



the good old summertime

Though Pap's formal education was limited, he was smart enough at setting up schemes to get work out of his boys. With every nasty little job that ever came along he would always say something to make it look easy.

One of many unknown and carefully guarded boons Pap often proposed to bestow on us after a tough job was finished was to "starch our pants and go and

hear the bob whites holler." We never got to do it, but we just busted to find out what it meant and to this day I get a certain thrill out of the bare mention of starching my pants to go hear the bob whites holler.

One of the hottest and meanest jobs we had to do was mowing weeds along the fence rows. On a two hundred acre farm divided into forty and twenty acre fields there was a considerable stretch of fence rows. It seems to me now that we must have had nearly four miles of plank, rail, hedge and wire fence on Old Orchard Farm. But at weed mowing time during the dog days of August it seemed we had at least a hundred miles.

We always tackled the fence rows when the weather was as hot as it ever gets. Between the tall corn and the hedge fences lay a five or six foot strip of every kind of stinking weed you ever read about. Not a breath of air could get in and the sun beat down on our heads like fury.

We used a short bladed scythe we called the "Armstrong Reaper." First we swung to the right and then to the left, with all our strength slashing into the weeds to a depth of six or seven inches. Every little while we would strike a regular sockdolager of a weed that the scythe couldn't cut and we were forced to pull it up by hand. On top of this, about every third lick we would run the point of the blade into the ground. It was work for a horse. A dozen strokes made us sweat all over and in a little bit we just had to head for the shade in the cornfield and rest.

Pollen from the corn and surrounding weeds stuck on our sweaty faces and necks so that we were as yellow as pumpkins. It itched like the dickens, but when we tried to wipe it off with a bandana handkerchief it chafed the skin all the more.

About every thirty minutes we got so thirsty we'd walk back to the water jug sitting in the weeds and sheltered from the sun. But it was a pretty poor drink, for it was usually about as warm as dishwater. It was wet, however, and that always helped. Sometimes we walked a half mile to the house or to the Cappeses to get a cool drink. And it was worth the walk, too.

Pap used strategy to get us out to cut these weeds. He always said that if we cut all the weeds during the dog days in August, they would not be there the following year. So we yanked that old scythe through those blessed weeds convinced that this was the last time we would ever have to do it. And it was, at least as far as those particular weeds were concerned. But a new crop always appeared the next year, calling for another ten days of mean and dirty work.

Corn husking always brought out another of Pap's plans for speeding up our work. Two or three of us would be on each side of the wagon and Pap would work on the down row. He was always able to find all the corn on his own row, gather up what the horses and wagon knocked off, and find every nubbin we left on the rows behind us. Late in the afternoon there was always a let down so Pap would sing out, "Here we go for cider." That meant that the sooner we husked to the

end of the field the quicker we could get to the cider barrel. It always worked too. At other seasons of the year it would be "going for gravy," or "going for sausage," or whatever else came into his mind.

But life on the farm was more than ornery work and hardships. There was always enough work to keep us busy, of course, but along with the chores there were pleasant and funny experiences that relieved the monotony.

Summer brought wonderful things to Old Orchard Farm. 'Way back when the first few peeping blades of green grass appeared, we figured it was time to shuck our boots and go barefoot. There was something mighty fine about turning your bare feet out onto the fresh warm earth for a sweet summer outing. At first we had to be careful because our feet were tender from having been shut up so long. But they toughened up pretty fast and by midsummer they got so calloused that we could run anywhere — over rocks, stubble or even hedge-thorns. But we never learned any way to keep from getting hurt by the saw grass that grew down along the lake. That pesky stuff would grab right onto your bare legs and scratch worse than any cat. It would burn and itch and scratching it only made matters worse.

We had a lot of fun running barefoot along the dusty lanes, kicking up great clouds of dust which floated off over the fences. And what bliss it was on a hot day to wade knee deep in the cool creek with its swift water rippling over the white pebbles.

But what a job it was to wash your dirty feet at bed-

time! With feet all banged up, the bark knocked off ankle bones and only half cured, with little cracks all over the top of your feet and maybe a thorn buried in your heel, and with your legs scarred by saw grass, washing was an awful job. Mother sometimes made a short down pallet for us so that our feet could stick out, then would let us go to bed without washing them. We always appreciated that!

In early summer we got lots of fun out of hunting goose eggs among the drifts in the willow grove in the old lake bottom. Geese have a way of hiding their nests which you have to know about. An old goose will make her nest in a spot where small sticks and loose rubbish can be found. After she has laid an egg she covers the nest, doing such a good job that the place looks almost exactly like it did in the first place.

But to one who knows about geese it is different. The place where the nest is looks smoother and in damp weather looks dryer. It was fun to take off these sticks and rubbish to uncover a nest full of great white eggs. Since we never ate any of the eggs we would cover them again and go on searching for another nest. But when the old goose settled on her nest to hatch out some goslings we had to be careful. She was as sassy as could be, wouldn't budge an inch for anybody and could bite and beat fiercely with her wings.

