

drouth,
windmills
and
tramps

As a general thing it rained every few days during the spring and early part of summer, and then slowed up a good deal and only rained once in a while for a month or two. But two or three different years there wasn't very much rain at all and things got pretty dry. The tires began to come off the wagon wheels, and hoops to loosen on tubs and such things. The water in

the creek dried up and the wells got so low that every time we watered the cows we pumped the wells dry. Then the cows that hadn't had a drink yet would stand around and fight flies and wait, and maybe in an hour or so enough water would seep in so we could finish up the job.

One year when it hardly rained at all after summer set in, all the wells in the neighborhood went dry. Fortunately on the Mussack farm there was a well that they said had a big spring in it, and couldn't be pumped dry. So a lot of different people drove their cattle over there to get water. It wasn't such a very hard job to work the handle and just make the water boil up, either. The water stood up to within two or three feet of the top, it didn't have to be lifted very far, and that's what made it pump so easy.

I have seen as many as five or six droves of stock cattle and cows herded down around Mussack's farm, taking turns at getting watered. Some people drove their stock as much as four or five miles to water there. But since it was pretty hot, by the time they walked back home again those cattle would be about as thirsty as ever. Then they would mill around and bellow and bawl like everything.

So everybody got busy trying to locate water on his own farm. In those days all the wells were dug by hand, and mostly were eighteen to twenty feet deep. A lot of people didn't even have a pump, but rigged up a contrivance over the well called a sweep. It was made of two parts, one a post with a forked top that

stood maybe fifteen or sixteen feet high, off to one side of the well several steps. Across this post and fastened by a bolt somewhere near the middle — in the crotch — was a great long pole, the butt end resting on the ground and the small end hoisted away up in the air. From this small end a rope dangled down and on the end of it was a bucket. You could pull down on the rope and lower the bucket into the water and then pull the rope to hoist her up. A rock or some other weight would be fastened on the butt end of the sweep to balance the bucket of water, so it didn't take much of a pull to bring it up.

The well stood open at the top, but a kind of box was built around it called a curb. Kids seldom fell in, but once in a while a chicken would lose its balance and go down the well, and I remember when three white geese got in some way. But Pap let one of the boys down on the rope, to tie a goose at a time to the bucket, so it wasn't long 'til they all were out. The boy stayed down at the surface of the water until the last goose was out. That wasn't hard to do though, because the well was lined with rocks, and these stuck out into the well so you could stick your toe in and even climb up and down.

The geese didn't seem to worry very much about being down there for they are natural born swimmers and can sit on the water all day — and I suppose all night, as far as that goes. But I never saw a chicken or a turkey taken out of the well alive. Maybe if we had discovered them soon after they fell in, it would have

been different. But they can't stay up long in water, and pretty soon down they go. It's several days before they get light enough to float, and that's the first you know they are in there. Generally, if the men were not too busy in the fields, they pumped the well dry after fishing out anything that was dead and in most cases it filled up with water again in a few hours. But whether it was pumped out or not, I never heard of any harm coming of it.

One extra dry year, when the wells were all failing and we had to pump for the cattle out of three or four different ones, Pap took a notion to try for water in the old lake bed on our south forty. For one thing it was the lowest ground on the farm, so he figured that he might not have to dig so far to reach water.

We hitched a team up to the big wagon, loaded in spades and shovels and a jug of drinking water, and of course I went along, boy like. We set up at the lower edge of the lake bed about a rod from where the division fence ran across. Pap and one of the boys went right to digging and by dinner time had struck quicksand with water in it, not a bit over four feet down. When we got back after dinner, there was six inches of water in the bottom of that shallow hole.

It was in the fall of the year and the blackbirds were gathering up to go south. A great swarm of them came by, fairly darkening the sun, and lit along the bank of the creek, likely as not looking for water. The field along that creek bank was just covered with blackbirds, several rods back from the bank, for a quarter of a mile, and such a jabbering you never heard.

The boys slid down and dipped the water out, best they could, and went to digging again. Joe ran his spade down into the bottom of that hole and struck something. He thought at first that it might be a chunk of wood or something. But when he pried it up, it was a great big mud turtle — the size of a washpan. He got it by the tail and hoisted it out, and didn't seem to think so very much about it, but all at once he ran his spade against another turtle, as big and ugly and smelly as the first one. Inside of an hour the boys dug up and threw out of that well eleven big mud turtles.

