The First Twelve

by
Katherine Plapp Peterson

Introduction

Katherine (Katie) Plapp Peterson, author of "The First Twelve", was born in 1891 in a two-room sod hut, northeast of Kearney, Nebraska. When she was four, the family returned to the farming village of Malta, Illinois, which they had left in 1878. As one of the youngest children in a family of thirteen, Mrs. Peterson observes both that late homesteading period of American history and the dynamics of family life. The narrative of events leading up to her mother's death shapes her memoir.

The Plapp family was not unusual in its movement from Illinois to Nebraska and back again. Homesteading was often unsuccessful; about 60% of the claims filed were abandoned. Homesteaders sometimes had economic trouble and moved on after a year or so. The Plapps, more successful, lived on their land for fifteen years, from 1878 to 1894, and succeeded in claiming it. However, the 1890's were bad years throughout the plains. An economic depression and bad drought hit the prairie settlers particularly hard. These were the yeors of the Farmer's Alliance and the Populist movement. Mary "Y'Ellen" Lease urged farmers to roise "less corn and more Hell."

In the midst of this general crisis, the difficulties of caring for a family of twelve in a two room dirt hut proved too much for Elizabeth Plapp. The family blames the terrain and the weather; Mrs. Peterson remembers a crisis during a prairie thunderstorm. However, her mother's long range despair and breakdown must have had its roots on both national and personal problems, problems which became focused during the trauma of a violent storm. The storm precipitated action by the mother's Illinois relatives. Mrs. Plapp's father and brother came to Nebraska and talked the family into moving back to Illinois. There, her family, the Schweitzers, gave the Plapps considerable aid in reestablishing themselves.

A family's return to the wife's relatives appears frequently in the literature of the west. Economic failure could be masked by references to the wife's feminine frailty. A woman's economic

dependence upon her husband could be cause of concern for the wife's relatives who might feel responsible for her welfare. The Schweitzers were genuinely concerned about Elizabeth's health and welcomed the Plapps with a generosity that amazes even the young Katie. The older boys were given jobs on relatives' farms; the rest of the family moved into an already over-crowded house-which seemed like a mansion to the children, who were used to two sod rooms. Another house was purchased for the Plapps and relatives helped prepare it for habitation.

Mrs. Peterson's memories of her childhood are full of the atmosphere of the sod house and the small town in Illinois. She remembers flowers and fields and games; she tells of the teasing between brother and sister and of the close ties which the little ones in the family formed. But of her mother and father, she seems only to remember generalities. In a family as large as this one, the mother would have had to delegate responsibilities. David Plapp was mostly to be avoided.

After her mother's death, Katherine Plapp became largely responsible for the family. The years immediately following those which end the memoir would have been difficult for her. However, she got her high school diploma in 1906, married in 1910 and taught school from 1909 until 1922, picking up occasional courses at local colleges. She stopped teaching in 1922, but returned to it in 1930, when she took on a lifetime career. She taught until 1965, when at the age of 74 she finally retired. Her special love was the rural school, and as Illinois closed out its rural schools, she became the teacher who would take a one-year contract for the last year of a school, driving forty or fifty miles to see it through its final stages.

The memoir has had to be edited to fit space requirements. Sinee Mrs. Peterson is a natural storyteller, and sinee the tale itself has a clear narrative line, I have edited to keep Mrs. Peterson's most vivid memories and to capture the story of her mother's death, as impressed upon an eleven-year-old's mind.

June O. Underwood

It has long been in the back of my mind to set down for the family my thoughts and recollections but time seems never to have beeu too pleutiful--always too much to do--always first things first--always maybe I can tomorrow--which outline to follow or why bother--maybe a big task or I'm tired--perhaps how to begin. But--here it is.

As to the family beginnings, -- mother, father and two small

children, ages two and one, migrated to Litchfield, Nebraska, to stake out a homestead claim. There, before returning to Illinois, the vicinity of their own childhood homes, ten children were born and one more joined the family after the return in 1894 to complete the thirteen offspring in the family. I was number eleven.

