

**SURVIVING AND THRIVING
DURING THE
GREAT DEPRESSION**
Tales From Yesteryear

By

Lillian Miller Simms
(the middle child)

This epistle is a tribute to our parents John and Mary Miller who never said “can’t and somehow managed to ward off the horrors of those terrible years so that we emerged as warm-hearted and useful citizens. We did not know we were poor and we thought everyone wore hand-me-downs or had their clothes made out of garments in the storeroom. We thrived and made do with what would be considered today living below the poverty level. We had fun as well as did a lot of work in the house, barn and fields. We loved each other and a bond was created that is still strong to this day.

© January 2005

PREFACE

Seven of us grew up in that little house on a forty-acre farm and all graduated from the University of Michigan. Five of us were born during the Depression, two at the beginning and one at the end. Some say that the invention of the automobile was the greatest event of the 20th century. I say, the Depression (1929-1941) brought out the best in people and especially women who rose to the occasion, tapping inner resources they had forgotten they had. Like the pioneers of earlier times, the men and women of the Depression kept families together and raised their children against terrible odds.

Some people jumped out the window. Others hit the streets and became skid row people. Our parents lost everything but their gumption when the Great Depression hit in '29 but they somehow managed to move five kids and themselves to a rodent infested old farmhouse in Remus, Michigan. Our Great Uncle Philip Baumann had formerly owned the house. It was very small, drafty, and had no indoor plumbing or electricity. Two old stoves had been left in the house by the previous owners and they provided heat, when stoked properly. A kitchen with front and back porches had been added to the main house some years before. Everything creaked, the windows rattled and flies had easy access to the front and downstairs through screens that long ago had become warped and damaged. Two more children would be born in this house and the house itself with its surrounding acres became the only respite we would know until Adolf Hitler started World War II and the Depression came to a dramatic end.

Our mother and father were determined to have a life for themselves and the seven children they had produced. Against all odds, they brought that little farm to life and the house became not only a place of shelter, but also a haven of learning. Although our father never completed high school, he had a magnificent mind and taught us critical thinking which served us in good stead throughout our lives. Our mother was brilliant and more than a match for our father although he always wanted to be known as the master of the household. He was very "macho" after the old style having grown up as the adopted son of his aunt and uncle who were very traditional. Having lost his mother at the age of three, he had to weather many storms in life and never had the safe haven he hoped to create for us. During those years of the Depression, our father used to say he did not have two nickels to rub together but he had seven kids who could do anything. He was the bravest man I ever knew and would take on any challenge if it meant preserving his family. He was always battling the "elements" either when he was trying to start the old Model T with a hand crank or walking to town in deep snow to bring bags of coal and groceries home. Ma was no slacker either. I would never have received a Regents Alumni scholarship without out mother's courage. When she was driving me to Mt. Pleasant in order to take a pre-scholarship exam, the old Chevrolet popped a flat tire. Normally she would not allow us to hitchhike, but on this day she got out in the middle of M-20, stopped traffic and begged a driver to get me to the exam site in Mt. Pleasant. A woman picked me up and deposited me at the correct place and I dutifully passed the exam, thereby winning a full tuition scholarship to the University of Michigan.

Our mother was the reader in the family and the financial wizard. How she made every penny stretch, we will never know. She produced wonderful clothes out of a storeroom of cast off garments. She was a marvelous cook and produced all manner of foods, many of which would be considered too high in calories today. We needed those extra calories for without central heating, we needed all the food we could get. None of us were fat and I used to be known as “string bean” or “slender shanks” as I was so skinny. Ma let us read everything we could get our hands on. We were fortunate to have an Aunt Ronnie who kept us supplied with newspapers and books. One of our greatest treats would be to receive a big box of comics which our aunt had saved for us from her newspapers in Chicago. She never lost her job during the Depression and was to come to our aid many, many times and had even purchased the small farm for our parents when they lost everything in Detroit, including their home and garage business. Our mother’s sisters Jo and Helen never lost their jobs either and we Miller kids owe them a special debt of gratitude for bringing extras into our lives during those terrible, wonderful years.

We had no radio in those years and didn’t even know the big war had started until we heard at Remus School that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Television was yet to be invented and so our communication with the outside world of Remus was dependent on our contacts at school and our mother’s correspondence with her mother and sisters in Riverview, MI. The bombing changed everything for us. Factories would open to make war materials and our father would find steady employment again, the bills would be paid at last and the boys would go off to war. Nothing was ever the same again. Even though our father would soon have more than two nickels to rub together, the old feeling of total dependence on each other was lost forever.

The skills of daily living that I learned by the age of ten will be with me until I die. In addition to the regular chores and seasonal work, I had mastered frying sunny-side up pinked eggs without breaking them, making jello in winter (we had no refrigeration for summer jello), making oatmeal for nine people, kneading bread, darning socks, taking care of a newborn baby (bottle, burping, rocking and keeping the cat out of the crib), washing and drying dishes, and building a fire in the kitchen stove from scratch using kindling and maybe a bit of kerosene. We were always careful on the farm to make sure we had only kerosene in the can by the back door. It seems that a neighbor Juanita Geitzen burned herself to death when she accidentally used gasoline to start the morning fire. In later years, I was to wonder if this was an accident or whether someone else planned it for her husband appeared with a new stylish bride six months after Juanita died so horribly.

I have tried to capture a few of the memories I have of those days in the thirties. It is only a glimpse of the past as no writing can totally capture the wisdom we developed in those early years of our lives. Who else had a father who showed them how to blow their nose using grass when you had no hanky? (Kleenex was unheard of). Who else had a mother who showed us girls how to use and care for rags for menstrual periods? Kotex hadn’t been invented yet; at least we couldn’t afford it. Who else had parents who did creative thinking and problem solving every day? They could solve anything using methods of their own and imagination.

To my siblings, Ronnie, John, Art, Mary, Bernie and Ann I say thank you for making the most of those years with me. We cannot go back in time but we can recapture memories of some of the best years of our lives.

Ronnie—the chemistry teacher and world traveler

John—the mathematical wizard, chemical engineer and family war hero

Art—the inventor and mechanical engineer

Lillian (me)—the philosopher dreamer and nursing professor

Mary—the social worker and artistic seamstress

Bernie—the dental hygienist, tree climber, and all around gymnast

Ann—the NIH researcher, home renovator and barn restorer

LEISURE TIME

We all knew these were desperate times and we really did pitch in and help without too much prodding. I only saw our mother crying once when she was sitting at her desk writing letters and she didn't have a three-cent stamp to send a letter to her mother. She always said it was important to stop whatever you were doing and write a letter to someone you loved. All through the Depression, she wrote diligently to her mother in Riverview, MI and Grandma Knight always responded and I think even sent stamps. Our Grandpa Knight was a very grouchy old codger and not much acquainted with human kindness. It was a great event for us kids though when he and Grandma along with the Aunts Jo and Helen came to visit. He always slipped either a dollar bill or a fifty-cent piece in our pocket when he said good-bye.

