

town school

In the fall of 1904, when I had attained the advanced age of twelve years, I was placidly contemplating starting back to the country school, where I knew I could move along about as fast as I wanted to in reading and spelling, meanwhile merely skirting the edges of arithmetic, geography and history, especially arithmetic, which as far as I was concerned could just as

well have been left out of the curriculum. But my father and mother had other plans for me. They had observed, without my knowing it of course, that in school I did what was easy for me and slid over the other stuff.

So to my considerable surprise, and somewhat to my dismay, I was told that I was to leave the country school and start going to what we farm people always called "the town school." It is apparent to me now that this must have taken a good deal of arranging, for no doubt my father had to see the County Superintendent, the Principal of the Washington School in Mason City where I was to start, and perhaps others too. There was the problem, too, of negotiating the 7-mile round trip every school day, and this was solved by the purchase of a rather elderly Indian pony for me to ride. A stable had to be rented near the school so the pony could be safely and securely tied there in all kinds of weather and a small supply of feed kept for him. All these things were done for me and must have taken a good deal of time.

It was a rather terrifying experience for a youngster as painfully shy and bashful as I was to be taken out of the quiet, easygoing security of a little country school and dropped suddenly into an institution where I knew no one among the hundred and fifty or so scholars who gathered each day. I had tried to talk my father and mother out of this new idea. . . . I was afraid I couldn't do the school work. . . . I hated being stared at and I didn't like to get up and recite before

a lot of other youngsters. I was really afraid, too, of what the "town kids" might do to me, for I had somehow acquired the notion that they were a rough, tough lot and would just as soon scalp a country boy as not or skin him alive if they got their hands on him. Fortunately for me, of course, my father and mother firmly overruled all my objections and did what they could to minimize my fears.

It was a bright, sunny morning in September, when, wearing a new, rather scratchy suit of clothes, and with my shiny leather lunch box slung from my shoulder, I climbed aboard the Indian pony, took a last look around the barnyard, for who could tell but what I might return a beaten and hunted thing, and started down the road westward to town. My father drove on ahead of me that first morning for I didn't yet know where the school building was, and I think he wanted to make sure that I didn't weaken and turn for home. Off across the fields a mile to the northwest I could see the white painted gable of the little school to which I was never going back, and I felt sad, very sad indeed.

It is said that there is no despair like the despair of youth, and it was while I was meditating, if a twelve-year-old can be said to meditate, upon the good times that were to be no more for me at District Number Seven, that my pony and I started down one of the two long, clay hills on the road to town. With other, heavier thoughts, on my mind I had neglected to keep a tight rein on the animal so he would hold his head

up and pick up his front feet as he should. Suddenly the pony fell flat on his nose, and I did a swan dive over his head into the dust. My beautiful new lunch box flew open and the sandwiches and pie my mother had packed so carefully were scattered in the dirt and gravel of the roadway. I picked the things up and dusted them off as best I could, but if you have ever tried eating a lunch that has been through treatment like that you know it can be an extremely gritty mess. What happened to my new clothes I am unable to recall, though it could not have been anything good, and I am rather inclined to think there was an embarrassing tear in the knee of one black stocking. All in all, it was not an encouraging start on what you might call the second phase of my early education. I was pretty much in favor of calling off the expedition to the town school and starting over in, say, a year or so. There was no need of hurrying this education business, was there? But my father, who had turned around and come back to help me, expressed himself as being quite definitely opposed to any thought of turning back, and presently we went on, arriving finally at the Washington School without further mishap. The pony was stabled in a small barn directly across the street from the school building. I braved the stares of the youngsters who had already arrived, and by the time the opening bell rang, found myself assigned to the fifth grade, taught, I believe, by Miss Gibson.

To my surprise, I found the work in grade 5A quite

easy. The kids were not too hard to get acquainted with, and I began to enjoy life after all. I was just getting used to the place when Miss Gibson came to my desk one day and told me I belonged in a higher grade. She could see, I suppose, that I could just as well be working harder. I rather objected to the idea for I liked being in her classes, but I was promptly moved to the sixth grade, where Miss McDermott was the teacher. Again I had to go through the mental torment of getting acquainted with a new group of kids, new surroundings and new books, but I lived through it, and in a few more weeks Miss McDermott moved me into 6A from 6B, or half a grade higher. This change was not hard to make, for the new class was just on the other side of the room, and by that time I knew most of them anyway. I was not extra smart or anything of the kind, but the Superintendent of Schools had started me in the 5th grade because I was woefully behind in the subjects at which the country school teachers had not made me work — thus my rapid advancement. I had some catching up to do at the Washington School. I have often wondered what I said or did in class that convinced Miss Gibson and Miss McDermott that I should be pushed along faster. They could just as well have ignored me, but they didn't, thereby saving me half a year of wasted time. For this I am grateful, but since I have lost track of them, I haven't been able to tell them so. There was no more skipping grades for me after that, and when we finally moved into 7B, I was lucky to keep up with the rest of the class.