Each day was like the others in the sod house where the David Plapp family lived at Litchfield, Nebraska. The hub-bub in the two room house was common as the daily tasks were done, for indeed, each member had his part to do and each soon learned that when our father assigned tasks, they had better be done. As one of the little ones I cannot remember having anything special to do but can remember being told to sit down or go into the "other room." The "other room" was the additional sod part added to the original one room when the sod house was put together. For the first family of four the one room was sufficient but as the family steadily increased, the "other room" was needed. It was almost as large as the original part of the sod house. It was necessary to go up two steps to get into the "other room." We often sat on these two steps to play or when we were told to be quiet or get out of the way.

The "other room" was used mostly as a sleeping place and, as it was up a little higher from the first room floor, the underneath place entered from the outside made a place for small animals or chickens. I don't remember much about its use but chickens seemed always underfoot in the door yard. My older brothers often said the wind was always blowing in Nebraska, sometimes blowing the feathers off the chickens. We smaller children thought of it as a good joke but perhaps to them it had a real meaning.

A faint idea of going to our cyclone cellar comes to mind although I cannot recall anything about it except the entrance. The cellar was not far from the sod house, and my older brothers said it was a storage place for vegetables in winter and used for safety in summer. My most vivid recollection of the Nebraska home is of the wind and the cyclone. It was late summer. The Nebraska climate had been unusually difficult. The crops had been hurt by the drought and the grasshoppers had ruined what the drought hadn't. The everyday worry and trouble with a growing large family shortened tempers and in general magnified every problem to the breaking point. Especially susceptible to uneasiness and unrest, and most of all to the futility against grasshoppers and bugs, storms, and loneliness for her parents and brothers and sisters, from whom she had been separated for so long, was our mother. So far away from her loving family, she was vulnerable to the unpleasantries of her

life, which were many, unpleasantries compounded by the whims and frenzies of an alcoholic husband. The genteel word "alcoholic" was not used in my childhood. We just said the plain word--drunk.

The season was frought with storms. The storms did not guarantee rain but brought much wind. The deficiency of rain left the ground hard, dry, and dusty. It was necessary to carry water from the "Draw" where the older boys said water was running low, too. To carry water was a problem, although there were many hands to help. Through spring and summer we were visited by terrific wind storms, which pulverized the dry earth and raised immense clouds of dust. At last it seemed a breakiug point was at hand.

The sky clouded. The threat of rain was welcomed but never the wind, dust, and destruction which it brought with it. We were all admonished to not go far from the house as we might need to go to the cellar. My father had taken the wagon to get supplies at Broken Bow.

The sky grew darker and darker. Then it suddenly took on an ominous look. Our mother and older brothers got us all together to go into the eyclone cellar. We were iu the kitchen area and before we could head for the cellar, the storm broke. With her amazing capability to do the best thing, which I often recognized in later years, our mother got us all crouched in one eorner of onr kitchen, threw a heavy eomforter over our heads, and told us all to hang on to the edge of it. For a few terrible moments, mother and children fought with the wind. Being one of the little ones I had no part in the hanging on to the comforter, but I can recall the suspense and fear as the roof of onr sod house disintegrated and disappeared in the terrible noise and foree of the wind.

Then the rain came, and onr mother, spent with the tension and fear, seemed to change into a different person. She became hysterical, incoherent, and almost a stranger to us. The older brothers saw what was happening and took charge of the sitnation as best they eonld. This acnte change of manner persisted for several days. Something had given way to leave her with an affliction which was to plague her the rest of her life. The damage in the nervous breakdown had been immense and, in spite of the loving care given her by her older ehildren and my father, it was many, many days before she gained her usual personality. It was at this point in onr lives, in response to letters telling them of what had happened, that one of my mother's brothers and my grandfather eame to visit us. They, too, sensed the great change in onr mother and discnssed the possibility of the family's retnrn to Illinois where my mother's fami-

ly, three brothers (two farmers and a minister) and two sisters might be able to assist in the care of the family.

We later learned that upon their return to Illinois, my mother's sister, Aunt Amelia, became so worried about what they had to tell of their visit that she had my grandfather write for us to get ready to return to Illinois. He would have a home ready for us.