Sundays were our only days of leisure. We went to church, ate, went to church again, ate some more and then went to church again in the evening for a few extra prayers. St. Michael's Church was the center of our existence beyond our home. It meant everything to us. No events were ever planned without considering the time of Mass. After Mass, we were free to play or make ice cream. Somehow, our father came up with a nickel for us to go to the Hessel farm across the road to buy a block of ice. You could buy a big block of ice to make your own ice cream. We kids would cart it home in a big red wagon or the wheel barrow, stick it in a big burlap bag and then beat the bag with a sledge hammer until the ice was in small enough pieces to fit into the ice cream maker. Our mother prided herself on her "cream only" recipe. She never used substitutes or fillers. It was flavored with vanilla and it was delicious. Our ice cream maker was big enough to make a gallon of ice cream and by the end of Sunday, every bit was gone. I can taste it now in my imagination. I never heard of anyone making ice cream any day except Sunday. All the kids with arms big enough to turn the crank took turns, round and round until the crank wouldn't move any more. That's how you knew when it was ready. It kept us busy for several hours and out of mischief and the result was a fitting dessert for our mother's chicken dinner.

I remember picnics at School Section Lake and our father in his purple striped bathing suit. Sometimes, on a nice sunny Sunday, our mother would make a big kettle of boiled dinner and other goodies and off we would go for a picnic at School Section Lake. I think she must have enjoyed these outings for our father would always take us for a swim while she rested on a big quilt they spread on the ground. As I sit here typing away, I wonder what ever happened to our father's purple striped swimming suit. It was considered fashionable for that time. It was a one-piece garment with the upper part striped and the lower part black. The legs were mid-thigh. I don't remember what we wore, as we had no money for real swimming suits.

Our parents always took a nap on Sunday afternoon and we knew better than to open their door. We had orders to keep out of mischief and not destroy each other. We dared not misbehave, as our father could be very strict. His word was law and I was scared to death of him most of my early childhood. I don't ever remember getting a spanking but his firm voice was enough to terrorize me for hours. Once he made me sit at the kitchen

table and finish some boiled onions on my plate. To this day I cannot eat boiled onions. I could hardly swallow the evil things.

I don't remember our older sister Ronnie being home much during the winter time because she was always being sent to Grandma Knight's because of her mastoid ear infections which had to be treated by a "city" doctor. I think Ronnie was the only child who actually ever saw a doctor when they were small. A school nurse at St. Michael's administered baby vaccinations and our parents treated all childhood illnesses. You can't beat a tablespoon of hot whiskey with a little sugar in it. This cured most colds. In later years, I remember sulfa products were used to treat upper respiratory infections but for the most part we lived with our mother's ministrations. No proper household was ever out of iodine, Mercurochrome or boric acid. These were used to treat infections.

Ronnie was usually back home in the summertime and I fondly remember her reading the "Swiss Family Robinson" to us younger kids. We four girls (Ann was too small) would stretch out on the boy's bed so we could look out the window and Ronnie would read a chapter to us every afternoon. It was wonderful. I have never forgotten that story and have read it many times myself since.

We kids loved it when Grandma Knight took the bus to Remus by herself. Our father would pick her up in the old Model T and we would have her company for at least a month. She came every summer to help our mother (with all of those kids) until she couldn't travel alone any more. The first thing she would do would be to gather up all the goose feather pillow in the house and give them a good cleaning. I think she would actually wash the feathers and the pillows would be hung out to dry on the clothes lines until they were full of fresh air again and smelled so wonderful. Then she would get us kids started beating the rugs. You haven't lived if you don't know how to beat rugs. There were no vacuum cleaners in those days for people who didn't have electricity. Therefore, at least three of us would be armed with a wire contraption with a handle that you used to beat the living room rug either on the front lawn or the clothesline. Boy, did the dirt fly. Several months of dirt flew out under our zealous beating. Now and then, we took a swipe at each other when Grandma wasn't looking.

By the time I was in third grade, I was an avid reader and I read every chance I could get. I was determined to read every book in St. Michael's School. The nuns noticed how well I could read and would often have me help the children in the "Baby Room" who were just learning to read. They also would have me read to the downstairs kids when they needed something read to the entire group. I only had one good eye but I could outread anyone in that little three-room school. Mary and I didn't get to finish grade school at St. Michael's as our father became quite ticked at the priest about something or other and we were shipped off to Remus School for our next grades. I believe Bernie and Ann also went to Remus School. Besides there was no tuition to pay there.

Sometimes, Mary and I would walk down the road to pick up apples from a roadside tree. They weren't exactly tasty but were better than nothing. Every time we walked pass Bill Lobert's farm, we would pray that the big ugly, mean dog Jyp wouldn't be loose. To this

day, I am scared to death of German Shepherds. He never bit any of us but we were always sure he would. If we could get Max Hessel to go with us, we would wander on farther down the road until we came to a little stream where we could catch minnows. I don't know what we did with them. I am sure we didn't eat them.

We had absolutely wonderful Aunts and Uncles who would come to see us every summer. Chores would be abandoned for a few days and we could just wallow in the attention of these wonders of the world. Uncle Mike would always go fishing when he came. He had been in the Navy and knew how to fish. He would catch a whole tub full of fish in Lenhart's Lake and Ma would fry them for breakfast. Aunt Jo and Aunt Helen would bring big boxes of oranges, which we could never afford, and we would gorge ourselves on the fruit. Aunt Ann would come and help mother with sewing and tell us wonderful stories about her dress shop on 5th Ave. in New York City. Before she left, she would measure all of us girls and after she went back to the city, she would make each of us a dress for school. We wore that same dress every day and kept it as immaculate as possible as we had no other.

Our Aunt Ronnie only came for short visits but when she came with our Uncle Frank, her brother-in-law, we had to have everything in apple pie order for she owned our little farm and we were only poor squatters. I can see her now marching around in her 3-inch heels inspecting everything (including the barnyard). She was actually wonderful to us but managed to terrorize our mother with her visits. She sent us wonderful presents at Christmas time and would save all the comics from her Chicago newspapers and send them to us in a big box. She bought Ranger bicycles for the boys and roller skates we could all share. She was an example of an "iron lady" who had brought herself up from poverty and became a hospital superintendent after nurses training. One summer, she had her piano sent to our house via moving van. It was a special gift for Ronnie who was an excellent pianist. What a day that was. We all sat on the front steps waiting for the van to arrive. I can't remember how they got it into the front room but I suspect it came through the front porch, which at that time had detachable walls. Also there was a doorway going directly into the front room. That piano was to be the joy of our lives. We could hear Ronnie playing when we were out in the fields and we had many hours of enjoyment singing around the piano. Ronnie took piano lessons from Sister Mary Bertrand and then she taught Mary and me simple piano playing skills.

