

yorknuts
and
puppy
love

I have heard a lot of talk about the lonesome and drab sort of life people live out in the open country. But a whole lot of that talk is just bunk. As far as we were concerned, we had just the bulliest kind of times all the year round.

For one thing, I never used to hear anybody complain much about times being hard, or money tight.

During the time I was growin' up at Old Orchard Farm I don't believe people were much excited about making money. All they seemed to want was just a comfortable living. If we had good crops, we had a good living that year. If the crops were short, we cramped down a little, but got along somehow. We always had plenty to eat and wear. Nothing gaudy, of course, or particularly stylish, but good enough.

Pap never had a thought of money grubbing, I am sure. He got a stump patch in Brown county, Illinois, when his father died, and a few years later he traded that, even up, for a quarter section of mostly raw land in Iowa. By always keeping out of debt he generally had money in his britches pockets, and sometimes, after selling off a herd of hogs, would have as much as two or three hundred dollars to carry around. He never thought of getting robbed.

But Pap hung on to his money. He didn't hand it out to any of his kids. We went without a cent from one year to the next. One Fourth of July, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old, I went to New London — ten miles away — on horseback, with a silver dime in my pocket and a lunch done up in a rag. Mother had given me the dime — from a dozen eggs she sold for the purpose, for Pap never thought of anything like that.

First I bought a glass of red lemonade at the celebration and got a nickel back in change. Along in the afternoon I blew the balance of my wealth for a sack of fresh roasted peanuts, which I nibbled at for a couple of hours. After they were gone I wanted a drink of lemon-

ade worse than ever, but my money was all gone. So I went over to the town pump in the middle of the public square and got a big drink of water. I went without any supper because I wanted to stay for the fireworks, then rode home in the dark. I got there about ten o'clock. Mother was awake listening for me, but Pap was sound asleep as a possum. Nothing worried him.

Another Fourth of July, when I was about sixteen, we were all going to Linn Grove, down on Flint creek. But I had been jumping in my Sunday boots and busted one of them all to pieces, and Mother was worried what to do about me. I was too big to go barefooted, and my feet were so big I couldn't wear any of the girls' work shoes. It was awful to think of staying home on the Fourth of July. But Belle thought up something that saved the day for me. She got the idea I was to wear the good boot I had and bind up the other foot like it had been cut or injured.

So that is what I did. When we got there I climbed out of the wagon and started to walk into the grounds just like nothing had happened. But Belle stopped me and said, "You got to limp with that sore foot. No, not so much as that. Just a little, so it will look natural like." So I cut a cane from a sumac bush, and limped a little with my bandaged foot. Lots of folks from our neighborhood asked me what had happened to me. But I always shrugged it off with a casual "Nothing much," and let it ride that way. It was a bully idea and I was always thankful to Belle for thinking it up.

We had an old lake bed on our farm that used to

be big enough to cover ten acres seven or eight foot deep with water. But after all the fields around were plowed up, the water washed so much dirt in when big rains came that it got badly shallowed up. Finally cattle got to bogging down in there and the lake had to be drained out by digging a big ditch out of the lower end. After that a creek was all that remained.

Lillies had been growing along the shallow parts of that lake for goodness knows how long, and they had big pods of nuts on them that our folks called yorknuts. The nuts looked like hazel nuts in size and color, but were as round as buckshot. They had a thin, tough shell and the meat was as hard as a rock. We thought their little green hearts were poisonous so we always picked them out before eating the meat.

When I was a boy, that lake had been drained for several years, but we could still find yorknuts after a big rain. One of our favorite sports was to roll our britches up to our knees and go yorknut hunting down at the lake bed. Boys used to come for miles around to hunt them. And so did girls, but mostly they never found any, so we divided ours with them.

Twenty years after any yorknuts had grown in that lake, we could still find a good many where the creek bank crumbled off. There the little brown balls would be sticking in the mud, half buried in the bank and shining like everything. They were just as hard and as good as ever.

In the wintertime we had get-togethers such as spelling bees and literary societies about every week.

We used to ride horseback as far as Liberty schoolhouse, six miles away, to go to one.

Stella Walker, at White Cloud, was our champion speller. She was the cutest little thing, with black eyes and lips that always looked moist and inviting. It seemed to me she could spell any word in the world, and she didn't have to study, either. I got so interested in Stella that I used to ride all the way to her house alongside her horse on the way home. It was out of the way some, but I didn't mind that.

As time went on I found myself thinking about her a good deal of the time, and finally I asked if I could come to see her. Not long after that I borrowed a top buggy from John Cappes and took her to a celebration at New London on the Fourth. I had forty cents and she had a quarter, so between the two of us we had all the treats we needed. Her mother furnished the dinner for us, and I took along a dozen Early June apples.

We drove home after the fireworks — just the two of us — and it was as pleasant as could be. I just let the horses walk the whole ten miles, and she never complained a bit. I tried a few words of spelling on her, but I couldn't think of very many. Then we talked about what a pretty night it was, and the stars, and what good times we always had at school. When I let her out at the front gate I asked for a lock of her hair. She asked me if I had a knife but I didn't, so I had to drive off without the lock of hair.

