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## So Well Remembered

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### SO WELL REMEMBERED—JANUARY

January was the shining month. It was cold, austere, transparent, yet of great power and depth. It was impersonal, it was just, it rewarded without warmth and punished without rancor. If one were careless, or heedless of its positive warnings, one suffered; if one conceded its sovereignty, one might derive sound rewards, the more pleasing for the effort required. Its snowdrifts were profound, exquisite, chaste, and in some cases, punitive, but never aggressively so. January *was*; as a diamond *was*, or a star. It was also a challenge.

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\* George William Busbey was born July 15, 1901, on a small upland farm in Madison Township, Putnam County, Indiana. He began his elementary schooling at Oakalla, which was a stop on the Big Four—New York Central Railroad until 1906 when it was abandoned because of a change in route. While George was yet a young boy, he and his family moved to Brazil and thence to a farm six miles east of Brazil. Here he completed his elementary schooling at a country school; he went on to Brazil High School and was graduated in 1918. Fifth District Congressman Everett Sanders, later secretary to President Calvin Coolidge, recommended Busbey for an appointment at the United States Military Academy, West Point, from which he graduated in 1924. His army career (1924-1954) has included significant service in various capacities in the United States, England, Europe, and Paraguay. Now retired, Colonel Busbey resides at Grass Valley, California. Colonel Busbey's grandmother, Hannah Boone Busbey, was a granddaughter of Squire Boone, Daniel's brother. While growing up in Putnam County, George spent much time doing farm chores, hunting and fishing, and in roaming the woods. Even so, he adds that he found time to "read anything and everything available." Colonel Busbey's recollections offer vivid descriptions of life in Putnam County, Indiana, during the early years of the twentieth century. His recollections indicate and illustrate the prolonged and substantial persistence of various processes and the tradition of pioneer self-sufficiency in Indiana. The essays which follow were originally intended to be published as a book dedicated to the author's mother, "whose faith never faltered."

Inextricably woven into my memory of January's cold white tapestry is Oakalla and its little white schoolhouse. And rightly so, for had there been no Oakalla there would have been no school for a beautiful dark-haired young lady with incredibly lovely hands to come and teach and board with my father's sister. And, unlike the beguilement practiced on Jacob and Rachel, after only seven years of waiting and working, she became my father's wife and in due time, my mother.

Woven into my memory, too, are minor tribulations repetitiously inflicted in my weekdays which began with a lamp-lighted, unenthusiastic partaking of breakfast, progressed through arbitrary bundling into cap, muffler, overcoat, and heavy two-buckle arctic overshoes, to a cold-enforced brisk pace from the front door toward the public road leading westward to school.

My grizzled, hernia-hampered, short-tempered grandfather insisted against all skeptical opposition that his bowlegs came from carrying too many books to school, thereby implying some sympathy with my own reluctance to further my education. He negated much of the assistance, however, by insisting just as firmly that he had often skated on the ice all day barefooted! No one paid much attention to his two claims, but since they belittled the cold, and basis of my chief overt argument, I shivered forlornly into the frigid day.

But because of the mighty drifts which refused to pack in sub-zero temperatures, walking was a series of flounderings which quickly tired my legs, made my heart pound, and forced me to breathe deeply the bitterly cold air. In no time at all, I was sweating under my clothes even as tears from my cold-and-snow tortured eyes froze on my cheeks or dripped from my already running nose. The half mile to school seemed at least four times that long in January, and the morning and evening trips were metaphorical millstones which ground me exceeding fine before Spring came North again.

Oakalla is a name almost unknown today, but until 1906 it was a flag stop on the Big Four railway beside Walnut Creek, complete with store, switches, station, telegraph and ticket office, and a home for the operator and his family. Its reason for existence included two limestone quarries and the families whose men worked therein; also, it was the focus of most of the neighborhood's interests.

Not yet reduced in importance by the interurban line, and much closer than the Vandalia's shipping point at Hamrick's Station or the Limesdale Junction, Oakalla and its railroad enjoyed a long period of leisurely monopoly of all things beyond the proper sphere of animal-drawn freight or passenger traffic. Now it is a ghost, existing only in the memories of a few old residents or of expatriates like myself who have drifted far and yet clung tenaciously to fragments of their Indiana childhood.

The Oakalla school consisted of an entry hall with cloakrooms on either side and a large room nearly full of single desks. There were several small windows in the east wall, two in the north—one to each cloakroom—and large ones along the entire south side of the room from a height of four feet to the ceiling. When one was seated, it was impossible to see the nearby ground through them, but they gave lots of light and afforded a fine view of wooded hills and sky. That is, they did when their long curtains were not raised to shut out the southern sun. When they were raised, everyone in the room seemed to be floating in a pale tan liquid between the west wall blackboard and the short-range glare from the small windows in the east.

A huge, unpolished stove occupied space in the center of the room, where, when the draft was opened, it scorched the clothes and hides of those unfortunate enough to sit near it but rendered fairly comfortable the peripheral band. Conversely, when the draft was closed, those nearest relaxed somnolently or wriggled sensuously, depending upon whether or not they were reciting, while the outer-space denizens huddled in chilly immobility, silent except for the castanet chattering of their teeth. Perhaps of all months January marked my period of greatest book learning; there were no holidays or distractions within and few enticements without. Therefore, we studied and I learned well enough two of the three R's—the third, "ritin'," eluded me then and thereafter.

That was not a painless elusion, either, for a certain Mr. Henry Carpenter, pedagogue, and probably descended from Ichabod Crane, was so harassed by my mother that he in turn harassed me into overtime copybook labor—all of which did not improve my penmanship one whit, but it did engender in me such a rebellious attitude that a sound caning

was the result. Nor did he cane me with good honest hickory switches with which the neighborhood abounded, but, instead and inexcusably, used some red elm kindling which a rascally supervisor had foisted on the taxpayers! The kindling was sawed, square-edged, and left imposing welts on my backside and legs which came to maternal notice during my Saturday night bath and evoked sufficient questions to elicit the whole sorry story.

Half hopefully, I thought the family might rally behind me and demand the discharge of the sadistic Mr. Carpenter, but the reverse was the case. Sadly, I recall that it was touch-and-go for several hours as to whether or not I should receive another whipping for insubordination to the master. Like January, the schoolmaster *was*; he was also a challenge, but one that I did not meet successfully.

A little later, as years go—but the end of a biological cycle in a boy's life—I was ten years old and living in a different county on a larger farm cut by a smaller creek which became intimately my own. Like every other facet of January, the creek impressed upon me the lesson that January is of great power, under perfect control, a latent, impersonal danger, but not an offensive one.

Sheltered by high bluffs, Croy's Creek ran shallow and straight over near-level shale. And like yellowish-olive, dark-blotched exclamation points on a slate, *Hypentelium nigricans*, the common hog sucker, lay without pattern beneath the unflawed ice. Who first discovered the fact I do not know, but it was common knowledge that, after a few heavy blows on the ice above them, it was possible to chop a hole and lift out the temporarily stunned fish. Hog suckers, unlike other suckers, were practically boneless and considered excellent at table.