Our aunts were wonderful examples of free spirited women. Only Aunt Ann had married (unhappily and soon divorced). Jo, Helen and Ronnie never married. Our mother's baby sister Lillian married Uncle Wick (Aloysius) who was a milkman and the funniest guy I knew in those years. He was a great storyteller and made us all laugh with his milk route stories. When company came, we had no guestrooms so we made do with an old army cot and our father would drag out the back cushions from the Model T. One kid or another could thus be spared from sleeping on the floor. Our city cousins were delighted to hear that we were never required to take full body baths. We had no indoor plumbing and therefore no bathtub. Sponge baths were the best we could do by the front room stove (behind the Sears Roebuck screen that now stands in our Garden Room on Wines Dr.). Country showers were rain showers and whenever rains came during the summer

months, we kids donned our swimsuits or whatever and raced outdoors to play in the rain. In this manner we were washed clean from head to toe. Of course, Ma would not let us go out in an electrical storm with thunder and lightning.

Ma made fruitcake every Fall and she had a special way of cooking it in the pressure cooker. We kids all helped crack the nuts and cut up the various fruits. She made enough to send to all the relatives in Chicago and Detroit. Making fruitcake around November was never considered work. It was pure fun and besides, you got to sample the fruits and nuts while you were chopping them. Our mother's fruitcake was the best I have ever eaten and I really miss it at Christmas time. She steamed it in the pressure cooker first and then baked it in a slow oven for a short period. After that, it was cooled, wrapped and stored for aging. In mid-December, she would send cakes to our relatives in Chicago and Riverview (near Detroit). We of course had some too for Christmas and New Year's. It was dark and delicious.

The holidays were always special. Somehow our father used to be able to find a Christmas tree either on our back "forty" or a neighbor's field. We had a lot of decorations from our days in the city and I suspect our aunts sent more. We always seemed to have enough to eat at Christmas time and it was the only time of year that our father was the least bit lax about chores. Our mother could make a Christmas dinner that would bring tears to your eyes. Although we often wished to have a real turkey, we dearly loved her pressure-cooked and fried hens that had come from our chicken coop. Our mother at times would recall the good old days in Detroit when she could afford to buy a goose. To this day I wonder what roast goose tastes like for she never could afford one once we moved to the country.

In 1940, we celebrated Christmas in May as well as December. Unbeknownst to us, our mother was pregnant. We only noticed she was always wearing smocks. Anyway, on May 7th, our father sent Mary, Bernie and me down to stay with Rose Lobert, supposedly to help her with chores and play with her kids. When our brother John came to get us and bring us home, we found a precious present in a little bassinet by the living room stove. It was a brand-new baby and our father let each of us take turns holding the little bundle of joy. He said she was to be named "Ann" and that Dr. Philips had brought her in his medical bag. We never questioned why our mother was a bit blue from chloroform or why she was to be in bed for a week or so. This was my first experience with a newborn baby and I shall remember it all my life. This little bundle was to be hugged and loved and carried around everywhere. I don't believe she ever went to sleep without someone of us rocking her first. I used to come home from school and take care of her for our mother if she had to run errands. I was only ten years old but considered advanced for my years and quite capable of caring for my little sister so no harm would come to her while our parents were away.

SEASONAL WORK

As I wrote this chapter, I wondered what on earth should be included here. Seasonal work goes way beyond ordinary chores and is absolutely essential to the success of the farm. When we were kids, we had what was known as a “working” farm, one that had required activities going on every day and seasonal activities.

When we were very small, we could hardly wait to help haul hay. By the time we were teenagers, we could hardly wait to see the last load of hay hauled in. By the 4th of July each summer, our father would be out feeling the hay for dryness and testing the flowers on the blooming alfalfa. When everything looked right, he would come into the kitchen and announce that the weather was just right for mowing the hay. In the early days, he would borrow a team of horses from a neighbor and off he would go with the mower. In later years when horses were not readily available, he would use our old Chevrolet car to pull the mower. After the hay was cut, it had to dry in the fields and then be raked into windrows so it could dry even more. We knew by the age of three, that you never put wet hay in a barn. The fear of “spontaneous combustion” still appears in my mental list of worries. Wet hay in a mow can actually generate extreme heat to the point that fire can start and burn the entire barn down.

When Mary and I were very small, our father would let us ride on the horse-driven hay wagon so we could learn to tramp the hay. Tramping is essential to getting a good load. Hay must also be tramped in the barn so that it settles down and you can get more hay in. What started out as fun when we were little turned out to be hard work in later years. What strong legs we developed. We kept tramping and jumping on the hay until it finally obeyed and settled down a bit. In later years, I wondered if this wasn't a good way to keep the little kids busy. We did enjoy the work however and would even sing as we worked. To this day I feel that sense of accomplishment as I remember the last load of hay going into the barn. Our mother always made the task easier for she would bring a metal pail of lemonade, made with well water, out to the field to help quench our thirst.

After the hay was safely in the barn, we could goof off a bit and weed the garden and corn patch two or three hours a day. In October, serious work began again, as potatoes had to be harvested. This was such a major event in rural areas that schools closed for two weeks so that potatoes could be picked up. What backbreaking work it was to pick up those spuds. At the end of the first day you thought your back and thighs would break and you could hardly fall into bed. The next day you were better prepared for bending over and were able to cope with your assigned “beat.” By the age of eleven or twelve we not only harvested our own potatoes, neighbors could also hire us out for five cents a bushel. Work permits were unheard of and in a sense, one acquired permits to “not work” if one was physically incapacitated for some reason.

Until potatoes and tomatoes were fully harvested, we kids spent a lot of time every other day or so either plucking off potato or squash bugs or hunting and killing tomato worms. I get really disgusted with environmentalists today who know nothing about the vandalism of these creatures. A single big fat tomato worm can completely decimate a

tomato plant such that no fruit is produced. Our favorite method for annihilation was to drop them into a glass jar of kerosene. I didn't care much for this task but I knew it had to be done.

In mid-winter, we would butcher either a cow or pig. Whatever, it was a day which permitted excuse from school at least for our older brothers. Everyone worked hard all day and those of us who were able to handle sharp knives (by the age of 3 or 4) were permitted to cut up the fat for rendering into lard. Nothing on a pig was thrown away. Intestines were cleaned out and used for making sausage. Head meat was made into "head cheese" and the various parts now sold as sweetbreads were incorporated into sausage. Livers, hearts and kidneys were delicious when cooked properly. The only thing left for discard was the "oink", the neighbors used to say.

