

THE LIFE STORY OF SUZAN JACOBS LAKE IN BITS AND PIECES

My mother used to tell me about begging her mother to write down her life story so that my mother would have a written memory of what my Grandmother Swensen's life was like. Of course, Margaret Davis Swensen never did write. I often reminded my mother that I needed her to write her story down for me so that I could hear her voice on paper long after she was gone. Did she do it? No! I kept giving her journals, lists, hints, blatant demands, but all I ever forced out of her was a one-page description of her yard and house. Nothing about the people who lived in it.

If I had taken to heart my own nagging of my mother for her biography, I would have been more diligent about keeping a journal. Somehow what I demand of others is far easier to handle than demanding the same task for myself. Last year for Christmas, you wrote such poignant memories of your younger days that I thought I might begin by giving you a glimpse into my youth and childhood. So this is a momentous day because I am actually dedicating time to write about my life. In the years before I married Randall, I used to keep a journal, but when the marriage dissolved, I found the pain of stuffing feelings into words nearly choked me. So, I stopped writing. That was long ago; now I'm ready to begin anew. This time it is for you. I will not write in chronological order, but I will write as memories come to me. Let me begin with those golden years in Elsinore, Utah, population 364.

1948-1949

I entered kindergarten in Richfield, Utah, and attended the Richfield Elementary through second grade. My parents were renting a house at 397 West Center Street, just a block down from the high school. Our neighbors and landlords were the Pace family who lived in the house just east of us. I think Daddy wanted to buy a house and found this one in Elsinore. Who knows why they chose Elsinore, that little town just eight miles south of Richfield. Someone once told me that one of the founders said that it looked much like the city in Denmark where the king lived.

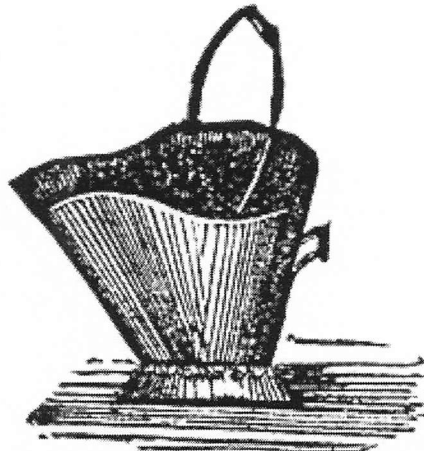
Our house, white frame, had a huge cherry tree just to the right of the front steps that led onto the porch. To the right of the house was a granny garden of flowers, planted at random between the front lawn and the row of lilac bushes that lined the lane behind it, a blaze of colorful with red-orange poppies, tulips, roses, morning glories, bluebells, and many others. A white fence with a large rounded metal gate separated our yard from the dirt road in front of our house. To the left of the house stretched a huge vegetable garden that covered a good half of our acre-plus yard. Half of that garden was alfalfa for the chickens. My mother, who figured she could earn a few extra dollars for our family, decided to plant cabbages and sell them to the only grocery store in town, Gilbert's. Since she knew he had trouble getting fresh produce at that store, she would beef up his produce section with home-grown cabbage heads. When all was said and done, my mother, hauling the cabbages the mile to the store in her little red wagon, earned a penny a pound for her Herculean efforts.

At the south end of the garden a tree-lined canal flowed the entire length of the garden. Daddy built a rope swing for us that would carry us out over the canal and back. Directly behind our house to the left was an orchard of peach, apple, and apricot trees. When the fruit ripened, especially

the apples, I would climb the trees, fill a tin bucket with apples, lower it down by the rope my Dad tied to the handle, and he would empty them into bushel baskets. The washhouse, which housed our old wringer washer, was a few steps behind the house on the right with the chicken coop just behind the wash house. Somewhere in front of the washhouse was a root cellar with two or three bathroom-sized bins, holding potatoes, apples, carrots, and cabbages to keep them fresh and unfrozen for the winter. Having a layout like this, in retrospect, was a wonderland to explore and discover.

If we wanted to, we could sneak into the chicken coop and scare the chickens into a clucking and wing-batting, feather-flying frenzy. On ordinary days, we had to gather the eggs and buff the chicken droppings off them. I had a specific patch of lawn that I discovered had scores of four-leaf clovers for good luck. I remember spending hours, flat out on my stomach on the lawn, finding these clovers and drying them. They made me feel so lucky and smart.

