Growing Up in Kansas

by Blanche Beal Lowe

MY FATHER, William Beal, and all of his neighbors had barbed wire fences on their farms in the prairie country around Conway Springs, Kansas. Keeping those fences mended and tight was a hard job. To make the job easier for himself, Papa designed and hammered out on his forge a tool he called a wire tightener. That was in 1894. When neighbors began wanting a tool like Will's to mend their own fences, he had his invention patented and hired men in a factory to make more tighteners. And he and his brothers and his father (who also were farmers) loaded up their wagons with tighteners and drove out in all directions selling them.

But a team-and-wagon was a poor way to carry tighteners to distant farmers. That was a job for the railroad. Papa knew he couldn't handle that kind of business from the farm; he'd have to have an office in Wichita, a good-sized railroad town about twenty-five miles away. Papa didn't know how to run an office, and he had very little money. So he went into partnership with Cousin Robert McKibben, who was a businessman with a furniture store in Conway Springs and a little soap factory in Wichita. (We called him "Cousin" because he had married Mama's cousin Leora Edwards.)

So in 1896, when Papa and Mama (her name was Anna) were thirty years old, Papa stopped being a farmer and became a businessman. He and Mama loaded their five children and their big black dog named Nimbus and all of their belongings into farm wagons and moved to Wichita.

I was four years old, the youngest of those five children, but old enough to remember being plopped up onto the wagon seat beside the driver, and being scared by a big red ball of fire in the sky until the man told me it was the sun coming up. And old enough to remember the long, slow day's journey to the house Papa had rented on Seneca Street. And the lanterns bobbing about in the darkness when we got there. I was so sleepy I let my doll fall under the wagon tongue. When I tried to grab her, a man unloading kitchen things stumbled over me and dropped an iron skillet on my little finger.

Mama was already in the kitchen laying out supper. She tore a strip from a clean dish towel, wrapped it round and round my finger, and poured turpentine on it, to help it heal. That made me scream even harder until my sister Ethel brought me a slice of bread and butter and sugar and set me on a stool in a corner out of the way. For several weeks I was proud as a peacock, Mama said, showing off my old fingernail growing out and the new one growing in.

Ethel was the oldest of us five children. She was ten. Then came my brothers, Ralph and Carl, and my sister Leona, or Loney, as we called her. Most of the family called me Babe or Baby, but Papa called me Blanche, which is my name. And Lona is my middle name.

On our first Sunday morning in Wichita, we all got slicked up and drove old Prince to the Methodist church for Sunday school and church service. I think Cousin Robert's brother, the Reverend Frank McKibben, was the preacher.

Papa and Mama always said that next best to having a good home was having a good church; and next to having a good church was having a good school. Or maybe they said school came before church. Anyway, Ethel and Ralph and Carl and Loney went off to school the next day, leaving Nimbus and me watching down the cinder walk for them to come home again.

At noontime a girl in the yard next to ours tossed a corn cob over the fence and nearly hit Loney, but Loney just laughed and tossed the cob back again, and that's how we found a friend. Her name was Helen.

Blanche Beal Lowe, the youngest of five children, was born in Kansas in 1892. In 1902 she moved with her family further west to California, where she married and raised two sons. Recently she has been writing accounts of her early pioneering life; in addition to this article, her story of the Beals' experiences during their first five years in California, Ranching Near Farley Peak, 1902-1907, will soon be published by the Mendocino County Historical Society, Ukiah, California. She now lives near her son Vincent in McMinnville, Oregon.

The author wishes to express her appreciation to her sons Vincent Lowe and the late Harvey Lowe, Jr., for their help and encouragement in preparing this reminiscence for publication.
Tallman. Her father had a farm out near Clearwater. Loney and I later visited there in the summer, romping and making life miserable for Helen's big brother Sam. Helen had an older sister, too; I think her name was Bertha.

During the school year, when we'd all done our chores, we'd play in Helen's yard, or ours. I remember the day Helen taught us how to drink out of the barrel that lay on a rack by the fence. After we'd all traipsed to the barn to find straws that we could sip water through, Helen picked the hung out of the barrel and sucked her straw through the bunghole and sucked.

"Apple juice!" she said, smacking her lips. "Pretty soon it'll be vinegar. Now you try it." So Loney sucked up through her straw, and because we were company, she pretended to like the juice. Then I had to do what Loney did. And it was Helen's turn again. We kept taking turns sticking our straws through the bunghole and sucking up apple juice till Loney and I got so sick we could hardly stagger home. Mama was scared till she smelled our breath; then she was ready to spank us. But she just put us to bed to sleep it off.

We hadn't lived on Seneca Street very long when Papa said we were going to move into a house he'd bought at 1150 University Avenue. It was just down the street from Friends University, which was the big red brick building he'd pointed out to us. He said Friends were called Quakers, or Quakers were Friends. A good neighborhood, he said, with cement or cinder walks all around, and brick pavement in some of the streets. And gas piped into the house for lights, but he thought coal oil lamps were safer, and probably cheaper. When we all trooped down to see the house, Mama said, "Oh, Willie!" and cried from happiness. Mama always called Papa Willie; and Papa called her Annie or Wife.

There was running water in the kitchen and a bathroom upstairs; even a place in the cellar where Mama could do the washing. But we children were proudest of the big, elegant barn with a little look-out room on the roof Papa said town folks called a cupola. Once I had a rough slide down the stairs from that cupola which tore the white muslin panties and the hide off my bottom and bruised my tailbone something awful.

The boys helped Papa patch the back fence and the grape arbor that led to the barn, and tidied the garden. We girls helped Mama pretty up the whole house inside with curtains at every window. And Old Nimbus patrolled the big yards, front and back, like a policeman. One day, when a tramp slipped past him to ask for a handout at the kitchen door, Nimbus chased him clear to the alley and tore the seat out of the man's pants as he went over the fence.

I especially remember the laundry tub in the cellar of our new home because I was there beside Mama sizzling out my doll clothes one Monday when Papa came down the cellar steps. When Mama looked up and saw Papa's face, she cried, "Oh, Willie, tell me! What has happened to Charlie?" And Papa told her that a horse had kicked her brother Charlie in the belly, and that he likely wouldn't get well. Mama put her apron up over her face and cried and cried. And she kept saying that she'd had a feeling that something awful was going to happen to Charlie.

They took me with them to Conway Springs to Uncle Charlie's funeral. I remember standing at the grave between Mama and Grandma Erwin. They were wearing long black veils over their faces. The smell of roses was all around us, for friends had brought roses not only to Uncle Charlie's grave but also to the graves of Mama's Grandpa Abraham Erwin and her Cousin Leora McKibben and I don't know how many others.
When we got home Papa told Mama that Uncle Orrie's friend Chester Pierson had sat beside Uncle Charlie all night till he died and then had helped to lay him out. It was a long time before Mama could laugh and sing again.

**Visit to Grandpa's**

Quite a while after Uncle Charlie died, Mama's brother Orrie came to borrow me, he said, to keep Grandma and Grandpa Erwin company while he was over at Chester Pierson's place helping to put the roof on the new barn.

"With Charlie gone," he said, "and Frank working out in Pratt, it's mighty lonesome for the old folks. So, please, Annie, get Baby's duds together so we can light out right after breakfast." (Frank was Mama's other brother; we didn't know him very well.) Then after supper, Uncle Orrie coaxed Mama to try the foot-pedal organ so we could all sing. And we felt good again hearing Papa's booming bass and Uncle Orrie's high, sweet tenor. Then Mama played our going-to-bed tune and we children lined up, Ethel first and I last, and marched upstairs to bed, pinching and giggling and waving good night over the banister.

Grandpa's house was small and white and stood at the end of a lane beyond a big red barn. Grandpa was at the stable door when we drove in. He called out "Hello," Old Shep barked, and Smart, the big yellow mouser, waved his tail. Papa was six feet tall, but Grandpa Erwin was taller. He'd been a soldier in the Civil War and still walked straight like a soldier. Mama said Grandpa played a fife in the army and had three of them when he came home, but I never saw him play one. Grandpa was great big but not fat and had beautiful blond hair and whiskers, and sharp blue eyes. And oh, how he could sing! Grandpa's first name was Linneas. But even Grandma never called him by his first name. She called him Pa, and he called her Mother. Her name was Elizabeth. Grandpa Erwin was always kind to me, but I think I was a little bit afraid of him.