I love the memories. I knew when our father fired up the big iron kettle over an outdoor fire that we would have lard for our mother's pies and biscuits. And we would have at least two tubs full of "cracklings" to munch on after school. Boy, were they delicious with a little salt on them. Nowadays you find cracklings sold in little jars in deli shops for \$5 or \$6.

The bible says that each activity has its season and so it was on the farm. By June 1st, we had to have the garden planted or there would be no food for the winter. The middle-sized kids dug holes for tomato and cabbage plants. The smaller kids got to drop the seedlings in the holes. The older kids got to tamp the plants firmly in the ground after adding a bit of water around the roots. Our father who had plowed the garden then served as the inspector who walked through each row making sure every plant was in place. Thank heavens, he knew what to do as he had grown up on a farm and knew everything about farming. Next came the seeds, which had to be distributed evenly and carefully so they didn't all end up in one place. We could hardly wait for the seeds to sprout and the plants to grow. In the cow manure enriched soil, everything grew like crazy, including weeds. We kids learned in a hurry how to tell the difference between a weed and a plant and weeding became our every day responsibility throughout the summer.

Our father and the boys usually planted the corn with a hand planter that created a hole in the soil and dropped a seed or two in. Dad carefully marked off the correct placement for the corn with a string marker that could be pulled along by hand or horse driven. Squash seeds were planted near the corn hills, as both plants would grow well together. Oh those squash! We had to keep the bugs off them, water them with little pails and pick them in the fall. As we had no central heating in those days, we could keep the resultant squash under our beds upstairs along with cabbages. Years later when I was traveling in China, I noted the same ingenuity among the Chinese people. Apartment houses would have stairwells that contained huge quantities of cabbages. No space was wasted in those buildings either.

While the garden was growing and we were all out of school, we helped our mother clean the house from top to bottom. She usually started with the storeroom, that wonderful bedroom upstairs that was filled to the brim with hand me down clothing and shoes. Ma

would sort everything in the big girl's bedroom and decide what was usable to wear or to make over into other clothes. Once she discovered a litter of baby mice in the bottom of a box and she brought us in to see them. I don't know what she did with them but I still remember the little pink things. They were kind of cute actually. After the storeroom was back together, we started on the really big work and that was washing and cleaning the front room and kitchen walls and ceilings. We had neither a parlor or dining room and the main part of our living quarters were the front room and huge kitchen. Our parents big dining room set from their early days in Detroit were splendid pieces of furniture in the front room and the table served us well for Sunday dinner or playing games.

Cleaning the wallpapered walls and painted ceilings was a game for us kids. Our mother would hand out big wads of cleaner which was some kind of cleaning clay and the trick was to keep the wad moving over the area to be cleaned until all the dirt was gone. Then the wad was kneaded until a clean surface emerged and you could swipe off more dirt. Swiping is a very firm wipe. There was plenty of soot from the living room stove and we managed to get most of it off. When our mother wasn't looking we would throw our cleaning wads at the boys and they would return the favor. Most of the time we caught the rascals as they came flying through the air but sometimes we missed and had to get down the ladder fast to retrieve them before Ma caught us. When the walls and ceiling were cleaned, we beat the old gray carpet on the front lawn until it quivered with relief and brought up no more dust.

The final part of the whole event was for Ma to wash and dry the living room curtains. After the curtains were washed, Ma would starch them and hang them to dry on curtain stretchers that guaranteed that they were pulled back into their original state. A curtain stretcher was an absolute necessity in those days and the trick was to stretch each curtain out until it reached the frame where it could be hooked onto sharp little nails that edged the entire frame. After a few misguided finger pricks, one soon learned how to attach the lace curtain fabric properly. I can still recall how wonderful the front room smelled after Ma hung up the clean curtains. The whole room sparkled. The same procedure was followed in our parent's downstairs bedroom.

The kitchen was another matter. Those walls and ceiling had to be washed by hand with some kind of solution that was prepared in two or three pails. The taller children could wash the upper walls and ceiling and the younger twerps could work on the lower part, which was an old country style four-foot molding. The soot in the kitchen was unbelievable. We scrubbed and scrubbed and tried not to wash away the last of the threadbare paint. When we were finished, it looked beautiful in our eyes and we were ready to face another winter. That kitchen was the heart and soul of our lives. Mary and I made popcorn and fudge in the evenings. John made noodles and doughnuts whenever he had the opportunity. Art despised cooking in any way. (He also hated carrying out pots and hoeing the garden and cornfield and always tried to con his younger sisters into doing his share of the work.)

Late summer, we helped Ma with her canning. She canned everything. Our parents had a pressure cooker like no other I have ever seen since. It had special clamps on the top to hold the lid down and a pressure gage, which had to be monitored. When the cooker was loaded with jars, someone was assigned to sit on a stool by the stove and monitor the pressure. If it went too high, you had to move the cooker to a cooler part of the stove. If the pressure started to drop you had to stoke up the fire and move the cooker back to a hotter part of the stove. This was serious work. The cooker could blow up if the pressure went too high and the foods would spoil in the jars if the proper pressure weren't maintained. God forbid that any of us catch botulism from improperly processed food. We were all so afraid of botulism that we remain on our guard even today. I cannot imagine having the same organism injected into my face to remove my wrinkles but that is what is happening today for vain women who want to stay forever young.

I must deviate here a bit for it is a beautiful memory. We never saw our parents kiss or hug. Yet we knew they loved each other dearly. I remember one very late evening when I heard low voices downstairs in the kitchen. I crept down the stairs and peeked into the kitchen and saw our parents still working on the canning process. The pressure cooker was on the kerosene stove (now illegal in most states) and they were waiting for the last batch of jars to finish processing. They were talking quietly about something and the expression of their faces was something I will never forget. They were in this together no matter what. Their closeness and respect for each other was obvious. I crept upstairs quietly and tried to get back to sleep.

Our mothers canned goods were always safe and delicious to eat except during the war years when the government forced the substitution of rubber for the lids. We had to throw out a large amount of canned meat because the lids did not seal properly. She canned everything all kinds of vegetable and fruits and of course beef and chicken. Her canned beef was out of this world and so good on a winter evening. We tried to fill every jar in the basement and in addition she would make dill and sweet pickles in big crocks. Ma was a great reader and what she didn't know how to do she looked up somewhere. Our parents bought a set of encyclopedia that used to be in a special bookcase beside our father's chair in the front room. No one in Remus to my knowledge had such a set. We could look up anything and everything. I am not sure Ma got her ideas from those books or others but I do know she could always find answers somewhere. She was a well-educated woman for her day having graduated from high school and had excellent secretarial skills. Our grouchy old grandfather had paid tuition for all four daughters (as well as son Frank) to attend high school. Although our mother was never to seek employment outside the home after she married, she used her knowledge in multiple ways to keep us fit and healthy.

