



four grandparents

One of the most interesting diversions, I think, is to speculate upon what sort of a person this or that ancestor may have been who appears in one's pedigree or family history. Most of the time it has to be pure speculation, for too often the only record there is tells only that so-and-so was born, lived here or there, and died at a ripe old age. That's too bad. It tells you practically

nothing. We are all pretty familiar, of course, with the good, the bad and the indifferent qualities of those who chance to be our close-up relatives, but what about all those folks farther back?

Now I knew my paternal grandfather, John Wilkinson, pretty well and I'll tell you more about him presently, but his grandfather, James Wilkinson, is not much more than a name on the record. The only things we know about him are that he lived in Shepley, which is in Yorkshire, England, and that he was a Quaker. Therefore, and here is that pure speculation, he must have been a mild, God-fearing, peace-loving citizen, a strict father and a good, though probably not exciting, husband. But was he? We just don't know. We don't know the name of his wife either, but the couple had ten children, Joseph, Mary, Jeremiah, John, James, William, Phoebe, Ann, Jane and Betty. That could have been a pretty lively family, but perhaps Papa James was not one to stand for any foolishness.

I am especially concerned with one of those ten children, Jeremiah, for he was my great-grandfather. Here again the record tells nothing except that he married Hannah Batty. She was a daughter of Elihu Batty. With a name like that, Elihu could have been a very distinguished personage indeed. But we can only guess. For some years I have corresponded with a second cousin, Clarence Wilkinson, of 1 Seabank Rd., Heswall, Cheshire, England, but he is unable to throw more light on Jeremiah, though he writes that he seems to recall that his own father had a brother whom

they called Jerry. Have you ever heard the story of the long-winded Evangelist who had been speaking for an hour and a half about the major Prophets and then announced that he was ready to talk about the minor Prophets? "Now," said he, "where shall we place Jeremiah?" A man in the back of the hall stood up and said, "He can have my place, I'm going home!"

On October 28, 1825, Jeremiah and Hannah Wilkinson became the parents of a son whom they named John. This was my grandfather. My younger son is named after him. The family still continued to live at Shepley, where there were woolen mills. Nearly everyone in the town worked at this trade, for which work was fairly steady but the pay small. Grandfather stood it there until he was 30 years old, but he was getting dissatisfied with the place. Now we come to a rumor that has persisted for nearly 100 years. Maybe it's true — maybe not. The story is that Grandfather went to the station to see a cousin, Jack Holden, off for America. Suddenly he decided that he had had enough of Shepley, so he boarded the train with Holden. They landed in the United States May 22, 1856. Just how passports, steamship fare and other such items were arranged for on the spur of the moment nobody seems to know, but the fact remains Grandfather got here and never went back.

He came first to Chicago where he worked for several years, went to night school and attended the Unitarian Church. He often said he could have become a millionaire had he just bought Chicago real estate

which was then very cheap. Later on he went to Exeter, Wisconsin, where on March 10, 1863, he married Jane Dezell, my grandmother. During the next five years the couple moved several times, meanwhile gradually acquiring a family. From 1868 to 1872 they lived in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where Grandfather became a boss weaver and made good wages for those days. For a long time I thought my father was born in Waukesha. However, his birthplace really was Monroe, Wisconsin, and the time was March 26, 1864. But I used to like to startle my friends in the country school by telling them my father was Wendell Waldo Wilkinson from Waukesha, Waukesha County, Wisconsin.

Stories of the golden opportunities to get rich quick on the marvelous, cheap land in Iowa kept drifting back to the Wilkinsons from their friends who had gone west, and they began to get dissatisfied with the humdrum life of the factories. About this time a certain Mr. Cordwell had 72 acres of land in Falls Township, Cerro Gordo County, he wanted to sell. He heard the Wilkinsons in Waukesha were getting land-hungry, so he made a trip back there to try to persuade them to buy his place. Grandfather, himself no farmer, told Grandmother to go out and have a look. Grandmother, a courageous woman if there ever was one, did so, taking two small children with her in order to keep busy. This was in the fall of 1871. She liked the farm. It had an old log house on it which was badly in need of repair. But there was plenty of woodland, *a clear running little creek so that water would*

always be handy, and a rock quarry from which the broad flat stones to rebuild the house's chimney and great open fireplace would come. Not much of a farm, we would say today, but in that day all the things for which she looked were needed. The next spring the farm was bought, and the family fixed the log house, bought a team of horses, two cows and some pigs and chickens. The woolen mill days were over for the Wilkinsons — they had begun to farm.