So preparations began for us to move back to Illinois. Our home had been in Nebraska about fifteen years. The family of four had beeome a family of fourteen. As to what preparations were made, I remember nothing and indeed never asked my older brothers abont it but in my adult years I learned that the "Government Regulations," concerning improvements and ownership of Homestead claims had been satisfied. As to the disposal of the claims or belongings, my knowledge is as vague as is the trip to Kearney to board the train.

My memory is nil about our trip to Illinois except that we were in a train, we were a large group, and the train was an enigma to me. I had never seen or heard of one before. However, I well remember Uncle Louis, my mother's brother-in-law, meeting ns at the train when we arrived in Illinois. An older hrother earried my baby brother Andrew. I remembered Unele Lonis taking my hand and saying, "Katie, you come with me." I was the youngest of the four or five who were to go with him. Only the baby Andrew was younger and he was to be with our mother. Together we left the depot, crossed the tracks in front of the depot, and threaded our way between buildings to the main street of that little town. Uncle Louis said he had to go to the bank before he took ns home -- us being the younger children who were to live with his family in a many-roomed house on my grandfather's farm.

It was a two part house. My Unele Louis' family lived in one part and my Grandfather, Grandmother, and Aunt Amelia lived in the other part. Some of us would be in each part of the house. It was a fairy house to us who had been living in a sod honse. There were many spacious rooms, stairways, a veranda continuous on three sides. What a house! What a change for children from a sod house on the wind swept plains of Nebraska!

So we yonnger ones spent our initial time with our uncle and Grandfather's families. As we grew accustomed to our new surroundings, my perceptions and memories increase. Most definite are memories of the geese, avoiding the th-th-th of the big gander at the head of the flock, the barns, the animals, hunting the eggs, the fruit, the garden. Distinctly do I remember the garden at the east side of

the house beyond the fringe of the wide lawn which snrrounded the big house. We were permitted to go in at will to pick the flowers. They were so beautifnl and so many kinds. "Pick all you want," said Grandmother. "Jnst don't step on them or waste them." It seems to me now as if my relatives couldn't do enongh to try to undo the cavages of our Nebraska sojourn. I remember them as ever loving, giving, helping, praying.

My grandfather, John C. Schweitzer, was a native of Frenkendorf, Switzerland and married to Elizabeth Lesher, also of Swiss aneestry. During their early years in America he was a cirenit rider, serving eharges in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Illinois, and later became the owner of a farm four or five miles north of Malta, Illinois. It was that community the family entered on the retnrn from Nebraska.

Besides my two oldest brothers [Ezra, who became a minister, and Jesse, who watched over the family in later years] several other brothers were old enough to be helpful on farms. Althongh at that time I knew nothing of their whereabouts, I learned as I grew older that they had been placed on farms of relatives or acquaintances in the community.

We remained with my uncle's and grandfather's families only a short time. I have a vague memory of our family living in a small house at the south edge of Malta. We were father, mother and the youngest children; the others remained on farms nearhy. We lived in that house during the time that the house in Malta was being readied for us.

In his great wisdom and business acumen, Grandfather Schweitzer had contacted our paternal grandmother aud her families and apprised them of the needs and conditions in our family. Together the sturdy practical families provided a plan for our large family to put down roots.

The house provided for us, situated at the southeast corner of a block of good level land at the north edge of Malta, Illinois, was a frame building of seven rooms, four upstairs and three downstairs. Only the hack part of the house was new and that was unfinished. But these grandparents had provided sufficient lumber with which to complete the building both inside and out. It was to be finished by my father and brothers.

So a block of land, a house, small barn, ample garden space, large hearing fruit trees, a well in front of the house, a school two bloeks to the east, neighhors on surrounding blocks made a truly wonderful home.

