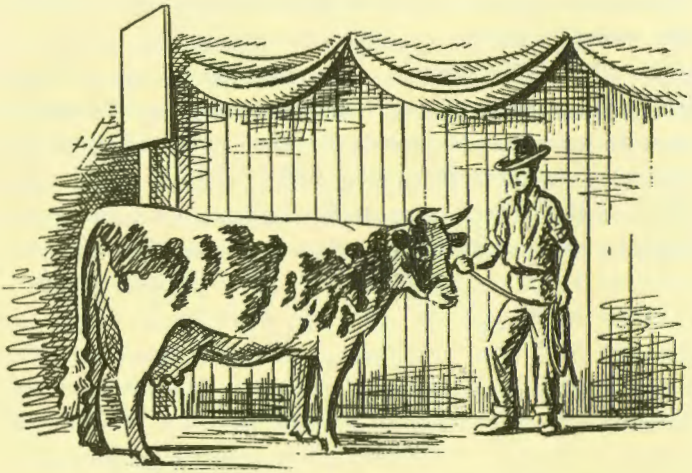

the best years

Around the first of August, Jack and I decided we had had enough of the North Dakota ranch. The food was getting worse, if that was possible, and we were developing a fairly well-founded suspicion that the cook was more interested in the boss himself than in getting good meals. There had been only about a week of actual work with the Holstein cattle, all as wild as deer when

we got them up from the pasture, and a brief showing at the Pembina County Fair was a headache because the animals were of course not trained to lead or stand quietly. The barn dance in the huge new haymow had been a great event to be sure, and we danced till the streaks of dawn slanted up in the east. In fact I danced so much with a cute little girl whom Sandy, young as he was, had fallen for, that he told me "I wish you'd stayed in Iowa."

My pardner and I as we lay in our horse blankets on steamy nights and cursed the bad luck that had brought us to a place we did not like, planned what we would do next. We settled upon the day we would tell the boss to give us our time. Jack had a bicycle, and he would ride it to Hamilton the morning we quit, while I hoped to persuade the manager to drive me there in the Ford. I would ship my suitcase home, keeping only a few necessary articles of clothing, and the remains of a box of fudge the curly-haired girl in Clinton County had sent me. These things I would tie on the handlebars of the bicycle I hoped to buy in a little shop we knew of in Hamilton, and we'd be off on the open road to explore at our leisure the broad prairies of the Dakotas. We would sleep in the shelter of friendly haystacks, working a day or two now and then when we felt like it. We might go on to Montana or swing down through Wyoming and Colorado; there was no hurry, for the days would be long and the nights mild until early September.

"I'll raise your wages to fifty dollars a month," the

boss told me when I explained rather timidly that I was going to leave. "I've taken an awful liking to you," he went on, "but I never had any use for that pardner of yours." I suspected the reason for his dislike was the fact that Jack, an outspoken lad, did not take orders too kindly sometimes. When I said that my mind was made up the manager finally agreed to drive me to Hamilton. Meanwhile Jack had pedaled rapidly away on his bicycle that morning according to our plan, but without saying anything further to me, which I thought was a bit strange. However, I felt I would soon be seeing him anyway as we started on what we both looked forward to as quite an adventure.

It was nearly noon before the boss could leave to take me to town, and I fretted over keeping Jack waiting in Hamilton so long. We had become good friends as well as pardners and would have some great times on the road. But when we arrived in the little village the manager and I hunted all over town for an hour or so. Jack and his bicycle had disappeared completely and absolutely. I was terribly disappointed. I could not understand how he could have let me down so badly. The manager was sympathetic but said little. I thought he was even thinking "Well, what could you expect of a fellow like that?"

Finally we gave up the search, and the boss said as long as he was not busy just then he would drive me to Grand Forks, about 50 miles off to the south. He must not have been kidding when he said he liked me

for that night he took me to Ringling Brothers' circus which happened to be playing in Grand Forks, found a place with some friends of his where we stayed overnight, and the next morning took me to the well-kept dairy farm of a man named Jerry Bacon, and persuaded the manager to give me a job helping show Holstein cattle at the Grand Forks Fair, then in progress.

This was better. The manager of the dairy farm, when he learned I was from Mason City, said, "Why, I used to go to Business College there," whereupon we said the usual hackneyed things about it being a small world and so on. The cattle were good. In fact one of the cows was at that time world champion for milk production over a period of one year. I looked at her with considerable awe at first, but when they told me to go ahead and milk her I found she munched her feed quietly and "gave down" much in the manner of lesser animals. She had a special stall at the Fair, and I slept in it beside her at night, feeling that I was indeed in distinguished company. The shattering blasts of rockets from the evening displays of fireworks, the raucous calls of the barkers — carnival people call them talkers — along the midway or the nearby bawling of a homesick heifer disturbed the champion not at all, and I wished that I had been blessed with an equally iron clad nervous system. In the daytime when streams of people came by to see the cattle and some of them asked how much milk this cow gave in a year's time we delighted in telling those whom we could plainly see were city

folks such exaggerated tales of the cow's production that had they stopped to figure it out they would have known us for the world's most stupendous liars.