By the time I came along, a quarter of a century or so later, the original 72 acres had been added to considerably, a new frame house and barns and other out-buildings had gone up, and the exact location of the log house had almost been forgotten. I was sorry they hadn't kept the old log building for it sort of made the romance of the trek westward to Iowa complete. But when I pestered my grandfather to show me where the building had stood, even he was vague. "I think it was about here that we used to live," he would say, indicating a little knoll in one of the fields. "But I'm not sure. It was a long time ago."

From those placid Quaker ancestors Grandfather Wilkinson inherited a remarkable constitution, and while he was well past 70 when I first knew him — he lived to be 85 — he was an extremely active man, able always to get about nimbly, with good sight and hearing and blessed with marvelous digestion. When, just before the brief illness that turned out to be his last, he had gone with Grandmother to visit some relatives, and had returned home somewhat indisposed, he de-

clared he had only "eaten something." He loved to eat and, in fact, sometimes ate things Grandmother and his children told him he ought not to. Like most of the older men of his day he wore a full beard, which, like his abundant hair, was well grayed by the time I was old enough to be bounced on his knee. If, luckily, none of us who came along later shows any tendency to become bald, perhaps we have this rugged old gentleman to thank for it.

He was of medium height, slightly inclined to stockiness, though never fat. He spoke always with his inherited English accent, dropping the h's, so that I was 'Erbert to him. A pleasant custom indeed that he followed as long as he lived was that of slipping me a silver dollar every Christmas. This was always done on the sly. He would manage to get me away from the rest for a moment or two while he slid the dollar into my hand, with a wink and an "'ere, 'Erbert." That was all that was ever said, and of course, each time I pretended to be greatly surprised though I knew the dollar would always be forthcoming. When I thanked him for it he appeared slightly embarrassed and walked quickly away as if nothing had happened. You can readily see why he was immensely popular with his small grandson.

Grandfather was interested in politics and argued violently for what he believed in. He was strictly a Republican and had no use for any other party, and once, in an especially heated discussion, he is said to have shoved a political opponent bodily out of the hall

where a debate was going on. I'd like to have seen that. I'll bet there were dropped h's scattered all over the place. I never heard of him holding any political office though I recall that at least once he was delegate to the county convention in Mason City.

I do not think he took readily to farming, for his more active years had, of course, been spent in the woolen mills. For this reason, perhaps, he was somewhat inclined to resist change. He may have been a bit of a procrastinator on some things too, for I know Grandmother used to land on him now and then with a fairly sharp tongue. A trait that I noticed in him has evidently been inherited by subsequent generations. He would talk animatedly on some subject that interested him, then suddenly stop and sit for a long time without uttering a word. My own father did the same thing. I am inclined that way myself, and when sometimes I observe my sons following a similar pattern, I can only smile and think of those sudden silences which seemed to come on Grandfather as he sat rocking on the porch at the Falls Township farm. Like so many Englishmen, he was a good citizen, never wanting much for himself, law-abiding always, kind to his family, content to let others branch out and make money, and at his death, sincerely mourned by everyone who knew him.

I think if I had had a daughter I should have liked to call her Jane Woolsey Wilkinson. I have said that my grandmother's maiden name was Jane Dezell. Her grandmother was a gal named Jane Woolsey, and here is a story that has persisted to this day. Jane Woolsey was

an aristocrat, a descendant of Lord Woolsey. Her family were aristocrats. Maybe they were even snobs. Anyway Jane's life had been pretty well laid out for her by her papa and mamma, and she was supposed to marry only a boy from the "best circles." But Jane had ideas of her own, and she proceeded to fall in love with and marry a handsome young Irishman named John Magee. Her family is said to have promptly disinherited her, though no doubt they forgave her later, as such families usually do. In the natural course of events John and Jane had a daughter they named Mary. I have a lot of good friends of Irish descent, and I like to startle them occasionally by stating abruptly, "You may not believe this, but my great-grandmother's name was Mary Magee." They think I'm kidding, but it's the truth.