Shortly after the family became residents of the new home, my second oldest brother, Jesse, again became one of us. He had found work in the little town and from then on lived with ns as long as any of the younger children were at home. He dedicated himself to the care of us all, especially our mother. Of course he knew of the circumstances and her condition in Nebraska. It seems to me as if he vowed to always take eare of her and protect her, and in taking care of her he looked out for all of us. My father's alcoholic tendencies persisted until her death and after. I was eleven then and Jesse's care, consideration, and protection was evident and necessary often. He was a financial help as well. His room was at the head of the stairs across the hall from my Mother and Father's room and when one of the other older brothers stayed home for any reason, his bed was shared by them.

Within the next two or three years of our move into the house, of the seven ehildren who had entered the home, the oldest, Ves, and two sisters next in age found part time or seasonal work.

Soon after we hegan living in Malta, my father began working as a blacksmith. He built a small shop at the south edge of our block not far from the house. He also repaired machinery and in season ran a threshing machine engine and separator. Ves worked with him in the harvest time.

During these years he also snpervised our gardening. Every bit of our block was put to use to produee food for our family or the animals. Our garden supplied an integral part of our living. Under our father's supervision we very young ehildren were called npon to help in whatever way we were able. Care of the animals was a part of our daily chores. We pulled weeds, hoed, planted, gathered and helped prepare. In general we seemed to enjoy work. We enjoyed play as well, bnt we learned early that when our father told us to do something we had better do it and play after the work was finished. He might be having one of his alcoholic spells and we conld find ourselves in big trouble.

I recall how on one oceasion father had told Ves, the oldest of the seven younger ones, to hurry home from school and get wood ready for the stoves. Ves, choosing to play a while at school, delayed too long in getting home. As if that were not enough, he had talked a younger brother, George, into playing at the sehool ground with their friends, too. The games ended abrnptly when they sighted father coming after them with a buggy whip in his hand. So the two blocks home were eovered in reeord time with the boys doing their best to ont run father and keep far from that snapping whip. Ves

was sereaming loudly while George was using all his energy to get home as quiekly as possible. He was more seared than hurt. When it was over another brother and I heard Ves and George talking it over. Ves was laughing about it as he said, "Why don't you holler like I do? Then he thinks he's hit you and he kinda quits. Don't just run, holler." So we learned to cope with whatever came along. He was a good father. He often joined us in our games and singing but if he had been drinking, look out.

So we learned to work and in many ways we found our work enjoyable and fascinating. In the spring and summer we took the cow ahout two hlocks to the pasture near what we called the back alley. In the mornings we would drive the cow to the road back of our block, then south one block to the entranee of the alley. The alley was one block long and led to the pastnre where the cow fed until early evening when we got her home to be milked. Neighbor children who lived near often joined us there and together we found frogs or snakes or unusual bugs, ehased dragon flies or butterflies, examined weeds and flowers as well as bird's nests in the trees whieh edged one side of the alley. It was the back alley that Andy and I first saw that phenomenon, the larva of a monarch hutterfly spinning its chrysalis. Although not on haud for the emergence of the butterfly from that chrysalis, we did see an emergence and the spinning of several cocoons that season. We examined dozens of milkweed stalks to see if larva were feeding there so we would know which ones to observe. We also saw a snake trying to swallow a frog whieh was a bit too large. We took a walking stick home in a ean to ask what it was. Snch a qneer insect!

Making dandelion stem curls, stem rings, braiding long yellow dandelion chains, pieking flowers, learning to whistle on a blade of grass or finding a suitable green willow twig for making a whistle --many are my memories of the back alley.

It was not all chores and work for us. There was mueh fnn especially when some of the older ones were home Sundays for dinner and afternoons after church. The big boys were often home at least until ehore time. Then we were many together. My mother and father seemed happy, too, when we were many. There was always mueh activity, indoors or out, winter or summer. In winter there was eorn popping, candy making and lots of singing together. In summer there were games, contests, hoop rolling, using the iron rims of buggy or wagon wheels. Often neighbor youug folks joiued us. Perhaps because we were a family of many ages our yard became a playground for our end of the little town.

The second winter in our house was one of much snow. My father and big brothers got the idea of building a toboggan run at the side of the roadway near his blacksmith shop. Some strong timbers and boards for completing the cellar under the new part of the house were available. These they used to make a platform from which a long sloping decline was built. This gave impetus to a sled which, beginning on the platform, would continue on farther than the end of our block -- even across our scarcely used back road. The toboggan has been one of my favorite memories, perhaps because it was of the earliest years in the new home.