In the late summer and fall, we kids all helped pick the produce. We often had bushels of tomatoes and cucumbers sitting on the back porch until they could be eaten or canned. Beans required snipping and cutting and fruits required paring and splitting into sections. Ma's canned peaches were beautiful and golden in the jars and her applesauce was the best I have ever had. She and Dad never tried to duplicate Mary Snider's sauerkraut for it

was an award winning secret recipe and our parents preferred to trade summer rhubarb for fall sauerkraut.

Farm kids learned from day one about “beats”. In the old days before World War II, farm kids worked on their parents’ farms or even neighboring farms. An assigned work area in a field was considered a “beat”, be it related to weeds or potatoes. It became your site for learning all kinds of things—sort of like on the job training or learning at work in the current business vernacular. Of course, you did all kinds of other work on a farm, but learning to work on a “beat” was something special. You learned to work in a small group, learned an assigned task, learned to be on time for a job and most of all you could even work for someone who would pay you for your labors. On the side, you were able to observe human behavior at its worst and at its best. A farm beat is like a policeman’s walking route which is also called a beat.

What is it like to bend over from the waist and start your “beat”, your assigned path, where you will spend your morning and afternoon? The potato digger goes up and down each row of withering potato vines, gently lifting the globules from the ground in nice clumps so you can easily see the potatoes on the ground. If the crop is very good, you have no difficulty seeing the potatoes that lie there waiting for you to grab them up and place them in a crate. When you first start this task, you use a pail and empty it in a crate and then you put a tag on the crate with your number so the boss knows whose crate it is.

The first day on the beat, you think you will never be able to stand again. You are certain you will have to quit. Your thighs ache so much that to sleep that night is a blessing. Your fellow workers and your boss tell you that the best treatment is to go right back to work again the next day. It turns out they are right. Within two days, your muscles have hardened and you can drag a crate along with you as you bend and pick. You don’t bother with the pail any more for it takes time to stand and walk back to a crate when you might have it with you all the while.

The October morning is crisp and cold and the heavy dew makes you glad you wore your heavy shoes to the field. Even boots some days. No mud of course. You can’t dig potatoes in mud. But the ground is damp and cold all the same. So you begin your day, saying little to your fellow workers for they are already bent over in their rows, picking as fast as possible. Maybe later in the day, if the digger gets stuck, you can have time to throw a few seedlings at each other, just for fun.

Potato picking has marked me forever. One learns about keeping in an assigned place, how to keep your head down and how to work until you drop. At every farm, the owners worked along with the pickers and just as hard, doing different tasks such as driving the tractors, picking up the crates, emptying them and bringing them back to the fields. Everyone had a beat so to speak. The pickers ended up with different backaches than the guys driving the tractor and trucks but all ended up with the same sense of accomplishment when the field was emptied of its crop.

Child labor laws, minimum wage requirements and the emergence of potato picking technology have forever obviated the need for potato vacations. Workers still pick other produce but the potato beats have passed into history along with big farm families and school vacations for farm work. Men and women in business suits now teach the lessons learned about working in small groups in fancy seminars for large fees. But the lessons learned on the land yielded much more. Can task accomplishment be realistically portrayed any better than a large potato field bare of potatoes? Memories of aching muscles will forever be reminders of working in a family work group.

CHORES GALORE!

I suppose city kids did have chores but I never heard of them when I was a kid. We had chores in the morning, chores in the evening and chores at suppertime. And then there were various after school chores like pumping well water and carrying it in and feeding the chickens and cleaning out the barn. Chores were mini jobs not real work like hauling in hay or picking up potatoes. But they were there to be done every day and were important to learn early so you didn't ever become a "lazy loafer." That was the worse thing that ever could happen to a person according to our father. Chores are the activities of daily living on the farm. They are like washing your face in the morning, brushing your teeth and combing your hair. They become habits very early on and all the children were expected to participate in them as soon as they could walk unassisted and could go to the outhouse alone.

We didn't have indoor plumbing on the farm until after World War II and the boys came home to dig out the new basement and lay the required pipes and tiles. I did chores every day of my life on the farm until I left home at the age of 17. There was one exception. One Christmas when I was about 10 years old, our parents gave me a book about Tom Sawyer's adventures. I read the entire book that Christmas Day and I finished it by nightfall. For some reason, our parents decided to give me the day off and let me read. I was in another world as I followed the adventures of Tom and Huckleberry Finn. No matter that they were boys in the story, I was right with them at every point. I suppose Becky did a few interesting things in the story but not like the boys. This must have been after the REA came through and we finally had electricity.

I learned early on to think creatively while I was doing chores and the various tasks turned into opportunities to mentally redesign something. To this day, I can redesign a room or solve a problem all in my imagination while I am doing another physical task. It is so easy. Chores were assigned by ages and height. Under the age of six you just weren't tall enough to turn the separator that stood in the old kitchen. One had to stand there and turn a big handle on a machine that separated the cream from the milk. The cream was to be sold to the Remus Creamery and the milk was ours to use for the next day's meals or fed to the weaned calves in the barn. Turning the handle on the separator was considered a very important task and I could hardly wait to be tall enough. Another task for a short child was to run and fetch pails and dishpans when the kitchen roof started leaking during heavy rains.

A lowlier task that no one wanted to do was carrying out the chamber pots each morning. There was an upstairs pot under the girl's bed and a downstairs pot under our parent's bed. These had to be emptied every morning before we got on the bus and went to school. Rain, snow or shine, these darn things had to be emptied out on the manure pile by the barn. We dreaded the assignment and only hoped that no one had used them for "Number 2" which required more effort. Number 1, ordinary "pee" was bad enough but Number 2 was the limit. Our brother Art was always trying to get out of the task and he would negotiate anything possible to get someone else to do his share of the duty.

In retrospect, I don't think the farm could have functioned without kids. There were before school chores and after school chores. Cows had to be milked and pots emptied before school. After school, water had to be carried in from the well and if our mother was planning to do laundry the next day, we had to carry in extra water to be heated in a big boiler on top of the wood stove in the kitchen. The old water in the crock by the pail on the table by the back kitchen door had to be emptied and cleaned each day. Water had to be pumped by hand if the wind wasn't blowing hard enough. We prayed for wind each day just not enough to send the old derrick swinging around. I was always afraid the windmill would blow over some night and land right across my upstairs bed. I always slept closest to the window. The windmill was useful in many other ways. The boys used to bypass the outhouse by going up to the first and second rungs and seeing who could pee the farthest. Of course we girls could not do this and we were properly envious.

