see their act. I don't know to this day whether any of the Girls could actually swim.

TRAVELOGUE

*I sometimes think I would like to go
To Kalabahai or to Borneo,
Where the sun is warm and the breeze is mild,
And the people are almost completely wild.*

*I'd caper about in a seaweed skirt
With never a thought of an undershirt;
I'd sing "Hey, hey," and I'd sing "Ho, ho,"
For that, so that they tell me, in Borneo,
Is the way to do, for the people there
Are funny and woolly and long of hair.*

*I'd lie on the sand while the sun beat down
And all of my hide turned a beautiful brown,
And even the lifeguards who loll by the sea
Would lie awake nightly in envy of me,*

*On a diet of mostly bananas and pie
My tummy would thrive, in Kalabahai;
And I think in a week — or possibly two —
I'd want to go home — now wouldn't you?*

Courtesy the DE WITT OBSERVER