

springtime
on
old
orchard
farm

While every part of the year was exciting on the farm, spring was the finest of all. It was such a big change from winter, with everything frozen up, and nothing stirring much except the livestock. But when spring set in everything seemed to come to life, the air filled up with bugs and insects, birds came surging back from the South, while wild geese and ducks, on

their trip to the North, just filled the ponds and lakes all around us.

Iowa was a young state and there was lots of water on the surface of the ground. Every section of land had a pond or two, and out west of our place three or four miles lay Canaan Flats, a wide stretch of perfectly level land, wet and soggy — just the kind of a place wild fowls were looking for. We herded the cattle in there sometimes in summer, when the pastures would get too short, and the horse we were riding would sink in halfway to his knees. It was mostly blue stem and ramrod that grew there, and the cattle didn't care so very much about it. But they would eat it after they got good and hungry.

Early in the spring we always finished up the wood pile. It was hard to keep your mind on your work when wild geese and ducks were flying over and lighting in the fields to feed. We could look off any direction and see six or seven great flocks, some of them several hundred, either soaring away up high on their way north, or circling around getting ready to land. Then all at once a great big flock of wild geese came down in a wheat field not forty rods away. They looked as big as turkeys sitting there right out in the open, only five rods from the hedge fence.

If Pap was at home we went and told him, and he was apt to say, "Well, finish up your work, and do the chores, then you can go and try your hand." But if Pap was gone to Yarmouth, we would get out Old Dalsey and the musket right away and start out. Gener-

ally it was a good deal farther than we supposed, because geese are so big they look closer than they really are.

When we peeped through the hedge fence at those geese pottering around in the young wheat right before our eyes, our hearts would palpitate and our legs just tremble. The question was to get close enough to shoot. Could we do it without scaring them away? For sure, it was an exciting time.

When we got up to within a hundred yards we took another look, and there they were, bigger than ever — some feeding, some just sitting around unconcerned, and some with their eyes peeled on the lookout for danger.

But we crawled closer on our hands and knees, over ground soaked with water, and with hedge thorns once in a while sticking out of the dead grass. The musket was only good for about forty yards, but Old Dalsey, which was a rifle, would bring them down at two hundred yards if you could hold her steady. But we wanted one goose for the musket and one for Old Dalsey. So we crawled a little closer.

Only fifty yards now from that wonderful flock of wild geese! We could see the stripes on their necks, and hear them jabbering with one another. Then we scootched down a little closer to the ground, and inched along, right on our bellies for another rod or two.

Then a terrible thing happened. There was a wild flapping of wings and such a honking as you never heard and away went that whole flock of three or four hundred geese. We raised up and banged away with

both guns. But the geese, although they looked as big as fanning mills, were too far away for the musket, and we couldn't hit anything on the wing with a rifle anyhow. There we stood, with our mouths open, and watched those blessed geese 'til they went out of sight behind Fred Smith's hill. Then we went back to our wood chopping again.

Nobody had any very good guns in those days, and the two we had were no better than the rest. We had not yet learned about decoys, blinds, or any other fine points of hunting. As a result we generally didn't get a thing, as far as geese and ducks were concerned. But we got to shoot at them, and that was worth a lot. We always figured that we would get them the next time.

We soon learned that a wild goose must appear to be only two or three rods away to really be close enough to shoot. But it was mighty hard for a boy to hold his fire while those great birds approached. Something always told us to shoot and usually we did. We also learned not to shoot while the birds were headed toward us. When we did, the shot just rattled off their feathers unless we were lucky enough to hit their heads or necks. When we were able to hold back until they had passed over, we had a better chance to get a bird.

Sometimes we had good luck. I shall never forget a time when Jodie Williams, an orphan living with us at the time, and I went over to the lake to take a shot at some butter ducks we had seen light in a round pond behind a grove of willow bushes. We sure did slay them that time.

A stray dog had been making his home with us for two or three weeks. He was black as a coal and deaf as a post. He had long wavy hair, dangling ears and web feet like a duck. Chauncey Blodgett allowed he was a spaniel. The dog was tickled to death when we threw sticks into the water so he could dive in and bring them out. He would do that all day, if anybody would keep throwing the sticks. We named him Heck. So Heck went along with us that day after the butter ducks.