When Ed Conkling came back from working in the

scraper factory at Mount Pleasant, he had a lot of new fangled ideas he had picked up from the town boys and a brand new top buggy of his own. He started going with Stella and I lost out. But I always liked her anyway, and never saw her afterwards without feeling a little like I did that night on the way home from the celebration.

Our Friday night literary societies were a mixture of recitations, papers, essays, a recess, and a big debate. Nearly everybody in the neighborhood went to them except Joe Mussack and Tom Darbyshire. Sometimes the meetings lasted half the night. We debated about whether "Fire Is More Destructive Than Water," "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword," "Republics Are Better Than Monarchies," and "Webster Was Greater Than Clay." We never touched on politics or religion since none of us knew anything about either one of them, anyhow.

I got my first start in public speaking at these literary societies. Dave Michaels was the one that egged me on after I thought I had made a mess of my first appearances. Dave said he always knew I was good for something besides carrying swill to the pigs. This perked me up, and I kept on trying 'til I got so I could get along pretty well.

We had wonderful times at our play parties, too. These came off during the winter, always at somebody's house. We never had a fiddler to play for us, like a regular dance, but several of the boys played French

harps, and all of us could bend a paper over a comb and hum through it. For some of the turns we sang the music. One of our favorites was "Skip to My Lou":

My wife's left me, skip to my Lou,
My wife's left me, skip to my Lou,
My wife's left me, skip to my Lou,
Skip to my Lou my darling.

Then one of the girls in the ring would bounce out toward one of the boys she wanted to dance with. He would meet her more than half way, slip his arm around her waist, and they would go circling around to the music. Then the words changed to:

Gone again, skip to my Lou,
Skip to my Lou my darling.

Then the fellow who had just lost his partner would begin:

I'll get another one, sweeter than you,
I'll get another one, sweeter than you,
Skip to my Lou my darling.

Then he would step out and motion to the girl he wanted to dance with and she would meet him, and they would go circling around, too. After a bit we all danced at the same time and kept it up 'til the harp players got blisters on their mouths keeping up the music.

When we got tired of that we would sit down and

play "Simon Says Thumbs Up," or "Fox and Geese," to rest up. Then away we would all go again on:

Charlie he's a nice young man,
 Charlie he's a dandy,
 Charlie likes to kiss the girls,
 Because it comes so handy.

Over the river to water my sheep,
 Over the river to Charlie,
 Over the river to see the gay widow,
 And measure up my barley.

I don't want any your weevily wheat,
 I don't want any your barley,
 It takes the very best of wheat,
 To bake a cake for Charlie.

On and on we went, making up verses as we went along. We danced first with one girl and then another 'til we had made the rounds three or four times. It was the pleasantest way in the world to get acquainted and spend an evening. Anybody could see that.

Then some lovesick girl would say, "Let's play Post Office," or "Needle's Eye," or "Drop the Handkerchief." Some of our crowd always seemed to like to play those kissing games best of all. I never complained about them myself.

These play parties got to be so popular that we had one almost every week. My sisters and I used to ride horseback as far as five or six miles in the coldest kind of weather to attend them. And sometimes we got home away after ten o'clock. Once at Doctor Baldwin's

house in Yarmouth, after the Doc and his woman had yawned around for an hour or so, along about ten he said, "Sarah, I guess we better go to bed; I think these youngsters want to go home." But we told him we weren't in any particular hurry to go, and stayed nearly another hour. It was young love at work, and we hated to part company.

But after a while some of the grown up boys got to coming. They brought whiskey with them, and that led to trouble and a good many fights. Parents wouldn't let their girls go any more, and it about broke up our play parties. After that some of us tried going to the regular dances, where they had a regular fiddler, but we never had as much fun as we did at our old affairs.

In the wintertime we made sleds to coast down hills and had some wonderful times. This was especially fine sport when we could get a girl to ride down the hill with us. Girls never could learn to guide a coaster without busting into something or turning the sled upside down. We generally had to put them on the front of our sleds and pilot them down the big slick hill ourselves. Sometimes we would make a mistake and go sliding off into the deep snow and maybe upset, going faster than a horse could run. But that was a lot of fun and we never had a really serious accident.

We skated sometimes, but we never had any "store skates" so it didn't amount to much. About all we could do was slide along on our boot soles, so we didn't keep it up very long and our "skating" never got to be as popular as coasting.

When we got old enough to do some real sparking we had dozens of bobsled rides — whole parties of six or seven couples going together in a wagon box half filled with straw. We'd have a spanking team of horses strung over with sleigh bells that jingled in the frosty air. Then we snuggled down in the straw, wrapped in bed quilts and horse blankets so we kept warm as could be.

Those really were the times and I surely remember them. The jingling sleigh bells with a music all their own — the prancing horses with their breath sending up clouds of steam in the frosty night air — your best girl snuggled close at your side — all of these put together made a pleasant evening every time. We never felt any worries about entertainment for country lads and lasses, and I'll bet a lot of the town kids would envy us.