The chief herdsman, under whom I worked, was a fairly lowbrowed character with a weakness for women and evil-smelling home brew, and, as we lounged about the barns after the evening feeding was done, he liked to regale the rest of us with tales of his considerable prowess with each. He once explained in some detail how he could tell "good" girls from "bad" girls, but we were not much impressed with his "system." One afternoon I was careless enough to stand directly in front of him as he opened one of the many bottles of beer he consumed daily. The cap of the bottle came off suddenly as he held the thing slanted toward me, and the carbonated rush of the liquid in my direction thoroughly soaked the front of my shirt. This would not have been a serious matter in itself, but in a minute or so we observed Mr. Bacon himself approaching our stalls to see how his show herd was getting along. I managed to keep busy at some little distance away from the owner of the cattle and well to the lee side of him. I felt that it was not an opportune moment to discuss Holsteins with him.

On show day, as we led out our animals, washed and brushed and oiled, with their horns glistening and the brushes of their tails carefully combed out after being braided the night before so as to give them a nice marcel wave, I was delighted to see the judge was none other then my old friend and professor, H. H. Kildee,

who, as he always does, dispatched the classes of cattle with smiling efficiency. This was more like it — the "big time" of showing that I had been yearning for ever since the days at Cedarside. When Fair Week was over at Grand Forks I was satisfied to entrain for Cerro Gordo County and home. I had had enough of knocking about for one season.

But I still wondered what had become of Jack King. Why had our carefully planned expedition across the wheat fields of the Great Plains so suddenly blown up? I found out a few weeks later. A letter from him came just as I was ready to follow the now well-beaten trail back to Ames again. In it he explained why he had not waited for me at Hamilton that day. He could not understand why I had crossed him up, he said. I bristled at this, and then became indignant as I read on, for the boss, in his dislike for Jack had plotted to keep us apart. He had told my pardner as he hopped on his bicycle to leave the ranch that morning, that I had changed my mind and was going to stay on. Jack had pedaled angrily off without further word to me, as I have already told you. Of course I wrote him at once telling him what actually happened, and we corresponded in the most friendly way for quite a while. That was 35 years ago, and I am afraid we shall never make the trip we planned so blithely, at least not by bicycle.

It had been pleasant being home again for a few weeks; the Abbott-Detroit purred smoothly now and then on a Saturday night between Mason City and

Clear Lake over the first stretch of paving in Iowa, and there were light-hearted companions to go along on such an expedition. I told my mother that her house was so spick and span by comparison with the places where I had lived most of the summer that it was like being in a hospital. I thought she and my dad seemed relieved to have me back.

I was eager to get back to college for I felt sure the years of being a junior and a senior would be even better than the earlier years had been. The curly-haired girl would be there too, and it was becoming increasingly important that I see her. I hoped she felt the same about me.

There is no experience quite like getting back to a fraternity house after a long summer's vacation. The first arrivals, in the old days when there was no summer quarter, found a rather desolate place, dusty and cobwebby, and there was a lot of work to do in making the place presentable for the rushing season. But as the boys began dropping in by ones and twos and threes, tanned and exuberant after the months away from books and classes, flinging their luggage joyfully upon the front porch or the living room floor, and rushing to embrace their comrades of the year before, the days and the nights were high-lighted by a whole series of noisy and boisterous reunions. How we loved to brag to one another about the adventures and the escapades of the summer. And if we tended to exaggerate a bit who was to know the difference?

There was the thrill of getting back once more to

the classrooms of some of the great teachers of their day, men like Dr. L. H. Pammel, to whom every class presented a box of his favorite cigars. Whereupon the benign Doctor would make a gracious acceptance speech, and botany would be pretty much forgotten for the remainder of the class period. Or like W. H. Pew, who did his best to cram livestock feeding knowledge into our heads, and who was considerably embarrassed once upon a time at a pep meeting when the cheer leader called on the assembled crowd to burst forth with "Rah! Rah! Rah!, Pew! Pew! Pew!" Or J. B. Davidson, famous for his work with farm machinery and whom we couldn't blame for becoming slightly irritated one day with a tobacco-chewing student who persisted in firing the juice at a hot radiator. Soft-voiced L. B. Spinney was another great one. He calmly performed eye-catching experiments in physics to our open-mouthed wonder. We thrilled to the great Clyde Williams, immortalized in the stadium which bears his name, when he stood before us in the gymnasium and told us to take care of the bounding health we were starting with. And there was Orange Howard Cessna, the chaplain for so many years, beloved by thousands for his kindly ways and his sound advice, and we loved him all the more when he once told us as we left for a summer vacation that he hoped we would all come back "full of veal and zigor!" He laughed harder than anyone when he realized how a twist of the tongue had tricked him. Long after lectures are forgotten and laboriously filled notebooks are yellowing with age and

JULY NIGHTS

Sun has set in a glow of red,
Moon climbs up from its eastern bed.
Kingbird stirs in a tree-top nest,
Farmers stop for a bit of rest.
Barley fields send their rich perfume
Through open windows in my room.

Restless pig stirs his litter-mates,
Cattle rub on the barnyard gates.
Windrows of new alfalfa hay
Lie in wait for another day.
Rustle of corn leaves, row on row,
Listen close and you'll hear them grow.

Voice of the gentle southwest breeze
Lingering still in the maple trees
Soothes the kingbird to quiet sleep;
A child asks God his soul to keep;
Stars wink down from their firmament,
I doze and dream — and am content.

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