But nobody could be afraid of little Grandma. I saw her there by the well in her long black dress, looking taller than she really was. When she turned and saw me trotting up the path she came running, grabbed me up, hugged me hard, and kept crying, "My Baby! My Baby!" And she carried me right into the kitchen and set me down at the table for a cookie and a cup of milk. Grandma Erwin's eyes were brown like Mama's. Sometimes they twinkled, but her voice was sing-songy, because she was so deaf she couldn't hear herself talk. She had a kind of trumpet to help her hear. It was wide at one end, but small enough at the other end to fit into her ear. So when you talked with Grandma, you had to talk into the wide end of her trumpet.

Here are some of the things I remember about Grandma Erwin's kitchen. It was big, and it was so clean that even the bare boards in the floor were almost white from scrubbing. The table where we ate was covered with white oilcloth. There was a big, shiny, black stove. A black iron tea kettle and a blue granite coffee pot were on the stove. Stew pans hung on the wall; beside them, the frying pans, or skillets. Two of the skillets were iron. Grandma always fried her chickens in the iron skillets.

She said some folks still called their iron skillets spiders, because they used to have feet on them and looked like spiders. A skillet on feet could stand above the coals without getting too hot, Grandma said, and that was a good thing to have when women had to cook at the open fireplace the way her grandmother did.

There were three coal oil lamps in the kitchen: one in a bracket on the wall near the stove; another one on the shelf by the big clock Grandpa wound every Saturday night; and one on the table to read by. Over by the window was a rocking chair big enough even for Grandpa. Near it, against the wall, was a narrow cot with a red calico cover that had a wide ruffle reaching to the floor.

In the little parlor next to the kitchen, Grandma kept the blinds pulled down so the sun wouldn't fade the roses in the carpet. There was a foot-pedal organ in the parlor that Mama used to play for Grandpa and her brothers to sing by the way we did at home. And a sofa where Grandma sat down for my nap. The wind sounded lonesome blowing through the trellis on the little front porch.

A big apricot tree just outside the back door made a shady place where the bare ground was hard. Grandma swept it with a tree branch every morning, as if it were a floor. The shady place was like a sitting room because in it were two chairs and an old bench and a little old table. Grandma used to rest there, or shell peas, or maybe darn Grandpa's socks. Sometimes she'd drop a spool of thread and we'd laugh to see Smart chase it. But I remember best sitting beside Grandma cracking dried apricot pits with an old flatiron to get at the little nuts inside.

On a bench by the back door there was a water bucket with a tin dipper and a wash pan and soap. Above the bench was a shelf with a comb and brush. A towel hung beside the shelf, and a little looking glass above it. Grandpa washed up at that bench before he went in to his meals.

Grandma had to be out in the sun a lot, like when
she worked in her flower gardens, or hung the washing on the line. Or went to feed the chickens and gather the eggs. But Grandma never went outside, even to the privy, without tying on her black sunbonnet. The front of her bonnet was starched stiff to stand out from her face. A ruffle around the back kept the sun off her neck. When she was going out for a long time, like to the garden to pick beans, she'd cover her arms with an old pair of black stockings with the feet cut off. She said no lady would let herself get all brown and freckled if she could help it.

I tried to remember to wear my bonnet, too. It was made like Grandma's, only mine was pink. Sometimes when Grandma was tying my bonnet strings, she'd brush back my hair and say, "Oh, Baby, Baby, what are we going to do with you?" Because I got freckled, bonnet or no bonnet.

Down in the barnyard Grandpa had a well with a windmill to pump water into the big trough. Overflow from the trough made a little pond where a mother goose took her goslings. I dearly wanted to touch one of the little fuzzy babies, but whenever I tried to get near, the old gander would come at me hissing with his beak wide open, ready to tear me apart. Grandma wasn't a bit afraid of that gander. She said she raised geese for their down and feathers, which she sold or put into pillows. She said a goose is good to eat, too.

The other well was only a little way from the back door. Grandpa had built a brick wall around this well, and a peaked roof over it. Under that roof he'd hung a wheel he called a pulley. Over the pulley, he'd fitted a long heavy rope, then tied a wooden bucket on to each end of it. Grandpa showed me how pulling one end of the rope let the empty bucket down into the well while the full bucket was coming to the top. Sometimes he'd tip the bucket a little so I could get a drink over the edge. The water was cold, and smelled mossy.

There was another rope in the well that didn't quite reach the water. One end of that rope was tied to the frame around the well, the other end to a wide-bottomed bucket. I helped Grandma set jars of milk and bowls of fresh-churned butter in that bucket. And then we'd let the whole thing down hand-over-hand into the cold well. At dinner time, when we pulled the bucket up again, the butter was hard, and the milk was cold and sweet.

One time a little green frog rode on a jar of milk and clear up to the top. Grandma and I hardly breathed, as he sat there blinking in the light. When the little frog made a great big jump, Grandma said, "He's scared, poor little tad." She couldn't bear him hit the water way down in the well, but I thought I did.

Grandma said come along then to the cyclone cel-
lar before the sun burned a hole in my bonnet. The cyclone cellar was under a big mound of earth out beyond the well. It was like any other cellar, Grandma said, but without a house over it. And the only place a body could hope to be safe during the terrible twisting wind and rain of a cyclone. Some folks called their cyclone cellars "fraid holes," she said. And before I could ask her why they called them 'fraid holes, she said I'd know why if I'd ever seen a cyclone roaring and spinning toward me across the prairie.

Inside the cool, dark cellar, we slipped back our bonnets. Then Grandma lighted a candle, and I could see shelf after shelf of canned peaches and pears... and... "You said cyclone cellar, Grandma? I hollered into her ear trumpet. Grandma laughed and said it was a good place to store our canned fruit, too, because it was cool in summer and never froze in winter. As we walked slowly along, Grandma found two jars with bubbles seeping from under the lids. She said the fruit in those jars was "working," and had me set them outside. "Working, Grandma?"

"Fermenting," she said, "the fruit is spoiled." Then she told me to pick anything I wanted for dinner. I picked apple butter.

Grandma said (and Mama said it, too), that a woman in the kitchen can throw out more food in a teaspoon than a man can carry in in a shovel. Well, Grandma never wasted a teaspoonful of food. When she ran out of fruit jars, she cut up leftover apples and pears and peaches and laid them out in the sun on sheets. To keep off the bugs and dirt, she covered them with cheesecloth and left them right there till they were dried clear through, and would keep all winter. Then she put them in packages, but I never knew where Grandma stored her dried fruit. When I was there she never dried apricots, because we ate them right off the tree as fast as they ripened. I dearly loved apricots.

When Grandpa picked his corn, he took off the husks and stored the big yellow ears in a special building called a granary, to be safe from mold and rats. The corn stalks that he'd left to dry in the field Grandpa called fodder, or cow feed.

One morning I was watching from the shady place where he drove old Kit and Jerry out to the field for a load of fodder. Shep was running everywhere, waving his tail and sniffing the ground for rabbits and field mice. When they came back, Shep was trotting along under the wagon with his tongue hanging out. That looked like fun, so I ran under the wagon and trotted along beside him all the way to the barn.

Grandpa didn't know that I was there. And I didn't know that Grandpa was going to back the
wagon up to the barn to unload the fodder. When Grandpa said “Whoa!” the horses stopped, and I stopped. Then when he clucked to them to start again, I trotted forward... but the wagon was moving backward! And there I was right into Old Kit’s heels. I yelled, “Wait! Grandpa! Please wait!” Grandpa heard me, but he didn’t know where I was till he looked down just in time to see a little bundle of calico kicked out away from the wagon wheel. Poor Grandpa: you know what he was thinking when he picked me up. And poor Grandma, when he came running into the kitchen and laid me on the red cot as limp as a rag doll, she said.