That particular portion of Croy's Creek was one of the finest stretches of skating ice in the country in the daytime. And it would have been delightful at night, too, had it not been for a few lurking rocks which barely penetrated the ice and required daylight to insure avoidance. It was almost incredible to one who had never tried it to learn how far a fast skater could travel through the air when one of his blades happened to strike one of those traps in the nighttime.

Far better was Mogan's Pond, deep, easily accessible from the highway, yet pleasantly secluded by scrub oak and

sassafras. Seen from above, it closely resembled a tadpole with an unrealistically long tail, and although it lay in a sharply sloping depression, the last few feet before the waterline were almost level, thereby providing fine space for bonfires and general gregariousness. With a good fire, a full moon, and a package of Favorite cigarettes, the older boys made do excellently.

If there were girls present, the boys did even better, with songs and cross-hand skating far down to the tadpole's tail beyond the firelight's glow. This, I then considered pretty silly; but in viewing it with the more tolerant eyes of retrospect, I concede that it may have been an acceptable variant of plain skating. I envied them the Favorites, though, and thought the aroma superior.

January always seemed interminable, a challenge and a purification. Probably there is some deep reason why so many of our evening meals consisted mostly of huge bowls of clabber or of steamed bread, buttered and sugared heavily, and eaten silently in a dining room chilly despite a roaring fire of maple chunks in the big Estate Oak heater, while outside trees cracked in the frigid night and frost encrusted thickly the tight-shut windows. January *was*:

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—FEBRUARY

Like a child of severely austere parents, long inhibited from normal expressions of feeling, February usually began as a colorless extension of January. But, as if suddenly orphaned and released from restraint, its behavior became unpredictable, ranging from bleak to effusively charming—often back to bleak again, fearful of its unaccustomed freedom. Affected by the whimsicality of the month, people, too, figuratively kicked up their heels like colts in pasture. The February Thaw was both physical and psychic. It gave us maple syrup, maple sugar, sassafras tea, pork tenderloin, liverwurst, fresh sausage, and sometimes spring beauties.

In 1906 the Big Four Railway altered its route, thereby depriving my grandfather of his chief source of entertainment, or irritation, when trains failed to pass on schedule. His loss was my gain for the construction superintendent

had a daughter who, on one of the infrequent perfect Sundays, was brought to Sunday School at the old Mount Olive Church. After one unbelieving look at her tiny perfection, I appropriated the space at her side on the hard old bench and gazed enthralled at her lovely cheek until the very intensity of my look caused her to turn her face toward me. Simultaneously, the blessed sun poured pale gold into her flaxen curls and did magic things to the delphinium blue of her eyes. Perhaps I did not know all those words then, but I certainly knew the music. Instinctively, my right arm went round her neck and rested in ecstatic naturalness on her shoulders while angels and cherubims hummed round our heads in benediction. Her name was Ruth, and we were not quite six years old.

Thus, I shared the general February giddiness on special occasions, and several mores usually appertaining to it were of paramount interest and intense pleasure to me. Specifically, holidays and hog killing. Technically, there was one holiday, one day of general note, one of general observance by means short of quitting work, and one of vital interest to everyone. Lincoln's birthday received only token, yet respectful, attention, but we made much of Saint Valentine's Day, devoting considerable time, ingenuity, and occasional artistry to the manufacture of confections from wallpaper and allied materials. Skilled use of scissors, flour paste, and various scraps of ribbon, gilt paper, as well as dashes of perfume frequently produced a tender missive which eventually set many a nubile maiden up in housekeeping.

Washington's birthday called for a school recess, ever a season and reason for rejoicing, but all these fiesta days were insignificant in import compared with the universally anticipated and fearfully viewed Ground Hog's Day. If there were heretics in the neighborhood who doubted the accuracy of its prediction, they wisely kept silent. In a predominantly Republican area, Teddy Roosevelt was sacred; Democrats and skeptics concerning Ground Hog's Day, planting by moon phases, and the efficacy of sassafras tea as a salubrious springtime blood thinner did not flaunt their ignorance publicly.

And there was butcherin'! Man is the strangest animal. To him there is nothing inconsistent but consistency. He can compose a sonnet of ineffable delicacy with hands still dripping

blood and foul with gut filth! I submit that few vegetarians have ever accomplished anything of lasting value to humanity; to do that requires meat.

And meat we had. Admitting that we had killed a hog in November, we justified the act by saying it was mostly for soap-making and just a small hog, anyway. In February, we *butchered!* Not one, but eight or nine slowly fattened and conditioned pigs weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds each. My family favored a dual purpose hog which gave a generous amount of lard yet had excellent lean hams and acceptable bacon.

According to custom, and because of their acknowledged skill in such matters, father and grandfather did much of the meat cutting throughout the neighborhood. As a result, that neighborhood had a cut, well-known then, never encountered nowadays in meat markets. It was a backstrap of tenderloin, a foot or more long, and about three by four inches in cross section. For years, the Oak Restaurant in Brazil, Indiana, specialized in tenderloin sandwiches at the standard price of five cents, one nickel, the twentieth part of a dollar. O tempora, O mores! If there be a finer morsel I want to know, and go.

Before dawn, my insomnolent grandfather had a fire going under several big, black iron kettles of water. Assisted by one or two stout neighbors, we started our hog killing shortly after first light. According to my earliest remembrances, my father, a very strong man, used to knock the victims efficiently in the head with the head of a single bit axe. There was never a squeal or a delay in demise and, I am sure, there was no pain. The corollary throat cutting was utilitarian and equally painless. In later years it became routine to shoot the porker with a .22 short ca'tridge in father's squirrel rifle, and then I learned the immutable rule: shoot a hog high, and a calf low—a bit of information which served me no useful purpose thereafter, so far as I can remember.

There followed the scalding of the hogs in a barrel of near-boiling water, the scraping to remove all hair, the hanging on gambrel sticks for gutting and thorough cooling—during which time hearts, livers, feet, and heads were carried to the kitchen for the womenfolks to process into headcheese, liverwurst, and pickled pigsfeet. Much of this was kept for

home consumption, but there was always a surplus which grandfather liked to hand-carry to one or two saloons on the North Side—he always capitalized on these visits in conversation or letters to imply a certain disreputability—where it was in annual demand for the free lunch counter. For the enlightenment of the young, free lunch was a delightful institution, regrettably vanished with the era of the one hundred cent dollar, yellow backed twenty dollar bills, and five cent beer.

Butcherin' night was devoted to cutting and hanging, the day following to cutting lard fat, grinding—and occasionally to stuffing—sausage, into which father put lots of sage and considerable cayenne pepper. Also, during the afternoon, the lard fat, cut into one-inch cubes, was put into one of the black iron kettles and tried out. The liquid, poured into various sized crocks and jars, quickly solidified into its final state, but the solid portions remaining in the kettle were put into a lard press and squeezed to cracklings.