We churned butter, stirred soup and helped our mother in all manner of ways. Someone had to turn the wringers on the washing machine by hand until we finally got a washing machine that had automatic wringers. The first one in memory was a gasoline-powered machine that our father had to start. Of course, I had to experiment and stick my hand in, much to our mother's chagrin. She had to rescue me as I couldn't pull it back out and my arm would have gone in up to my shoulder if she hadn't saved me in time. She declared she would surely "land on me" if I ever did that again. Mary and I helped her sort the clothes into piles of lights and darks and in the summer time, we wiped off the metal clotheslines so clothes could dry out doors. To this day I can remember the wonderful smell of line dried clothes. The sun does wonders for clothes that indoor dryers simply cannot do. Kids who were tall enough got to help our mother hang clothes on the outdoor lines.

I recall that there were strict rules about putting too many clothes in the laundry. Kids were expected to wear the same underclothes and socks all week. Saturday night was soon enough for a change. Our clothes had to last and last and couldn't be worn out with multiple washing. Not only did we carry water in from the well to fill the big boiler on the stove; we carried in more water to fill the big rinse tubs. The same water was used over and over for the entire wash, going from the whites and lighter clothes to the dark socks and overalls. Dad's overalls were frequently caked with mud and these had to be washed last. During the Depression, he worked on the roads under the federally subsidized WPA and his clothing showed the wear and tear. We always had to take special care with Dad's long underwear, as this had to last the week also. I never knew our father to wear any other underwear but long Johns winter and summer. They kept him cool in the summer and warm in the winter. And he always wore bibbed overalls and carried a pocket watch. Real farmers wore bibbed overalls.

We had numerous other chores, like making the beds, dusting the living room, washing the dishes, drying the dishes, carrying various things to the basement cellar for our mother or bringing up canned goods or potatoes from the cellar for the evening meal. We carried in wood for the stoves, filled the coal pail and whatever else need to be done like

cleaning eggs for sale at the market or carrying the pails of cream to the cellar storage can. The cream cans were placed out by the driveway for pickup once or twice a week.

Then of course, we had outdoor chores, which were always great fun. Mary and I loved to feed the chickens after school. One had to get a small bucket, fill it with chicken feed from the barn bins and scatter it on the ground in the barnyard for the chickens. They would all come running as soon as they heard the bin being opened. Some of them even wanted to be petted. This was a special task and one we all liked to do.

If you have cows, someone has to go and get them for the evening milking. Sometimes the cows came up to the barn by themselves but mostly one of us kids had to go get them. I dreaded going into the fields to get Flossie until she finally had her horns removed. She would swing her horns at me and I would be terrorized. She always was a mean cow compared to Bessie, Molly and Daisy. I was always hoping she would get into the wet alfalfa like poor Molly. All farm kids know from Day 1, that you cannot let cows eat wet alfalfa or they will bloat. Although we had to guard our cows religiously, somehow after a heavy rain, a very pregnant Molly escaped into the nearby hay field and consumed mountains of wet alfalfa. Of course she blew up like a balloon. Having no telephone, we could not reach the vet in time and she died. The treatment is simple. A bloated cow's stomach must be pierced with a sharp knife to let the gases out. We all cried that day. Not only was Molly a great milk producer but the sale of her calf would have meant new shoes for some of us. I never was chosen to help take a calf to Big Rapids for sale. Bernie can best tell this tale as she used to help hold a calf in the back seat of the old Chevrolet while Dad drove. What an experience that was!

There were food chores and there were animal chores in addition to the various household chores. In the summertime, we kids picked mountains of wild strawberries and elderberries. The strawberries took hours of time to hull and kept everyone out of mischief but boy were they good in shortcake with real whipped cream. Elderberries grew wild on Gietzen's Rd. and we picked numerous pails of them and helped our mother make jell. Towards fall we had numerous wild chokecherries trees and the cherries made a delicious jell from the boiled and juice extracted cherries. You could eat them raw but they were quite tart and made you feel like you were choking. City kids would not know how wonderful it is to run out to the garden and pick produce for supper. (You don't eat dinner on the farm, you eat supper). While you are picking whatever your mother needs like rhubarb, beans, tomatoes, peppers cucumbers or whatever is in season, you can pull up a kohlrabi, peel it back with your fingernails and then have a raw pretend ice cream cone by hanging on to the root. Delicious! I still love fresh kohlrabi but rarely find good ones even in the Farmer's Market.

Rhubarb is also called Pie Plant in the country. One time (before I knew this), Mary Snider came over and wanted some Pie Plant which our mother told her she could have. I told her we didn't have any. I soon after learned from our mother (who was not home at the time) that I had given out the wrong information and Mary Snider had gone home empty handed. If she had only told me the regular name for rhubarb. We also had a Summer Apple Tree that bore apples that made delicious apple pie. We never knew the

real name of the tree for it was there when our folks moved to the farm. It was to bear fruit for many years until our father was in his nineties.

Animal chores were every day and before and after school. There was always milking to be done morning and evening. Farm children learn to milk cows as soon as they can sit on a milk stool and grab the “tits” properly. What a thrill that is to master the skill of squirting the cow’s milk into the pail without missing or spilling the pail. I think Ronnie was the only one of us who never learned to milk a cow. Because of her repeated mastoid ear infections, she was protected from many tasks. Then of course, the cows must be fed each day. When they are not out in the field every day eating good grass, they must be fed hay in the barn. They also must have water each day so our father had arranged two big wash tubes by the well and it was our responsibility to keep these filled with water every day even if the wind wasn’t blowing and we had to pump the water by hand. Watering the cows was usually a pleasant task except when the yard was icy. Then it was hair-raising as we were worried sick that a cow might break a leg. Fortunately this never happened.

Cows poop a lot and cow manure must be cleaned out of barns every morning and evening. We all got pretty good at heaving the manure out the barn window although the shorter kids usually threw the stuff out the door by twisting at the door so you could hit the manure pile. This manure was gold to the farmer as it meant crops would grow the next summer if the piles of manure were properly spread on the garden. Our father never got to see the bags of dry manure now for sale in markets. We only handled the wet stuff and did it smell. Little did we realize at the time but farmers in the thirties created the first compost piles. All the kitchen scraps were dumped onto the manure piles and the resulting mixture was a great fertilizer for the gardens and fields of corn.

Chickens create immense piles of chicken shit called chicken “noodles” by the kids. Cows make pies but chickens make noodles and horses make biscuits. In the early years on the farm, chickens had free range which meant you had to watch every step when you went to the outhouse. Avoiding people shit in later years seemed to come naturally to me when I grew up. I think my early farm experiences really helped in this regard. I was to discover that people are not always nice to work with and it helps to know how to protect yourself. After the new chicken coop was built, it was easier to clean out the droppings and it became a matter of immense good humor to require new boyfriends to clean the coop if they wanted to continue dating one of us. My husband to be enjoyed this immensely and manage to pass the test when he came courting.