Jodie and I slipped along behind the willows until we were only forty feet from the pond, there we peeped through a little opening and saw almost a hundred of the prettiest little wild ducks, splashing water, and chasing one another around. Jodie poked the old musket through some twigs, took a good rest over a chunk that was lying there, and let drive. There was a terrible fluttering of wings and squawking, as the ducks scrambled out of there, and we popped through the thicket to see what we had.

Heck went right into the pond and began bringing out the ducks. He kept it up, without stopping to rest, until he had ten of them at our feet. He never even shook himself until he was all through, but then he splashed about a gallon of water all over us. But what did we care? We had a wonderful string of ducks to take to the house and show the folks, and nothing else counted.

On the way home we had an experience that proved just how ignorant a young boy can be. Heck was out ahead of us when suddenly he stopped dead still and

stared into a clump of little bushes. There he stood, not moving a muscle until we passed him. Even then he didn't show any sign of following us. We called him but he didn't pay any attention. Then we walked on hoping he would follow, but Heck just stood his ground and wouldn't budge.

Jodie and I couldn't understand what had happened to that dog. He was a smart dog but he was acting mighty funny. I thought maybe the water had dazed him but Jodie was afraid he had gone mad. We didn't know what to do and were about ready to break and run when the dog lunged into the bushes, leaping and snapping in all directions as a big covey of quail flew out. Heck had tried to tell us about those birds, for he was a setter as well as a retriever. It was a case of a dog knowing more than two boys. Even that was not saying too much for the dog.

Once I shot a low flying goose just as twilight was closing in. She didn't fall immediately but I saw her sag down when I shot and I knew the bird was badly hit. I watched her mighty close but it was pretty dark. She dropped out of sight when she was even with the tops of the cornstalks so I ran over as fast as I could to search in the dark, but I couldn't find a trace of her. Then I went home and did the chores. After supper I took a lantern and Frank and I searched up and down every corn row, but had no luck, even though we kept looking until nine o'clock.

Next morning just as daylight came out of the East I was out again searching that cornfield. Finally I got up

on the rail fence, on the far side, and looked across a pasture. I could see a black looking object away over toward the other side, so I ran over there to see. It was my goose, or what was left of her. But the coyotes had beaten me there. All that was left was a few bones and feathers. It was a cruel blow for that was my first wild goose. But what a night I had made for the coyotes!

Many other kinds of water birds passed through every spring. Plover, snipes, rails, curlews, loons, cranes, and the like came by the thousands. And what wonderful flyers the sand hill cranes were. They came late in the spring, after the grass was green, and hardly ever lit in our parts. Usually they flew as much as half a mile high, circling all the time in kind of long sweeps, in no hurry at all. They made a guttural kind of sound not a bit like any other bird, and you could hear them for some time before they came in sight. We used to lie on our backs, shade our eyes with our hands, and look all over the sky for them. Finally, away off yonder, looking not much bigger than humming birds, we could see a big flock of cranes circling around and coming over. Like as not it would be ten or fifteen minutes before they passed over us and went out of sight.

Dick Peckham had a 32 Winchester which he always claimed would bring down a sand hill crane, no matter how high he was flying. Dick said it would shoot two miles on the level, so why not up in the air? We always thought he was stretching it a little, but he said, "Wait and see, you don't understand a regular breech loader."

Not long afterward, when we were in the pasture

drowning out ground squirrels, Dick came by with his famous rifle. He said he wouldn't waste his high priced ammunition on such things as ground squirrels, but if we could find a ground hog or a coyote he would show us something about how a real rifle could shoot. But just then a big flock of cranes came circling over so Dick emptied his gun at them. First, he tried the leader, with three or four shots, then he fired a little farther back into the flock. The rest of the cartridges he fired sort of all over doing his level best to bring down a crane.

But as far as we could see he didn't disturb them at all. They didn't seem to even hear the shots, and didn't pay the slightest attention. They circled around as lazy as you please and finally flew out of sight. Dick said he didn't have the regular kind of cartridges made for his rifle, and that's why he didn't have any better luck. So he shot a few ground squirrels for us, then made out that he had work to do and went on home.