One time four or five of us were prowling around in the grove doing nothing in particular, barefooted and as carefree as could be. I stepped over a pile of driftwood and set my foot down right alongside a stray

nest where an old goose was setting. Before I realized what had happened there was a terrible pain in the lower part of my leg, a sharp hissing sound struck up and I was getting whipped around the legs by the wings of an excited goose. Then with her jagged little teeth she nabbed the big tendon that runs up from the heel. Two other boys ran up to rescue me or I would have been scared to death. That goose bite turned black and blue over night and bothered me for about a week. We learned that we couldn't be too careful if there were any nests around.

We had the grandest apple orchard you ever saw. It lay on the south slope west of the barn and had at least a hundred trees with green grass under them. When that apple orchard was in full bloom in the spring it was one of the prettiest sights of the year.

Birds lived there by the hundreds. Blackbirds, robins, thrushes, doves and flickers came there to build their nests. The flickers pecked holes in dead limbs and nested there, but the other birds used the crotches of the trees to build out where it was cool. Blackbirds and robins made some nests nearly as big as a man's hat by weaving together pieces of old rags, sticks, twigs and a little of everything they could find. Then they lined them with mud carried a mouthful at a time from the lake nearly a quarter of a mile away, and finished them with feathers to make the nest soft and comfortable. But doves were poor at it, for they only chucked a few sticks in a crotch to keep the eggs from rolling out and let it go at that. They must have had something more important to do than building nests.

We had names for most of our apple trees. I still remember the Rich tree, the Cin tree, the John D. tree, the Skin-a-cat tree, the Corner tree, the Hockey tree, the Stomach-ache tree, the Sweet tree — and perhaps forty others. All of these names meant something and stuck to the trees just like people's names.

Blossoms and blooms, birds and bees, rabbits and garter snakes, tumble bugs and hen's nests, green and ripe apples, fine places to climb and limbs to swing on, the wheat granary by the gate and the hay stack down at the lower end — all these showed us a wonderful time every day we went in.

In the evenings Pap used to turn the horses loose in the apple orchard to keep the grass mowed short. For years an old "A" harrow sat up-ended against a tree in the edge of the orchard. Behind it the grass was always a foot high. Once a work horse named Buckskin ran his head through the frame of the harrow in an effort to get at the tall grass. When he tried to straighten up he pushed his head into the fork of the harrow forming the "A."

Buckskin was so scared that he threw his head up high. This caused the harrow to slip down over his neck and stabbed the teeth into his breast. He tried to back out of the trap, then he tried to turn around, and finally he lost his reason entirely and fell in a heap with the harrow on top of him. The whole family ran to the rescue with the men trying every way to do something. But nothing worked. Then Buckskin jumped to his feet, gave a blood chilling squeal and rushed about aimlessly, first one direction and then another. He ran

into a tree and nearly butted his brains out, he broke through the barn lot fence and finally fell in a tangled heap by the water trough.

The men got a rope and tied the poor horse's legs to keep him from killing himself while they cut the harrow in half. We all thought that would be the end of Buckskin, but he fooled us. Apparently he didn't wear the name for nothing. Outside of a few scratches he wasn't hurt a bit. He was a tough critter.

One spring while the men were sowing oats it was a fool steer that caused the trouble. Pap always broadcast the small grain by hand, using a sow-sack strapped over his shoulder. The supply stations for the seed were located in the middle and at both ends of the field with salt barrels serving for containers. One afternoon when the oats supply was nearly gone in the barrels, a three year old steer poked his head in for a mouthful of oats. But when he went to take his head out the barrel caught on his horns. The steer threw his head wildly into the air trying to toss off the barrel. The loose oats then came tumbling down into his eyes and nostrils. With his head in the barrel he was blind as a bat and the more he thought about it the more frightened he got.

Then he started to run across the field with his tail high. Pap and the boys cut for the fence for safety, for the steer was charging in every direction. After a little he set off toward the west at full speed — soon coming to a dry ten-foot ditch which he plunged into at full tilt. The boys hurried over, supposing the steer had broken his neck. Before they got half way, however, the steer

came crawling out of the ditch with a lot of wooden hoops dangling around his neck. He had hit the bottom of the ditch hard enough to break the salt barrel into a thousand pieces, but he wasn't hurt a bit.

A runaway team of horses is as bad as anything on a farm. Everybody who ever lived in the country knows what a runaway is, but will agree that it is something worth seeing, too.

Work horses, harnessed or saddled, are as gentle as little lambs, as a rule, as long as they think you have them in hand. But remove your hand, let the horse think he is free, and there is a runaway right there. Maybe it is no more than laying down the lines a moment or relaxing control in any way and a spirited team will run away.

And a runaway horse just goes crazy. He runs at top speed and never cares what he runs into. He will run over anything that happens to be in his path, break through fences, jump over ditches, and has been known to crash right into a stone fence and break his fool neck. A genuine runaway is surely a sight.

During my years on the farm I was mixed up in several runaways. Once the lines slipped off the dashboard of a lumber wagon when I turned around to slide a post down. Before I knew what had happened, away went that team at breakneck speed with the lines dragging underneath the wagon. I was as helpless as a baby.