We had pigs for awhile when I was very small but I don’t remember much about them. I know they were butchered eventually and made good eating in the wintertime. I never had to “slop” the pigs as our brothers did. All kitchen waste was given to the pigs but I don’t believe our mother ever shared her dishwater. Our father would never permitted pigs to be in the same field as young calves and I learned later that a grown pig could actually kill and devour a young calf. This must be a throwback to their wild nature as boars.

I have always felt that chores helped me build mental and physical stamina. In later years, I have found comfort in doing the simple everyday chores of living. Even though I have automatic laundry equipment, I still take pleasure in sorting the clothes in the old way and on a sunny day I may even try to hang a sheet out on the single line just to try and experience that wonderful fresh smell of sun-dried linen. As the middle child and often the oldest girl at home (when Ronnie was away) I was expected to help care for the younger girls. Mary could manage by herself except for braiding her long hair. Ann and Bernie required much more care. Bernie was really tough having been born during a really big snowstorm. Once I was supposed to keep her in bed so she could recover from chicken pox. Not only would she not stay in bed, she insisted on jumping on all the upstairs beds. In despair, I decided the only thing I could do was to keep her from going downstairs where our mother would see my inability as a caregiver. So I sat on the top step and read while she continued to jump to her heart's content.

OLYMPIC GAMES ON THE FARM

We had our own Olympics on the farm. We didn't buy games as kids do today; we made them up and varied them as the season required or the number of players. We had both winter and summer games and they were not for sissies. They were hearty muscle stretchers and great for building team spirit. In the spring and summer we played a tough game of barnyard basketball, where my brother had placed a basketball net on the barn (much to our father's chagrin). Lacking a basketball didn't stop us in the least. We had a football that worked almost as well except it didn't bounce. Various versions of the game emerged, sometimes boys against the girls or Miller kids against the neighbors. Either way was loads of fun and we always played in good spirit. I broke my rimless glasses several times and our father threatened to ban me from the game but I always managed to get involved.

When we weren't tearing around the barnyard (under the watchful eyes of the cows who came up to watch), we were playing "Annie I" over the house with a softball. First we had to have teams for each side the house. The purpose of this game was to catch the ball when it came sailing over the house. If one team member caught a ball, then the whole team ran around the house and tried to tag a member on the other side. If he or she were successful, the tagged member had to join the other side. The team with the most members won. The game usually ended with a call to supper. Games could go on for hours if necessary.

Then there was hide and seek, the plain version or "kick the can" which modern kids would never understand. "Kick the Can" was the most fun and the biggest challenge. The seeker had to stand by the tin can (any old can will do) and count to a hundred while every other player hid in various places in the yard. Usually limits were specified so that no player went back to the woods. "Coming, ready or not," the seeker would yell after the count to 100 was completed. You cannot imagine the places, one can hide on a farm and the seeker really had to work to find players and bring them in. The challenge of course was for an unfound player to race in to the home base and kick the can as far as possible. If he were successful, all the captured players would be free from prison and could hide again. This mandated that the seeker had to start all over again. What a challenge!

The winter form of "hide and seek" is played in the haymow. That is really a challenge. There are loads of places to hide where no one can see you. You can dig down into the hay and cover yourself just enough so you can still breathe and then wait for the person who is "it" to come find you. Modern kids don't get to do this any more as hay is now kept in huge bales in the field. A good game of haymow hide and seek can only be played in loose hay. If I close my eyes I can still smell the fresh hay and the good smell of cow and manure down below. Dad once told me that some day I would wish I was back in that barn and he was right.

Of course winter games are out in the snow which can be very deep. We had wonderful sledding paths and one went right under a barbed wire fence. We were told to never raise

our heads when going down hill and I of course had to try it. I could have had my head cut off but fortunately I was only cut and had to be bandaged by our father who didn't have anything kindly to say to me. I wonder if that is why I have so much problem with my vocal cords today. I get laryngitis very easily. However, the problem may also be due to the fact that my older brother Art tried to hang me one time but thought better of it once he got the noose around my neck and noted I was turning blue. We had only one pair of skis but soon discovered that two people could ski on one ski at a time and have twice as much fun. I note that a new form of sledding on one wider ski is now popular at ski resorts. We kids were already doing this on an ordinary ski, years ago on the back hills in Remus.

For the most part, we kids made up our own games. We had our mother's store room full of old clothes and various items and a basement with a sand pile for carrots so we could imagine numerous games. Our Aunt Ronnie sent us various word games like Lexicon so we wouldn't grow up to be dullards and we always managed to have decks of card so we could play Pedro with our Dad in the evening. Ma never played cards with us. She always sat by the warm living room stove reading while the rest of us played cards, munched popcorn and ate huge Northern Spy apples that our father kept stored in the well hole. To this day, I can not imagine a better tasting apple than the Northern Spy that has been stored in the well hole for safekeeping.

Store room "dress up" could be played with any number of kids. There was a never-ending supply of old clothes and a barrel of shoes in the storeroom plus our mother's cedar chest in the big bedroom. You could be almost anybody in that upstairs playroom and we imagined ourselves in various roles. In the wintertime, you had to duck the clothes that were drying overhead. Dryers were unheard of in those days and so our mother hung the week's laundry in the girl's bedroom upstairs and frequently we would awaken to snow on the windowsills and frozen clothes hanging overhead. We would wait for the sound of fire crackling before getting out of bed in the morning for we realized it would be best to dress downstairs by the newly build fire in the living room stove.

We had other summer games when we weren't going to school. Mary and I played jacks for hours on end and sometimes we were lucky to be permitted to go to the neighbors to play house in an old school bus that was parked in their yard. Who else had a bus to play in? It was wonderful and we could imagine all sorts of roles. One game, I will never forget because it was so innovative and yet so devastating. Our older brother Art was always inventing something and he came up with the idea of making a merry-go-round. He proceeded to build a turnstile and firmly attach a long board where we could sit on the ends. He then proceeded to give us all rides. We gave the boys rides too and all afternoon we went round and round and when our mother called us for supper, we found we were so dizzy and nauseated we couldn't eat a thing. To this day I can remember that horrible vertigo. We never played that game again and Art dismantled his dream machine the next day.