Cracklings were variously used for crackling bread, dog feed, or just for nibbling between meals. The cocktail hour with its fried grasshoppers, antipasto from Italy, hors d'oeuvres from France, and Smorgasbord tidbits from Scandinavia, with its seven-to-one martinis, sub-freezing vodka or akvavit had not—and probably still has not—invaded Putnam County. What we did have was sassafras tea.

*Sassafras variifolium* vied with wild blackberry briers, ragweed, and cockleburs as a farmer's worst enemy. In fence rows and cutover land, in sour pasture land, in ungrazed corners, it flourished and created in a few years almost impenetrable thickets. When cut, it sprouted prodigiously; when burned, it throve the more. Drought and flood alike were its sponsors, and only sheep or goats cared to eat it. But in February, sassafras became the universal panacea for all ills resulting from a winter of heavy meat eating. It thinned the blood—so spake the sages, and none of my acquaintance disputed it.

For the hoi polloi, those who bought the makings in a grocery store, roots of the red sassafras or even small chips and blocks from sizable sticks provided something which, when boiled or infused in very hot water, produced a dark reddish tea, aromatic and slightly astringent on the tongue. For the initiate and those who owned their own sources, there



was what we called the yellow sassafras, a large tree with widespreading branches, rare and highly prized. From its new roots a superfine tea was brewed. When we moved from my grandfather's home to land of our own, we were forced to abandon our one prized yellow sassafras tree and, regrettably, had to use roots from some large red sassafras trees. These made far better tea than grocery store trash but not nearly so good as our former gourmet infusion.

With our blood properly thinned, we endured February's growing pains with equanimity spiced toward month's-end by anticipation of March's entry—Lion or Lamb, that was the question.

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—MARCH

March was the gamblers' month, the month when urchins pitched pennies at ubiquitous cracks and staid old carpenters suddenly engaged in saw-filing contests, or stopped to play marbles with their grandchildren, or . . . over-indulged in bock beer. March raised the annual sweepstakes question: Will it enter with a blustering roar, painful but safer in reality than a mealy-mouthed simulation of February's thaw? Or, will a dissimulating lamb breathe unseasonable warmth and beguilement until silly fruits bud and blossom, only to be heartlessly ruined by a late deep frost? It could be either, and not even the most cynical old sage was immune to the lure of trying to guess which.

For there was intoxication in the sight of dandelion gold by the roadside after months of drabness; tonic, also, in greens from curly dock, pokeberry shoots, and wild mustard. Many a family, dauncy from a winter of fried pork and hot bread was tided over to garden sass by the greens of March.

A mystifying indetermination to me was whether or not March would bring Easter or whether, for some obscure reason, I must wait until April—April which was already sufficiently blessed. Easter in March was better for several reasons. In the first place, chickens had finished their moult and were laying prolifically, thereby permitting easier accomplishment of a game peculiar to that part of Indiana, the stealing and hiding of a large number of eggs.

The origin of the custom is unknown to me; the practice is as impossible to justify as the hoarding of light bread, for the idea of denying any youngster as many eggs as he might desire would have been as unlikely as failing to milk the cows. Still, we stole them with a skill worthy of a better cause and hid them, manifesting much ingenuity. Sometimes too much, as when one boy hid three dozen amid the interior gears of a little-used, hand-operated corn sheller, with spectacular results when his father innocently decided to shell a few ears of corn to supplement the calf ration.

It is probably a sign of senescence, if not of downright senility, to comment that today's children seem to lack the ability to find satisfying entertainment within themselves by using only minor props. Call your friendly psychiatrist if you will, but during one March Eastertide, one of my young friends and I found day-long entertainment in pretending to be a pair of crows. Our visual aids were two crow legs with which, by manipulating exposed tendons, we were able to pick up small objects and fly—metaphorically speaking—to our nest. Today's children would doubtless regard such goings-on as *prima facie* evidence of idiocy and, of course, they might be right. But we were happy in our harmless folly and . . . it didn't cost our parents a cent!

I cannot say that gossip was nonexistent in our neighborhood but it was seldom that children participated, or even heard it. One notable exception comes to my mind, however. I can recall spattering happily home from a visit with my favorite playmate on a raw March afternoon and announcing in a clear and ringing tone that, "Johnny's mother made his father sleep in the barn last night!" The effect was about the same as if I had brought an irate skunk into the kitchen. Thereafter, I kept my gems to myself, but I often wondered why the lady did it.

Juvenile delinquency may have existed—may even have burgeoned—but in our neighborhood it usually died a-borning on the rough side of a red elm club. Parents were mostly busy folk, impatient of innovation and interruption alike, especially those of immature conception. In spite of our early handicaps, my generation produced middlin' good citizens who muddled acceptably through two world wars and launched the atomic age; there may be two schools of thought as to the value of our achievements, though.

A lot of elderly sages reckoned their longevity by March; succinctly put, the rule was: If I live through March, I always last out the year. They often had threescore years, and more, to prove their point. During March, sorghum began to become unpleasantly grainy, strange dogs drifted through our backlands, grandfather came home from a Saturday afternoon in Greencastle smelling like a cross between our apple bin and a hot mince pie—much to the disapproval of the distaff side of the family—and ordinarily amenable livestock went on fence breaking junkets into the wilderness beyond our north boundary, motivated by Aries and his ilk.

From time to time there were outstanding events, such as when a premature flooding of Big Walnut Creek breached the Big Four right of way's levees and sent trackwalkers swinging lanterns along the grade the whole night long. This occurrence stimulated the hidebound pedagogue of Oakalla school to such coltish disregard of schedules as to take the entire student body down to observe the swirling torrent. Sometimes, in a nostalgic dream I hear again the treble whistle of Yesterday's freight engines, slogging with many a sanded slip up the long grade toward Greencastle.

Summing up, I cannot think of a single essential concerning March, save Easter, yet I would not eliminate a day of it. Wasn't there a song which said: "You may have been a headache but you never were a bore"?

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—APRIL

It is raining on my roof. I glance instinctively at a splotch on the ceiling, where last year a steady drip plinked a tune in the tin can below and nagged me unmercifully to take more permanent remedial action. My thoughts go back.

I awoke after an all night April rain to find my father unaccountably absent. Reluctantly toying with my oatmeal, heavily loaded with rich Jersey cream, I questioned mother repeatedly as to his whereabouts, receiving absent-minded answers as she hurried about endless household chores. Even less satisfactory were the grunts I got from my grandfather, who, wedged in a window corner of the kitchen glaring fiercely at the latest edition of the *Greencastle Weekly*

*Banner*, was alternately damning some idiocy of the Democrat party and the poor quality of his spectacles, looking for all the world like a grizzled old ground hog grumbling at the mouth of its burrow. Only my grandmother, soft-voiced and patient from sixty years of birthings, buryings, and eternal questionings of children, gave me comfort by her warm assurance that father would be home *d'reckly*, probably bringing something nice. Relieved, I hugged her tightly and wandered outside, repeating her words soundlessly under my breath.

