



a trip to the mill

We raised all our own wheat in those days on Old Orchard Farm. We hardly ever sold any of it, because it took most of it to keep our big family. Mother always baked our own bread, of course. The kind she baked was mighty good, too, so we ate a lot of it three times a day. In winter we generally had buckwheat cakes for breakfast, with ham gravy or sorghum molasses. But

wheat bread was the main standby, so we raised wheat for that.

Though our folks usually went to the grist mill at Kossuth, there were others at Lowell and New London. The Kossuth mill was a couple of miles closer, and some claimed that they didn't take quite as much toll.

It was a pretty place down around that mill, with a fine big creek running right past it and a spring of good water. It was a full day's trip there and back from Old Orchard Farm, so the men always took their dinner and feed for the horses. It was a trip which took us over into Yellow Springs township, ten miles or more, with a whole day with nothing to do but just jog along the road and laze around the mill, waiting for the grist.

When I was twelve years old I begged Mother to ask Pap if I could go along to the mill on the next trip. I hadn't started to work in the fields, so except for pulling weeds, carrying water, herding the cattle, driving flies, bugging potatoes, picking berries, and helping with the chores, I didn't have much to do. Pap wasn't much for the idea at the start. He asked why I wanted to go and wondered if I just wanted to get out of work. But Mother told him that I had been a good boy, had never been anywhere much, and that it wouldn't hurt to let me go. Pap never said I could or couldn't, so Mother told me to count on going. She said that if Pap didn't want me to go he wouldn't be a bit backward about saying so.

So we could get an early start on the day of the trip we always sacked the grain the night before. Usually

we took six sacks of wheat and two sacks of corn. We always welcomed corn cakes as a change from the wheat cakes, so Pap raised some white corn which we shelled for that purpose. After supper the men brought four or five hundred ears of white corn into the kitchen, got down a tub or two, a dishpan, and a couple of buckets. Then we gathered around to shell corn.

Shelling corn required a special technique which we quickly learned. We took a corn cob and shelled off three or four rows down the side of the ear, then with the thick part of the palm and with a twisting motion we shoved the kernels toward that open part on the cob until they broke loose to fall into the pile. That method worked well at first, but after shelling a dozen ears or more a blister often showed up on our hands, forcing us to use a corn cob to shell with for the rest of the evening. It was slower, but by ten o'clock we usually had about four bushels, which would make a lot of meal.

That trip to the mill was one of the finest experiences I ever had. We rode along perched up on the spring seat, with a sheepskin for a cushion, behind a fine team of horses, with a big umbrella to keep the sun off. We saw people all along the roadside doing the commonest kinds of work right out in the glare of the sun, while we seemed detached from the world, riding in luxury.

We passed the Tucker farm, the Michaels' place, and the Michaels' school, painted red. The first thing I knew we were out of our neighborhood and passing the place where Henry Fye lived. He was the one who owned the thrashing machine. It wasn't long then 'til we came to

the Shortridge place, where they made sorghum molasses. There was the sweep, the furnace, the vats, and a big stovepipe most fifty feet high which had to be held straight up by wires tied toward the top and fastened to posts around it. I couldn't figure out how anybody ever got up there to fasten those wires.

Pretty soon we came to Flint creek, but at first it was pretty much of a disappointment to me, since I had heard a lot about Flint creek and supposed it was as big as a river. Joe explained that where we crossed it was pretty well up, and that down below a few miles it was a lot bigger. I was glad to hear him say that. A fellow doesn't like to find wonderful things smaller than he thought they were.

In another half hour we drove right along in front of the Linn Grove churches, sitting there in the woods, nearly surrounded by gravestones. My hair practically stood on end, for I had often heard the folks tell about the Linn Grove churches. I had always wanted to see them, and there they were right before my eyes!