Then there were other games one could play like climb the crab apple tree or clothesline posts. Actually Bernie was the only one who could really do that well and she could even hang upside down from the upper post while we watched in awe. She was quite a gymnast even then. I think her genes were passed on to her granddaughter Erin who is a wonderful gymnast today. When we got really bored we thought of other games not mentioned in any modern book like “Hide from Queenie” our multicolored dog. Two of us would wrap up in an old rug and wait for Queenie to find us. She loved this as much as we did and she never failed to find us. One time, our brothers thought they would have some extra fun and when Mary and I were hiding with just our hair sticking out, they ran up and threw a handful of prickly burrs in Mary’s hair. Boy was our mother mad. It took her hours to get the burrs out and she may even have had to cut some out. Mary and I had very long hair at the time.

Modern kids don’t seem to have the opportunity to create their own games any more. So many toys and games are manufactured for them. We could play imaginary games like school, nurse/doctor, build in the basement sand carrot box and even come up with creative ideas as to what to do with the new box of multicolored modeling clay. Our Aunt Ronnie had sent a big box of clay to keep us busy on rainy days and after we created several different sculpted designs, we decided to see how the clay would look pushed into the back screen door. Our mother didn’t like this a bit and she threatened to “land” on us if we ever did such a thing again. We also had time for individual games with our pets that were numerous. How many city kids get to play with 200 baby chicks quartered under the kitchen stove? I can still see those little furry things. We learned to not squeeze too hard and to pick them up very carefully. They loved it and when they grew to full size, they would come up to us in the yard to be petted.

The basement carrot box was a corner of our Michigan cellar devoted to preserving carrots over the winter. It was also a wonderful place to play and when we were small we loved to go down there and build houses and castles. Who needs to go to the beach when they have a Michigan cellar? We loved to play bedtime word games and when the house settled down for the night and all the lamps were extinguished, we kids would start the countries game. The leader would call out “Name a country that starts with _ and ends with _” and our favorite was always Yugoslavia. This one never failed to achieve much laughter. Only occasionally did our parents tell us to quiet down. I think they enjoyed hearing us settling down for the night.

Who else ever got to roller skate in a chicken coop? One year while our father and brothers were building a new chicken coop, the cement floor remained clear of chickens until the cement cured. Mary and I took advantage of this and roller-skated to our hearts content, having borrowed John and Art’s skates. These skates were marvelous as they could be adjusted to fit all shoes and feet. In later years, I was to wonder why our Aunt Ronnie sent specific sports equipment like bikes and skates to the boys but not the girls. Perhaps she knew we would share. Little Ann tagged along with us everywhere. She learned our games, followed us to the fields for chores and became the family pet caretaker. She dearly loved all the little farm animals. One of my favorite pictures of her

is one in which she is holding her bunny rabbit Floppy. The little kittens followed her everywhere.

World War II brought an end to this idyllic existence. When the boys went to war and our father went to work in a weapons factory in Muskegon, we were touched by outside forces. Although we moved out of the desperate poverty we had known since early childhood, we never again had the close, warm family, totally dependent on each other in a very special way. Every evening during Lent we would all kneel down in the front room and pray the rosary together. Ma would be very solemn but Dad would be keeping an eye on baby Bernie trying to keep her out of mischief as she crawled around tickling everyone's feet. During every severe windstorm during the Depression, our mother would wake us and bring us down to the living room to pray the rosary. Usually by the time the rosary was completed, the storm had eased and we could go safely back to bed. No one even thought of going to our Michigan basement for cover.

BESSIE'S LAST FLING

Bessie had big “tits” not “teats” and she had a “bag” not an “udder.” My father never went for modern words when the old farm words would do better. We all learned to milk cows by practicing first on Bessie. She had huge teats that you could grab a hold of and really squirt the milk out. What a magnificent experience to achieve a pail full of foaming white milk just by sitting on a milk stool and pulling on those big spigots. The last phase was called “stripping the tits” and you better do it right or you wouldn’t get the last precious drops. This was accomplished by grasping the tit with the thumb and forefinger and stripping downward until no more milk came out.

Anyway that is not the real story here. Bessie had other wonderful characteristics. She was old, tolerant of children and gentle. My brother once tried to ride on her back and she promptly dumped in the middle of a metal drag by bucking him off. Cows aren’t like horses and they don’t like to be ridden. Bessie was also determined and independent and the recognized leader of our small herd of cows. She seemed to understand humans without us ever knowing. One day she heard my father say that Bessie was getting too old to have more calves and she was not to be bred any more. We weren’t sure what “bred” involved but we thought we had the general idea.

Bessie made up her mind to bypass our father’s plan. While he was away at work in a nearby city and our mother was away visiting relatives in Detroit, it fell to me and my year younger sister to take care of our two little sisters and tend the 40-acre farm for two days while our parents were away. Our two older brothers who might have helped us were away serving in the army during WWII. Bessie sized up the situation and made up her mind to get moving. Besides, she discovered she was “in heat” and raring to go. She knew no one would take her to the favored neighborhood bull about two miles away so she sniffed the air for closer testosterone.

Would you believe it! The big brown bull on the farm just behind us was turned loose for the day in the field adjacent to ours. I didn’t discover Bessie’s plan until I went to bring in the cows for evening milking. No Bessie was in sight and I finally discovered to my horror that she had jumped the fence behind our woods and made it into the neighbor’s field and was busy cavorting with Romeo who looked anything but friendly to humans. He wasn’t about to give up Bessie to a skinny girl who didn’t yet understand the important things in life.

I yelled to my sister Mary that we had to do something to rescue Bessie (who didn’t seem to want to be rescued). I raced into the house and called our neighbor who usually helped us out of tight spots. “There’s a big bull in our back field and he has our Bessie trapped.” I yelled into the phone. The good neighbor thought I said there was a “ball bat” in our back yard and he no doubt thought I was a bit crazy. When he finally realized what I was saying he told me to “Leave them alone and Bessie would come back on her own.” I didn’t believe it, but had no choice but to accept his word, as he wasn’t about to challenge Ferdinand either. He probably was laughing his head off about my cow story and my lack of knowledge about the facts of life.

Mary and I had a terrible time sleeping that night. We knew we had failed our parents and we didn't know how we were going to explain the lost cow. Bessie was supposed to be our next winter's meat supply. Around 6 AM I got up and went out to get the cows and start the morning milking. Much to my surprise, Bessie was back with the herd looking absolutely delighted with her successful tryst. Although my sister and I searched and searched, we couldn't find where she had gotten over the fence into the bull's field. Her secret died with her for after her calf was born in the Spring; she was again scheduled for the butcher shop in the Fall. As we munched on her steaks for snacks over the card game Pedro, I could imagine her smiling at us. She had the last word after all and her fling was one of the best ever. The amazing thing about the whole story is that old Bessie went after Ferdinand. She was the one who climbed over the fence. He no doubt had no idea she was trying to attract his attention or he would have galloped over the fence into our field. Oh what powers female hormones stimulate!