They didn't seem to have much life in them, and laid still where the men tossed them. Even when you put a lighted match to the end of their tails they didn't cut many capers. We didn't know what to make of it but Chauncey Blodgett happened along that afternoon, and told us that these turtles "hibergated," or something like that. He said they burrowed down below the frost line and lived that way until about the time the first thunder and lightning came.

That was the funniest well you ever saw. The men couldn't get it dug any deeper than about four feet, no matter how hard or fast they dug. The water just came surging in on all sides and from the bottom, and the edges crumbled off and caved in as fast as they scooped out the quicksand. Pap was determined to dig deeper, but it wasn't any use to try. By the middle of the afternoon that well was eight or nine feet across at the bottom and only four feet deep. They had heaved out tons of quicksand in the last three hours without deepening the well an inch.

So we drove the team to the house and Pap got the saw and hammer, and we picked up a lot of stray fence planks, and some two by fours, and went back and made a square curb for that wild well. When they got it ready they upended it and dropped it into the hole. It was boarded up about five feet, and the corner posts stuck up six or seven feet in the air. The idea was to nail more boards on as the well was deepened and the curb sunk down.

The men got to digging again, and Pap and I stood on the edges of the curb to force it down. Little by little we could feel it settle. It was a good scheme all right, for that curb held back the sand from caving in, and it was easy to heave out just what was inside it. In that way we finally got the well to a depth of about seven feet, but there the curb stuck, solid as a church, and all of us together couldn't budge it an inch. The quicksand had settled all around it and wedged it fast, so we had to quit trying to deepen the well and let it go at that. The last hour or so we hadn't done much good at it anyway, for the water came in so fast it took about all the men's time baling it out.

In ten minutes after the digging stopped, there was three feet of water in that well. The men pulled a big wooden pump out of a dry well and put it in, and nobody could pump fast enough to lower that water six inches. It was a good enough well to have watered all the cattle in the county, I reckon. That old lake bed, twenty acres or more, was just naturally underlaid with quicksand and filled with water. You might as well try to pump a river dry.

As soon as they had the trough set up and leveled off, Pap sent two of the boys to drive the cattle down for a drink. The way they did swig down that fresh water was a sight. I don't pretend to say how much water an old cow can drink when she is good and thirsty, but to put it mildly, I should say a barrel, anyway. They don't drink fast but they stay at it a long time.

Generally they moisten up their insides with two or three gallons, then stop and breathe, think it over a little, and really enjoy it. Then they will start in again. Pretty soon you can see a hollow place in their flanks begin to fill out. Like as not they will take another rest, and swing their heads around over their shoulder to scare off the flies. Then they will set in to drink in dead earnest, and swig, and swig, until their sides swell away out and you think they surely will burst. When they finally waddle away from the trough they look just like a blown-up balloon.

It takes rivers of water to satisfy a bunch of thirsty cows. I have pumped, and pumped, and pumped, until I lost all sense of what I was doing. Over at the Mussack farm one of the Peckham boys, on a hot evening, pumped himself sick. They had to bathe his temples with vinegar, rub salt on the back of his neck, and put a horse radish poultice on the bottoms of his feet, to bring him to.

That same fall Pap bought a brand new Eureka windmill and set it up over our new well, and I reckon that was the cleverest thing he ever did. First we used to go down there and throw her in gear and watch the cattle drink for an hour or two, 'til they were all

satisfied, and then throw her out of gear again. But after a while it got to be more common to us and we used to just leave her in gear all the time. There was no end of water, to begin with, nor wind either, for that matter. So we kept it well greased and just let her flicker, day and night, whenever the wind was blowing.

Next year Pap built a big round tank, that held as many as fifteen or twenty barrels of water. I captured a good sized catfish out of the creek once and put him into that tank, and he lived all summer there and seemed to like it all right. In the fall I put him back into the creek, because the winters got awful cold and that tank would surely freeze solid to the bottom if we left any water in it.

The windmill had a big long tail which held the wheel facing the wind. To throw it out of gear you pulled down on a long lever, and a wire that ran up to the top works pulled on another lever, and lifted a big iron ball that was there to hold things in working position. Then the tail would whip around alongside the wheel and the wind would catch it and swing the whole thing around so that the edge of the wheel pointed into the wind and she stopped whirling right there.

