



cooks and holidays

I am one of those lucky persons who seems always to have been associated with, or related to, marvelous cooks. In the preceding chapter I said that my Grandmother Wilkinson was a great hand with "vittles." She had good company. My mother could cook or bake anything well. No other pumpkin pies have ever had quite the gladsome touch she was able to give the

seasoning that went into these crusty creations. Then there were Aunt Annie, Aunt Myrta and Aunt Theo, all in a class by themselves with a skillet, roasting pan or baking dish. Perhaps my Aunt Myrta, wife of my Uncle Rufus Pickford, had a slight edge on the other two, for everything she ever set on the table before us seemed to be flavored just right. But Aunt Annie could make milk gravy that was like the nectar of the gods, and Aunt Theo, wife of Uncle Arthur Pickford, could turn out a roast fowl that was a gourmet's delight.

How we kids looked forward to the three great holidays of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. We were farm people, and evening celebrations were out of the question, for there were always the chores to be done at night. So the whole crew of us got together for a day-time dinner on each of these occasions. There were, of course, Grandmother Wilkinson's family at Rock Falls, with Aunt Mabel and Aunt Jessie always on hand to help; Uncle Rufus and Aunt Myrta Pickford with their two boys, Arlyn and Gerald; Uncle Arthur and Aunt Theo Pickford and their four boys, Lyle, Harold, Rollo and Hugh; Uncle Cal and Aunt Annie Bitterman with a variation in the way of girls, for they had, besides my cousin, Dale, two daughters, Ruth and Grace. The last three families lived from five to seven miles from us near Nora Springs.

Naturally, we younger ones had no responsibility at all for the preliminary arrangements by way of

deciding where each dinner would be held and who was to bring certain foods. I suppose there was a sort of rotation system, whereby each family entertained the others in turn, and probably there was some kind of an agreement concerning who furnished the pies, the cakes, the fruit salad, the escalloped oysters, the jam, the rolls or a dozen other things. Everything always worked out perfectly so far as we youngsters could see. All we had to do was gorge, and we proceeded to do just that.

My cousin, Dale, was easily the biggest and fastest eater among us, and I think he took a certain amount of pride in the distinction. The rest of us cousins tried hard to keep up with him, but we were simply outclassed. There were six of us boys close enough in ages to have a swell time together on every occasion. Usually there were not enough chairs or enough table space for everyone to sit down at the same time, so many times we lined up on the stairway steps with our plates on our laps and waited for the groceries to be brought to us. I think the family at whose home the dinner was being held furnished the meat and potatoes, while the other relatives brought the rest of the provisions with them. Fruit salad was new at that time, and I assume the jello this dish required had just been discovered or invented. We considered it a special treat indeed. Then too, there was always home-made candy. I think it was my Grandmother Wilkinson who made the round white flat candies with half a walnut resting on each center, toothsome morsels that were

simply out of this world. Goose, duck or turkey were always there in tremendous quantities — none of that half-a-bird stuff, it took several fowls to satisfy us.

After we boys had stuffed ourselves to the absolute limit it was immediately necessary for us to do something to "settle" our dinners. If we were at our place near Mason City, there was a good hill for coasting in our pasture, and sometimes our little creek had enough clear solid ice on it for skating. If we were at Grandmother's we often headed for what Uncle Thee always called "the timber," the delightful, and, to us, mysterious and silent woodland which began a mile or so away from the house and barns and stretched into distances we never had quite the courage to explore. Here on a snowy winter day was an enchanted land, where the great elms and basswoods and oaks stood in towering splendor, surrounded by slender saplings and thickets of undergrowth that were the quiet nesting places of the startled rabbits, the quail and the pheasants flushed as we followed winding and shadowy trails through the forest. Always we were on the lookout for bigger game, a fox perhaps, or even a wolf, for some said they had seen these crafty animals in the timber. But we might have known that our shrill chattering was enough to scare them far away.

If the ice was clear on the creek in Grandmother's pasture we went skating after we tired of tramping in the woods, and sometimes we could persuade our folks to let us go as far away as the Shell Rock River at "the Falls," as almost everyone called the village.