In that part of Indiana, directly was always *d'reckly*, and the term carried no implication of immediate action. Rather, it could be translated as: "in a few minutes," "after a while," or, "when I get through with what I am doing." *D'reckly* was a good word. It filled a lamentable gap in the language and gave considerable leeway to a small boy too busy to comply with an order but too young for disobedience to be tolerated. It was polite, noncommittal, and handy as an alligator wrench.

At mid-morning father appeared, wet to his knees, moving with customary soundlessness around the corner of the woodshed. His hat was pushed back and his face wore that blank expression of innocence which ever betokened triumph after some episode for which Dad felt a little necessity for justification. Farmers didn't wander off on casual junkets just because it rained—not when there was harness to mend, tools to sharpen, sagging gates to rehang, and a thousand other things ever waiting the master's hand.

But, there was one thing which could justify a trip afield, whatever the weather and however many tasks clamored for attention. When I saw that father was carrying an article locally termed a nickel basket, and gazed bug-eyed at its heaping contents, I knew without question that father had been fixin' fence. To give support to the deduction, I noted that a pair of wire pliers, a hammer handle, and a brown paper bag of what must have been *steeples* protruded from, or bulged, appropriate pockets of his blue overalls, but the basket's load proved the point, for it was full of *musharoons*!

And none of your store boughten little buttons, nurtured in cellars, bereft of the light of day and, for my money, bereft of most everything else bare edibility; but morels! Beautiful, succulent, miraculous morels! Mushrooms, you say? Well, all right, mushrooms if you must, but those Indiana musharoons were better.

Mother was orally congratulatory, grandmother smiled placidly, her belief confirmed, father was complacent, and even grandfather emitted a commendatory grunt, after he had lifted the stove lid and half-quenched the kitchen fire with an enormous phrrrt of ambeer, before pulling out his knife and demanding that all and sundry get busy with the cleaning. Me? I was tickled pink.

And so we distributed ourselves variously around the basket and two big dishpans of water from the cistern, gently lifted the musharoons from basket to water to slosh them back and forth to remove what, in another milieu, might have been termed extraneous matter, before splitting them down the middle, rewashing, and laying them on clean dish-towels to absorb the surplus water. In the amiable confusion, father made his escape, perhaps to fix some more fence.

But there were no absentees when we sat down to dinner—at noon, of course—around the old oval drop-leaf table that had solidly borne the burden of tons of the finest food ever produced in a county where fine food and finer cooking had been too commonplace for comment ever since the Boone boys barbecued the first buck haunch over a bed of split hickory coals beside the limestone cave which represented one of the terrors and delights of my childhood.

Dipped in flour, salted and peppered lightly, the musharoons were popped into black iron skillets full of bubbling bacon fat to change their pallid surfaces into crinkle-edged, convolute morsels of varying shades of gold and brown, comparable to but different from pan-fried chicken. With a multiple-holed skimmer, they were lifted for a moment to allow the surplus fat to drain, then heaped on a giant iron-ware platter and set, crisp and beautiful to the eye, before our drooling faces.

My eyes oscillated back and forth like the eyes of a spectator at a ping-pong match as the grown folks filled their plates so bountifully that it seemed there would never be enough for me. But there always was, and when, with nose and lips quivering like a rabbit's, I bit through the hot outer crust, and tongue and brain were one in pronouncing the flavor almost unbearably delicious—well, there just wasn't anything appropriate to say or do, except eat more musharoons.

Reluctantly, I have adopted the accepted spelling, m-u-s-h-r-o-o-m, in the interests of harmony and to avoid adding further to a widespread reputation for eccentricity, but it still sounds wrong. I know that the mushrooms I refer to are of the species properly known as morels, or *Morchella esculenta*, of the genus *Ascomycete*, and that is all right for definition among the intelligentsia. By any name, they are the finest thing of their kind on earth—better than fried catfish, and a little ahead of abalone.

Morel hunting is an art and a joy forever. To penetrate their miraculous camouflage and locate a productive spot is a rewarding triumph that never grows old. Morels look like nothing else—except *Gyromitra esculenta*, an inferior though edible cousin never found in morel country—and it seems incredible that at least fifty attempts of mine to paint a clear word picture of them have resulted in flat failures, a few near fist fights, numerous shattered illusions, and an abiding loss of self-confidence in my ability to describe anything more difficult than a game of bean bag.

I remember one man who had both a Phi Beta Kappa key and a master's degree in anthropology and who listened intently while I told him that a morel looked, in silhouette, like a small tree; that it varied in color from moist grey through the various shades of ivory to rich brown; that the hollow stem was large in proportion to the top and that the top itself was deeply convoluted. Finally, I told him that morels bore no resemblance to the ordinary button, or umbrella shaped, champignons commonly found in luxury markets or smothering five dollar steaks. To make the description still clearer, I drew him a pretty good sketch of several typical morel forms. He listened with apparent intelligence, thought deeply for a while, and then sighed before shaking his head and murmuring, "But how do you tell them from toadstools?"

Now if I were sure that a man could tell a morel from a moron, and if I couldn't go with him to fix a bit of fence, I would advise him to wait until late April rains had turned Indiana into a green-and-limestone paradise before sallying forth on his quest. Then, I would tell him to seek out a few abandoned apple orchards where the sod grew thick and inviting under his feet, or a place where May apples opened their parasols on southern slopes, or a spot under the greater shade of a giant elm where cow tracks cut deep in squidgy

black loam, or a lightly wooded pasture where old stumps drowsed like turtles amid scrubby second growth walnut and oak. And then, as he set out on the great adventure, I would damn the two broken legs which bind me to my bed and mourn for my vanished youth.

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## SO WELL REMEMBERED—MAY

There was a time when if I entered a certain club in Berlin, the orchestra would stop whatever it was playing and swing softly into "*Drei Rote Rosen*," a nostalgic bit of torch made for low-ceilinged, smoke-blued rooms where friends sipped Asbach Uralt brandy or quaffed endless saucers of fine champagne from bottles still bearing the ironical legend: "*Reserviert Fuer Wehrmacht*," forgetting for a little space the hate-filled past and the uncharted future. And deep in my memory, impossible ever to forget, lies the haunting, hopeless, fatalistic resignation of the final words: "Und einmal wird es wieder Mai . . . und fast so schoen wie einst. . . ."—And once again it will be May . . . and almost as beautiful as it was once. . . .

Almost as beautiful as it was once! Even when I was a very small boy, May was so wonderful that it hurt a little, and each succeeding year it brought added poignance to torture me exquisitely. For the February thaw, which started sap moving in the sugar maples and even sometimes brought out spring beauties on sheltered southern slopes, was but a delusive preview of things to come. March held little to tighten the throat or mist the eye. And April, for all her morels and fence fixin' days when the soft chuckle of split hickory flames gently applauded the easy talk of my home folks around the kitchen stove and the smell of wet earth and drying clothes snuggled into the folds of my brain forever and ever . . . April, I say, was still a greensick girl when her beautiful sister arrived.