Once in a big field by the Carter place we saw a flock of cranes on the ground about eighty rods away. They looked bigger than turkeys, with necks even longer. I always wondered how these big birds could fly as far as they did without stopping to rest. They must have been "fearfully and wonderfully made," as our teacher said. A lot of things are, if you stop to think about it.

In the spring the first clap of thunder brought out the frogs. It was a sure sign of spring when along in the evening they began to sing to beat anything. In the creek there were swarms of minnows and suckers as well as some pretty fair sized bullheads. It surely was fun to

fish off the edge of our bridge in that clear, four-foot pool under the big bridge while our feet dangled down. We cut our poles in a willow thicket, used common store twine for string and a bent pin for a hook. The fish would jerk the cork almost as soon as it hit the water and a pint of fishworms wouldn't last an hour. Of course, lots of fish bit that we never caught, for a pin hook had no barb on it. Unless we jerked the line at exactly the right moment, the fish was gone. But we caught a good many bullheads, some good sized redhorse, and sometimes a sucker or two.

Once when we got caught in a heavy rain storm while fishing we crawled under the bridge where a shelf stuck out. But we forgot to think that a bridge with a plank floor wouldn't turn water. Water poured down through the cracks, washing all the dirt down with it to leave us the dirtiest looking brats in the neighborhood when we finally crawled out. We were ashamed to go to the house so we took off our clothes, washed them in the creek and went swimming while they dried on the fence. There may have been sports which were more fun than that kind of fishing, but we never found them. It was good enough for me.

We were deathly afraid of snakes. This was partly because we always went barefooted and partly because of the big stories people told about rattlers. Once in a great while, of course, somebody ran across a rattler, but he was really a scarce snake. We ran onto lots of garter snakes, as harmless as flies, but we jumped back when we saw them just the same. But we always kept clear of the

blue racer. He was a deep blue color, lived in the grass and was generally found in wet or low places. He was sure a fast runner. The ones I saw were going the other way just as fast as they could streak, then would disappear in the grass. I never could understand why a poisonous snake, as we thought the blue racer to be, would always run the other way as fast as he could when we ran across him. I always expected the next one to run up my britches leg and bite me a time or two before I could strip off my clothes.

Pierkses two boys said that down in their pasture they saw a blue racer run right up a horse's leg, bite him three or four times on the back and then jump off. The horse, they claimed, died that very night with both eyes swollen shut and his tongue hanging out. They said more than a thousand blue racers lived on their farm. We stayed off the Pierkses farm after that. And they had some of the best eating apples in the country!

Springtime brought big rains that made the creek come clear up. That gave us the chance for some of the grandest adventures that boys ever had. When there was a freshet, we dragged an old horse trough down the hill to use as a boat. Then we poled it down to the lower flood gate. After this we would walk along the slippery bank, pulling our craft back to the starting place to do it all over again. We always pretended we were savages on headhunting expeditions in the jungle so we did all this without a stitch of clothes on. When our skin peeled a few days later from sunburn we really looked a good deal like savages. And we felt like them too.

One thing that never failed us when we were out for blood on these trips was that curious crab-like creature we called the crawdad. They were built like lobsters with the meanest kind of pinchers for hands, and carried their young wrapped up under their flat tails. They crawled forward on land but swam backward in the water. At the time of a freshet we could find them by the dozens at the mouth of every little draw that emptied into the creek.

We used to fasten our boat at these crawdad stations and make raids on them. We called them the "Americans" and were out to capture them dead or alive. It wasn't very hard to do, but we made out that it was dangerous business. We convinced ourselves that they were poisonous like blue racer snakes and that they could pinch us to death if they ever got held of us. On one trip we captured more than a bushel of these crawdads. It was a little awkward, without any clothes on, to find a good place to ride in the boat with several hundred crawling monsters, every one equipped with poisonous fangs and anxious to deal us a paralyzing blow. But we managed to get along and finally arrived at the lower floodgate with our whole cargo.

