

*friends
and
neighbors*

Though I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, I know now that there were a good many odd people in our neighborhood, with a lot of curious ways.

Old Joe Mussack was the iron man of our community, a great big fellow, strong as an ox and a horse for work. He took such pride in his strength that sometimes it was a little hard for the other men to take. At

thrashing time he always insisted on working out in the shock field and would actually pitch a whole shock of grain onto a wagon in one forkful. Other men pitched one bundle at a time, and that gave the loader a chance. But not Joe. He would nearly bury the loader alive, so the other men tried every way they could to avoid his station.

Joe's front teeth were double and he liked to startle folks — especially strangers — by chewing chicken bones and tough foods which other people would leave on their plates. He could neither read nor write except to sign his name. His oldest boy taught him how to scrawl *Joe Mussack* so it could be made out, and that was the extent of his formal schooling.

Both he and his wife were over six feet tall and all their children grew to be that tall too.

He had to have fork handles and ax handles made extra strong and they say he could hold up a ten gallon keg of beer and drink out of the bunghole. Once he carried home on his shoulder all the way from Yarmouth — a distance of four miles — a wooden pump with twenty feet of spouting on it. It must have weighed 150 pounds and he never set it down once. He never had any fights, for there wasn't any use for anybody to try to lick a man like that. "Strong as Old Joe Mussack" came to be a common saying.

On the next farm south of Mussacks lived Old Tom Darbyshire and his family. He was a rough, loud-mouthed Englishman nobody could ever quite figure out. Though celebrated for his cussing, his profanity

was confined mostly to just two words: "By Goll!" But he said it so often, no matter what the subject was, that he got the reputation of being one of the cussingest men in the world.

He always had a fuss on with his livestock. Early in the mornings or late in the evenings we could hear Old Tom, whooping and yelling at his cattle and hogs and "By Golling" them something fierce. He always seemed uncomfortable and fretting at something like a hayseed down his back or sand in his boots.

His wife, Aunt Emily as everybody called her, was as quiet and as sweet and as nice as anyone could be. She was very religious, and to her every piece of poetry was a prayer. She used to clip every little verse she saw in the newspaper and paste it in a book. She took a lot of pleasure in showing these poems to people who dropped in.

"That's a pretty little prayer" she would say, handing over a verse, though like as not it was a thousand miles from a prayer. But no matter what the subject was, if it was in rhyme it was a pretty little prayer to Aunt Emily.

Old Tom taught us one thing we never forgot. It was not much in itself, but it stuck like a cocklebur in our memories. It was one of his odd habits at the family table. If there was something that Tom wanted which happened to be out of his reach he never bothered to ask for it. He would simply stand up in his place at the table, reach across the table and spear it with his fork. If it happened to be fat meat, it might

drip all the way across to his plate. But it did not seem so bad in those days, for most women used oil-cloth instead of table cloths.

Tom would do the same thing at anybody's house when he would be there helping to thrash or raise a barn. We thought it was funny and we children used to mock him when the old folks were away and nobody was looking. "Tommin'" we called it. And I never to this day see anybody make a long reach at the table without thinking of Old "By Goll" Tom Darbyshire.

Then there was John Conklin, bellwether of the Baptist church. John always raised all the money to pay the preacher and served as Sunday School superintendent for forty years. He always talked very proper, and always ate with napkins, glass goblets and pearl-handled knives and forks on the table. When his boys grew older they persuaded him to change the spelling to Conkling because they thought it looked more impressive that way.

One thing gave John a strange appearance, and came from his habit of always wiping his mustache the same way, from left to right. In time it got to growing that way. Generally a mustache parts in the middle and sprangles off evenly both ways. But John's mustache all headed toward his right ear. We got used to it of course, and John would have looked queer to us any other way. They were fine folks, of course, but there was a general feeling that maybe they thought themselves a little above common folks.

John Tucker was our neighborhood mystery man.

Mystery surrounded his whole family, for nobody was ever able to get acquainted with any of them. The Tuckers never mixed with the rest of us to any great extent. Neighborhood gossips whispered that Tucker was a bootlegger and the Funk boys, his immediate neighbors on the west, always claimed he acted like a detective. A good many people were afraid that some day Tucker would break loose and harm someone.

Once our folks saw him digging a hole in his field along a line fence. This started the rumor that he might have murdered someone and was disposing of the body. Late that night several neighbors gathered, went to the spot and dug into the fresh dirt, but they couldn't find a trace of anything suspicious. That only deepened the mystery!