When I opened my eyes and saw them crying, I said, “Grandpa, am I going to be like Uncle Charlie?”
And Grandpa made a big sound like crying, and said, “No! child! Thank God, no!”

Then Grandma put her trumpet to her ear so Grandpa could tell her what had happened. When she took off my dress to see where I was hurt, the only mark she could find was Old Kit’s hoof print on my chest. “Poor Baby!” she said, “kicked the breath right out of her.”

“And saved her life!” Grandpa said, and made that crying sound again.

Then I drank a cup of milk Grandpa brought me from the well. And Grandma pulled the big rocker close to the cot, and sat beside me until I fell asleep. She was still sitting there beside me when I woke up.

The very next day Grandpa took me back to Wichita. Grandma cried when he took me away.

Chores: Town and Country

I don’t remember how long we’d been living in that home on University Avenue when a man wanted to buy it for a good deal more money than Papa had paid for it. Mama said she wished Nimbus had chased that man over the back fence the way he’d chased the tramp, because she didn’t want to move out of the only house she’d ever lived in that had a bathroom. But if Papa thought best...

So Papa bought a house farther up on University Avenue at 1603. It was a homey place with a big yard and porches front and back. Papa said, but needed some fixing up.

“And cleaning up!” Mama snorted before she’d even set foot inside the place. Nobody had swept away the mountain of dried mud where folks had cleaned their shoes on the foot scraper, nor even washed the fingerprints off that front door, nor polished the doorbell. And look at those parlor windows!

But this was going to be our home, so in no time Mama had us all working to put a shine on it. My first job was to scour the rust off that front doorknob with brick dust. But when Mama caught me pulling down the little handle outside just to make the bell ring inside, she sent me to help Loney. I found her out back sitting cross-legged under the mulberry tree using her saucer of brick dust on the real old kitchen knives and forks.

Our new home had a sink and a pump in the kitchen, but no bathroom. So we were back to taking our Saturday night baths in Mama’s big washtub in the kitchen. And going outdoors to the privy. Mama said we neededn’t complain, we’d all seen worse. In fact, we were proud of our privy. It was whitewashed inside. And never smelly, because Papa had the boys put lime or something down the holes every Saturday. And it was comfortable, with a big hole and a middle-sized hole for the big folks and, at a lower level, a little hole for little folks. And it was so handy, especially in summer, that we still used it even after Papa put in a bathroom upstairs.

There was no way to drain a wash tub in the cellar, though, so Mama did the washing in the kitchen in winter and in summer on the back porch. This was lots easier, she said, than carrying water from a well the way she did on the farm. The hanging-out was easier too, she said, because she didn’t have to lug those big baskets of wet clothes up the cellar steps. Papa said Mama was a great one for making do. He said he’d bet if he set her adrift some morning in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, she’d have hot coffee ready and potatoes frying when he got back for supper.

A good deal of the time Papa was away from home selling wire tighteners. He’d go as far north as Canada and as far south as Mexico. He always carried with him printed circulars showing the wire tightener and how to use it. Before he left on a trip, we’d all sit around the dining table folding the circulars while he pointed out on the map where he was going. And he’d say to Ralph, “Son, you’re man of the house while I’m away. Take good care of Mama.” To Mama he’d say, “Wife, think these young’uns have enough chores to keep them out of mischief?” And Mama would say, “If not, I’m real good at thinking up others.” And they’d both laugh.

What Papa meant about chores was that town people had chores to do much like country people. For behind every house in our neighborhood there was a barn and a chicken house, fruit trees, and a big garden. Some people also used vacant lots to grow bigger gardens or alfalfa for livestock.

But there was one of our town-and-country chores that only Papa could do. That was taking care of the cutting tools. Papa especially prized those tools be-
cause, as a pioneer, he'd lived where the loss of such a tool could mean big trouble. There was no place to borrow or buy another, and you had to have it to stay alive. You see, an ax cut wood for fire, and rails and posts for a fence. A spade dug the garden, cut sod to build a house out of, and dug a well. A hoe cultivated the garden. A knife fashioned utensils; prepared food; skinned animals for their fur to sell or use for clothes or covers; skinned other animals for their hides to make harness, shoe soles, saddles, and such.

Many times Papa told us these things and said that's why he gave special care to the cutting tools. Was an ax handle loose? To make it tight and safe, he'd drive a wedge in against the ax head, or soak the handle in water to make it swell and fit snug. Was a sickle bent? He'd clamp it into a vise and straighten it with pliers.

And every single cutting tool on the place he'd sharpen on the grindstone, which was a big, round, flat stone with an axle running through a square hole in the center and mounted in a frame. Papa fixed it so he could sit facing the grinding edge of the stone and push pedals to make the stone turn. A tin can with a hole in it, hanging from a rod above the stone, dripped water on the stone to help the grinding. After he'd ground the edge for a while he'd test its sharpness by running his thumb along it, and if it wasn't sharp enough, he'd shake his head and grind some more. After grinding an edge that had to be extra sharp, he'd take a little whetstone out of his pocket, spit on it, and carefully whet the edge "fine enough to shave with," he'd say. But no matter how sharp he made Mama's kitchen knives, she'd whet them on the edge of a crock every time she used them.

We used a lot of wood for Mama's cookstove, so Papa and the boys had to keep the woodshed full. Papa used his ax to split the big chunks of firewood, leaving the smaller pieces for the boys to split with a hatchet. They split kindling, too.

Along the cinder path to the barn there was first the house for Old Nimbus, then the wood-and-coal shed, and beyond that the privy. It wasn't much of a chore to keep the kitchen woodbox filled, because, coming back from the privy, we passed the woodshed, and it was only good sense, Mama said, to make our heads save our heels by fetching along an armload of wood.

But it was a chore to carry in the coal and carry out
the ashes for the base burner in the living room. There was a lot of it because that one big stove had to warm the living rooms downstairs as well as send heat up through vents in the ceiling to take the chill off the upstairs. In real cold weather we used hot flatirons wrapped in newspapers and blankets to warm our beds. And Mama kept a lighted coal oil lamp beside the bathroom pipes to keep them from freezing. When snow and wind came with the cold the boys bundled up and got out early to shovel snow off the porches and walks.

Papa was always at home to help put in most of the garden. First he'd have a man plow it good and deep, then harrow it to break up the clods. Every one of us helped with the planting. To plant corn, Papa dropped kernels into little hills the same distance apart straight across the patch. One of the boys followed along with the hoe to cover the seed to just the right depth. They'd plant only two rows at first; then after a few days, two more rows, and so on, which kept us in fresh roasting ears right through the summer.

To get a head start on vegetables like tomatoes and cabbage, Mama would plant the tiny seeds in flat boxes in the house and keep the tender plants in the sunny bay window with her house plants until the weather warmed up.

Papa always saved the garden rows nearest the house for Mama's flowers, and he made two round beds in the front yard for her canna's. Mama was like Grandma Erwin — she dearly loved flowers.

For potatoes we didn't have regular seed. Instead we cut up whole potatoes into chunks so that each chunk had a spot on it called an eye. When those chunks were planted, sprouts would grow up out of that eye and make potatoes under the ground.

Loney and I thought nothing ever tasted so good as the first mess of early potatoes and peas in a kind of white gravy Mama fixed with them. But Papa liked best the roasting ears fresh from the patch. "Twenty minutes from patch to pot!" he'd say, "and please pass the butter!"

The boys thought it was fun planting the garden in the spring with Papa there to help. But it was a chore hoeing and weeding under the hot sunny sun, even with Mama helping them. Loney and I liked picking beans and peas and sitting out under the mulberry tree helping Mama get them ready for supper. But we hated the chore of picking off potato bugs and dropping them in cans of coal oil (I think it was) to kill them.

The boys had plenty of chores at the barn, like keeping hay in the manger for Prince and the two cows, Bossy and Old Blue. That meant climbing the straight-up ladder to the haymow and pushing down the hay with Papa's giant pitchfork. They pumped water to fill the troughs in the barnyard and chicken pen. And brushed and curried Prince, and cleaned the stable. And every morning, except in winter, one of them led the cows out to pasture at the edge of town. Sometimes Carl would coax me to ride Old Blue on the way out so he'd have company walking back.

