



a yarmouth saturday night

The little town of Yarmouth — where we traded, got our mail and had our blacksmithing done — was a mighty interesting place. After working all alone in the fields, and not seeing anybody but our own folks for several days at a stretch, it was quite a treat to go to Yarmouth and see some new faces.

Yarmouth wasn't much of a town — only three stores

and a few houses. But it was a big improvement over what we had before the narrow gauge railroad was built through. Before that it was ten miles to a railroad track. We got our mail at a post office called La Vega, which was kept by the Lotspietch family in their own farmhouse, nearly four miles away.

But Yarmouth built right up, with a boom, as soon as the depot was finished, and in a year or two was big as it ever got. Since then it has gotten smaller, if anything.

A good many boys in our neighborhood went to Yarmouth about every Saturday afternoon and had a regular picnic of a time all afternoon. They would go back home to do the night chores and eat supper, and then go right back to town to spend the evening. Pap never let us go in the daytime, unless it was too wet to work in the fields — and even then he generally could find weeds for us to cut, or hedge to trim, or fence to fix. But we always got to go on Saturday nights, and we were mighty glad of that.

As many as forty or fifty teams would be tied in rows all along the hitchracks, and the streets would be just swarming with folks. Nearly everybody would be there, and sometimes people came from as far off as six or seven miles. In every store people would be sitting around on sugar sacks, nail kegs, and right on the counters — talking about the weather, and the crops, and other interesting things. Dave Michaels always had a lot of funny stories to tell, and some of them were pretty nippy for a young person to hear. At the end nearly everybody

would break out in a hearty laugh, and nod at one another and wink.

In Andy Cline's store, back toward the stove, there would be two fellows bent over a checker board and six or eight others standing around looking on. Every little bit one of the spectators would ask why the players didn't move this man and take two, or something like that. Andy was one of the best checker players in the county, I reckon, and his two boys had to do the waiting on customers whenever anybody bantered him for a game. John Conkling was stiff competition, and James Robert Hale had to be watched pretty close, for he had a checker book and studied it 'til he knew nearly every move on the board. All the good players kind of went in "cahoots" against James Robert, and would move so as not to let him get the men in the shape he wanted them, or it was bound to be his game. Every Saturday night, and all day long when there was a big rain, they were right at it, tooth and nail.

We would go over to Ben Ward's shack, where he had lemonade, peanuts, candy, and ice cream for sale. He also had a little pool table, and cigars, tobacco, and a cigar box full of pipe tobacco on the counter, free to all. It was a good smelling place — pleasant to be in whether you bought anything or not, and Old Ben generally had a new story or two to tell. It was the general opinion that he held it over Dave Michaels a little when it came to stories.

For the most part we boys had our good times out of doors, even at Yarmouth. We played every kind of a

game you ever heard of. We wrestled, jumped, ran foot races, pulled square holts, chinned, boxed hats, threw the fifty-pound test weight, and worked ourselves up into a regular lather. If we had been forced to work half that hard on the farm, we would have nearly died, I'm sure. We kept it up as late as ten o'clock sometimes, and we were always sorry when the stores closed and we had to go home.

Over at the Henry County Fair at Mt. Pleasant, I got to see two real cowboys from the "wild and woolly West." They were all dressed up in leather britches, red flannel shirts, and broad brimmed hats. They rode into the ring on sure enough broncos, their saddles had double cinches, big stirrups, and a horn a foot high, spurs dangled from high top boots, and strings of buckskin hung down from their horses' bits. The sight nearly set me wild.

The cowboys took after a little herd of wild horses, that had been brought there from the West. After a good deal of galloping and circling around, they roped one of them and threw him down so hard we thought it surely had broken his neck. The two got off, blindfolded the horse and let him up, strapped a saddle on his back, and forced a riding bridle on him. Then one cowboy got on and away went the wild pony, bucking, pitching, sunfishing, and twisting this way and that — and that wonderful cowboy just sat there in the saddle as comfortable as tho it was a rocking chair. After a while the pony got winded and stopped cavorting around. The cowboy jumped off and bowed at the crowd, and

everybody waved handkerchiefs and yelled and clapped for five minutes. Right then I decided to be a cowboy.

On the way home I thought up what I was going to do. And the first idle time I had, I brought a three-year-old mule out of the pasture. It had never had even a halter on. I locked him behind a rail in a box stall in the barn, then strapped a sheepskin on his back, put a blind bridle on him, and got aboard. I kicked the rail loose and that big colt went out of the barn sidewise in the biggest kind of a hurry. He knocked several boards off. He backed right through a high picket fence. Then he commenced to buck and pitch something awful, but I stuck on by holding the strap that held the sheepskin. Next he ran under an apple tree and nearly scraped the top of my head off, as I scootched down trying my best to miss the limb. He went through a hedge and into the potato patch and was going through the wickedest kind of maneuvers when I dropped off. It took some time to pick all the dirt out of my right ear, my neck was all twisted around to one side, and I was as dizzy as could be for a day or so.

I never tried being a cowboy again. I know now that being tuckered out that easy was a sure sign that I wasn't ever cut out for a cowboy anyhow.