May was a birthing sort of month. She swelled and burgeoned and proliferated into incredible fecundity, yet managed to keep her figure and virginal aspect. Nor is my conception provincial. And I submit in testimony that, while it is remotely conceivable that there may sometime *not* be

an England, there will never be a month so inherently part of the British life, letters, and loves as that selfsame May. From Chaucer to Browning—yea, even all the later lutes—find me an one who sings not of May entwined with life and love, and I'll give you odds that he be not British!

At my home, there was work afoot, it is true, yet it was never onerous. It was, on the contrary, satisfying, communal, and almost choral. There was concerted harmony in the voices about me, each with its theme or counterpoint, euphonious with the clink of spades on alien rocks, with thud of hoe's heel on recalcitrant clod, or the slurp of water in a sprinkling can. Music, too, in the steady plod of the plow team, or the staid old mare pulling a single shovel plow in true lines down our garden's length to make a bed for started plants to come.

And, because of the universal feeling of comfortable fatigue from long days of plowing and planting, grandfather decreed that we sample the first of our slowly smoked February hams. With hot biscuits, red or flour gravy, fried potatoes, and the wealth of jams, fruit butters, jellies, and syrups which always loaded our table, the delicately flavored ham slices were a joy to the eye and a blessing to the tongue. As an added attraction, grandmother sometimes opened a jar of sausage cakes, redolent of sage and hair-raising from the cayenne pepper which father had added with a heavy hand. We relished our victuals on those days!

Quite logically, May in her parturient fervor gave us little of immediate use or edibility, but on every side could be seen the plethora of tomorrow. Cymose white flowers had given way to embryo strawberries with their promise of shortcakes and ice cream topping eftsoon, while falling petals of apple, pear, plum, cherry, and peach severally disclosed their fruits a-forming. And, the rains and ruins of winter being surely over, the creeks became crystal clear to betray schools of spawning suckers to the predatory youth of the neighborhood.

Daily I haunted the banks of Croy's Creek, peering hopefully into every limpid pool which might deceptively offer itself as a haven to the fish. I grumbled mightily when they were late arriving but actually was so full of sensuous delight in living in such a paradise of sights, scents, and sounds that I would have made the same search had it been certain that



no fish would ever appear. But they always did. One day the pools were rippled only by vagrant breezes or a few flirtatious minnows; the next, there were groups of foot-long fish, mysteriously come and mysteriously poised in instinctive formations, and except for winnowing fins, as immobile as if frozen in ice.

Then, from my pockets came the main implement of capture: the ten foot cord, to which was attached a lead sinker and a bit of brass wire long enough to form a noose about six inches in diameter. With my knife, I cut a suitable willow, trimmed it to proper length, and attached the cord to its smaller end. The resulting rig then consisted of a pole, a line, and a noose of wire, stabilized to a degree by the lead sinker fixed just above the noose.

What followed is easy to describe but took a lot of doing to produce fish for the pan. It consisted of lowering the noose behind a static fish, with the least possible water disturbance, and cautiously moving the pole so that the noose passed around the tail and forward to a point just back of the gills before giving a quick upward flip to tighten the noose and hoist the fish unceremoniously from his happy trance to fatal reality. Such rudeness necessarily disturbed the school and imposed a period of waiting before tranquility was restored and another catch made possible. A skillful snarer, however, could sometimes remove fish after fish without stampeding the others unduly. Perhaps the fact that they did not see what was going on before their very noses has something to do with the origin of the slang term, "sucker."

A variant was to find a fat hen fish laying eggs in a shallow stretch of water, noose her from the sweet yellow sand, and flip her ruthlessly to the bank. Such roe as remained after this merciless treatment appeared along with the fish at our next breakfast. In spite of the myriad and unavoidable bundles of bones, we considered suckers delicious, fried them crisply brown, and ate them bones and all with lots of bread and many cups of coffee.

It has been years since I have seen a school of spawning suckers, and I am told that snaring is illegal in many states. Probably it was then, too, but we knew little of such things and cared less. Anyway, it was May, and it would have been a queer game warden who would have flaunted a man-made law in the face of her magic.

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## SO WELL REMEMBERED—JUNE

"And then came June, and, rose in hand, my threadbare penitence apieces tore. . . ." So, almost, spake the Tentmaker. If I ever felt any penitence I fail to recall it, but well remembered is many a sunny June and its roses—wild roses with their five petals spread in complete abandon while robber bees made free of their unguarded gold. Old-fashioned yellow roses, too, poignantly perfect on straggling unkempt stems, like beautiful damsels in a once fine neighborhood now surrounded by slums. And roses of every species known to my green-thumbed grandmother and her friends for counties around.

It was in June that my parents, on the fifth day, made dual fiesta of their wedding anniversary and my father's birthday, and well into my fourth lustrum provided an excitement ranking with Christmas and the Fourth of July. My own contribution grew from merely helping to pick cherries for the special pies, without which father did not consider the day complete, to more ambitious duties as I grew older—duties such as picking enough wild strawberries for the breakfast shortcake, or providing a mess of catfish, young squirrels, or rabbits to be fried in the fat of home-grown, home-cured bacon with just enough fresh salted butter to give the superior golden brown crust which both delighted the eye and conserved the delicious flavor beneath. Just for the pleasure of remembering it, I shall describe the shortcake—its preparation, care, and use.

First came the plan, which like all good plans, was simple and objective. To make a shortcake was its essence. But this meant reconnaissance, for the strawberries were not called wild for nothing. Kittle as Hieland cattle, each year they challenged anew both eyesight and imagination to find and fix them. For a while they would be numerous on east and south slopes, only to vanish and reappear in brier-grown marshland half a mile away. Or as if wishful of a better means of transportation, for several years they were to be found in profusion along the Vandalia right of way and nowhere else. Even the succulent morels—our musharoons—so dearly prized, were more stable in their habits.

Once found, a patch had to be analyzed. The day of optimum ripeness had to be determined to avoid too much squishing away of precious juices; and the enemy situation

had to be estimated accurately since it was quite important at times. For I was not the only addict of wild strawberry shortcake, and whereas I was one, the enemies were numerous and shrewd. To catch a bed just right, and ravish without ruining, was an achievement worth commemoration for years afterward.

The picking was hard work but it never seemed so. There were so many things to see and hear and taste and smell as fingers went about their selection, and it was a rare time to catch up on a lot of deferred thinking. Too, ever and anon, the mouth-watering vision of the completed shortcake would almost overpower action, forcing the picker to concentrate fiercely on the current task in order to consummate his dream more quickly.

More skillful hands than mine usually did the final stemming and washing. The berries were then sweetened slightly and allowed to stand until the cake was baked. The cake or, rather, the cakes—usually three—were of unsweetened short dough, about an inch and a half in thickness, and were allowed to cool before being split carefully, sandwichwise. Then, out came the berries to be ladled between the slices and between each cake as it was decked upon the one below. Three cakes made six layers of alternate red-and-tan-edged white, and this was about as high as a good shortcake could go without being unbalanced or ostentatious. As a matter of fact, there were seldom enough berries to go further, especially since the crowning dollop was spread thickly and the surplus juice poured slowly over the whole creation.