There was skating in the winter as well as sledding. The area beyond our back road was usually flooded summer and winter. Young folks from all over Malta came to skate or play what we called "Shinny on the Ice." There were acres of ice. The only time I could skate was when I could use my brother's skates. It was seldom but I used them every chance I got. But I could put on a pair of larger discarded shoes over mine and hang onto a bigger boy. He would say, "If you can catch me." You may be sure I would try. The discarded shoes were necessary because my shoes wore out so fast.

We younger children played "Crack the Whip" on the ice or "Fox and Geese" or "King of the Hill" or built forts with the snow. It was fun to have so many to play with. I remember playing "Sardines", "Tally-i o" and "Run-Sheep-Run" in the long early warm evenings with children from other parts of our village.

In the spring when the ice melted and the water receded somewhat, the higher part of the flooded acres became dry enough for baseball. This part was called Island #10. However, part of the flooded area was never dry and if it happened to be a rainy spring the water became deep enough to build and float rafts and catch frogs or turtles. The same older children that skated and played there in winter activities spent summer hours there. The young folks scrounged around their neighborhoods for boards or whatever could be used to make rafts or poles to propel them. We small ones could ride or maybe fall off a raft or be ducked in the water. No one was ever seriously hurt. But our mother was afraid for us. She always admonished the older ones to "Take care of little __________." which ever child it was. I can still hear her say as we little ones played together, "Take care of little Calvin." He was the thirteenth child born after the family returned to Illinois.

The financial affairs of our big family -- and there were problems -- seemed to be taken care of by the brother Jesse who lived

with us and the older brothers who were working. Jesse also assumed responsibility for us morally.

Father continued his use or misuse of alcohol and there were many to keep him company. There were four saloons in that little village of less than three hundred people. His alcoholic tendencies were probably the best lessons in temperance for our boys, as not one of the ten followed in his father's footsteps. They were all intolerant of his drinking. My mother often said he was sick -- not defending -- just trying to help them understand or placating. So it seems to me now. Then I did not sense much unusual. She seemed quite herself ordinarily. At times when there was unrest or distress, the older ones were more observing and considerate of her.

The woodboxes come often in my memories of play as well as work. There were two. One was a long, large, wide box with a cover. It stood against the wall behind the kitchen stove. It was a convenient place where four or five children could sit and play or pass the time. It also served to get us out from under foot of older ones. To the left of the covered box was a smaller open box.

Probably one of the first chores given a young child was to bring in a few sticks of wood for the box and later to keep the woodbox filled. In winter the open box was kept filled also.

To the left of the window, which was above the open box, and behind the door were hooks where wraps were hung.

The covered woodbox was a place where we could sit with our slates and play games -- old cat or dominoes -- guess riddles, pile up hands -- play bean porridge hot or maybe find refuge after a reprimand. It was a handy place for little ones.

A more genteel pastime for us all was music. We sang together at morning and evening devotions. Sunday afternoons and evenings we often sang. We sang mostly hymns at first but as soon as four of the seven were in school, school songs were added to the list.

An older brother, Joe, who worked just a mile or two west of Malta on a farm, saved his money and when I was not yet six years old presented the family with an organ. It was arranged for my two older sisters, nine and eleven years old, to take music lessons from a Malta music teacher who came to the house. My sister Marie became a good player but the oldest sister could do so much better by ear that she soon gave up taking lessons. The organ became the nucleus for the whole family whenever several were together and Marie seemed always ready and soon able to play for us. Everyone sang.

The summer passed quickly, yes, even the years, and the family passed the initial stage in the Plapp house.

We seemed to be a sturdy group - except our mother. She tired easily and the older boys often took us younger ones to task or gave us a quick box on the ears if we did not jump to help when she spoke to us or did not anticipate helping without being told. Jesse told me in later years, "Oh, yes, we had to watch out for her." I'm sure we younger ones did not sense any need for special care of her. However, the older boys sensed the need and perhaps were apprised and kept aware of her need by our grandparents, uncles, and aunts who were at our house often.

