

Growing Up on a Farm: A Grandmother's Memoirs

I was born November 24, 1892, on a farm near Hoopeston, Illinois. I had one brother, Francis, and two sisters, Mary six years older than I, and Iva, about two and one-half years younger.

We went to a country school which was about one-half mile from home. Our school was a one room white frame building with a vestibule at the south end where we hung our wraps. On two sides of the vestibule were benches where we put our dinner buckets and where we sat to take off our overshoes. Also, on one bench was our water bucket with the long handled dipper in it. A tin cup hung on a nail above it. We had no pump in the school yard, and each morning boys went to the nearest farm (where my uncle, aunt and cousins lived) and brought back our supply of water.

In our school room we had wooden desks. An iron potbellied wood and coal-burning stove warmed the room in winters. There were blackboards across the north end of the room behind the teacher's desk. Above the blackboards were pictures of George and Martha Washington and, at one side, a flag.

All eight grades were taught in the one room, except sometimes when two grades worked together or there were no pupils for some grades. This meant a great range in age and size in the one room. My first year I was the youngest and the littlest, and I enjoyed special consideration by my brother and other big boys. At school we played outdoors if the weather was not too unfavorable. We played ball games, London Bridge, jump rope, anti-over the schoolhouse and circle games. In winter snow time, we played fox and geese where we made a big circle and cross paths in the snow with a safety zone in the center. We built forts and had snowball battles.

There was a fence around our school yard. In the northwest corner of the school yard was the boys' privy and in the northeast corner, the girls'. The privies had two holed wooden seats which in winter seemed terribly cold. The needed light came in below the roof and through a waning moon cut-out design in the door. Pages torn from an old Sears Roebuck catalog served as toilet tissue.

After school at home we all had a special work – our chores, to do – bring in a supply of wood and coal for the stoves, empty the ashes, clean the lamp chimneys, gather eggs, fill the reservoir on the kitchen stove with soft water collected from

the rain on our house roof into a cistern from which it was pumped to the pantry sink for dishwater, laundry and cleaning.

On our farm our water supply was brought from a deep well by a windmill. The water was clear and cool. When there was no wind, we pumped by hand with a long handled iron pump. The overflow from our water supply cask flowed through pipes to a nearby wooden trough in the milk house and around two or three gallon stone jars filled with milk which was thus cooled and kept temporarily. After the cream rose to the top, it was skimmed off to be churned. From this trough the water ran underground through pipes to the big wooden horse tank in the barnyard, where the horses and cattle drank. Also, in time, some water was piped to a big tank which was our lily pond, with beautiful yellow and white water lilies in season.

Mother loved flowers and we had many flowers – annuals and perennials. We had an attractive yard with beautiful maple and cedar trees and flowers in season. We had a croquet set and a high rope swing. Around the front yard was a picket fence. One summer, Iva and I painted it white. For this we were given \$5.00, which we sent to Sears Roebuck in Chicago and bought a two-seated wooden lawn swing. When it came, father and Francis assembled it in the shade of a big maple tree near the house.

Along the north fence were three hives of bees that supplied all the honey we wanted. One time we girls made some candy and it sugared – was grainy and not smooth. We put it out by the bee hives hoping the bees would use it to make honey. Later we went out and found a garter snake on the plate.

Father loved nature and was aware of the many birds and bird songs. He helped us know them. To this day when I hear a meadowlark, I think of him. We had a big garden and a good orchard. One of my favorite places to sit and dream was a big apple tree in the orchard. It was extra good when I could hear the joyous song of the orchard oriole.

Another thing we had on the farm was an underground cave – an underground room covered with earth and sod with steps leading down from the back yard. In this, potatoes and other vegetables and apples and pears were stored in barrels and baskets. On shelves were many jars of fruit and sometimes canned tomatoes. In case of a cyclone we were to run for the cave and close the cellar door behind us. Fortunately we never needed it for storm protection, but it served well for storage.

Iva and I did the churning. When the cream was ready and Mother started us going, we turned, rotated, our barrel churn with each one turn alternately doing 100 revolutions. When we heard the butter splashing, Mother came and lifted the butter from the buttermilk and put the butter into a wooden butter bowl and, with a wooden paddle, worked it down to get the excess liquid out and some salt in.

We were always glad when a ewe, a mother sheep, had three lambs at one time and we were given one lamb to feed on the bottle because the mother did not have enough milk for all three. When it was sold, we were given the money for it. However, we shed some tears to see our pet go to market with the others. But it would have been worse, unthinkable, to have it butchered on the farm.