When Papa was at home the boys helped hitch Prince to the phaeton, because Papa had to drive across the Arkansas River to his office in town. Papa said he didn't know why town folks gave his buggy a stylish name like phaeton. And nobody seemed to know why the river through Wichita was called Arkansas; while the state with the same name was Arkansas.

Morning and evening the cows had to be milked. By the time Ralph and Ethel were strong enough to carry full buckets of milk they were strong enough in the hands and wrists to help with the milking. Tiger Tom, the cat, always followed Ralph to the barn at milking time and waited close by while Ralph settled himself on the stool and started milking. Then Tiger would meow, and Ralph would turn the cow's teat toward him and shoot a stream of warm milk right down the old cat's throat.

Mama strained the milk through cheesecloth and poured it into crocks in the cellar. Our cellar wasn't deep, and because Mama was tall, as tall as Papa even, she could hardly stand up straight down there. But it was cool, and a good place for milk and butter and eggs. Papa had laid some boards on the dirt floor so dirt wouldn't be tracked up to the kitchen and built a hand rail on the fall-off side of the steep narrow steps. He'd built bins for winter apples and potatoes and turnips and stuff, and also shelves for canned fruit.

Ethel got so tired of helping Mama can fruit and stuff to fill those shelves she said she hated the very sight of fruit jars. Then one day she heard Papa say he'd bet there wasn't another pair of women in the whole state of Kansas who could match Mama and Ethel for getting things done. Right away Ethel said, "Mama, I'll make the biscuits for supper. And could I open some of my quince honey for Papa to eat?" I guess she forgot about fruit jars.

Mama put china eggs in the nests for the laying hens, because hens usually lay in the nests where there's already an egg. Loney and I didn't call it a chore to gather the eggs from those nests. But we were scared to look under a setting hen for fresh-laid eggs, because setting hens peck. Mama wasn't scared. She'd just lift the old biddy right off the nest, tuck her under her arm so she couldn't peck, and never mind the squawking.
When a hen acted as if she wanted to set, Mama called her broody. But sometimes a broody-acting hen would change her mind and leave the nest after Mama had put a setting of eggs under her. Mama said any hen that wouldn't stay on her nest for twenty-one days to hatch her chicks had better forget the whole thing. To help her remember, Mama tied a red rag to the hen's leg and turned her loose. And oh my! the squawking when the silly thing saw the long red tail floating along behind her. Mama said now if that hen didn't settle down and start paying for her keep by laying eggs again, she'd find herself in a stew pot, flavoring the dumplings.

Usually when Mama was going to set a hen, she and a neighbor who also had a fine flock would trade eggs, about fifteen to a setting. She said that improved the flock; she didn't say how. They often traded young roosters, too. Mama always scribbled pencil marks on each setting egg before she put it under the hen, so that when we gathered the eggs at night we could tell the setting eggs that might be about ready to hatch from the fresh eggs some other hens had laid in beside them during the day.

Mama asked us one day if we could think of anything worse than to have somebody at the breakfast table crack open a soft-boiled egg and find a baby chick in it.

"Especially if that somebody is Papa," said Ethel, laughing.

"Oh, it's bound to be Papa," Mama said, "and most always a man will tell you about it when he finds something amiss." . . .

"Like maybe a stray fly in the sugar bowl?" Ethel asked, giggling.

"Well, yes," Mama said, "or maybe a stray hair in the butter." Then Mama and Ethel just stood there laughing out loud as if there was some joke between them.

The boys helped Mama clean out the chicken house and whitewash the inside to keep rid of lice. If Mama did find lice, the boys shoed every last chicken back into the chicken house while Mama went to fetch the house-killer she kept ready. This was a mixture of soft lard and coal oil which she kept in a can along with a swab made from a stick with a rag wrapped round and round one end of it. Then as the boys brought each chicken to Mama, she swabbed the poor squawking thing under the wings and tail and on top of the head, and never mind the clatter, for Mama couldn't abide lice.

Mama said even if we didn't like eggs and hated fried chicken, she'd still raise chickens, because there is nothing in the world like chicken droppings well mixed with cow manure to make a garden grow.

Carl wasn't lazy. He and his friend Frank McKibben, the preacher's son, would work like beavers building their tree house in the mulberry tree. He even said he didn't mind the now-and-then chores, like helping Mama with the chickens. But he did hate the regular chores, like cleaning out the stable every day of the week. Once when Carl complained about this, Ralph said what about him and Ethel, having to do the milking twice every day of the week? And Loney said, well, look, she and Babe washed dishes three times every day of the week. . . .

"You don't wash dishes three times every day, you . . . Shirker!" I'd called Loney the dirtiest name I could think of because she'd slipped out to the privy right after dinner the day before and stayed there looking at pictures in the catalog. Ethel had found her there on the way back from dousing the soapy dishwater on the cabbages to kill the worms.

"Shirker your own self!" Loney hollered back; "You didn't empty the chamber pots this morning and it was your turn. You're not calling me a shirker!" And she started for me, but Carl caught her braids. Most times Carl liked a fracas, but now he said he hadn't meant to set a match to the fireworks.

Ralph laughed and caught my braids, and said Mama would say they're like the pot calling the kettle black; so they're even. And Ethel said, my goodness, if Mama shirked because she hated cooking three meals a day, and doing the washing and making all our clothes and keeping the house tidy and things like that. . . . My goodness, if Mama shirked, we'd all be in a fix. Which kind of sobered us down.

**Housecleaning**

Papa used to say he wanted to turn tail and run when Mama showed symptoms of summer housecleaning fever. But he was always on hand to put up the screen doors and hook good tight springs on the inside to make them snap shut. Some of our windows had screens; others Papa covered with mosquito netting; some we never opened. Still, flies were a pest from about the time Mama let us stop wearing our long underwear until winter came again. And a worse pest during housecleaning time when there was so much running in and out.

Some flies we scared away with long fluttering fringes of newspaper tacked to the tops of the doors; many we trapped on strips of sticky flypaper; and hundreds we swatted with rolled-up newspapers. If the flies still buzzed around inside, Mama shut the doors and pulled down the blinds to make the rooms dark and the flies drowsy. Then when she opened the
outside door and the flies started moving toward the light, we'd all jump up waving dishrags and aprons and shoo them out.

And Papa was on hand to move the base burner stove out of the living room into the storeroom next the kitchen. And to take down the stovepipe that connected the stove with the chimney, being sure not to spill soot all over. Fitting the tin cover over the hole in the chimney finished that job.

The next job was taking up the carpets for cleaning. That was worse, because every carpet was tacked in place. Even so, Mama got the carpets on the clothesline one by one and set the boys to beating them with big wire paddles, called flails, to loosen the winter's dirt. Then, while the boys caught their breath, Mama swept off the loosened dirt. Then more beating and sweeping, beating and sweeping, till Mama was satisfied and ready for the next carpet.

Under each carpet was a layer of straw matting or newspapers to keep the floors warm and save fuel. All of that had to come out, along with the strips of rags we'd stuffed in around the loose windows. Mama brushed the high ceilings and walls with a rag tied around the broom. Then we'd help sweep the matting and carry it out, burn the rags and paper, scrub the floors and woodwork and windows, and wipe off the window blinds. After the boys had covered the floors with fresh newspapers and laid the matting on them, they brought in the clean carpets. All of us helped to stretch and hold the carpets while Papa or Mama tacked them back into place.

Mama washed and starched the long lace parlor curtains, and we helped hook them onto the stretchers to dry. Then she washed and starched the ruffled muslin curtains for the other windows. Ironing those muslin curtains was hot, hard work. But after Papa got the coal oil stove, the kitchen didn't get as hot as when we had to heat the irons on the cookstove.