The next to last touch was now added: granulated sugar was sprinkled lightly over the top where it sifted into the little valleys to dissolve into delicious syrup or where it clung precariously on the peaks, semi-solid, to receive its final treatment a few minutes later. Next, a few small pieces of sweet butter were placed irregularly on the top berries, never too many, nor too close to the edge. And now the cake was gently inserted into a moderately hot oven for melding into ultimate goodness all the peerless ingredients so carefully blended by human hands. The result? Why, the result was a wild strawberry shortcake, if you wish to be literal, but such a shortcake as should make a bulldog break a ten pound log chain merely to sniff.

The last thing, of course, was the eating. I have been warned to use caution with the verb *to eat*. Told that if carelessly tossed into a sentence in lieu of *lunch, dine, breakfast, partake of food, break bread, share a repast*, et cetera, ad nauseam, it might connote of tearing at raw meat or something. Mebbeso. To me, the ultimate in gastronomical inefability is to eat such a wild strawberry shortcake as I have just described. Ah, June. . . .

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—JULY

In my boyhood book, July was a month which could have been left out of the calendar without upsetting anything, provided of course that the Fourth could be tacked on somewhere else. Such a splendiferous fiesta could not possibly be spared, but for certain economic reasons it would have been better to sandwich it between, say, Halloween and Thanksgiving. Growing up on a small Indiana farm made me rich in everything but money; but, inasmuch as money seemed to be a requisite for getting the most out of the Fourth of July, I would have preferred that it come after we had disposed of our crop and before the cash had all been spent for Christmas or such unavoidable essentials as schoolbooks, winter clothes, and the interminable doctor bills.

No one had then come up with the statement that it was impossible to have both butter and cannon, but such a pronouncement would not have been malapropos in our neighborhood—merely redundant. For we had butter aplenty, but I couldn't have cannon crackers—at least not in the quantity and size I fervently desired. To make it worse, we always had one or two neighbors, just on the verge of indigence, whose ideas differed widely from those held firmly by my father. And those neighbors bought fireworks to the wide-eyed envy of us less fortunate younguns, and to the tight-lipped disapproval of the rest of the community. None of which appeared to bother the profligates nor, more shame to them, to prevent the bigoted majority from inviting the feckless ones to come and bring their pyrotechnics.

On numerous Glorious Fourths, my predicament was analogous to that described in the classic story: "There was

Otto with his big bass horn, and there I stood with my little piccolo." More exactly, there I was with my puny packets of Chinese squibs compared with the neighbors' younguns' wealth of big Roman candles, pinwheels, nigger chasers, giant crackers, and the breath-taking splendor of skyrockets with their plethora of multi-colored fireballs bursting high in the starry firmament . . . so beautiful it hurt my throat to see.

On my first birthday, grandfather gave me a puppy. She was a lovely little black and tan lady of the work breed locally and loosely called shepherd. How she grew and did her work on the farm, created a legend, and died without ostentation in her sixteenth year has no real part in this calendar, but the remark made about her by Mr. John Stoner, dean of the local stockmen, has. For it was during a hot drive of a cantankerous mixed herd of cattle to the Hamrick's Station loading chutes that old John watched more fine stock dog work in one morning than he had seen in a lifetime. With the July sun blistering his ruddy face, Mr. Stoner sat his saddle, hat in hand, and paid his tribute reverently when he said, "By God, that dog's got more sense than most Democrats!" The words were spoken about 1905 and might be considered too far to the right today.

There were good reasons for not liking July. It was hot. Not the kind of heat we have nowadays, diluted by air-conditioned, air-cooled theaters, drugstores, and homes, and with shorts and halters, backless play suits, skirtless dresses, shirtless chests, and sockless feet more prevalent than rabbits in Australia, but real heat. Heat that started half an hour after sunrise and continued without interruption of breeze or cloud to fulfill its mission making corn grow and people suffer.

July brought prickly heat to some; a case in point is that of Taylor Crump. Mr. Crump was a Civil War veteran whose temper was short most of the time, and particularly toward the end of July before his pension check arrived—afterward, he was ebullient for a day or two until his supply of spiritus frumenti ran out. With prickly heat a torturing belt around his ample waistline, the old man gullibly hearkened to the advice of a couple of John Stoner's hellion sons; they said that Sloan's Liniment was a sure cure for his ailment, and in his discomfort, old Taylor forgot that specific liniment was for horses and that it often blistered their tough hides. With

a lavish hand, he doused the first areas; there were no further dousings.

On fire, the old veteran sprinted for the house, bellowing to his daughter a request which became a neighborhood slogan: "Lizzie, bring the cream!"

Nor did our Indiana heat disappear with the setting of the sun. Oh, no! It settled down around us like a suffocating shawl through which, late in July, we watched ten million fireflies light the stage for about the same number of katydids whose rasping orchestration was broken only by the flutes of whippoorwills and the screech owls' counterpoint. Meanwhile, we gasped languidly and waved palm leaf fans or scratched our chigger bites.

Chiggers were the worst plague of my childhood. Without them, I could better have endured the heat; and without the heat there might not have been so many chiggers—I do not know. But I know that through many a sweltering July night I have tossed and moaned and scratched and tortured myself with camphor, salt, coal oil, and anything else available in a futile effort to stop the maddening itch till green dawn brought a short nap to a mighty tired little boy. The heat and the chiggers made tempers short and made July an easy first choice of months I liked least. It even ruined much of the joy I might have derived from my birthday which fell perversely on the fifteenth of the month.

To the young, though, no month could be all bad and my senescent eyes, peering through the soft lens of retrospect, easily identify as my own a meandering path where dust puffed and mud squished pleasingly between bare toes, where young rabbits and squirrels fell, metaphorically, into the family skillet, and whole Jersey milk combined synergistically with junket tablets to produce hand-cranked ice cream of an excellence never equaled thereafter. I define the Good Old Days as any portion of the life span at which we gaze back nostalgically—even July, chiggers and all.

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—AUGUST

August was the *eatingest* month! Not only did hard work engender terrific appetites, but there were so many good things to eat. Furthermore, competition raised its head, for August was the month of community enterprises—hayng

and threshing—and shame be to the housewife who failed to set a superior table for the haying crew or the threshing ring. She might not be read out of church, but she knew full well that her failings would receive wide publicity, even unto the third and fourth generation. These were no alien hired laborers, but neighbors, and hence, highly critical. In Madison Township it was impossible to gain much by setting an exceptionally good table, but it was exceedingly easy to lose a lot of face by setting a mediocre one.