I do remember about Father butchering hogs. For this, water was heated in a big iron kettle over a fire in the barnyard. A rope and pulley was rigged up to enable him to scald the hog in the hot water to loosen the hair. Then he scraped it so it looked clean and good. Father cut it up, and we had fresh pork roasts, chops, sausage, lard and head cheese. We also used and liked some cracklings. Some ham was cured in the tin smoke house. For smoking, pieces of hickory wood were burned. Some hams were preserved with brown sugar, saltpeter and salt, wrapped in brown paper and hung up to cure.

In our huge iron kettle, which hung over the fire, Mother also made soap by cooking excess lard and other fats with lye, some water and some ashes. When the mixture cooled the soap was taken off the top. This soap was used for laundry and cleaning.

Sometimes in the summer, especially if it was a dry time, we didn't have enough pasture, and Father let the cows out to feed along the roadside for awhile. I was allowed to ride a horse and herd them. This I liked to do, because I loved to ride horseback and it was an easy job.

When I was eleven years old, I went to a Singer Company sewing class to learn to sew. From then on, I made most of my own clothes and later my little girls' dresses. One time I made a blue dress. For stitching I used thread that was a bit too light. When Mother looked it over she said that shade of thread will never do and that I must rip out all the outside stitching thread that showed and sew it with darker, proper thread. I did and knew it was better. I never forgot that lesson.

One of the most exciting times of the farm year was threshing time. Neighbor men came with their wagon racks and pitch forks and pitched the bundles of oats on to the wagons. They were then taken to the steam threshing machine which was run by a coal or wood-burning engine. There was smoke and lots of dust in the air. The workers in the fields got hot and dirty. We girls drove in the buggy across the fields taking cooling jugs of water to refresh the men. Sometimes the jugs were corked with corn cobs. Occasionally we took sandwiches, but a big dinner was served to them at noon.

For washing up before dinner, wash pans, soap and water were ready on a bench under the trees near the kitchen door. Also there was a comb in a wooden comb case and a mirror nearby. Linen, not paper and rarely cotton, towels were at hand. Days before, Mother baked supplies of bread, cookies and, on the last day she made pies and set out the tables. Some neighbor women came to help serve. Some brought food, more pies and fresh garden produce.

The men ate at a long table. Meat and potatoes and garden vegetables in season, home-made bread and home-made pies were the staple foods. They ate loads of food. Sometimes, if too many flies came in when the screen doors were opened, we girls would wave small leafy branches of trees or shrubs over the tables to shoo the flies away. Sometimes from the ceiling hung ribbons of sticky fly paper to entangle flies. After dinner workers sometimes stretched out on the grass for a few minutes rest before going back to work.

We had no commercial insecticide and I remember knocking potato bugs with a stick into an old coal bucket. When they tried to crawl out, we banged with our stick on the outside of the bucket and tumbled them back down... Farmers used no commercial fertilizer but with a manure spreader drawn by horses, scattered the refuse-litter and excreta from the stables and farm animals – horses, cows, chickens, etc., and thus enriched the fields.

We had no paved roads. They were dusty in dry weather. We had light weight lap robes and wore dusters over our dresses and veils over our hats against the dust and wind. In spring when the roads thawed and the rains came, the roads were muddy and the mud holes sometimes seemed almost bottomless. When cars first came in, horses were frightened and often reared up or ran. When we were driving and about to meet a car, Father drove to the side of the road, got out and went to the horse's heads and held them, patted them and talked reassuringly to them. Gradually the horses got accustomed to cars.

My family was industrious and thrifty. We had the things we needed. We did not waste anything – money, supplies, time. We did not buy what we could not pay for. We paid cash.

Mother did what she could to add to the farm income. Because she kept milk jars, the barrel churn and milk vessels clean and sweet, and worked and seasoned the butter well, she made premium butter and sold it to a number of regular customers in town. Iva and I delivered it on Saturdays. We also sold fresh eggs, some buttermilk and sometimes cottage cheese and live chickens. Sometimes in season, we sold fresh vegetables and fruits. We rode the three and a half miles to town in a one-seated buggy driving “Old Fan” – our gentle trustworthy horse.