Ethel had learned to iron as soon as she was strong enough to lift the irons, and tall enough to reach the ironing board that Mama laid across the backs of two kitchen chairs. And she'd had lots of practice ironing ruffles on our muslin panties and petticoats, and some dresses every week. So Ethel helped Mama iron
the muslin curtains. And all of us helped get them right back up again, to please Papa. He said a house without curtains at the windows was just a house, not a home.

The bedticks had to be emptied of straw and turned and washed and dried and filled with fresh straw. Ethel sewed up the gap in each tick where we had poked out the feather ticks. I don’t remember feather ticks in Wichita, but we had feather pillows. Mama washed some of the feather pillows and dried and fluffed them in the sun. When a pillow tick needed to be replaced, Mama ripped open one end of the pillow and basted the open end of a new tick to it. When she’d worked the feathers into the new tick, she broke the basting thread and closed and sewed the opening of the new pillow. No matter how careful she was, some feathers and down were bound to get loose, so Mama always did that job outdoors.

Mama cleaned and dusted off every inch of every bed and bedspring and wiped them with coal oil to take care of any bedbugs that might have come home with Papa. He said some of the places where he stayed were crawling with them.

Housecleaning was a good time to watch out for moths, too. Mama could wash the woolen blankets to rid them of moth eggs, she said. But the comforters with woolen tops and cotton stuffing were too heavy to wash. So she gave them a day in the sun along with every scrap of woolen clothing, then brushed them inside and out and put them away in mothballs. Mama said some folks thought newspapers or black pepper worked better against moths, but she stuck by mothballs.

At housecleaning time, all the lamps and lanterns got attention beyond the weekly cleaning. Ethel was put in charge of this chore. She always grabbed me for the dirtiest part, which was cleaning the insides of smoked-up chimneys with wadded newspapers, because, she said, my hands were better than hers. She poured the coal oil out of the lamps, and we washed them and the chimneys inside and out, and polished them with old soft flour-sack dishtowels. Then while Ethel filled the lamps with fresh coal oil, and trimmed the wicks so they’d make an even flame, I followed along fitting the chimneys back into their wire holders. When Mama came in and saw all the lamps cleaned and lined up on the shelf, she said nobody could have done them better. Then she and Ethel cleaned the big pull-down dining room lamp. It had a china shade with flowers on it. Just beautiful.

While the boys scrubbed the porches, hung the hammock, and tidied up the outhouses and the yard, the rest of us emptied, cleaned, and put in order every closet and dresser drawer, and washed every dish on the cupboard shelves and every pot and pan in the kitchen. Then shined up the kitchen stove with enough blacking, Papa said, to keep it from rusting till a year from next Christmas.

But whether at housecleaning time or not, the best part of any summer day came after supper. For then last Mama would rest in the hammock while we children flopped on the front porch steps, or chased fireflies, all the time watching for light to come on in Mrs. Allison’s street lamp two blocks down. That light sent the boys and Nimbus and Loney and me (but not a big girl like Ethel) trooping down with the neighbors’ children and dogs to follow the lamplighter as he moved up the street with his magic wand — a long rod with a little flame on top. With that rod, or wand, he turned on and lighted the gas lamps in front of our neighbors’ houses all the way until he came even with our house and lighted ours, and then went on up the street lighting lamps as far as we could see.

Mama said it wasn’t the lighting of the street lamps that seemed like magic to her. The magic for her, she said, was living where there were so many lamps to light. Because all those street lamps meant people, enough people to make a town where everybody, even a farm woman like Mama, already past thirty years old, had a chance to learn and do and be things they’d hardly dreamed of. Mama said that was enough magic for her.

**Family Happenings Before We Moved to Wichita**

You see, Mama had never lived in a town before. She’d always lived in the country, on the fringe of things.

In 1874, when she was seven years old, her folks, Grandpa and Grandma Erwin, hitched ox teams to covered wagons, left their Indiana farm, and joined other Indiana farmers in a caravan heading west for Kansas. There the Erwins began farming again out on the Kansas prairie.

The Wichita Indians there were called peaceful because they weren’t hostile. But once they did try to burn out the Erwins by setting a prairie fire. Grandpa saved the buildings by plowing furrows around them to make a bare strip of earth the fire couldn’t cross. When the Indians came begging for food, Grandma didn’t dare to send them away. But they stopped coming after she closed the handouts with red-hot pepper.

Mama said none of the folks that came out from Indiana made enough on their crops that first year to live on. So toward the end of winter, the Erwins were living mostly on parched corn and the rabbits Grandpa trapped. Shooting rabbits was easier, but
Grandpa was short of lead to make bullets. Short of fuel, too, except the dried buffalo chips the children helped bring in from the prairie.

In fact, the Erwins were short of almost everything except buffalo bones. There were so many bones on the prairie the children easily gathered wagonloads for Grandpa to haul off to a trading place. Now, the trader knew that Wichita businessmen needed bones to make things like umbrella handles, corset stays, buttons, and crochet hooks. Bones were even ground up for fertilizer. So when Grandpa came in with no money in his pocket, but a load of buffalo bones in his wagon, the trader was ready to do business. He got the bones, and in exchange, Grandpa got flour, medicines, coal oil, cattle feed, lead for bullets... many things the family needed. Mama said finding bones to barter was about the luckiest thing that could have happened to the Erwins.

As more settlers came into Kansas, one-room schoolhouses began to appear. To reach her school, Mama at first had to ride her pony alone across the prairie. But when Uncle Frank reached school age, he rode up behind her. At first there were only a few pupils in Mama's school, and of course only one teacher. The teacher’s job was to see that every pupil learned at least to read and write and cipher, which meant to do simple arithmetic.

The settlers had Sunday school in the schoolhouse and a preaching service there as well when it was their Sunday for the circuit-riding preacher to come. They called the preacher a circuit rider because he rode (usually horseback) from one small congregation to another, preaching to each on the appointed Sunday.

Grandpa Erwin taught singing school on Friday nights at the schoolhouse. Mama always went with him, riding up behind his saddle, her long legs dangling. The class learned to read music by notes and syllables and to sing parts together. Grandpa used a pitch pipe until they somehow got a foot-pedal organ for the schoolhouse. From the time Mama was twelve, she played the organ for singing school and for Sunday school and church. I don't know how Mama learned to play, unless maybe she taught herself on the organ they brought west with them in the covered wagon.

As Mama grew into her teens, the railroads were fanning out across the prairies and bringing more settlers every day. Little towns grew into bigger towns with better schools and churches.

But a farm girl was still on the fringe of things.

Papa’s family came out to Kansas in 1883. By that time the railroads had pushed so far across the prairies that his parents, Silas and Elizabeth Beal, and their children, Adeline, Thomas, Oliver, and Pryor, could climb aboard a day coach in Indiana and ride in style all the way to Kansas. This was the journey that Mama’s folks had made by ox team and covered wagon only nine years before.

William (Papa) was the oldest of the Beal children; he was seventeen. He didn’t ride in the day coach. It was his job, he told us, to chug along for ten days in a freight car looking after the livestock, farm machinery, and household goods. First time he’d ever been on a train; first time he’d ever been out of Indiana: his big adventure, he called it.

The Beal family settled on Slate Creek in Sumner County. I don’t know how far they were from Grandpa Erwin’s farm, but it didn’t take Papa long to spot Mama playing the organ Sundays and at singing school. The summer of 1884 found Papa and Mama riding in to Conway Springs on a load of newly harvested corn Grandpa Beal had given them to trade for a little gold wedding ring for Mama. They were married January 4, 1885, in the recently completed Greenacastle Friends Meeting House. In August 1886, Ethel, their first baby, was baptized there.

Like most farmers, Papa wanted a farm of his own. He’d go ‘most anywhere, he said, and do ‘most anything to get it. That was why in the fall of ’86 he and Harry Webb and some other neighbors went out to western Kansas to look over the government land offered for homesteading. Papa said it didn't look like the kind of farm land he was used to, but it was land, so he filed a claim for 160 acres in Morton County close to the Colorado border and marked it with a pile of sod and a board with his name on it. Richfield, a little town about twenty-five miles from the claim, was the county seat. But for most of their supplies they'd have to drive the forty-five miles to Garden City, the nearest railroad town, about a four-day trip, camping overnight each way. They'd get their mail at a place named Maud, which was little more than a wide place in the road, Papa said. I don’t know how far Maud was from the claim.