Nobody can imagine, unless he has had a similar experience, what a wild ride that was—over rough

ground, with no springs of any kind, and the wagon bouncing two or three feet high at a bounce. It was mighty lucky for me that the team got pretty well winded before they reached the barn yard, and came to an abrupt but harmless stop at the gate. I got off alive, but about scared to death, and my hair stood on end for a good while.

Another time I got off the seat of a riding plow to go to the fence row for a drink of water. Just as I lifted the jug to my lips the three plow horses were frightened by something and away they went. As they gained speed the beam of the plow came down and the share gouged into the ground. How the dirt did boil! And those fool horses just seemed to put on more power and heaved into their collars with all the strength they had. Pretty soon the beam lifted and there was a fresh spurt of speed. Then down went the beam again and up went another stream of dirt five or six feet high.

They kept that up all the way across the field and never paid the slightest attention to the wire fence. They plunged right into it, full speed, and pulled out all the staples for a hundred yards. All three of the horses fell in a tangled heap of barbed wire. After floundering for awhile they calmed down and lay there as meek as kittens.

I ran to the house as fast as I could to bring Pap out to help. Together we cut wires and harness all to pieces before we could get those horses on their feet. Strange as it may seem, none of them was hurt. They were scratched up some, but there were no broken bones or

deep cuts. But the fence, the harness and the plow were a mess.

With a team of mules it was different. Mules were still more likely to run away than horses, but a runaway mule team was more of a joke than a calamity. A mule is either too lazy to put up a real thriller or he has too much sense to take the risk of getting killed. As a rule, a runaway mule team will never get beyond intermediate gear and will come to a safe and sane stop within two hundred yards with no harm done. Old Tom Darbyshire said that the only way he could get a real runaway out of his mules was to "throw the lines away, By Goll, keep up an Indian whoop, By Goll, and pour the whip into them every step of the way, By Goll."

But of all the happenings, carrying water to the work hands in the field at harvest time gave me the biggest kick of all. With a horned saddle strapped over a smelly sheepskin, a gentle old mare, a gallon jug with a strap fastened to the handle to loop over the saddle horn, stirrups buckled up where I could get my feet into them and a whole day before me — that was my idea of the good life.

I filled the jug at the force pump and corked it with a fresh corncob, sidled the old mare alongside the board fence, hung the jug over the saddle horn and climbed on. Then I turned the old mare toward the harvest field, where half a dozen men were at work.

Pap drove an old Eagle dropper, which chuckled along cutting a four-foot swath and dropping the bundles every two or three rods. The field was divided

into four stations, with a man on each station. He was supposed to set in right behind the dropper when it came along and bind the grain into sheaves, using a band made of twisted whips of straw. Each binder was supposed to cover his section before the dropper came around again. To get "caught" by the reaper before the station was all bound was considered an everlasting disgrace.

Mounted on my charger, I made the rounds of these harvest hands with my jug of cool water. And they were always ready for me too. They would pull out the stopper, slop out a little water to rinse off the mouth of the jug, and then turn it up and gurgle down a quart or so. When it came to watering Pap, the old mare would generally shy considerable at the dropper, and sometimes it took several tacks before I got her close enough to hand him the jug. Pap never admitted he was thirsty, but he always drank more water than any other man on the job.

Then I would return to the well, fill the jug with fresh water, climb on and head back to the field. There I was, guiding a big, strong horse all by myself, swatting a greenhead that lit on her shoulder or riding through a weed patch eight feet high. Talk about luxury, or heaven — it was all those with some to spare!

The only other experience that approached this one in boyhood pleasures came when I was old enough to go along to the timber to salt the cattle. The timber was four miles from home, wild and lonely and without any sign of a fence. Our neighbors turned their cattle loose in the woods when pastures got short in mid-summer.

All the animals had to be branded, of course, and our brand was a large "O."

Sometimes it was hard to find our woods cattle, for the timber was thick and stretched for miles. There were always other droves running loose at the same time and they all had some kind of a bellweather. We would ride into the cool woods, ford a creek or two, climb the great hills and finally catch the faint tinkle of a bell far in the distance. But like as not, when we reached the cattle, they were not ours — so off we went in another direction. It was always such fun to ride through the woods that I used to hope we wouldn't find our cattle for a long time.

But finally we always found them. As soon as they caught sight of us they came running and bawling, hungry for the taste of salt. My brother would open the sack, dip out big handfuls and drop them on the ground. The cattle would surge in, pushing and shoving and acting as greedy as hogs. Often they would get a mouthful of salt and slobber so much that it all ran down to the ground. Once I saw a steer take a lump big as a pint cup and chew it down without batting an eye.

Then came the ride home. My brother always chose a way that led away off and around, to give the impression that he was lost. Then he'd say that we might have to spend the night in the woods. It was great fun for a boy, believe me.

I have often wondered what city boys find to do just for fun. All cluttered up with houses and laid out in streets with no horses or mules, or cattle or dogs, or guns — it must be pretty dull.