We knew the skating was likely to be much better on the larger stream, and we knew too that if we could talk my Uncle Rufus Wilkinson into coming with us — and we usually could — we would be thrilled with his expert figure skating. On just an ordinary pair of old-fashioned skates clamped to the soles of his shoes — no one had ever heard of shoe skates or the special runners for figure skating — he could do many of the stunts you now see in the big ice shows. His balance, his easy grace and his complete command of his “outside edges,” to use a figure skating term, were superb. The rest of us tried to imitate these maneuvers but wound up sitting down hard on the hard side of the ice, and finally, giving up in disgust, we would unclamp our skates and plod back to Grandmother’s. The holiday was over then. It was chore-time, time to hitch up and start the cold ride home.

There were no hills for coasting, nor creeks or ponds for skating, on the farms of our folks who lived near Nora Springs, but we discovered an immensely satisfactory substitute for them one Christmas Day when we had gathered at Uncle Arthur Pickford’s for one of those enormous feasts which seemed to us kids to be so well planned. In their long dairy barn the Pickfords had recently installed a new manure carrier, which, if you have ever spent much time around a farm, you will know consists of a tublike container some four feet long suspended from an overhead track on which it rolls along on a couple of small trolley wheels. The tub can be raised or lowered with a chain hoist,

and when full of litter from the gutters in the barn alleys is pushed out through an open door where the track is carried on poles high above a fragrant and steaming manure pile.

We found, after some experimentation, that two small boys could comfortably sit in the carrier at one time. To be sure, the thing had been in use for a few weeks, but what of it? It wasn't so very dirty, and after all it was just that nice clean barn smell to which nobody should object. We found too, that if someone gave the carrier a hard shove at the point the track started, it would gather momentum rapidly down the long alleyway, arriving quickly at a thrilling sharp turn at the other end where it made for the door leading to the manure pile. We would lean far over toward the inside of the turn like the bobsledders do at Lake Placid. The trolley wheels made a deafening clatter as they got up speed, and the tub swung dizzily from side to side. We spent a couple of hours at this delightful new diversion, and altogether we felt the day had been far from wasted when our folks appeared at the barn doors late in the afternoon, took one horrified look at our clothes, and told us it was time to go home.

With my cousins, Dale Bitterman and four of the Pickford boys, all so nearly of my own age, you can understand, perhaps, why it was each year as the holiday season approached, I pestered my father and mother to let me go and stay a few days with these youngsters who were such delightful playmates. They were

unusual boys, every one of them, with sharp, active minds, interested in a great variety of things, from printing and photography to steam engines, and I enjoyed their company immensely.

One Christmas I was lucky, for my folks had consented to my going home with Dale, his father and mother, who were Uncle Cal and Aunt Annie to me, and the two girls in the family, Ruth and Grace. The feast that day was at Grandmother's, and in addition to being thoroughly stuffed I was in a seventh heaven of anticipation of my holiday vacation. About four o'clock in the afternoon—there were chores, you know—Uncle Cal hitched his fast-trotting team to the two-seated open buggy the family travelled in, and we were off in a whirl of snow and a clatter of wheels over the frozen ruts in the road. It was one year when not enough snow had fallen to make good sleighing. I felt sorry for my own family who had nothing more exciting to look forward to than returning to the home farm I was so glad to be leaving for a while. Soon we were at the steep and rocky bank of the Shell Rock River a couple of miles south of Rock Falls. We were about to cross the stream on the ice for there was yet no bridge at this point—the horses were sharp-shod so they wouldn't slip—and my uncle drove out cautiously after we had jolted down the approach to the crossing. We all held our breaths for we didn't know whether there was three feet or twenty feet of water below us if the ice gave way. The horses went into a

quick trot; the buggy swayed alarmingly on the slippery surface; then we were scrambling safely up the opposite bank. Everyone breathed again.

It was dark when we reached the Bitterman farm that night. My uncle and aunt changed their clothes and went out to do the chores, while we four kids stayed in the house and played Carom and Crokinole and Pit, games that were popular at the time. Always when I stayed with Dale we talked far into the night the first evening. After that we were tired enough to settle down and go to sleep at a reasonable hour. The day after Christmas Dale seemed a bit listless, but we didn't worry too much about it. When a fellow had been eating candy, nuts, fruitcake and two or three kinds of pie on top of roast goose with oyster dressing, perhaps he could be expected to feel a little off, couldn't he? After I got home several days later I didn't feel so good either, and when some telltale little red spots showed up all over my hide we knew the real reason — chicken pox. My mother said she might have known I'd pick up *something* when I went away from home.