Our best customer was the banker's family. They lived in a big brick house surrounded by a big lawn with a fancy iron fence around it. We drove in through the back gate to the delivery and servants' entrance to the back door, where the maids received us, accepted the produce and paid us. Sometimes they gave us a freshly baked cookie. Mother always had everything itemized carefully for us to help us keep the accounts properly. For doing this, we were given 5 cents each every week to spend as we pleased. Sometimes we bought a double-dip dish of ice cream or an ice cream cone or a sack of peanuts in the shell or licorice or horehound candy. I remember one time we even went to a Saturday afternoon show at the nickelodeon which was near the livery barn.

In our home, we often made shadow pictures on the wall with our hands between our lighted lamp and the wall. Sometimes we made a “cats cradle” with string looped around our fingers and, sometimes folding a big handkerchief, we made a doll in a hammock. Folding paper, we made many things – birds, boats, pianos, flowers and whirly gigs.

One evening pleasure was running about on the grass (sometimes bare-footed in the dew) catching fireflies, “lightening bugs,” and gently carefully putting them into a glass covered jar and watching them light up and glow for a few minutes before we removed the lid and watched them fly away. At night on the farm the stars seemed closer and brighter – more friendly than they appear from the city. We made and flew our kites. We played catch with bean bags and with balls. We pitched horseshoes to get a ringer on the stake.

Another thing we enjoyed on the farm was home-made ice cream. We all wanted to turn the freezer to help make it. Mother put the milk mixture into a metal can inside a wooden bucket filled with chopped ice and salt mixture. The paddle or stirrer, which extended down through the milk mixture in the can, was turned by a crank outside the wooden bucket until the ice cream was frozen. Occasionally, especially on Sunday evenings, Father would pop corn in the big iron skillet, and we enjoyed delicious buttered popcorn.

In the wintertime we wore long underwear, and it was always a problem to get it folded over smooth underneath our long black stockings, especially at the bottom of our underwear. What a day when warm weather came and we could leave off our long underwear. Any chilliness we felt was overshadowed in our feeling of relief. In the cold weather, a register in the floor of our upstairs bedroom let some of the warm air from our base burner rise up and make the bedroom not warm but less cold. Sometimes we put out heated foot rock in the bed. Our foot rock was a flat piece of soapstone about 9 x 12 x 1-1/2 inches in size with a wire handle from the two sides. This we heated slowly on our kitchen stove and put into our bed a half hour or so before we went to bed. In the coldest weather if our pump froze up it could be thawed by pouring some warm water.

For many days before Christmas, a glow of excitement and eager anticipation pervaded the atmosphere of our home when, as individuals and in two's and three's, we began to plan and make gifts for our family and friends. We did not have mass-produced or mechanically-operated toys and gifts. Occasionally we bought a useful or much needed gift of clothing or some equipment for the home, but mostly our gifts were made by hand by us and showed the creative ability plus ingenuity of the makers. Gifts were symbols and expressions of priceless relationships of love. Father made a sled for us, some doll furniture and toys. Mother sewed and made dresses and aprons. We like to make popcorn balls, and it was a special treat to make and pull taffy.

In addition to these activities at home, we also had Christmas programs at school and at church. I remember at church getting some hard candies and English walnuts in the shell and an orange. That was my first orange. I remember one Christmas, when snow covered the ground, we rode in the bobsled behind a trotting team of big bay horses in the moon light. Sleigh bells ringing added to the festivity of the occasion. What a memory!

After winter comes springtime, and sassafras tea and sometimes sulfur and molasses were used as a spring tonic. But more to be remembered are the special joys of springtime – the return of the robins, the brown thrashers, the barn swallows and many more birds. A thrill of spring was to hear the musical honk of the Canada geese and see them on their northward flight high overhead in their V formation flying freely over man-made borders. It always gave my heart and spirit a great lift. In spring our baby chickens were hatched from eggs under a hen without benefit of incubators. Other bringers of beauty and joy are the flowers that bloom in the spring (tra la), the first spring beauties and violets, crocuses and daffodils, pussy willows and many blossoms throughout the year. When they were in bloom, the fruit trees – apple, peach, cherry, pear and crabapple – looked like big bouquets. They were beautiful.

Each season had, and still has, its special delights and its work and problems. The years passed quickly. I am glad I lived on a farm.

In 1916, at the age of 24, Naomi Newburn became an assistant in the Department of Home Economics at the University of Illinois, where she worked on the extension staff until she was married in 1919. Her husband eventually became head of the university's Department of Agricultural Economics.