“Folks sometimes called that government land free,” Papa told us. “But don’t you believe it. The price of a homestead was a five-year proving-up period, living on the claim six months of the year.” After three years of living on and improving the claim, though, Papa said, you could change from the homestead plan to a purchase plan and buy the land at $1.25 an acre... if you had the money.

The homestead law said that they had to “take up and reside on the land on or before six months after filing for the claim.” So it was in early March 1887 that Papa and Mama loaded into their farm wagon carpenter and garden tools, a plow, seeds to plant, bedding,
fence posts was over at Butte Creek twenty miles away. My! How the wind did blow across that prairie. Wonder it didn’t blow us all away. No place to be living with a baby.” But they did live in a tent on those cold windy high plains until Papa could build a house out of sod.

Whether in a tent or a house, they couldn’t live without water. So until Papa could dig a well he had to fill their water barrel from the well of their nearest neighbors, Joe and Cindy Rice, two miles away.

To build a house, Papa first dug a hole about two feet deep and fourteen by sixteen feet on the sides. This area smoothed down would be the floor. After rain had at last soaked the buffalo grass sod, he plowed up long, wide strips of it which he cut into larger “bricks” with a spade.

“Being neighbors meant trading work,” Papa said. “I’d helped them, so now they helped me.” Joe Rice and George Miller helped lay up the sod into walls for the house and stable, and Jim Pratt and Harry Webb helped roof both buildings with one-half-inch lumber Papa had hauled from Garden City.

“When I was buying that roofing lumber I saw two nice windows right there beside it,” Papa told us. “Windows make a lot of difference in a house, so to please your mother, I bought the windows, too. Roofing and windows cost me all told eighteen dollars, every penny of cash I had in the world. But I never was sorry.”

After Papa got the windows set in, he put up the stove and built up a good fire out of buffalo chips (their only fuel) and got the whole inside of the hut good and dry. Then he mixed up a kind of plaster out of natural gypsum he’d dug close by and plastered the inside walls white.

“With two nice windows and a real door and the plastered walls, our house on the inside didn’t look at all like a sod hut,” Mama told us. “When Papa put straw on the floor and pegged down my rag carpet on top of it, we moved in, and my! were we proud and happy. A home of our own at last.”

Papa had trouble with his well. He didn’t strike water that first season even though he got the well dug down to thirty-five feet. Then he had to stop work on the well in order to put in a crop, which was slow work, he told us, because breaking a furrow through that tough buffalo grass sod was about all his team could do. But by plowing an acre and a half a day he managed to put in forty acres of millet for hay and a little gyp corn.

It was in November of that first year that a lady everybody called Grandma Petitt came to their house. Papa told us that during the night she caught a baby in her apron. Mama named the baby Ralph.
“To keep this home we were making, we had to leave it,” Papa said. “We had to get some cash money somehow, and nobody in western Kansas was hiring help.” So with their two babies Papa and Mama drove the three hundred miles back to Sumner County where Papa could earn money in the harvest fields.

“All summer we lived there in our tent. I earned good money and saved every penny I could. I traded the old mare for two wild Texas mare ponies with a little to boot. And then I had to break them to harness. But I'd done a lot of horse breaking as a boy back in Indiana, so the mares were ready to be hitched three abreast with Old Tom when we plodded on west again in September.”

Papa said his first job when they got back to the claim was to finish the well before winter storms could snoop down and bury them in snow as they had the winter before. Joe Rice was on hand to let him down in the hole on a rope, and Papa landed smack on a rattlesnake.

“Joe said folks could hear me yell clear over into Colorado,” Papa laughed. “I yelled all right but I killed that snake with my shovel and made myself as thin as possible while Joe was hauling me up out of that hole because I thought snakes were rattling in little crevices all around me.” It was scary, but next day Papa was digging in that hole again. When he didn't get water at forty feet he hired a well driller who finally struck water at seventy-five feet.

“We surely praised the Lord that day,” Mama told us. “Good water and plenty of it right at our own door step!” She said she could hardly wait for the water to clear before she started washing everything in sight.

The first season's crops had hardly made enough for seed, because of drought. But every farmer lives on hope, Papa said; sometimes very little else. He traded the two mares for a strong mule to match Tom. Now with a good team he could open up more land and put in a bigger crop. But after another summer in the tent in Sumner County and another winter on the claim, they still were hardly breaking even.

They stuck it out through a third planting season. All three seasons were dry, so they had to give up on the claim, and try the only thing they could do: go back to Sumner County and farm some other man's land again. But Papa couldn't start back until July when Grandma Pettit came again and caught another baby in her apron. Mama called that one Carl.

The good neighbors, Joe and Cindy Rice, took care of Mama and the children until Carl was three weeks old. Then, when Mama insisted, took them by wagon the forty-five miles to the railroad at Garden City, camping overnight on the way. “We had to change trains twice,” Mama said, “and all of us were sick from the August heat. So we were pretty well tuckered out by the time we reached Conway Springs.”

Papa rented a farm near Grandpa Beal's. Loney, Mama's fourth baby, was born there in 1891; and I, the last, in 1892: five babies in six years.

One time when I asked Mama about the picture of Ethel, Ralph, Carl, and Loney, she said the picture was taken in the fall of 1891, a year before I was born. One of the boys in Ralph's room at school had come down with whooping cough, which meant the whole class had been exposed. Right away Mama and Papa took the children to have their pictures taken, “in case they got whooping cough,” Mama said, “and we lost one.” They did get whooping cough, but Dr. McIlhenny came out from Conway Springs and pulled them through, though they hardly knew a family that hadn't lost one or more of their children to whooping cough or diphtheria.

In 1894 when I was two years old, diphtheria swept across the county. Ralph came down with it so suddenly there wasn't time for pictures, I guess. When Dr. McIlhenny came out to take care of Ralph, he put the red quarantine flag on our gate. Then Ethel got sick, then Loney, but not Carl nor I.

When our neighbor Grandma Snowden heard about the sickness at our house, she marched right in past the red flag, carrying her nightgown and a change of clothes. She knew the quarantine law, Mama said: once in the house past that red flag she'd have to stay till the flag came down. And stay she did, helping, till the doctor said we were well and took down that hateful flag.

That day Mama praised the Lord and fumigated the whole house. And it was on that very day that I came down with diphtheria, and up went the red flag again. Dr. McIlhenny said I was so sick nothing could save me unless it might be the new antitoxin he'd read about in the medical journal. No doctor in Sumner County had used it, he said, but if Papa and Mama wanted him to try... .

So that's what he did. The medicine worked like a miracle, and next morning they were all thanking God for the miracle of medicine and for a doctor who wasn't afraid to use it.

When we all got well Ethel and Ralph went back to school. We were all in Sunday school. And the whole family was received into the Greenscastle Friends Meeting. Meantime, while he was farming and trying to get his wire tightener patented, Papa was turning his hand to anything that would earn him an honest dollar.

“One day a fellow came along in a light cart,” Papa
told us, "and asked to stay with us while he went around the neighborhood peddling family Bibles and a book called Footprints on the World. I didn't know it then, but that was a turn of fortune for me. The bookselling fellow got to taking me around with him, and pretty soon I was out selling Bibles and other books on my own."

When a wire fence salesman came long, Papa studied how the man went about his business and began selling fence wire instead of Bibles. Now he knew he could sell. If books and fence wire, why not wire tighteners? So Papa borrowed five hundred dollars to get his wire tightener patented. After he got the patent he began selling the tighteners, but he kept on farming too. When he was sure he could make a go of the wire tightener business, we left the farm and moved to Wichita.

**New Horizons**

While living on the farm, Mama had been on the fringe of things. In Wichita, she was in the middle of things. Now, for example, instead of looking across the prairie for the chimney smoke of a distant neighbor, Mama could look into the backyards up and down the block on Monday mornings to see if any neighbor was ahead of her in getting the week's washing on the line.

