

*pierkses*

*two*

*boys,*

*one*

*of*

*'em*

"I'm Pierkses two boys, one of 'em."

That was the answer he gave to Pap's question as he bounced along on horseback close behind our democrat on the way home from Yarmouth one Saturday night.

It was this way. Henry Pierks, who lived in a cabin at the edge of the woods a few miles farther on, had two boys about fourteen and sixteen years old. From the

time they were little fellows they were always together, went places together, worked together and wherever one was, there the other was too. It got to be funny. Our Sunday School teacher always said that "the Pierkses boys are inseparable." And that was about it.

I do not remember that I ever heard either of their given names. They were just "Pierkses two boys," and somehow we got to thinking of them as twins.

On this Saturday night the brothers had got separated in the crowd and one of them was galloping home alone. As was the custom in those days of friendly informality, Pap turned and called, "Hello, there, who might you be?"

Quick as a flash the answer came back, "I'm Pierkses two boys, one of 'em."

Pap laughed right out loud and we kids giggled. The more we thought about it the funnier it seemed. And it has stuck with me through the years as one of the homely incidents that helped to brighten things in a country neighborhood given pretty generally to corn and swine, with a little apple cider on the side.

Through the years I have completely lost sight of the Pierkses, along with many of the others. If the two boys are still living I hope they have managed to stay together. If dead, I hope they lie side by side. They live, in memory, along with Old Joe Mussack, Dan Michaels, Tom Darbyshire, Pete Funk, Chauncey Blodgett, Conrad Bombey, John Tucker, Pete Schomp, Sam Griggs, John Emerich, Pete Capps and Peckham as fine neighbors and good friends.

This short list of folks has a striking number of Petes in it. Not one of them was ever called Peter, for it was country style to shorten every name. Again these names appear strange on the printed page but to us they never seemed odd, for they were typical American names.

This matter of a name led to tragedy in our community. Itsie Wurmser, who attended our district school, was good looking and smart. But she was always sensitive about that name. She felt that *Itsie* was bad enough, but *Wurmser*! Of course, she could always hope to get rid of it some day by getting married but in the meantime it worried her constantly.

Nobody graduated from our school in those days. Students either dropped out to go to work on the farm or in the kitchen, or sometimes simply got too old to go to school any longer. Eventually the time came when Itsie stopped attending school, for she had a "feller" whose name was Adolphus Schlaub — from away up in the country.

The courtship of Itsie and Adolphus progressed handsomely as far as anybody could see and in due time he popped the question. Itsie said yes. Whatever else may have been in her mind, here was a chance to escape the stigma of that name. The future held great promise for her until one Valentine's day she wrote a perfumed note to send to her beloved as a Valentine. Just in fun, and as countless lovers have done, she signed her name Itsie Schlaub. There her world came to an end. Itsie Schlaub! What a mixture of skin irritation and sauer-

kraut that name proved to be when written on paper!

They found the poor girl dead in her bed the next morning. There was an empty laudanum bottle on the lampstand and a final message of despair. "Itsie Schlaub is even worse than Itsie Wurmser. Goodbye forever."

In a frontier settlement like ours, in the 1880's, the death of any person was an important event. Our best attended gatherings were the funerals. But a suicide! The taking of one's life! It would never do to let such a person be buried without benefit of the presence of the entire community.

A mile-long procession slowly followed the earthly remains of the poor, disappointed Itsie to her grave. Without regard for the cold or the snow-blocked roads they poured in from every part of the community in sleighs, bobsleds, wagons, democrats and road carts of every description. Another hundred or more came on horseback. Not a fourth of the crowd could find room in the little country church and most were forced to stand in the cold outside to speculate on the possible fate of the one who had committed the crime which the preacher said, "left no place for repentance."

In the crowd waiting outside that day were a couple of old cronies named Sam Griggs and Pete Cappes. Since Cappes was deaf as a post, Griggs had to repeat everything to make him understand. As the crowd shivered and milled about we heard Griggs say, "Pete, you can't blame her. I say you can't blame her."

"You say they couldn't tame her?" whispered the deaf Cappes.

"No," replied the exasperated Griggs, "I say you couldn't blame her."

Pete seemed to show some signs of understanding and after a moment of contemplation responded, "No, you didn't name her. Nobody can blame *you*."

Old Pete Cappes — what pleasant memories are revived by the mention of that name. Pete was German through and through. He had run away from the Fatherland to escape military service, bringing his thrifty frau with him and settling on the farm just north of ours.

Mrs. Cappes was one of the most neighborly and kindest women we knew. Was there ever in the world such coffee cake as she could bake! How she enjoyed passing a big slice of it to me over the hedge fence that bordered our field in front of their house when, tired and hungry from the hard work of weeding corn, I would rest in the shade of that hedge. She always insisted that its flavor was better with coffee but I never could understand how it could have been improved on one bit.

Pete Cappes was better than a daily newspaper, and in some ways that was exactly what he was. Since there were no daily papers in those days, Pete reported all the news for us. He knew everything that was going on in the neighborhood, in spite of his deafness, and he liked to tell it to everyone he came across.

In all his years in Iowa he never dropped the German forms of speech. When his hogs killed a number of geese in the barnlot he told us the next day

"The geese eat the hogs up." Or on other occasions he would say, "The cow jumped the fence over" and always he would command, "The stove put some wood in, John." When people began to lay tiling to drain wet land Pete called it "pifin." I guess he tried to say *pip*ing, but I never knew for sure.

His three boys — Bill, John and Lou — could drive straighter corn rows than anybody else in the neighborhood. Straight corn rows were a matter of great pride and people would drive out of their way to see the corn rows in the Cappes fields. They were perfect. From one end to the other there wasn't a kink in them.

On rainy days the Cappes boys would come strolling across the fields to our house to loaf and visit in the barn. On these days we always mended the harness, sorted corn or fanned timothy seed and they were welcome help. If Pap had gone to town we would pitch horseshoes on the barn floor, using spike nails for pegs. Lots of money was made and lost on those games, but none ever changed hands. Money was scarce in those days.

We had a two year old bull which we kept in the barn but he had to be led out to water twice a day. To keep the bull at a respectable distance we snapped a pole into the nose ring, for he was ugly at times. One day when the Cappes boys came to visit, Frank decided to show off a bit and started to lead the bull to water. Not to be outdone in bravery, John Cappes jumped on the bull's back for a ride.

The bull was mad as a hornet. He made a wild rush

for the door, forgot all about the ring in his nose, and jerked loose from Frank's grip. He busted through the barn door and across the manure pile, all the time doing his best to buck John off. But John slid forward on the bull's neck and grabbed the critter's horns, to hold on. Around and around the barn the bull ran — plunging, bucking and snorting. We could tell that John was scared and wanted off but was afraid to slide down for fear the bull might turn on him. After some of the liveliest sport you ever saw the bull gave up and ran back to his stall. John jumped off pale as a ghost and with his hair on end, but he had really given us a show.

That goes to show how hungry we sometimes got for excitement and how reckless a young fellow can be.