Long before I was old enough to be more than a fascinated spectator, the arrival of the huffing threshing machine—a term which elastically included not only the steam powered traction engine and the big red separator, but also the water wagon and the technical crew—filled me and all my contemporaries with excitement. Excitement which manifested itself by our watching every move during the actual separation of grain from sheaves and by imitative creations of toy threshing outfits. These contraptions we dragged energetically about the neighborhood, trying to outdo all rivals in creating the nearest simulacra of their huge prototypes.

Due the fortuitous reroofing of our house with the consequent replacing of gutters and downspouts, I became possessed of a length of pipe with an elbow-bend very like unto the blower pipe of a separator, and concurrently, the owner of an old foot-powered sewing machine which, after a few pulleys and string belts had been added, emitted a thrilling rattle and hum when pedaled hard. These items, mounted on a small wagon and towed by a two-lever toy handcar labled "The Irish Mail," made me undisputed threshing machine tycoon for a whole season.

As for August eating, well, while there was still a solid foundation of ham, bacon, sausage, canned beef, and all sorts of tins, glasses, or paraffin-topped stone jars of fruits, jellies, jams, butters, conserves, preserves, and whole or quartered fruits, they were not really necessary, for Nature suddenly opened the gates and let her garden torrents inundate the kitchen and her poultry glut the skillets. August may well be considered as the month when Hoosierdom's activity in its favorite indoor sport of digging its grave with its teeth reached a peak; the prevailing attitude seemed to be: if I must die, I'll die happy.

A typical *carte du jour* might be as follows—but bear in mind that where the word *or* appears it often should be *and*, for the desires of the guest as well as those of the household received due consideration:

Breakfast: Fried chicken, fried ham, or canned pork tenderloin, or beefsteak. Red or flour gravy, hot baking powder or soda biscuits, or pancakes, or heavily buttered oven toast. Raspberry, blackberry, quince, apple, and grape jelly; various fruit butters, conserves, jams, and preserves. Honey, molasses, maple syrup, and *candy*. Horseradish, cayenne and black pepper, butter, milk, cream, sugar, coffee, and water.

Dinner (midday meal): Fried pork, fried chicken, gravy, new potatoes in cream, green beans, baked squash, roastin' ears, and fried green apples. Sliced cucumbers in vinegar, chopped pickle relish, white and red radishes, green onions, and clabber cheese (cottage cheese). Bread—on baking days, hot bread and yeast biscuits both appeared on the table—or baking powder biscuits, and butter. The condiments were increased by the addition of bottled hot pepper sauce, mustard, and a cruet of vinegar. Cake, cookies, and cherry, berry, apple, squash, chocolate, or cream pies—often all—appeared at the same meal. Cold tea, hot coffee, milk, and water. Syrup, sorghum, and *candy*.

Supper (evening meal): Hot bread or biscuits, cold bread, beef—boiled or fried—any leftover pork, or chicken, and if none, a fresh supply of one or both. Escalloped salsify, potato salad; mashed, fried, or creamed potatoes, or potato cakes, as whim or requests dictated. Sliced cucumbers in vinegar, wilted lettuce with chopped onions and hot sauce, sliced tomatoes with black pepper and sugar, and late in the month, finely chopped cabbage, over which was poured bubbling hot bacon fat. Add cake, pie, floats, pudding, all the jellies, jams, conserves, preserves, and stewed fruits of the earlier meals, coffee, tea, milk, water, syrup, molasses, and *candy*, and you have a repast which sustained until breakfast. That is, if you overlook several nibbles of *candy*, cookies, or even a solid sandwich of pork with horseradish when the day had been unusually hot and arduous.

This is a simple, day-to-day menu; we did better under stress. But it was not so much the daily routine which increased girths and decreased life expectancy, it was the over-



time extras: the Family Reunions, the Old Settlers' Picnics, the Old Baptist—Hardshell and Forty Gallon—Meetings, the Methodist Picnic, Camp Meetings, week-long Revival Meetings, Ice Cream Socials, and Golden Wedding Celebrations. Upon these, a freeloader with a good memory of blood and marriage lines, a fluent line of flattery, and unlimited gall, could subsist all month without spending a cent or losing an ounce.

Before condemning us as barbarous, profligate, extravagant, excessive, gluttonous, murderous, ostentatious, and disgusting, be cognizant of the fact that our table was seldom graced by just the five immediate members of my family. Habitually, from one to thirty extra persons partook of the aforementioned tidbits, and it would have been considered inhospitable indeed to have forced a single one to look in vain for something to tickle a jaded appetite.

For example, many a person might be tired of fried chicken and flour gravy yet be able to make a satisfying meal on fried ham and red sop, plus the rest of the table's load. Again, various elders had trouble with their store teeth and appreciated lots of soft stuff—mashed potatoes, stewed tomatoes, stewed chicken and dumplings, or bowls of chicken noodles in thick broth, instead of the usual diet of fried meats. Murderous our August menus might have been, but I deny categorically the other charges.

As off-beat in our conventional community as a banjo at a funeral, was a well-to-do farmer named Jacob Rogers—more often known as Jakey, or Uncle Jakey—who bought his whisky by the barrel, drank it from a half-gallon tin cup from cockcrow till chicken-roost, and died, hale and hearty, in his upper eighties. During haying, he used to ride about the field where his two strapping daughters worked side by side with their husbands and the hired men, a gallon stone jug with a corncob stopper swinging from his saddle horn. Generously and considerately, he made the rounds offering all and sundry honest bourbon refreshment and, as a gentleman should, taking a drink with each. Nor did he fail to wipe the jug mouth carefully with the heel of his hand before offering it to the next communicant. We shall not see the like of Uncle Jakey again—not even in August.

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## SO WELL REMEMBERED—SEPTEMBER

With few exceptions, September was a month of half-measures during which living creatures jillflirtedly tried everything and completed little. The amazing part of it was that most everything was delightful!

Squirrels stepped up their round-the-calendar dalliance; rabbits skittered foolhardily under the wheels of horse and buggy traffic; a normally conventional spinster ran off with a lightning rod salesman; and a local doctor, notorious for his extracurricular activities, went single standard long enough to perforate, with a nickel-plated .38, the paramour of his long neglected wife, or vice versa, I forget which.

Basic Nature, not to be outdone, laid on a weather program which could only be acceptable in September: ten million tomatoes ripened simultaneously and were picked with sacroiliac, down-in-back aftereffects noticeable long after hog killing time; schools opened in heat annually described as oppressive, unseasonable, or prostrating, according to the whim of the *Banner's* editor, yet the nights were downright chilly, mornings frosty-bright, and afternoons . . . impossibly . . . laaaazy warm; an unexpected rainstorm ruined the class picture of Rose Poly's Engineers and the Happy Hustlers' wiener roast at Buzzards Roost. It was a dry sort of rain, though, and did no one any real harm.

Specifically, the rain did not slow down the consummation of September's one sensible local activity, the production of sorghum molasses. The word *molasses* is pure lagniappe, for no one in Indiana needed it. The term sorghum is self-explanatory according to the season; in August, for example, it means the standing, still-green cane—no one but a miserly plutocrat would still have sorghum molasses in August! For the benefit of the uninformed, however, and because sorghum is not born in its liquid state of dulcitude, a resumé of its life-cycle follows.