A sturdy little Irish boy named John Dezell grew up in the village of Armaugh in Ireland. He lived there until he was 14 years old. We can only guess as to whether he then knew a colleen called Mary Magee, who, with her folks, lived in the same town. It would be nice to say she was his childhood sweetheart and that he had told her he wouldn't look at the Canadian girls when he and his family sailed for the new world. And it would be nice to go on and say that while young John did look upon the Canadian girls and found some of them exceeding fair he could never forget the black curls and the laughing eyes of little Mary Magee. And that Mary herself, lonely in Armaugh, often walked on the bleak moor at evening time and found that her

heart was reaching far across the blue ocean to the west. A nice story, and of course it could have happened just that way, but nobody knows for sure. But we do know that John and Mary did find each other somehow in America, were married, and, in the course of time, a little girl was born to them. This child was Jane Dezell, who many years later became my grandmother.

For some years the Dezells continued to live in Canada. Then they heard that Wisconsin was practically the same as the promised land, and moved there to try their luck at farming. By 1863 they had decided Canada was a pretty good place after all, and moved back again, leaving one member of the family behind. This person, as you may have guessed, was the woman who was to become my grandmother. There was a wedding that year in which she was a principal.

Grandmother Wilkinson was a rugged woman, a tremendous worker, a marvelous cook, an expert gardener. She had a booming laugh that sometimes startled us kids, but we loved her for it. She was the farmer of the family and made most of the decisions in the early years of living in Iowa. I have told how she insisted that there be wood and water on the land. The creek would do, of course, for watering the livestock. But for the family there was a spring, gushing clear and cold from the rocks in a sidehill fifty yards or so from the spot where the frame house was to stand. Over the spring, in the years that I can remember, had been built that immortal little structure of the earlier settled Iowa farms, the springhouse.

There's an atmosphere about a springhouse that you never find anywhere else. There's the gentle murmuring of the water as it comes mysteriously from some unseen cavern in Mother Earth, hesitates for a moment or two in the man-made wooden tank that is always there for the great crocks of butter and milk and cream to stand in, and then bursts out on its way to the creek, the river and the sea. There's the clean, good smell of cold milk and butter, the pungent odor of the wet planks around the wooden tank, the shadowed corners of the place — for a springhouse must be dark — and the welcome coolness as you step inside out of a hot July sun.

A springhouse is seldom in a handy place. Grandmother must have walked hundreds of miles in her lifetime carrying "vittles," as she called her food supply, up and down the little hill that sloped away to the spring. I wonder if that little cooling stream is running today. I must stop and see the next time I am in Rock Falls. Probably the folks who live on the farm now have a shiny electric refrigerator and would turn up their noses at a pat of butter cooled by the sweet water that the hand of Providence sent forth for Grandmother's never-failing refrigeration plant.

Grandmother was famous throughout the neighborhood for her garden paths bordered with pinks, a low-growing, brilliant flower that no longer seems to be common. Her garden was a big one, and these paths led to all parts of it. They branched out from a main path that started near the side door of the house,

extended south for a few feet, then turned and ran primly to the east, breaking finally into a magnificent sweeping curve that bore off to the south, ending at last at the vine-covered gateway to the orchard. Not a weed was allowed to appear in these borders, and when the pinks were in full bloom the paths were something to see. After Grandmother moved to Rock Falls in later years she again set out pinks along the paths of her new garden. But she was getting to be an old lady then, and besides, a town lot didn't allow for much room for a display such as that back on the old homestead.

Occasionally I was permitted to go and stay a few days at the farm north of Rock Falls. Grandmother was wonderful to me, and I remember she always let me drink coffee, saying, "I don't think it'll hurt ye." I loved coffee but was not allowed to have it at home. In those days it was a general belief that drinking coffee would stunt a young person's growth. We should have known better. I knew kids who were practically raised on coffee and appeared none the worse for it.

I don't recall ever having seen my grandmother read much, though she seemed to me to be an unusually well-informed person. If she sat down to rest she had knitting or crocheting to do, for she figured hands were to be kept busy. She was busy right to the last, and she died quietly one April morning as she sat in her chair, a piece of unfinished work in her lap. She was 84 years old.