One Saturday afternoon I had been prowling around the willow thicket down that way, hunting a few yornuts and Indian arrow heads, and went over to the windmill to get a drink. Then I climbed up the ladder to the little platform about three feet across, at the top of the tower, to study the mechanism of the wonderful machine that pumped all our stock water. I saw this big

iron ball fastened by a set screw to a lifting rod. It was set about two thirds of the way down. Why, I began to wonder, was it set just exactly where it was. Wouldn't it work just as well in some other position? If it was out more toward the end of the rod, wouldn't it work faster?

Bulging over with curiosity, I ran to the barn — a quarter of a mile away — for a monkey wrench, hurried back, scaled that tower again, and with the monkey wrench loosened the set screw that held the big iron weight fast. Then I slid it up several inches nearer the end of the rod, and climbed down to try it out. I unhooked the gear lever and tested out the pull to see whether it was more than before. I could notice quite a difference. I let the gear lever lift an inch at a time, in order to get all the fun out of it there was to be had. Just then I heard an awful thump, a board in the well platform was shattered across one end, and the big iron weight went rolling down the bank. I had neglected to fasten down the miserable set screw, and that forty pound weight had slipped off the end and fallen not more than six inches from my head.

I was terribly scared. I felt my legs shaking, and sat down on the platform and broke out in a cold sweat. Then I poured out my feelings on that confounded set screw. I don't think I ever blamed myself for tinkering with the thing. Kids are not built that way, and a lot of grown up people are a good deal the same way.

When my wits finally came back I fished that big weight out of the creek and did my level best to carry it up the ladder to put it back in place. But I couldn't

cut the mustard. It was about all I could do to lift it, say nothing about climbing a ladder with it. I did get up three or four feet from the ground a time or two, but soon found out that it was no use.

That evening, after supper, I told Frank that the weight had fallen off the wind pump, and he was for going down to fix it right away. I motioned to him to keep still about it, and we slinked out without being noticed. Frank said we would have to take the monkey wrench along and went to the currycomb box to get it, but it was not there. We hunted high and low but couldn't find it. So we took another kind of wrench out of the self binder box and went down. Frank wasn't sure that the wrench would fit, but I never once let on that I knew anything about the monkey wrench. You can't expect a boy to put tools back after using them.

When we got near the windmill I made some excuse to run on ahead, intending to pick up the monkey wrench and pretend that I had brought it from the barn. But it was nowhere to be seen. Frank noticed that I was scouting for something and asked me what I had lost. I told him, "Oh, only a yorknut," and that seemed to satisfy him. Then, without any more fuss, he climbed up the ladder with that big weight under his arm, just as slick as a whistle. I followed right below him and we both crawled out onto the little platform up there.

There was the monkey wrench, right on that platform! How it ever got there was a seven days' wonder. I knew nothing about it, of course, and Frank couldn't make it out. He told the folks about it and they all puzzled over it for quite a while.

It remained a complete mystery. Nobody could figure it out, and as far as I know, this is the first time the truth has been told about that monkey wrench. It bothered me quite a bit at first to keep it to myself, when it was such a big mystery to everybody. Then my interest in it began to taper off and years ago I thought I had outlived it. But I really feel a little bit relieved, even at this late day, that I have come right out with it at last.

An awful lot of tramps were around that dry summer. I can remember how those ragged, dirty men would come strolling up the road and ask for something to eat and maybe for a chance to work. Mother always fixed something for everyone that came along. I have seen her stop her other work and fry eggs, and ham, and potatoes for them, and set out three or four thick slices of bread, and a hunk of butter, and make them coffee, and fuss around like they were some kin to her. She had such a big heart that she never could stand it to see anybody want for anything, especially if it was in her power to give it to them.

We had more tramps call at our house than anybody else, I believe. Andy Cline, who kept a store at Yarmouth where the folks used to do their trading, told Mother that the tramps had a way of marking places where the women folks would feed them well, and that the more of them she fed, the more of them would come. But that kind of talk didn't seem to have any effect on Mother. She always claimed that what little she gave that way didn't amount to anything much, and she would rather feed a hundred scamps than refuse one honest man who was hungry. Anyhow she kept right on feeding

them, and two or three different times one of them insisted on doing work about the place to pay for it.