Pete Funk was another mysterious figure. As far back as I can remember he had been kept locked up in his bedroom, because of insanity. All of us youngsters were afraid Pete might get loose and catch us. Whenever we saw a man walking alone through the fields we ran for home, fearing that it was Funk.

Pete had three boys, Pete, Henry and Lou. They were good, honest and hard working German boys, but they had an odd manner of using their breath as they talked. Ordinarily people talk with just the breath that is going out, but the Funk boys used it both ways — perhaps to save it, maybe.

Henry once told of a hunting exploit when he fired a shot that killed a brant and two or three ducks. "The other boys shot and shot," he said, "but they didn't

kill anything. I shot and killed a brant and two ducks." Up to the word *brant* he spoke normally, using the outgoing breath, but he finished the sentence from there on while inhaling. Try that yourself and see how funny it sounds. One of our steady sources of amusement was to engage the Funk boys in conversation to watch them do double duty with their breath.

We had two men in our school district by the name of Oberman. Both were John Oberman and heads of families. True to country form we invented means of telling them apart. One we called "High John" Oberman because he claimed to be high German and the other we called "Dried-Up Johnny" Oberman because he was so little and skinny. High John was an educated German who had escaped from the Fatherland in disguise and we confidently waited for the time when he would be hauled back for service in the German army. His sober countenance and his fine manners put him pretty high. He could have been elected to any office up to Justice of the Peace, I imagine. But he never seemed to have any hankering for public office.

Dried-Up Johnny raised his family on a rough and hilly farm at the edge of the tall timber. They were pretty poor and their children sometimes came to school with pretty slim lunches. But Dried-Up Johnny had a way of curing meat that made it taste wonderful. I can recall to this day the smell of that dried meat the kids sometimes brought to school. Then sometimes we would trade our common fodder for a bite of that dried meat. Oh, but it was good! We could taste it for hours

and we learned not to take a drink of water for the rest of the day, just so we could keep that good taste.

Over behind our fields in a clapboard shanty lived an interesting family by the name of Perkins. We never heard the old man's Christian name, he was just called Perkins. He had a fat, soft and shabby appearing wife and several scarecrow-like children. They were a shiftless lot with too great a fondness for hunting and fishing ever to amount to much. They always had three or four dogs, a couple of old guns, an old grey mare, a one-horse democrat and several stands of bees — that was about all. The old man used to hire out for wages at harvest and corn picking time for a few dollars to live on. Just how they managed to get along nobody knew.

Old man Perkins had a habit of disappearing for sometimes as long as ten days or two weeks, but his family seemed to get used to it and never worried about it. His children never seemed to care very much for him, maybe because he was always bearded, ragged, lazy and shiftless.

Once he tried to find out from his son Jeff how he stood in comparison with a dog they owned.

"Jeff," he asked, "If I should take Watch and go away off, and be gone for a considerable spell, which would you be loneliest for, me or Watch?"

"I'd druther see Watch," said Jeff.

One winter night there was a loud knocking at our front door. Pap, who was always a light sleeper, jumped out of bed to see who was there at that time of night.

We heard him say, "Why hello, Jeff, what in blazes you doin' here this time of night?" Jeff replied that he had come to borrow a saw.

"Borrow a saw!" said Pap in great surprise. "What in the world do you need of a saw in the middle of the night?" Jeff stammered that they wanted it to cut the hatchway bigger, that the old man was caught tight in it and they couldn't get him down.

By this time we boys had our duds on and were ready for an adventure. Pap got the saw and we hurried across the field to the Perkins shanty. A dim tallow candle shone through the front window as we approached.

"What's up?" Pap asked of Mrs. Perkins when she opened the rickety door.

"We found Pa dead in the loft," the old lady replied, "and we been tryin' to get him down. He's been gone ten days I reckon, but we didn't think nothing of that, he bein' gone that way a lot. But yisteday I snifted something not jest right in the house, and tonight it got so bad I sent Jeff up into the loft to see what he could find out. And there lay Pa as dead as a mackerel."

"Well, well, well," Pap said, and then the old lady went on: "So the boys commenced right away to git him down, and did git him part way through the hatch-hole, but he was puffed up some, you see, and one arm kinder ketched back someway, and he stuck tight right where he is now."