When troubles came, perhaps more financial than we young ones knew, when my father drank more than usual, as he did by spells, when sickness came to the family as it sometimes does where there are several small children with childhood diseases, I know, now in my adulthood, my mother became mildly depressed for long periods of time. There were weeks of illness in the family -- measles or scarlet fever -- when her nerves must have been near the breaking point. Again, when our eighteen year old brother, who had enlisted to serve in the war with Spain, came home with typhoid fever, there were weeks of trouble. Three other brothers had typhoid fever before our family got back to normal. Again our mother had a period of depression -- or so it seems to me now -- but as children of seven, eight or nine nothing seemed much out of the ordinary to us. Devotions seemed more necessary and serious at times and boisterousness and noise less tolerated, but we did not couple this with anything being amiss with our mother's health.

She was proud of us all in our activities. I remember reciting a short poem at a Christmas program when I was very small. It must have been a comical one, judging by the burst of applause -- so loud it frightened me and I cried. She took me on her lap and explained that they clapped because they liked it. She was so kind, gentle, loving and proud of us all.

As the mother of such a large family she worked very hard. We all had to help but she had to plan and see that the plans were carried out. We canned hundreds of quarts of fruit and vegetables for winter use. She sewed, cleaned, prepared meat, as we butchered our pigs as needed, dried corn and apples, prepared sourkraut. The work was endless. Although we all had to do whatever we could, the responsibility was hers.

Malta was a lively little village of between two hundred fifty and three hundred people. When our family began living in the new house, Malta had two grain elevators, a thriving lumber yard, an active creamery, a post-office and bank as well as a butcher shop, a

hardware store, furniture store and several groceries, two blacksmith shops, a hotel, two restaurants and a livery stable. Two passenger trains often stopped for twenty minutes while the crew got lunch at the restaurant. During the lunch-time, switching operations would be carried on. Two doctors and two churches were guardians of physical and moral health, doing their best to offset the effects of the four saloons which our little town supported. The manager of the local furniture store was also an undertaker.

Oetzel's Tailoring Shop took care of men's outfits and a millinery shop catered to women's fashions. There were also other small businesses, barber shops, harness shop, tin shop, jewelry and perhaps more than I can recall.

One of the groceries operated as a department store. It carried a small line of shoes, clothes, appliances and would order whatever one needed.

It was before I was old enough to go to school that my father came home one day with a gunny sack full of bananas. I had never seen or tasted one before. He said, "Come see what I have." It was a bit of the first shipment of bananas ever received by our department store. We tasted and liked them. We children became quite excited. Father said the sack full cost only twenty-five cents. The price increased slightly, soon after that introductory price, but we had them often from then on. Malta's other groceries began to sell them too.

Our one department store was a busy place. We, with such a large family, were good customers. We bought groceries in large quantities: one hundred pound sacks of sugar or oatmeal, twenty pound sacks of flour and twenty pound drums of coffee beans, to be ground at home as use demanded. Cookies and crackers were sold in bulk by the pound from large tin containers but our family bought crackers in wooden boxes about fourteen by twenty inches. Most groceries were sold in bulk in those years and the grocer always included a free generous bag of candy with an order.

Then came a difficult fall. Cold weather set in early. In those years corn picking was done by hand and Thanksgiving was thought of as the time to have fall work pretty well finished. As children we looked forward to the holidays -- Thanksgiving and Christmas -- the school and Sunday school programs. As the weather gradually grew colder, we younger ones spent much indoor time with books, games and childish pasttimes on the wood box behind the kitchen stove. Our mother seemed much preoccupied during those early fall days before that Thanksgiving, more quiet than usual. She had worked too hard getting ready for winter, our Grandfather said. But to us

all seemed quite as usual. She took eare of us, got us off to school, tended to our wants and needs. We did our chores and had devotions. Then she sent us off to bed and saw that we were covered. She planned for Thanksgiving when her children, as many as possible, would be home sometime during the day, as their work permitted. It had been a busy fall as all helped to finalize the preparation of food for winter. The cellar was supplied with vegetables. Large amounts of wood were cut and piled ready for use. The wood boxes were filled more often. Days were almost ordinary although our mother seemed a bit more tired and quiet than ordinary. Father was imbibing as usual, provoking arguments with our older brothers during their frequent visits. We children avoided altercations with our father as we had learned to do. Eaeh year added to our interests and aetivities so it was easier to avoid him by seeming engrossed in trapping rabbits or sled making or ehores. When he wasn't drinking there was no need to avoid him.