Mama usually won that race, so she was set back on her heels one Monday when she carried out her first load and saw sheets already flapping on Sister Bass' line a few houses down. But the following Wednesday Sister Bass told Mama and Sister Collins and the other ladies who were quilting at the Aid Society that last wash day she'd hung dry sheets on the line as the only way to get ahead of Sister Beal. And Mama laughed as hard as the other ladies.

Not just Mama, but the whole family was in the middle of things, being part of a real church with a regular preacher, a good graded Sunday school, young people's groups, and women's societies. Before I was old enough for school, I went to Aid Society with Mama. While the ladies were sewing tiny stitches into the quilt stretched out in a big frame, I played underneath like in a tent.

Mama had always dressed Loney and me alike: the same black button shoes and black stockings; in summer the same white muslin pantywaists and panties that buttoned on; in winter the same outing flannel petticoats, and the same dresses, except when Loney had blue to match her blue eyes, I had pink. But Mama had been taking me with her in the phaeton clear into town to a sewing class to learn how to sew things prettier. And one day she let me wear to Aid
Society the new dress she'd made for me out of one Ethel had outgrown. Loney had a new dress too, but this time my dress was different from hers. The little gathered front and puff sleeves were changable silk; just beautiful. I hung on to Mama's chair until the ladies had to notice me. When they told Mama how pretty my dress was, her face turned pink all over, and she told me to run along now and play.

Sometimes at Aid Society I sewed on the quilt blocks Mama was teaching me to make out of tiny squares of dress scraps. It was the nine-patch pattern. I finally finished the quilt top when I was about nine years old. Mama got it into the frame which she'd set up in our dining room and invited neighbors to a spend-the-day quilting bee. When Mrs. Allison got a drop of blood on the quilt from a pricked finger, she laughed and told me I'd have to remember her by.

The church ladies called each other "sister," though only Mrs. Allison and Mrs. Bass were real sisters. They'd been school teachers back east before they got married. They were pretty and tidy and lively but ladylike, with quiet voices and nice manners. They had lots of books and knew about music. They liked children, though they had none. They were our favorite neighbors.

(But not Mr. Allison! He was no favorite of Loney and me after the way he'd hollered at us for taking a shortcut to school across his young alfalfa patch. Even if he was an important man, as Papa said, and a cousin of President McKinley, he didn't have to scare us to death. We hoped he wouldn't tell Papa, for we hadn't meant to tramp down his alfalfa.)

We were in the middle of things in schools too, and proud (except maybe Carh) when Mama came to visit each of our grades. And prouder still when one of our teachers came to our house for dinner.

There was no foolishness around the dining table during the evening homework period; and none when Papa and Mama looked over our monthly report cards. If you had a bad mark in deportment, watch out. Papa and Mama had had so little chance to go to school they weren't going to let us waste our chance. Papa always signed our report cards when he was in town.

I didn't get a bad mark in deportment, but I did get into another kind of trouble. When I went into the fourth grade, I persuaded my teacher, Miss Garnet Culp, to put my middle name, Iona, on my card. A girl in my class liked the name, I guess, for she told the truant officer who picked her up one day that her name was "Iona Beal." There was a real mix-up. But I kept right on being Iona Beal during that year.

Papa had always played hymns and simple tunes on his fiddle. Now he traded Mama's pedal organ in on a piano, and he and Mama played for all of us to sing. Soon Ralph was taking violin lessons and playing duets with a boy named Tracy York. Ethel was learning the cello, and Papa could hardly wait till Carl got through his first lessons on the cornet so he could join in playing part music. Mama played for Loney and me to sing duets. Our favorite was "Away in a Manger." Loney had a high sweet true voice, like a lark, Papa said. But Mama shushed him so Loney wouldn't get vain. I hadn't any voice to get vain about, but I could read notes and sing any of the different parts. Loney and I were supposed to act shy and hold back when somebody asked us to sing. But usually we forgot, for we dearly loved to sing, and maybe show off, too.

When Paderewski came to town, Mrs. Allison gave her concert tickets to Mama and Papa. They didn't know what to expect from anybody with that outlandish name. But they were glad they'd gone. Every time the man raced up the keyboard and ended with a note so high and soft you could hardly hear it, Papa chuckled right out loud. Mama thought she ought to shush him, but didn't.

Ralph was full of music. He taught himself to play all the instruments, even the piano. After the Paderewski concert, Mrs. Allison played some of the simpler parts of the program for Ralph and loaned him the music. He could play the notes, but he cried and carried on when, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make his playing sound like Mrs. Allison's. When Ralph was in one of his blue spells, he'd always say he knew he'd never amount to a hill o' beans.

People Coming and Going

It seemed like the middle of the night when we heard bells, horns, steam whistles, then Papa calling, "Wake up, everybody! Remember what day this is?" It was New Year's Day, 1900. For months the whole town had been planning celebrations to welcome the twentieth century. Papa thought the best way our family could celebrate was to knuckle down and see how far we could get ahead during this first year of the new century.

The Centennial Year, our preacher called it, and kept praying for the worldwide Centennial Sunday School Convention to be held in France. And for Brother and Sister Allison who were going there to represent our church. Loney and I found France in our geography books, but it didn't seem like a real place until Mama got Mrs. Allison's letters from there telling about it. Mrs. Allison wrote from the Holy Land, too, and brought home to Mama a tiny clay jug of water from the Sea of Galilee. The jug was shaped
like the pitcher "The Woman at the Well" carried on her head in the Bible picture. Once Loney and I opened the little jar and smelled the water. It stunk awful. We didn't tell Mama.

I guess all of us knuckling down the way Papa had said did help, because by spring 1901 Papa told Mama he'd paid off every last cent of his debts, with a little money left to lay by. Now maybe he dared to spread out some. He'd been training men up north and down south to sell wire tighteners for him. But out west nobody'd ever seen a wire tightener yet. Why not take one of those cheap railroad excursions to San Francisco, Papa said, and look things over? Maybe drum up some business with the new Crescent Tightener? (That was a model Papa's brother Tom had thought up.) Well, in July 1901, that's precisely what Papa did. And he took Mama with him.

Now, Ethel was a month short of being fifteen. She could manage meals and chores almost as well as Mama. But she couldn't manage us. And the lady who was staying with us couldn't manage Ethel. I think she left before Mama came home.

I remember when they came, because Mama asked me right away how I got that scratch on my nose. And I had to tell her I got it in a fight with Carl. Ethel burst right out crying, I think partly because she hadn't been able to keep us from fighting; but mostly because she was so glad to have Mama and Papa home again.

We never got tired hearing Papa and Mama tell about their trip: the long train rides, the folks they'd met from all over, the things they'd seen: forests, the Golden Gate, the ocean, cable cars ... and oh, the flowers, geraniums up to the second-story windows, Mama said. But they couldn't make us understand about mountains. "You just can't imagine a mountain," Papa said, "till you've seen one."

What we did understand was that Papa had fallen in love with California. He said he'd pull up stakes tomorrow and head for the Coast if he could figure a way to make a living out there. Said his folks and Mama's folks had moved west from Indiana. Their folks had all moved west from Ohio. Any reason why our folks shouldn't move on west from Kansas?

Then came Christmas 1901 and the biggest visiting trip we ever had. With us, Christmas had always meant taking part in the Sunday school program at the church, and Santa Claus passing out little boxes of hard candy from the lighted Christmas tree. We never had a tree at home. We hung our stockings instead, and always made presents for each other. I remember one year, though, when Papa gave each of us twenty-five cents to buy extra presents for each other. And Carl spent all of his money on a little puzzle box — and gave it to himself.

Mama and Papa about 1900. Mama is wearing the gold watch and chain Papa gave her when he began to have some extra money.
But holiday time 1901 was different. Because of hard times and poor health, Grandpa and Grandmammy had lost their Slate Creek farm, their home for so many years. To be near Uncle Oll they’d moved to a farm in Oklahoma. The whole family knew how hard the loss and the move had been on the old folks, so they planned to have Christmas all together at Grandpa’s new place. We had farthest to go.