Then I got a notion that I wanted to be a clown. I had seen some good ones at a circus, noticed how everybody laughed at their antics, and just itched to have them laugh at me in the same way. It was a tedious business to work up to, but I set to work as soon as I found time. I rigged up a springboard by using a bridge

plank stuck under the water trough, and held up by a chunk of wood. I got so I could jump off of this and turn a somersault and light on a straw tick and keep my feet. Then I trained two old tame cows we had to stand side by side in front of my springboard while I made the leap and somersaulted over their backs. It took a long time to train them to stand still, but at last they gave in, and generally stayed right there 'til I lit on the tick.

One Saturday afternoon I decided to give a matinee performance and invited my sister to see my act. I got hold of a Mother Hubbard dress belonging to one of the girls, painted my face with flour, and wore a paper hat running up to a high peak. The hat had been used in one of the schoolhouse plays the winter before. When I had everything ready, I opened the back barn door and my sisters stood up there while I climbed my springboard to show off.

I came down the board as fast as I could run — that Mother Hubbard flapping in the breeze — and made a try at a somersault. But the old cows were not used to the suit I had on and started to run away. Being upside down in the air at the time, I didn't know they were moving, and I came down astraddle of one's neck, right over its horns. They were gentle enough cows and of course wouldn't hook anybody, but in scrambling off those horns I lost a big piece out of the Mother Hubbard dress. One old cow carried it around several days.

When I lit, the girls busted out laughing, and then came running down to see if I had been killed. They

put linament on me several places, and Pap took several stitches with a rowel, sewing up a gash in my leg. A day or two later I had a high fever, and thought I was going to die before I got over it. I guess I must have been a quitter, because I never tried the clown business after that, and I made a pretty good hand in the field for a long time. Just settled right down, Pap said.

Another time I got the prize fighting craze. The *Police Gazette* was covered with colored pictures of John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilrain, and an article about their seventy-round fight at New Orleans covered three or four pages. I had never read anything that stirred me up like that did, and went to work right away to learn to be a prize fighter. I pulled wool off the fences, where the sheep had scraped under, and sewed it on the back of Pap's mittens for stuffing. It made tolerably good boxing gloves, too. I got a good many boys to practice with me, and since I was bigger than most of them, I got along fine.

One day I put the gloves on with a big fellow from New London who was out our way with his father, a cattle buyer, and that ended all the notion I ever had to be a prize fighter. He was one of the most discouraging fellows I ever knew. He thumped me right on the head, the mouth, and the nose just as many times as he liked. There wasn't any way I could find to prevent it. Pretty soon my nose was bleeding, one eye was about swollen shut, and I had a kind of sick feeling inside.

At the end of the third round my seconds threw a towel in the air, which was the signal that the fight was

over as far as I was concerned. I don't mind saying that I was glad they did. I could see more stars than you can see on a clear night in the dark of the moon, and had some queer feeling inside that I can't describe. Just like all my other ventures, this crazy notion I had about being a gladiator bogged down — like a cow in the mud — right there. I never tried it again and gave my sheepskin boxing gloves to a couple of girls that lived neighbors to us. They made a chair cushion out of them for their grandpa, so they were put to some good use after all.

I grew to be a good deal interested in girls, and finally the hankering broke out on me thick as chicken pox. All the things I had learned helped out more than you would think in getting along with girls. There wasn't a boy in our neighborhood who could hold a candle to me at writing a fine hand. I made a good many drawings of birds sitting on nests, all surrounded with the finest kind of scroll work, with maybe down below a pennant dangling with a girl's name printed on it. I never saw a girl who didn't take to that kind of present.

Then I had it over most of the boys in things to talk about. Riding around nights, I could pick out different stars and tell the girls their names, and how far off they were. I knew how to figure how many turns a buggy wheel made in going a mile. I knew a good deal about wild plants, and specific gravity, and induction, and could recite poetry from several books.

It got Belle Johnson's papa more interested in me than Belle was. He was a smart man, well read, and

liked to talk to me so well that when I went there to see his pretty daughter, he took up most of the time himself talking things over with me. Belle was a luscious, red lipped, beautiful girl, and I fell in love with her just the worst way. But I never got very far with it. She wasn't any older, but she seemed older than I was, and she got interested in an older fellow who had a top buggy of his own, so she kind of drifted away from me.

When the time came just right, it was all settled for me in a few minutes. When I met my Lucy at choir practice, she looked just like I had always wanted my best girl to look. When we were introduced, we shook hands across the top of the organ, and Ellen Hale was playing a church tune about, "Happy Day That Fixed My Choice." In the light of what happened afterwards, it seemed almost like a good omen. Organ notes never joined in making any better melody than we did right from the start, and it has always been that way.

Pap's trying to bust up that match a year or two later just fastened it down tighter, and the time came when I stopped riding horseback fifteen miles every Sunday to see her, and just went down and got her, and have had her ever since.

But back of it all stand a lot of wonderful experiences — experiences that nobody can get unless he is lucky enough to be born and brought up in the open country. Most of those experiences are as clear as though they happened only a year or so ago. I like to call them up and enjoy them over again.

One of the brightest and sweetest recollections is the

picture of Mother, the busy little woman who never thought of herself in her life, but just put her time in being lovely to everybody she ever met. And there is Pap, too — hard to understand and impossible to manage, but when you came to find him out, a likable, heroic, clean and wonderful man that any boy ought to be proud to have for a father.