It was a mess. Pap climbed up on a stool and sawed several boards off, and we all got hold and hefted

the old man to the floor. There was no such thing as an undertaker in those days, so Pap laid out the corpse on some boards laid across a couple of chairs. Then he offered to take the old lady and the children home with him for the night. It was arranged that two of us boys were to stay at the Perkins' cabin to watch the corpse. So the old lady washed out a pair of woolen socks and hung them before the fireplace to dry and asked us to slip them on Pa when they got dry.

It was kinda creepy sitting away over there back of the fields, off the main road, in the flicker of a tallow candle in the middle of the night and with a dead man for company. But we never blinked and sleep was the farthest from our minds. We kept pretty still somehow — stiller than you would think boys could be. After quite a spell of that we got an idea. Frank suggested that we might as well put the old man's socks on now. Being dead he wouldn't catch cold and what was the difference. I agreed that I could see no difference so we got the wet socks and commenced to put them on.

Now anybody who has tried to put wet socks on knows that they go on hard. We pulled and tugged and finally upset the contraption he was laid on and his body plumped right down on the floor. After that it was less trouble to get the socks on him, and we lifted him back into position on the pine boards and put the sheet over his face again. By that time it was beginning to get daylight, so we got our things on and headed for home. We were glad to leave, too.

The Perkins family couldn't afford a burial lot in

the graveyard, so we buried the old man on a little knoll not far from the shanty he died in. Mrs. Perkins said she had never before been so satisfied about Pa. Now she knew where he was, day or night.

The Perkinses were not altogether useless. The old man had been extra help at harvest time and corn picking, he sometimes drove around peddling fish, and often he would cut a bee tree in the woods and peddle the honey. They were clever about borrowing things, and when the smallpox epidemic came along they furnished three cases. We boys used to put Jeff through experiments that we thought were a little too risky for us. We learned from Jeff about the harmlessness of green apples as a diet. Mother had always warned us against eating them and taught us that "one green apple will put your teeth on edge; two will give you cholera morbus; three will kill you dead." We heard that so often that we could say it forward and backward and sideways. With great courage we would eat two and a half apples, then gravely ponder the question of what could be in that other half apple that could be so deadly.

One day we coaxed Jeff into eating three green apples. He not only obliged us by eating three, but went right on and ate three more for good measure. Then he jumped onto his old horse and rode off with no intention of falling dead from cholera morbus or anything else. We watched him ride away, expecting to see him tumble from his horse, but instead he came riding back in a short while with a rag and some salt in it. To our horror he chomped down several more green apples on

top of the six he had already eaten. And they were even better with salt!

That exploded the warning about the deadly effects of green apples. From then on we ate all we could swallow and, except for an occasional stomach ache, suffered no bad effects. But Mother was right. At least she thought she was and nobody could ever make me believe that she would try to deceive us, even for our own good.

Perkinses had a married daughter who lived with her worthless husband down on the river bottom. They never got much of a start in life, except with babies, and they had five of them by the time they had been married seven years. Lots of folks helped them every winter and mother always sent clothes after we had outgrown them. Occasionally she sent Nora one of her own dresses to make over.

Once when her good for nothing husband was peddling fish through the neighborhood, Nora came along to visit us. She was wearing one of the dresses Mother had given her. It was the funniest fitting dress we had ever seen, for it hung almost six inches longer in the front and puffed out at the shoulders so that Nora looked like a hunchback. We just couldn't keep from laughing at her.

Mother spoke up and said. "Nora, what in the world have you done to the dress? I thought you were about the same size as my girl Edith and that it would fit you good."

"Well," drawled Nora, "it buttons up the back and

I couldn't nurse the baby without turning it around. So I put it on hind part before."

Mother made her take off the dress and in five minutes had it all fixed so that Nora could wear it correctly with a slit in front for nursing the baby. But Nora had been too ignorant or shiftless to figure out how to do that for herself.

Another neighbor we thought rather odd was named Peckham. Nobody pretended to know very much about him. He was a tall, pale, rawboned and lonesome man. He owned the wettest, levelest and soggiest farm in the county. Some claimed that Peckham had web feet like a duck, but we never took much stock in that. He would work all day with a crowd of neighbors on some community project without saying a word. Our school teacher said that Peckham was silent as a Sphinx and I think everybody was a little afraid of him.

Altogether there were enough odd people in our neighborhood to furnish us all the diversion we needed, but perhaps we may have seemed strange at times to them also.