It must have been about 1908 — I'm not certain of the year — when Dale and I made a holiday trip to Madison, Wisconsin, that neither of us will ever forget. We still talk about it when we get together. We saw moving pictures — with *sound* — went bobsledding on the hills that overlooked lovely Lake Mendota, and I had my first drink of brandy. But wait a minute — let's start at the beginning.

How our folks ever came to permit us — two kids

in their tender teens who had never been more than ten miles away from home before — to go on this adventure, is still a mystery to me. Anyway, two or three days before Christmas my father took me and my little travelling bag down to Dale's, bade me good luck, and left me to go on to Nora Springs that night to catch the "Flyer," as the midnight train of the Milwaukee was called. Uncle Cal took us to the station, where we learned the train was to be from one to two hours late. My uncle said he guessed he wouldn't wait, so he left us in the dimly-lighted station after warning us not to stir out of the place until the train arrived. I don't remember whether there was a station agent on duty that night, but there must have been. Dale and I were both so excited and impatient that it was torture indeed hovering around the fat-bellied stove in the dingy little waiting room. After an hour or so we began to get hungry. What to do? We craved food but had no lunch with us. Probably Aunt Annie had offered to put some up, and we had loftily waved it aside. The gnawing grew worse. Finally Dale said he was going to high-tail it over to town a few blocks away and get us something to eat. While he was gone I was in a torment lest the train come, for I certainly didn't want to get on it alone. But Dale got back in plenty of time. What did he bring to eat? A bag of horehound candy!

The train did come at last, and we quickly climbed aboard, thrilled by the hissing, steaming monster that appeared out of the frosty night and hesitated only long enough to pick us up. I believe we were the only

passengers leaving Nora Springs. The train coaches were, of course, the old wooden ones, with seats of dirty red plush, and dimly illuminated by kerosene lamps. If there was a sleeper attached to the train that night we didn't know it. We wouldn't have known how to act in one anyway.

Our folks had warned us to be careful about talking to strangers, but I don't think anyone paid us the slightest bit of attention. At that time of night nearly everyone was sleeping, or trying to. But to a couple of excited kids the new sensations of rushing through the winter night, stopping at towns we had never even heard of before, changing cars at Prairie-du-Chien, the long hoarse whistle of the locomotive for some lonely crossing, the arrival at Madison just as dawn was breaking over the snowclad hills, were all enough to keep us wide awake. Our cousin, Edith Sears, met us and took us home with her where we met Aunt Amelia, had breakfast, and fell into bed to sleep until late afternoon.

The ten days we spent at Aunt Amelia's home at 219 South Mills Street were glorious. There were no cows to milk, no cream separators to turn, no skim milk to carry to the pigs, and we were entertained like young princes. Our cousins, Ray and Theo Owen, a gay and lively young married couple, owned a long, rakish bobsled that easily seated ten persons, and Dale and I worked harder than we ever did at home dragging that sled up long, slanting streets to the crest of hills, where we would pause a moment in anticipation

of the exciting ride down with the biting wind and whirls of snow in our faces. Dale, a year or so older than I and a bit more worldly-wise, though that is hardly the right expression, drew me aside as we climbed the hill after one of our fastest rides and whispered that he didn't think Theo ought to be out there with us, because, as he put it, "She's that way, you know." I had to admit that I guessed he was right, though the fact had not occurred to me. We were a bit uneasy over this situation, for sometimes the sled upset on a sharp turn. But Theo, the picture of health and always one to enjoy life to the hilt, seemed to be worried not at all. She bobsledded gaily all afternoon, and was never the worse for it. We thought she was wonderful.

You must remember that this was back in 1908, and that talking pictures were not to become common for nearly thirty years. But at a Madison matinee one afternoon, for which Uncle Henry Pickford had supplied the tickets, the characters on the screen talked — or appeared to. Actually the sound was supplied by people standing behind the screen, and though we thought the effect was sensational, the attempt to synchronize voice with action must have been pretty sketchy. But moving pictures of any kind were new then so we didn't mind.

On Christmas Eve we all gathered at the apartment where Ray and Theo lived. Uncle Henry and Aunt Ella Pickford were there too. There was a tree, and presents of course, and lots of good things to eat. We

had a gorgeous time. Finally we were ready to go home. It was icy on the sidewalk, and I was careless enough to fall and bump an elbow hard. By the time we got in the house at Aunt Amelia's I was getting faint from the shock of the fall. They stretched me out on the living room floor, and Aunt Ella, dynamic and rising to an emergency as always, got some brandy somewhere, gave it to me, and brought me around in no time. I remember she said, "If you get to drinking when you get older it will be your Aunt Ella's fault." Well, I have never been much of a drinker, but I have often thought of her remark while I was mixing up a highball or a Tom Collins for my friends.