One hot day in June a good looking fellow about thirty years old knocked at the kitchen door and asked Mother if he could pull some weeds out of the sweet corn patch to earn his breakfast. It was then ten o'clock in the forenoon, and that poor fellow hadn't had a bite to eat that day. Mother told him to go ahead, and soon as she could get something ready she would call him. But he told her not to bother about getting anything special for him, just to wait until noon, and he would eat when the rest did. So he went to work pulling weeds, and worked just like the garden belonged to him.

About half past eleven Mother took him out a big dipperful of cold buttermilk she kept hanging down the well, and the way the fellow guzzled that down was a sight. He never stopped to draw breath or anything 'til that dipper of buttermilk was all down. Then he thanked her, and bowed away down low, and went on pulling weeds, right up to the time the men came in to wash up for dinner. He stood around and waited 'til everybody else was through, then got a big washpanful of water from the cistern pump and soaped and scrubbed himself like he enjoyed it. He wouldn't come to the table with the rest of us, but insisted on eating off of a box out under the silver ash trees, all by himself. I kept one eye on him all the time. He put away as much food as I ever saw anybody do — and we had some big eaters in the neighborhood, too.

After dinner the men went out to sit around in the

breeze in the shade until the horses were done eating, but that tramp took down a scythe that was hanging in a plum tree and went to cutting weeds in the back yard. He kept right at it after the men went to work in the fields, and never stopped 'til he had mowed the whole yard and had it looking like yards did in the towns.

By that time Mother was out in the garden picking gooseberries. The tramp came out and went at it also, and picked more than four quarts. Then he picked about three gallons of cherries, and went out to the wood pile to chop and split wood the rest of the afternoon. Anybody who ever chopped wood knows that summer is no time to do it. It is one of the hottest jobs that ever was, in summer, and mighty few can stand to do it.

That evening, when the men were sitting around in the cool, Pap asked the fellow what his name was. He replied that it was Nebuchadnezzar, that he used to be a king of the Jews, and that this was his second time on earth. He said that the man he worked for in Burlington had run off with another man's wife, that same night his mill burned down, and a few days later the woman he was eloping with had robbed him of every cent he had in the world, and run away with still another man. This was too much for the employer, so he went down to the banks of the Mississippi about midnight and jumped off of a barge, at the deepest place he could find, and hadn't been seen or heard of since.

With the business for which he was trained shot all to smithereens, Nebuchadnezzar had struck out afoot

and had walked all over Minnesota, Nebraska, and parts of Missouri trying to find work. Finally he had straggled into our front yard because he had seen a tramps mark on the gate post and knew he could get a bite to eat.

It all sounded reasonable enough except that Nebuchadnezzar stuff. None of us could figure out what the fellow meant by that kind of talk. He slept in the barn that night and went to the fields with the men next day, hunted cockleburs and Canada thistles all through the young corn, straightened up ten rods of worm fence, trimmed the hedge fence around the apple orchard, and killed a big black snake. When he came in with the men for dinner, he took Mother around the waist and gave her the biggest kind of a hug, in spite of all the squirming and dodging she could do. She scolded him about such rough actions and told him she would be afraid to tell Annison about it for fear he would shoot him on the spot.

Nebuchadnezzar couldn't hold out any longer so up and told us that he was Mort Cox, a full cousin of Mother's from Cooperstown, Illinois. He had come over for a little visit with us, to see the beautiful new country where we lived. I never saw anybody so taken back and as tickled as Mother was. She was awfully relieved, and ran to tell Pap.

He came in and shook Mort good, and they began to talk about all the folks back in Brown county — the Henry's, the Legg's, the Orchard's, the McKinnon's and a dozen or so other families they used to know when they lived on a stump farm away back on Crooked

creek, before they traded farms with a lonesome old bachelor and came to the prairies of Iowa.

We saw some tramps every summer. They seemed to be going nowhere in particular, were always dirty, ragged, and hungry, and mighty few of them ever stuck to it very long if you gave them a job at good wages. But when times got a little better the tramps gradually thinned out. Some folks said they took to the railroads and lived off the town people. Maybe that was it. I don't know. All I know is that they were a shiftless lot as a general thing, and didn't take to work or water. But I never heard of any of them getting into any trouble with the law. I reckon they were too good-for-nothing and didn't have get-up enough even to steal.