I should like to visit Shepley, near Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, England, someday. For not only the Wilkin-

sons but the Pickfords as well originated in that little village. My mother's father, Benjamin Pickford, was born there. His father, Joseph Pickford, according to an old record that I have, had the more glamorous sounding birthplace of West Riding County, Kirkburton Parish, Yorkshire. Joseph was no doubt a carefully brought up lad for his father, Thomas Pickford, is said to have been a Quaker. What a lot of mild, peace-loving ancestors I seem to have had. But don't forget about Jane Woolsey and Mary Magee. I'll bet they were different.

Oddly enough, my Grandfather Pickford's mother was named Hannah, the same as was the mother of Grandfather Wilkinson. This maternal great-grandmother of mine was called Hannah Birkenshaw. For some reason or other I like that name, Birkenshaw. I don't know exactly why, but it seems to roll nicely under the tongue. Hannah was the daughter of Richard Birkenshaw and Elizabeth Rollin. About all three of these folks I am sorry to say we know absolutely nothing. I think that's too bad for they may have been interesting persons.

In 1866, Grandfather Pickford, then 44 years old, decided that he had lived in England long enough, managed to borrow \$300 from his brother-in-law, Joseph Wood, and engaged passage to America for himself, Grandmother Sarah and their five children, one of whom was named Ellen, 18 months old, and who eventually was to become my mother. I used to try to get her to tell me about the ocean trip, but she always

claimed she couldn't remember much about it. Sometimes in later years when she said wistfully that she would like to travel more, we kids reminded her slyly that after all she was far more travelled than we, having once crossed the Atlantic ocean. I don't think she was much impressed by our argument.

It came about, then, that on April 18, 1866, this family went aboard the good ship, "City of London," and with all their earthly goods stowed in four great wooden chests, each marked "Benjamin Pickford, Passenger. Monroe, Wisconsin. U. S. of America," settled down in what comfort they could find along with 1,200 other souls, for the weary eleven-day passage to the new world. One of these chests stood finally in one of our bedrooms at the Lime Creek Township farm, where it fascinated me because it locked with a wooden peg and had come safely from a faraway land.

The chests and the Pickfords arrived at last at Monroe, where they rested for a few days with relatives, then went on to live in Freeport, Illinois, where Grandfather had found work—the only kind with which he was familiar—in a woolen mill. The panic of 1871 drove the family to seek a living elsewhere, and soon it was established in Monticello, Wisconsin. Here, in a quiet little country town, the population of which was, and still is, only a few hundred persons, Grandfather became not only manager of the woolen mill but a designer as well. It was work he liked, for always there was a bit of the artist in this determined little Englishman, and the intricate patterns woven by

the whirring looms were the expression of this inner urge that was too often almost submerged in the hard struggle to make a living. He was to stay there for only five years, but the mill was to stand for nearly three quarters of a century afterward, a redoubtable old three-storied building of native-stone and tough frame construction that grimly faced the winter storms and the summer suns until that night in May, 1950, when folks in Monticello awoke to the alarm that the old mill was on fire. But when they had raced down the winding country road that led to the river where the mill stood there was not much they could do. They knew then that the old looms had stopped whirring forever and that the churning water would no longer hurry down the millrace to the great water wheel below. Its many-paned windows glowed briefly in the blackness of the night, then winked out and sank at last to ashes to mark the passing of another era.

Not long ago I stood on the bridge near the sturdy rock foundation that was all that was left of the famous old mill. The rocks were scarcely wet by the trickle of the once powerful river. On the bank over there — I thought — Grandfather Pickford must have stood many times and watched the swift current go by. Through that gaunt doorway he must have walked to see if the ponderous machinery was in order, and to listen to the steady hum of the looms above. Up that dusty road he must have trudged at the end of each day to the tiny house where his family lived. Somehow I was glad he was not there to see the mute

remains of the place he had been a part of so many years ago.

You would almost wonder why some of us, descendants of the Wilkinsons and Pickfords, did not become dry goods merchants, with so many weavers back of us. But there was a hidden hunger in both these families that had to come out — the land hunger. It was stirring in the Pickford family in Monticello. They had been able to save a little money, for three of the boys worked in the mill managed by their father. But it was slow going, and they were impatient. They knew, too, what was likely to happen if hard times came again as they had in 1871.