Dale tells me I wanted to go home at once but that he talked me out of the idea after we went to bed that night. He was burned up when we got back to Iowa after the holidays were over because Aunt Myrta said, after hearing about my fall and the brandy and everything, "I wouldn't have been surprised if it had been Dale, but I didn't think Herbert was that clumsy." I wonder where Aunt Ella got that brandy. It was the only time she ever offered me any.

It was a long, long wait from the Christmas holidays until the Fourth of July, but we kids started planning for it weeks and weeks before that great summer-time celebration arrived. Once in a while we were greatly disappointed, but usually we had a glorious time. One year my mother had been quite ill for several weeks, and it was out of the question for us to go anywhere for the day. I remember that my father and I took a

wagon load of oats to the elevator at Rock Falls the day before the Fourth, and I got some firecrackers at Bliem's store but couldn't set them off on the way home for fear of scaring the horses. Another time tentative arrangements had been made for me to meet Uncle Cal's family in Mason City to take the excursion trip to Clear Lake where there was to be a big celebration. The morning of Independence Day was rainy and the roads muddy, but my Dad took me to town, where we waited around for a couple of hours, with me in a lather over whether my uncle's folks were coming. Finally about noon we gave up waiting and plodded home though the mud. The sky was clearing as we splashed along the country roads. Just after we got home the phone rang. It was my uncle, calling from Mason City and wanting to know if I was coming for they were ready to leave for the Lake. Of course it was out of the question to drive back to town again for it was at least an hour's trip. I suppose I was about the most disappointed kid in the county — probably bawled all over the place — but my father certainly tried to do what he could for me when the rest of the family had to stay home.

Always for two or three days before the Fourth of July I watched the weather anxiously, hoping the great day would be a pleasant one, for rain just then was a catastrophe to us kids. I learned that if the wind blew steadily from the northwest it usually meant fair weather for a time; a southwest wind might mean warmer pleasant weather or it might mean showers; but

winds blowing out of the east meant trouble. On some of the long, lonely afternoons in the fields I made up a little verse that went "Wind from the north-a-west, that's where I like it the best; wind from the north-a-east, that's where I like it the least." One time I heard my Uncle Henry tell my father that the long, stringy, feathery clouds that sometimes hung in the sky were known as "mare's-tails," and were fore-runners of rainy weather. After that I was always on the lookout for them and hoping they would not show up on the second or third of July. I liked the beautiful, fleecy, high-flying clouds that came floating grandly down from the northwest with a background of deep blue sky. Not for many years did I learn that these fair-weather clouds were called "cumulus" or "cirro-cumulus."

Since I have worked for a good many years with people who live in towns I have noticed almost none of them ever pays attention to weather signs in the sky and in the atmosphere, observation of which becomes almost second nature to farm folks. Many times I have heard city dwellers say they had no idea it was going to storm when there were many apparent signs.

If you are out in a field working a tractor or a team some distance from the barns, you keep pretty close watch on a brewing storm. I don't know how many times I have raced a team of horses from a distant field to the shelter of the old barn driveway just ahead of a thunder shower, arriving thoroughly breathless and tingling with excitement at having outrun one of

Nature's angry outbursts. Or perhaps arriving well soaked because I "guessed I could make another round before the storm hit." It isn't near as much fun to drive a tractor in ahead of a downpour. You can't lash a tractor over the rump with the lines and yell at it to get the hell home to the clatter of a riding cultivator or a half-loaded wagon and hayrack. I always thought the horses entered into the spirit of the thing and got as much thrill out of galloping home ahead of a storm as I did.

Our favorite town for Fourth of July celebrations was Nora Springs. It was about 10 miles from our farm, and going there meant getting up early and doing the chores, then putting on our best clothes and hitching up the team to our new surrey. This splendid vehicle, of which we were extremely proud and which we kept under a canvas in the driveway of the barn, had cost us \$95 in hard cash at Schweiger's Wagon Shop in Mason City. We never had a snappy-looking team to go with the surrey. The ordinary work horses had to do extra duty on holidays and Sundays, wearing the same harness they wore all week, so that we always travelled to the clanking of trace chains and the creaking of wooden hames. Some of the farmers had expensive nickel-plated driving harnesses with checkreins for holding the horses' heads high. This was considered fashionable then but was, indeed, a cruel way to treat the animals.