What to do with them was then the question. When we took a vote on it, the majority was in favor of cutting their heads off, but we had only one pocket knife in the crowd, and it was half a mile up the creek in Frank's britches pocket, so we smashed a few of them as a warning to the rest, and let it go at that. Then we hauled the boat out on the bank, and turned it upside

down, while that whole ugly swarm of "Americans" scrambled down the bank into the water. We waited to see whether any of them would come out again to fight, but none of them showed up. So we wrote a warning on the floodgate with a piece of soapstone, and decided to explore farther down the creek.

We pried the floodgate open a couple of feet and finally got the horse-trough through. Then we got aboard and went sailing through Schomp's field without permission. We pushed around great bends and under overhanging trees as reckless as you please. Now and then we came to a place where another creek emptied in and then our creek would be a lot wider and deeper.

It was the bulliest kind of sport. Once in sailing around a sharp bend our boat started spinning and one end banged into the bank. Then the other end swung around with the current to hit the other bank and stop dead in the water. Pretty soon the driftwood and rubbish commenced gathering and backed up the water so it was nearly a foot deeper on the upper side of our boat. But just about the time we decided to abandon ship she broke loose so away we went again with driftwood, rubbish and all. After that we were pretty careful about how we sailed around the bends.

We got so wrapped up in this thing that we went right under a big wagon bridge without caring a cent. Pretty soon we passed another creek mouth which brought in even more water — covered with foam and rubbish. We sailed through a big willow grove that none of us could remember and once we passed in plain

sight of a house, but they didn't seem to notice us. We talked a little about going right on around the world, but since we didn't have even a rag of clothes on that was out of the question. So we gave it up.

Frank said he believed we were near the Peckham farm. This scared us, for Peckham was a mighty strange sort of man who might shoot us, likely as not. So we crawled out on the muddy bank to look around. We were more than a mile below the big bridge we had sailed under, and our clothes were at least half a mile above that. We tried poling the boat, but the current was too swift for that. We couldn't even hold our own — the water was coming so fast. Then we started to wade along the edge of the water and tried to keep out of sight under the bank. But every little ways the bank got so steep we finally made up our minds to stay out and beat it up the bank as fast as we could.

In a little while the chuckle of a wagon made us realize that we were below the main road and would have to get across it somehow to get back to our clothes. We made a shelter out of grass and weeds to keep the sun off and waited for a chance when no one was going past. When we did make the break we ran right into Mrs. Manson, who was on her way home from the post office. She sassed us good, saying we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. But we already were. She didn't have to tell us.

Springtime also brought lettuce, onions, dandelion greens, gooseberries, and wild strawberries. Was there ever anything as good as wild strawberries? Pie plant

pie was another mighty good thing to eat. But we never could eat more than three or four pieces without getting sick. Ripe currents were not so bad either. And apples were good to eat as soon as the seeds showed up. But green plums were the bunk, believe me. We learned to wait until they were ripe. In those days there was no such thing as buying any of these fine articles in any of the stores. We had to raise them ourselves. And Mother's garden was certainly a Godsend after a long winter of pickled pork, sauerkraut, and sorghum molasses. Not that these things were not good food. But we got tired of them after a few months and wanted a change.

Our Easter celebration also was one of the events of springtime. We kids gathered all the eggs we could find and hid them in the oats bin, the granary, the salt barrel, or any other place we thought of. It was a lot of fun to hear Mother complain about the hens not laying any eggs like they ought to. We thought we were fooling her, but she was fooling us, and knew all the time what was going on.

Then on Easter morning we would come lugging in eggs by the pailful. Some Easters we had saved up as much as a hundred dozen. And how Mother would carry on about the way we had kept her in the dark about it all, and how she had been laying it all onto the poor hens. For breakfast we wouldn't have a thing but eggs. She would fry a skilletful, boil three or four dozen, scramble a big dishful, and have the table all dressed up with colored eggs made by wrapping calico around them and boiling them in water. Each one tried to see

who could eat the most, and it was generally Pap who won. One Easter he ate seventeen, and we decided there wasn't any use to try to beat that.

Watermelons, muskmelons, green corn, peaches, plums, fresh mutton, catfish, once in a while a beef steak, fresh pork heart, spareribs and liver at butchering time, homemade bread, home churned butter, fresh buttermilk, cottage cheese, spiced apples, a dozen kinds of preserves, no end of canned pickles — nobody ever fared better or had any better time than we did on Old Orchard Farm.