In 1874 Grandfather went to Cerro Gordo County to visit friends and relatives in Mason City and in Falls Township. I have a notion that he visited that very 72 acres near Rock Falls where John and Jane Wilkinson were living. You remember, of course, that the Wilkinsons had arrived there in 1872. Old friendships formed in Shepley, England, were strong.

Back to Monticello went Benjamin Pickford, determined to buy Iowa land and get away from the mills once and for all. The records are a bit blurred as to when he bought the farm of 100 acres about five miles south of Rock Falls and four miles northwest of Nora Springs, but it was sometime in the year 1875. In the spring of 1876, on March 1, a cold, foggy, icy day, the Pickford family, Grandfather Benjamin, Grandmother Sarah and the children, took possession of the homestead that sometime later turned out to be my

birthplace. The children numbered seven by that time, including Henry, Arthur, Charles, Rufus, Amelia, Ellen and Annie. Do you begin to see how it chanced that I got my start in Cerro Gordo County? Wendell Wilkinson met Ellen Pickford — and there you are — or perhaps I should say — there was I.

I seem always to have thought of Grandfather Pickford as my *first* grandfather, and Grandfather Wilkinson as my *second*. The reason for this is, I suppose, that my mother's father was with me a great deal when I was very young, while later on that shining silver dollar on Christmas day helped to center my affections on my paternal grandsire. My mother told me a good deal about her father as I grew older. He was, as I knew from our pleasant walks together, a kindly, quiet man. I was to learn too that he was a great reader, a lover of music, a Unitarian and a booster for cooperatives, on the subject of which he wrote little pieces for newspapers. He could make up his mind on anything of importance if he could just "sleep on it." In the morning he would know what should be done. In this fashion he once decided to buy a neighboring farm so that his son, Charles, might have a place to live. He liked only plain food and not too much variety, for in Shepley there had been no frills on the dinner table. A real delicacy, he thought, was the drippings that gather in the bottom of a pan around a piece of well-done pork. He called the drippings "pork honey," and if he had some bread to eat with it, he wanted nothing more.

Grandmother Sarah Pickford, who, at the age of only 58, had died eight years before I was born, did not want to leave Shepley for the trip to a strange new land. No pioneer, she was content to stay among her friends in England. When the family possessions that would not go in those four great chests were put up at auction she could not bear to watch the sale. But when the time for sailing came she did not hesitate. Where her husband wished to go, she would go too. She fought seasickness, cold, and even hunger on shipboard for much of the food was so coarse and tasteless she could not eat. She was happy though, for the few short years she was to spend on the farm near Nora Springs, and she loved making a home for her large family. Grandmother Pickford liked to sit quietly and watch and listen while others sang or played some instrument, though she did neither herself. Her Methodist faith was strong and apparently never conflicted with that of her Unitarian husband.

All four of these grandparents of mine lie in what I think is one of the quietest and most peaceful spots on this earth, the little cemetery just at the north edge of Rock Falls. No highway traffic passes near it, and to reach the place you drive past the old stone church for a block or two, turn right, and then follow a driveway north for perhaps twenty-five or thirty rods. Second-growth timber borders the driveway on each side. There is some crushed rock to drive on now, but there used to be only a deeply rutted track through the sod. A cement walk has been laid so that the villagers may walk

in comfort to the cemetery, but each year the walk hides farther and farther under the bluegrass that crowds in resentfully from each side of it.

The graves of my mother and father are in this secluded place, which I visited again one bright August afternoon not long ago. Here were many familiar names on the stone markers that stand beneath "the murmuring pines and the hemlocks." Back out of the mists of boyhood memories, and chiseled now in everlasting granite and limestone came the Sears', the Krugs, the Perretts, the Bliems, the Gildners, the Peltons. There are many more of course, names I had not thought of for 30 years.

I sat for a long time there in the pleasant shade of an ancient evergreen. In some such hallowed spot as this, I thought, Thomas Gray must have sat while he composed "Elegy in a Country Church-yard." At long intervals there was the faint hum of a motor car along the distant highway. A cow-bell tinkled now and then from a thicket at the other side of the quiet place where the dead slept peacefully forever, and from somewhere far off beyond the bordering woodlands came the rhythmic muffled throb of a well-driller, like the steady cadence of some great, eternal timepiece.