Yes, it had been a diffieult fall. Several snows came early -- not heavy but intermittent -- that fall before that Thanksgiving. Perhaps it seemed difficult to me as an eleven year old, sensing a bit more of what family living might entail. It had beeu a strained, trying time. Was it because our father had been drinking a bit more than usual? Was it some foreboding in our mother about her maturing sons, or the cares and eoneerns of her large family or the after effects of the earlier tensions in her life? Morniug and evening devotions became a bit more serious and it was necessary that everyone at home observe them. Still this was not enough out of the ordinary for us to question. Nor did we question the inereasing number of times we found our father "sleeping it off," as we said when we were told to summon him for dinner or supper. He had a place to lie down in his little shop and we were relieved when he slept there.

Two days before Thanksgiving my father was to bring the sweet potatoes for the Thanksgiving dinner. They had been omitted from the shopping list. When the omission was diseussed, he had volunteered to bring them when he eame from work. When he arrived he had been drinking as usual. His awkward gait had probably caused the bag to break and one by one the potatoes had dropped out on his way home. Seeing only three or four left in the bag, a fact to whieh my father seemed oblivious, Mother sent Andy and me to retrieve the lost sweet potatoes which were needed for the Thursday dinner. Of course an altercation followed with Father doing some senseless talking and it ended with him "sleeping it off." Such sessions disturbed our Mother very much, often produciug a quietness

which sometimes lasted several days. We youngsters kept out from under foot and busied ourselves with our own activities on the wood-box behind the kitchen stove.

So Thanksgiving came and went -- a rather unusual -- but still ordinary holiday, Thursday, November twenty-sixth. The big family members were not all present. The eldest, the minister, was most always absent, Sam, the fourth son, was in Minnesota, Jacob at his own home, Aaron, the sixth son, the one who worked farthest away from the family, was absent. He worked about twenty miles away. Ves would begin work on a farm the next morning to be gone until school time on Monday.

Perhaps because her family was beginning to be scattered, perhaps because of the work load, or perhaps beeause of health reasons, our mother took on one of her continued quiet, preoccupied times. However, she went about her every day work as usual -- or so it seemed to us younger ones. I began to speak more often of my soon-to-be-twelfth birthday, December the fifth.

Jesse, Andy, Calvin and I attended church and Sunday School the following Sunday. It was cold and dreary. A light snow had fallen during the night. Our Mother was not encouraged to go as she did not seem quite like her usual self. In the afternoon Joe and my two sisters came for a short time. We had a usual Sunday afternoon time together and the older ones returned to their work. We had supper and took care of our chores; somewhat later came devotions and bedtime with our mother looking in on us to see if we were covered. Sleep.

Then in the darkness of the night all became astir. There was walking and talking in and out of our rooms. We children were awakened and wondered what was happening. It was my father and Jesse talking. Jesse had been alerted as Father discovered that Mother had not returned to her bed after going into our rooms to make sure we were covered. Not finding her in the house Father had notieed that the kitchen door was unlocked and feared she might have become confused and gone out the wrong door. Together with lighted lanterns they had discovered her foot prints in the light snow outside the kitchen door. Jesse had called to us, "Come on down stairs. We have to find Mama. We all have to help. You can keep the kitchen warm."

By the time they were ready to go out, we were dressed and down stairs. With their lanterns in hand, we were admonished to, "Keep wood on the fire." The kitehen door was pulled tightly shut and they were off leaving us three, questioning and bewildered on the woodboxes.