One of the chores I remember having to do was taking out the ashes from the two wood-burning, coal-burning stoves that heated the living room and that mama cooked on in the kitchen. At night we left the glowing red coals in the stoves so that they would heat the house because we had no furnace. In the morning when the coals were dead, I would get the coal scuttle, shovel the coals and ashes into it, and take it out to the compost pile or the pile next to it. In those little towns, garbage collection didn't exist, and we all had to find a way to dispose of our own waste materials. Usually, a fire was burning somewhere for leaves or paper goods.



A Coal Scuttle

The other mandated chore was pulling weeds between the front fence and the road; these weeds were eternal. Daddy would pay us for clearing a certain section, and Berta and I would fight over the easy spaces where not many weeds sprouted. I know we fought more than we pulled.

Berta and I shared a bedroom that was at the back of the house. I don't quite remember exactly how we entered our room except that we had to go through Mama's and Daddy's and James' room to get to our room. Because the stove was in the living room, we had almost no heat in that room. In the winter the bare floors only had a throw rug by the side of the bed, and I can still feel that icy cold linoleum freezing my feet. Getting into bed at night meant climbing into an ice-cave bed and shivering in a fetal position until body warmth thawed a spot that I could finally stretch into.

Daddy still worked in Richfield and would sometimes drive our seafoam green Ford the eight miles to work. Apparently, there was no train service between Elsinore and Richfield. I thought the train stopped at Elsinore so Daddy could take the train to work, but Berta tells me that we only took the train to Provo to visit our Swensen grandparents. Berta and I could do that alone. One of our other relatives would come to the train station to pick us up. One of the sounds I loved when we visited Provo was the far-away train whistles that I could hear in the night.

The elementary school in Elsinore was built in 1898 out of stone and had only four classrooms, two on the bottom floor and two on the top. For my third grade year, I was in a class of third-fourth split, and for fourth grade, I moved across the hall to a fourth-fifth-sixth grade class. I loved being in the classes with older kids because I could cheat and do their work as well as my own. Sneaking to do others' work gave me a secret thrill. Mrs. Christensen was my third grade teacher, and Mrs. Newell was my fourth grade teacher. The wood and wrought-iron desks had a round hole in the top right-hand corner where we could put an inkwell if we ever needed to. We may have used dip pens for writing sometimes, but maybe we also had fountain pens that came with a bottle of ink that had a little reserve glass section inside the ink bottle.

At recess every day, all the girls would go out into the large hall, sit on the floor, and play jacks. The best jacks were heavy and solid; I hated the little flimsy aluminum ones. Our stakes for winning were serious and involved Charley Suttabager. I believe he was the town drunk. If we lost, we would have to marry him. Needless to say, we played with fury to win.

On the east side of the top floor, by the coat hangers on the wood plank wall, hung the bell. The rope dangled down from two stories up in the belfry. When it was our turn to ring the bell for lunch or recess or at the beginning of school, I cheered. I would grab the rope, pull as hard as I could, and the swinging of the bell would pull me off the ground as I clung to the rope with all my might. The clanging resounded in my ears as my feet dangled above the other kids who stood watching with envy. I doubt there are many people left who had the privilege and power I had when I rang the bell and the bell rang me.

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One more memory I have of the school in Elsinore is the playground. Nowadays, school playgrounds are concrete and blacktop. Our grounds were dirt so that we could draw hopscotch game with a stick to our size and liking. We used the rubber heels of old shoes as the taws to throw into the squares.

Setup: Use chalk to draw a traditional hopscotch pattern on the ground. If you are playing indoors on a rainy day, you can put painter's tape on the floor. Your diagram should have 8 sections, numbered, with a "rest" space at the top.

What you do: The first player stands behind the starting line and tosses his marker in square number 1. He must hop over square 1 to square 2. In other words, he must skip the square where the marker is resting. Hopping should be done on one foot, unless two numbered squares are side by side. Then, he can put one foot in each square.

He continues hopping to square 8, turns around in the rest area, and hops back again. At square 2, he must pause and pick up his marker, hop on square 1, and then hop out. The player is "out" if he steps on any line or loses his balance and puts his foot down. If the player is out, the marker stays in the square until it is his turn again. They must repeat that square on their next turn. The next child then tosses their marker to square 1 and play continues. Children should try to work their way from square 1 all the way to square 8. The first child to successfully complete the diagram is the winner.