They stood about a hundred yards apart. One of them was built of bricks and the other was a frame church. About every Sunday services were held in the frame church, but the brick one hadn't had a sermon preached in it since the big fight twenty years before. Some trouble over the war had caused bad blood between the neighbors and it all came to a head at the dedication, with a big, general fight in which two or three were killed and several more crippled for life. That was the end of that church for good and all. It

was never used but the one time. After six or seven years, some of the neighbors built the frame church, and just let the brick one stand there empty. It had the same coal oil in the lamps, the same Bible still lay there on the pulpit, all mildewed over, and several of the benches were scattered around, just like they lay after the fight. Weeds and grass had grown up around the sides and along the stone walk. It was one of the most dismal looking churches anybody ever saw.

People claimed to have seen lights in that church in the night, but when they investigated there wouldn't be any lights at all. Some claimed it was rowdies trying to scare people, but the general belief was that the brick church was haunted. Mighty few people would venture past there in the night alone.

My brother Bob was riding along there one night, going home from seeing his girl, and was stopped right in the middle of the road by two men with pistols in their hands. He socked his spurs into his horse's sides and rode right through them; then he took out his twenty-two revolver and shot back in their direction as long as his seven loads lasted.

We got to Kossuth about eleven that morning, turned several corners among a lot of little cottages, and drove down the long clay hill, with the brakes so tight that both hind wheels were sliding. All at once we came to the mill, and a minute later drove right under a portico and stopped by the unloading door.

Joe seemed to know where to go without asking any questions. The miller came to greet us and receive the

grist. He was dressed all in white, with a little white cap on his head and flour all over his face and hands. They had some funny looking little wheelbarrows that stood right up on end, with little round iron wheels not much bigger than a silver dollar. A sack of grain just exactly fitted on them, and one by one, ours were taken off and wheeled into the mill. The miller waved his hand and Joe drove the team around behind the mill, where there was the prettiest kind of an open place, right beside the creek. We unhitched the horses, tied them to the wagon box and gave them their oats and hay. Then we went into the mill to look around.

It was one of the most wonderful places I had ever seen. As we went by the power house we looked in there and saw the big steam engine that ran the whole mill. What fooled me was that it didn't make any more noise than a bobsled. There was a flywheel twenty feet across, going round and round. Right back of the engine was the boiler room where a man with the dirtiest face I ever saw was shoveling coal into a roaring furnace. I got kind of shaky in there for I had heard you never could tell when a steam boiler might blow up.

In the mill almost everything was out of sight. We looked through some little glass doors on the sides of the machines and saw the rollers, shakers, sifters, and all kinds of machinery at work. But everywhere we looked there were great big leather belts whizzing around, and a humming noise going on that made it hard to understand anything that was said. After a while the miller came around and took us all over the mill,

up narrow stairsteps, through dark halls, and even up to the fourth story, where we could look right down on the horses. They didn't look much bigger than colts.

Afterwards we went down to the wagon and ate our dinner. Mother was a great hand to fix up a cold snack — we had chicken, cucumber pickles, beets, lots of bread and butter, some apple sauce, a jug of sweet milk with the cream left on, and some raspberry pie. After dinner we rolled up our britches and waded in the creek for about an hour, over smooth rocks that were as much as ten feet across. We got down and drank out of the big spring, but we had drunk so much milk at dinner that we weren't very thirsty.

Then we took a stroll around the town, and soon found out that there wasn't much to Kossuth except the mill. People said it had been a sizeable place once, but the railroad was built through two miles west, and a town had sprung up that they called Mediapolis. This was hard on Kossuth. But it was still an interesting place.

Along about two o'clock the miller motioned that the grist was ready, so we hitched up and drove around to the delivery door. Soon the sacks were loaded and we were off for home. We had to go through the middle of Mediapolis, and got to give that town a looking over. We had passed through it on the way down, but I was so excited about getting to the mill that I hadn't paid any attention to it.