The moon was still up, big and bright, and snow crunched under our feet when a neighbor came to take us to the railroad station. It was shivery cold, so cold the lamplighter, all bundled up, wasn’t wasting any time as he trotted along with his rod, turning off the street lights.

The train lights were making diamonds in the snow when the brakeman finally came through the car calling out: “Jefferson next stop! Jefferson!” and pretty soon Uncle Oll was bundling us into a big farm wagon for the long drive to Grandpa’s. He’d put in a thick layer of hay in the wagon and buffalo robes and other blankets so that, huddled together, we children didn’t quite freeze. It was two or three days before Christmas, but lots of folks were already at Grandpa’s, cousins we hardly knew, all along with his rod, turning off the street lights.

Harry and Sloan (Papa’s younger brothers) had put a layer of hay on the floor of the attic so our mamas could lay down pallets for all the girls, except babies. Our Great-aunt Lyde Kendall (she was Grandpa’s sister) slept in the one real bed in the attic. She wore a nightcap. After we were all tucked in, Grandmammy came up those steep steps — we knew she would — to hear our prayers. She kissed each one of us with quick little Grandmammy kisses, and asked God to bless her babies. I don’t think Grandpa let Grandmammy go out to the barn to kiss the boys goodnight — they slept in the haymow.

I remember that the men butchered a calf so we’d have plenty of meat. It was so cold the part of the meat they hung outside in flour sacks froze solid. I never knew whose calf it was.

Papa and our uncles and Aunt Addie had all chipped in to buy a pedal organ for their young sister Florence. She was going on twelve years old and had already taught herself to play a little. To keep the gift a surprise, Uncle Pryor and Uncle Harry brought the organ from town late Christmas Eve, and slipped it into the little parlor. Florence found it there Christmas morning. All I remember about that Christmas morning was Florence crying, and everybody happy.

Christmas afternoon we had our program. Everybody big enough to walk and talk had a part in it. Ralph had taught Loney and me to play “Chopsticks” on the piano. But when we tried to play it on Florence’s organ, it sounded awful, because we couldn’t remember to pump with our feet and push down with our fingers at the same time.

At the very end of the afternoon when things got kind of quiet, somebody, I think it was Grandmammy, said, “Annie?” And Mama went over and sat at the organ and we all gathered close around her. While she played, little folks hummed and big folks sang:

God be with you till we meet again,
By his counsels guide, uphold you,
With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you till we meet again.

It was like praying. When I looked up, I saw a tear trickling down beside Uncle Pryor’s nose.

Before parting, our family always sang “God Be with You.” But there at Grandmammy’s it seemed special, as if folks knew that a change was coming. And no wonder, with Papa talking, talking about California. Tired of traveling, he said, and about ready to settle down to something else. “Maybe farming,” he said, “till I go broke again.”

The men all laughed, and Uncle Tom said, “Well, Billy, nobody knows better than you how it is in Kansas: plenty for a while, and nothing for a while.”

“Might be different in California.” And Papa was off again talking about California. I guess the big folks wondered if we ever would meet again.

And several months later, we children wondered, too, when Papa told us he was going out to the Coast once more to see what he could find. That was in August 1902. What Papa found was a run-down sheep-and-cattle-ranch ‘way north of San Francisco. He wrote Mama that he had to go into debt again to buy the place. But he felt pretty sure, all of us pulling together, that we could make a go of it. If not, he said, California would be a dandy place to start over.

We could guess how Mama felt about leaving Wichita, but we never heard her say a word against the move. And when Ethel and Ralph cried about leaving high school — and Ralph his music lessons — Mama said whatever Papa thought best to do, that’s what we’d do.

So, in early October, exactly six years after we’d come to Wichita, the new red plush parlor set and Mama’s piano and all of our belongings were loaded into a freight car. Ralph coaxed Old Nimbus into the baggage car, and the rest of us found places for ourselves and our great baskets of food in the day coach of a train headed west.

“Where else but west?” Papa said. “Our folks have always gone west!”

Papa and Mama were thirty-six years old.
Epilogue

As Papa had warned us, we did have hard work on that run-down California ranch. But we had adventure, too, along with a good home and plenty to eat. And we children learned new skills and to some degree developed qualities that pioneer life taught our parents; qualities like adaptability, self-reliance, responsibility.

But formal education was available only in the one-room Farley District schoolhouse about a mile from the ranch. We three younger children worked through the eighth grade there. But Ethel and Ralph were in high school, so there was no schooling for them that first year because the nearest high school was at Ukiah, fifty rugged miles south. Later we all took turns going to high school, some going to school while others stayed at home to help on the ranch.

My sister Ethel, however, soon gave up her turn at high school to become a rancher’s wife. She married Francis Vassar, son of early settlers in Long Valley. They had four children, but Ethel died too young to see them reared.

Ralph graduated from Ukiah High School in 1907, immediately passed the county examination for a teaching certificate, and was hired to teach in the Farley District for the ensuing year. During that year, he “kept school” each weekday for his fourteen pupils. Papa had just sold the ranch, so in exchange for board and room, Ralph lived on there, helping the new owner. Thus situated, he could and did save for his college expenses almost every penny he earned from teaching.

Proceeds from the sale of the ranch enabled Papa to buy into a business in Palo Alto, a town adjacent to Stanford University. Carl, Leona, and I enrolled in high school there, and in the fall of 1908, Ralph came down and registered at Stanford, where, thanks to Leland Stanford, no tuition was required.

I never heard Papa speak of opportunities for us children, only of “advantages” to help us “get ahead in the world.” By settling in Palo Alto, a college town, Mama and Papa had done what they set out to do; put college education within reach of their sons. For daughters, higher learning was hardly worthwhile; “they’d just get married anyway.”

Indeed they did: Leona married John Howard Paine, an entomologist trained at Stanford. They had two sons. Widowed, my sister reared her sons alone, proving herself a good mother and able businesswoman. I married Harvey James Lowe, a forest engineer from Michigan. We also had two sons and fifty-two happy, interesting, and possibly useful years together.

Ralph graduated in 1912 with an A.B. degree in electrical engineering and a strong interest in communications. Shortly afterward he married Merle Hertsch of Palo Alto. They had one son.

After graduation Ralph got a job with RCA Communications in San Francisco. While working for RCA, he supervised, before and after World War I, the installation of the first global radio telegraph, beginning with the transmitting station at Point Reyes, California. As lieutenant commander in this war he supervised the installation and testing on submarines of newly developed equipment for underwater radio transmission.

For nine years Ralph was director of research of RCA Communications. And later he was vice president in charge of engineering of the company. He was recognized worldwide as an expert in the technology of radar, the electron microscope, radio, and television.

Carl entered Stanford University in 1909 and was awarded an A.B. degree in geology in 1913 and an M.A. degree in 1915. He married Helen Evans; they had two sons.

From 1915 to 1919, while working as a petroleum engineer for various government agencies, he published an impressive number of technical papers based on his research. One of his most important publications was Bulletin No. 177 of the U.S. Bureau of Mines entitled Decline and Ultimate Production of Oil Wells, with Notes on Valuation of Oil Production Properties. The concept set forth in this publication provided the first sound basis for evaluating and taxing oil properties. Stanford University recognized the importance of the original research involved by awarding Carl a degree in petroleum engineering and appointing him professor of petroleum engineering during 1919–20.

Subsequently, Carl won wide acclaim for his discovery of major oil fields, including the famous one at Kettleman Hills, California. And his treatise based on field notes made during his comprehensive geological exploration of Baja California was published posthumously as Memoir No. 38 by the prestigious Geological Society of America; accolade indeed.

In recognition of their extraordinary scientific achievements, both Ralph and Carl were awarded coveted memberships in the Sigma Xi honorary society.

In September 1946 Carl died, age fifty-seven. And just four months later Ralph died, age fifty-nine.

When Grandma Pettitt caught those two baby boys in her apron in that sod house there on the high harsh Kansas plain, they seemed unlikely candidates for fame.