The city park in Nora Springs was everybody's headquarters on the Fourth. Family picnics filled the place

at noon. The orator of the day held forth there. The kids hung around the big rock that still rests in the southeast corner of the square. Many years later my wife once asked me in all seriousness whether that rock was moved there or had always been at that spot. I've forgotten what I told her, but of course, the rock had been left by a careless glacier during the ice age.

Have you ever seen a water fight — the kind put on by members of the city fire department? This was a Fourth of July entertainment feature that used to be great stuff. Teams of about three men to a side were each given the nozzle end of a fire hose that was attached at the other end to a fire hydrant. The two teams squared off facing each other about 60 or 70 feet apart. Then the water was turned on. The idea was to see which team could make the other one back up a specified distance under the force of the water, which at Nora Springs came from a supply tank on a 100-foot tower. It was no laughing matter — except for the spectators — to face a stream of water under that much pressure. Team members were often knocked off their feet by the water and the struggle to hang onto and direct the nozzle of their hose. The men wore firemen's coats, boots and helmets, but they got well soaked anyway. Sometimes a hose broke completely away from the men holding it, and everyone within range got drenched too, to the great delight of all who didn't. I suppose the water fights are no longer held, for you can imagine how it must have run down the city water

supply. Having been connected with a fire insurance company for over 20 years, I have often wondered how many red faces there would have been had a fire broken out while the water fight was going on.

A terrifying invention of the devil himself during the early years of this century was the torpedo cane. A good many people were injured by these horrible noise makers, and they have been prohibited by law for a long time. The cane was a round wooden stick about three feet long, painted a bright color or gaily striped. It had a ball-shaped metal lower end in which was a slot for inserting a small dynamite cap. Below this slot was a short piece of iron rod, perhaps 2 or 3 inches long, that was forced violently up against the dynamite cap when the cane was pounded smartly against a cement sidewalk or a stone. The caps exploded with a tremendous bang and a burst of smoke and sometimes some flame as well. It was no fun to have one go off close to your ankles.

A certain groceryman in Madison, Wisconsin, had a good deal to do with what I always have considered my happiest Fourth of July. The year was, I think, 1905, though I may be a year or two off. Again I had been thrilled by an invitation from my Uncle Cal, Aunt Annie and cousin Dale to go with them to our favorite celebration town, Nora Springs. The weather had been showery on the second and third and the mare's-tail clouds had me worried, but the Fourth was gorgeous. "Nora" outdid herself to entertain us. The water fight,

ball game, horse races, picnic in the park, fat men's race — everything — was just right. But the best part was yet to come.

My cousin, Rossie Pickford, of Madison, was working at Uncle Cal's that summer. While he was at home and during the school year he had been driving a delivery wagon for a grocery store. Dale and I told him we thought that was about the best type of a job a youngster could have. We were thinking of the chance to grab a pocketful of cookies or a fistful of stick candy while loading a grocery order. Rossie admitted it wasn't bad.

Anyway, Rossie's outstanding personality had been working for him then, just as it did for many years in the life-insurance business. The biggest box you ever saw, packed full of Roman candles, skyrocketes, "snakes," pinwheels, sparklers and ordinary firecrackers had arrived a few days before the Fourth from that great-hearted Madison groceryman, whom we were sure must have been a millionaire. You can bet he wanted Rossie to come back and work for him in the fall.

Ordinarily when the sun went down on Independence Day we figured the fun was over and there wasn't much to look forward to until Thanksgiving. But this day in 1905 was different. As we jogged home in the dusk from Nora Springs we knew there was still a big night ahead of us. After the chores were done the marvelous contents of Rossie's box were brought out in the front yard, and the fun began. Late travelers along the road pulled up their horses in startled won-

der at the display of skyrocketes and Roman candles that rose from Uncle Cal's lawn. It was extremely late when the last pinwheel had been set off and the last sparkler whirled in the quiet night air. And when the evening's celebration finally came to an end and we had crawled wearily up to bed, the sudden rush of a violent July thunderstorm that came crashing and rumbling out of the southwest sky seemed a fitting climax to a great day.