We got another look at the haunted church as we drove back through Linn Grove. We met old Ben "Peg-leg" Ward right in front of it. He was sitting there in

his buggy when we drove up, taking a good look. He ran a little restaurant and pool hall at Yarmouth, and we knew him pretty well. It was nice to see somebody from home when we were so far away.

Of course talk turned right away to the haunted church, and Old Ben allowed there wasn't the slightest doubt about it, for several times he had seen lights in that church. Once he saw men hanging to the beams away up under the eaves, but when they noticed him they all let go and thrashed right down into the ground and didn't show up again. He allowed they were dead folks from the graveyard who had crawled up there to cool off and skedaddled when anybody saw them. It sounded reasonable enough to me, but Joe told me on the way home he didn't take much stock in such talk.

Then Old Ben told us a regular hair-raiser about an experience he had at that haunted church about a year before. He said he was driving past about an hour after midnight. The sky was as clear as a bell and the moon was shining as bright as day. As he got right in front of the graveyard he heard a moaning sound and stopped his team to listen. He didn't hear anything more for a minute or so, then it set in again, same as before. Sounded, he said, like it came from away down deep somewhere, but he couldn't make out just where.

So he climbed out and went over into the graveyard and looked around. Some white owls flew off into the timber, and a skunk crawled out of the grass and slinked under the woodshed, but outside of that he said he didn't see a sign of life, just gravestones all around.

Pretty soon he heard a "Baa-a-a-a, ba-a-a-a-a" that sounded like a sheep in a well or something. He stumbled around the place, he said, and finally came to an open grave that hadn't been used yet, and peeked in to see what was there. It was a tolerable deep grave, he said, but by getting down on his hunkers he could make out some white object. It gave out another "Baa-a-a-a," and Pegleg knew he was on the right track.

And then Old Ben told us something pretty hard to believe. He told us that he shoved a pole down into that grave and slid down to satisfy himself what kind of a "hant" it was that could blatt that way. All he found was just a sheep. A whole flock of them pastured in the graveyard, and one had fallen into that grave and couldn't get out.

Old Ben said he spent the balance of the night trying to climb that pole, but every time his wooden leg would catch on something and down to the bottom he would go. He had the inside of the grave all punched full of holes trying to hold what he had gained by jabbing his wooden leg into the side walls. He stayed in that grave he said, 'til almost noon the next day before he was able to make anybody hear him. The first two or three people who came that way, "broke and ran like the devil was after them" when they saw his hat sticking out of that grave. Finally, he said, Old Joe Mussack, who was never afraid of anything, came by on his way to the mill and hauled Pegleg out.

Maybe it was so, and maybe it wasn't. But I never saw the time even after I grew up, when I could go past

the Linn Grove churches in the night without feeling kind of creepy.

We got home from the mill about sundown. The men carried the sacks into the smokehouse, emptying them into nice clean barrels, while Mother pressed the flour down with her hands and filled them all to the brim. Then she put a round lid on every barrel, and a rock on top — to keep out the rats and chickens.

I was in a daze for a week or two, until the glory of that wonderful trip began to wear off. It was the finest trip a boy ever took, it seemed to me. Right from the time we drove out of the barnlot through the whole stretch of twenty miles there and back, it was just one exciting sight after another. And that double-barreled look we got of the Linn Grove churches, and what Old Ben Ward told us, was enough to satisfy any reasonable boy for almost a lifetime.

I tried to tell the Conkling boys about it, but they weren't much impressed. They had been as far as Kingston, six or seven miles the other side of Kossuth, and in a week were going to Wapello, in another county. They had been past the Linn Grove churches many times, and had seen as many ghosts as a dozen at a time.

But it was good enough for me. That trip to the mill was all I ever expected it to be — and a whole lot more. If I could be a boy again and were told by the President that I could pick out one thing to do that I would rather do than anything else in the world, I wouldn't stutter a bit in choosing to go to Kossuth to the mill with my big brother Joe.