What a cold winter that was — that first one of riding horseback three and a half miles to school. There is no such thing as comfort aboard a slow old pony as you head into the teeth of a bitter northwest wind with the snow whirling and whipping at your face, nor even if it's what we called "an open winter," meaning little or no snow, is there any comfort in the progress over the frozen, rutty road. That pony stumbled and fell on his nose again and again, but I learned by grasping a handful of mane along with the reins I could brace myself against leaving the saddle abruptly. My family laughed at this precaution and chided me about my horsemanship, and I wished I might ride in free and easy cowboy style as did one or two of the other country boys who rode to school on lively ponies that were sure-footed anywhere, neck-reined instantly, and could turn on a dime. There was a boy named Wayne Turnure who lived on the road half a mile south of us, who often pulled up beside me on the way to town — he was a dashing rider and bold spirit, and I admired him greatly. As he slowed down his gaily dancing pony for a moment, he would look rather disdainfully at my plodding animal, pat his own pony's neck and say, "Just the kind I like," and ride off again in a flurry of snow or a spatter of mud. I was ashamed of my handful of mane when he came along, and tried to cover up by pretending I was only stroking my pony's shoulder.

If I had had the thick flannel or wool shirts and the sheepskin lined coats with their big fur collars we have now, that daily ride might not have been so bad. But

I did have fleece-lined, fur-backed gauntlet mittens that came half way to my elbows, and were wonderful for holding up in front of one's face to break a sharp wind, keep off stinging snowflakes or wipe a dripping nose. Later on when my saddle pony had given out and I was driving a horse hitched to a buggy or a cutter I learned a trick for keeping my mittens warm all day and ready for the trip home. I stuck them between the two straps of the back band on the horse's harness and then threw a blanket over the horse. This was a good stunt except when one or both of the mittens worked out of the back band as the horse stamped about trying to keep himself warm. Then I found my precious mittens on the floor of the stall, usually trampled into some particularly fragrant horse manure, a situation which called for strong and colorful language. It isn't nice to start out on a cold ride with a mitten or two in that condition. It's no help at all to a fellow's disposition or his appetite.

A boy who lived at the edge of town sometimes caught a ride to school with me. He would help me unhitch and put my horse in the barn, and he evidently observed me stow those mittens under the horse blanket. One late afternoon when I pulled the blanket from the horse and got ready to hitch up for the trip home I discovered the mittens were gone. I recalled grimly that this lad had admired them. To add a further bit of circumstantial evidence, he caught no more rides with me. But I had no proof. Odd, though, that I should remember his name through all these years.

As I recall the days when I was riding the old pony,

an incident which rankled at the time comes to mind. In order for me to carry books back and forth to school my mother had made me a sort of knapsack out of gunnysacking, figuring no doubt that this tough material wouldn't be harmed by dust and dirt, or the smell of horses. Some of the kids had nice waterproof leather or rubber book sacks, but our family had no money for that sort of extravagance. Often I was several minutes late to school due to the severe weather and horrible roads. One morning I dashed madly to the school building after putting the pony in his stall. I kept my homemade book sack over my arm for I didn't want to stop to take the books out of it. Throwing my coat and cap at a hook in the hall, I scurried for my seat as the last bell rang, and, still shivering, with my fingers so stiff from cold that I had to blow on them or sit on them for several minutes before I could pick up a pen or pencil, I started to get my books out. A seat or two behind me I heard, all too distinctly, a girl's suppressed giggle and her scornful whisper to someone next to her, "Gunnysack!" I really did freeze then, and never again did I bring that bag into the schoolhouse. Today, if something like that happened to me I would likely exclaim, "You're damn right it's a gunnysack! Wanta make something of it?"

Though I had been dubious about starting to the "town school" it seems never to have occurred to me to quit no matter how tough the going or how much the not unfriendly, though sometimes cruel jibes of the other kids pricked my tender skin. In this I was cer-

tainly no different than many other country youngsters who fought storms and bad roads and ate cold lunches for years in order to keep up with their classes. I think it did something for us all, and when graduation time finally came we could say, as the English would, "We've had it." Once, many years later, when I had to fight a desperate illness for two or three years, I could never quite give up. Maybe those tough days from 1904 to 1911 had nothing to do with it, but I like to think that somehow they did.

THE FIRST SNOW

Starlight, and then the dawn —
We'd seen the gray, drab earth the night before —
Treetop and meadow bare
Had guessed what Mother Nature had in store.
Dawning and then the sun!
No Broadway brilliance ever equalled this.
Artists, your work is done
When you can paint a sunbeam, snowdrop kiss.
Sunshine, and frosty air —
We ought to find some rabbit tracks today —
Woodland and snowy hill,
The temptresses that call to come and play.
Moonlight, and while we watch,
A silver carpet on the world descends;
God must be very near —
In peace and beauty now the fair day ends.

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