The panes of the west window, above the open wood box, were covered with thick white flaky frost, Andy, kneeling on the wood, began to scrape off some of the flaky frost. He said maybe we could see which way they went by the lights. However, the spot quickly froze over again. Persistent efforts with a splinter of wood permitted us to tell by the lantern lights, which were soon joined by others, that they were following foot prints in a westerly direction toward our barn, then west and south toward our back road, across and into the field.

Again and again we were able to scrape, and by breathing against the glass, clear a peek hole in the thick frost while we took turns looking until the bobbing, flickering lights were too dim and too far away for us to see. Then came what seemed to us a helpless, endless time of waiting and watching.

Our little brother cried inconsolably at first. Andy was very quiet but we all cried now and then. We kept wood on the fire and waited, scraping frost off the glass again and again taking turns looking. But there was nothing to see.

Then the long wait seemed over. Andy once more scraping, breathing, rubbing a peep hole, said he thought he could see a light far west and south and a bit later, "Yes, it is a faint light. I can hardly see it." We each took a turn to see and little by little, under his directions were sure we saw the faint lantern lights bobbing and flickering about. Then a bit of relief. They must be on their way back. So we tried to envision what had happened as we waited and watched.

As we watched and waited, the lights flickering and bobbing about seemed to be coming a bit nearer, now seen, now hidden and as we imagined in the field, then a bit closer, probably in the land, then the pasture, then to the back road. Now many lights, closer toward our block and before long toward our barn, the shop, then toward the kitchen door we saw them -- carrying our mother's body. In a never to be forgotten moment I held the kitchen door open as they carried our mother's still form into a hushed, silent house and laid her in the north front room while we three looked on.

Jesse and our father answered our whispers, "Is she dead? "Yes" Is she frozen?" "Yes, she is." Calvin said, "Won't she ever get warm?" "No, she is dead." And we scurried to the woodbox behind the kitchen stove to be out of the way of the searchers who followed into the kitchen. And to do our crying.

With the searchers into the kitchen came neighbors. Many had been alerted by others to aid in the search and neighbors' families as well as three children had watched the return of the bobbing flicker-

ing lantern lights. All wanted to hear the circumstances of the search, the details of our mother's wandering out, the trail they had followed, and the finding. So like three lost waifs we sat on the woodbox listening to what was being said -- each crying in his own thoughts in what seemed like an indescribable, impossible dream.

By mid morning many people were coming and going at our house, all anxious to understand the circumstances of the tragic happenings and the trail.

A coroner was notified. All travel was by horse and buggy but by afternoon an inquest was scheduled and held. The jurors were well known to all of us as prominent men of our little town. A lumber man, the owner of a grocery and dry goods store, a banker, the editor of our weekly paper, another groceryman and the village constable made up the jury.

It was bitter cold weather and the inquest was in progress when my grandfather arrived. He was very cold and as he talked to us, George pulled up a chair to the kitchen stove for him and he put his feet to the oven to warm them. We talked a bit when Grandfather said, "Where is everyone?" George answered as he pointed to the south room. "In there." Grandfather arose quickly and said, "Oh, they are having the inquest for my daughter and I sit here." He left us and we four were on the woodbox for a short time. Soon George drifted toward the north front room where our mother's body lay and we stole in after him. We all cried as we felt how cold and still she was. Calvin's pitiful, "Won't she ever get warm again?" added to our grief and then through the front hall door which led from the inquest room came Jesse. He had left the inquest room in search for us. "Oh, here you are," he said. He knelt as he gathered us all in his big arms and we all cried together. "We didn't take very good care of her this time," he whispered.

That awful Monday ended. On Tuesday there was much coming and going. The older children, other relatives, neighbors, many people were in and out of our house. Wednesday brought the arrival of our absent family members. The eldest, the minister, and Sam, who had been in Minnesota, completed the group of thirteen children. The mother would be buried that afternoon, carried to her grave by her six oldest sons. On Thursday family pictures were taken, the only picture where all thirteen children are together --with a father but no mother.

Then the family dispersed each to his or her own work. My older sister, who had been working would be coming home to keep house for us for a short time. George returned to the Barber home and Father, Jesse, Sam and three young children were alone.

In two days I would be twelve.