Like the wine grape, and unlike maize, sorghum was best when grown on thin soil. Something in the struggle for existence seemed to add flavor and sweetness to the juice. As a corollary, a perfect seedbed was essential and clement weather highly desirable during the plant's early days. Tending a sorghum patch was no lick-and-a-promise matter, either; for if the days were so dry that noxious weeds were

limited to minor infiltrations, then much hoe mulching was considered mandatory to conserve moisture. On the other hand, if excessive rainfall denied one access to the patch too long, then weeds and canes shot up amazingly fast. This was a double-barreled misfortune, for while the weeds could be removed by a lot of work, the too rapid growth of the sorghum itself into luxuriant, coarse canes had a deleterious effect upon the quality and flavor of the molasses.

At just the proper time—which no one has ever been able to learn to estimate except by empirical methods—all blades were stripped from the stalks; similarly, at just the proper time the cane was cut and, for optimum results, transported without delay to the mill and maker for final processing. With rare exceptions, the milling and making were conducted contiguously. In its simplest form—which was the only form I ever knew—a sorghum making layout consisted of the mill, a quadrupedal power plant, various receptacles, a fire pit topped by a shallow, rectangular evaporation pan, and the maestro.

The mill was merely two or three vertical metal rollers, about a foot high, confined within a heavy cast iron cage, the whole bolted to the tops of several posts sunk solidly in the ground. All rollers were geared to turn when power was applied to one, and this operation was accomplished neatly by fastening the larger end of a long, drooping pole to the extended axis of one roller and attaching its smaller end to an equine or asinine prime mover which spiritlessly traced a perimeter with a radius the length of the pole, or approximately so.

Into the mangling device stalks of cane were thrust by hand, transported inexorably forward, squeezed dry, and heedlessly dropped into the bagasse pile below. Simultaneously, by way of a crude but effective chute, juice poured down into an appropriate receptacle. Cane juice looks like something I'd rather not see early in the morning. A fermented beverage called sorghum beer can, it is alleged, be made from sorghum juice and certain added ingredients; the less said of this the better.

When the pan was full of juice, the maestro took charge. A fire of steady-burning wood—hickory, maple, white oak—kept the mass boiling, and as it diminished in volume, the man alternately stirred and skimmed, depositing the nauseous

looking scum in a bucket for some unknown, but probably horrible, purpose of his own.

Eventually, the liquid thickened and gave off a perfume guaranteed to make any sorghum lover look hastily for bread, butter, and a deep plate with knife, fork, and spoon. Auxiliary platters of fried chicken, fried rabbit or squirrel, catfish, or smoked ham are not inappropriate if you insist on variety, but a real sorghum eater does not clutter up his plate with nonessentials; he just pours in a pint of syrup, adds half a pound of butter, beats the mixture to a creamy texture, grabs his bread or biscuit, and wades in. Some of the best sorghum eaters close their eyes, claiming that it tastes better that way; and I think they are probably right.

Aside from its admitted dietary excellence, there are numerous fringe benefits. Sorghum does not spoil easily, which is not the same as saying that it keeps well—not among sorghum addicts, anyway. It makes fine cakes which taste a great deal of sorghum. It makes wonderful taffy, and I have always liked to watch people pull taffy. It is superior for popcorn balls and, in a pinch, is adequate for resticking a steamed-off postage stamp. Its greatest boon to females, though, is its unequaled efficacy as a baby weaner—far superior to paregoric or laudanum—either straight, or on a sugar tit. Everybody knows that.

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—OCTOBER

Of all the months, October was the most nearly perfect. It was the complete, the fulfilled, the last vivid act of the farm boy's annual drama. In October, all things finished their life-cycle, ended or suspended their growth, ripened, acquired flavor, were harvested. And as humans held their celebrations ranging from bonfires, through chicken roasts, sorghum taffy pulls, and play parties, to school exhibits and county fairs, so did Nature bedeck herself in pagan colors, frost-inspired tints, and shimmering mantles of Indian summer haze. In general, she took things serenely, resting in warm contentment from her six months of labor.

October frosts were sharp, the better to mature her products and put to sleep the perennials of forest and garden.

With the change of scenery, new orchestration began; gone were the katydids, crickets, and locusts of late summer, their notes harsh against an undersong of plundering bugs and bees the whole night long. Instead, the violins of Autumn gently sent their farewell to Summer conducted by the night wind and, as days grew shorter, regretfully began the long overture to Winter. Like woodwinds and percussion instruments, blades and husks of corn whistled and sighed while walnuts and hickory nuts thumped the earth at the direction of that same night wind.

Unavoidably, a tinge of melancholy invaded the theme, yet coons whickered contentedly in the timbered bottoms, the hooting of owls was gregarious laughter, a vixen yapped lightheartedly in the pennyroyal hill pastures, and farm dogs indifferently bayed lazy gossip back and forth to complete the predominantly cheerful symphony. Only the far-off trumpets of migrating geese blew an urgent threnody, a last lament for the death of the great Kankakee Marshes, victim of drainage schemes.

Occasionally it rained, turning cornfields into near-morasses of yellow clay or black alluvial soil, depending upon whether the locale was an upland field or a creek bottom patch. In the latter, cockleburs grew tall; and to avoid horrible tangles, we braided our horses' tails tightly and covered them with sleeves from wornout denim jumpers. If a hard freeze came now, the fingers of corn shuckers cracked open and huskers' lotions became a necessity. Our family favorite was equal parts of glycerin, witch hazel, and bay rum, thoroughly shaken before each application. It had a pleasing fragrance and was efficacious. Too young to make a hand, I gleaned the downrow and took a lot of pleasure from the tom-tom thumping of corn ears against wagon sideboards—and still more from the long rides to and from the corncrib.

Just as we harvested fruits, grains, and garden truck, so we annually collected enough nuts for our needs. Black walnuts were everywhere, hickory nuts abounded, and the less popular butternuts were sufficient in quantity. Removal of walnut and butternut hulls was for me a tedious process involving pounding the nuts with a club, whereas father swiftly tramped them out, kicked the hulls aside, and left the nuts for me to spread on our henhouse roof for final drying.

Hickory nut hulls usually removed themselves if let alone or if rolled around a bit. In my opinion, there is no better nut on earth than the hickory nut; its delicate flavor lends itself to the improvement of cakes, candies, and to general eating. I remember so pleasantly long afternoons when, with rain pouring solidly on our barn roof, father paused from his harness mending or tool sharpening long enough to crack a panful of nuts, which we shared companionably, picking and munching like a pair of squirrels, while our stock dog snored softly on a pile of grain sacks under the work bench.

One misty night, father took me on a possum hunt with some neighbors and their sons. Because I know that he had no great interest in the sport, and even less in possum as an article of food, I feel sure that he went in hopes that our course would lead through a fine pawpaw patch in the woods pasture of a neighbor who preferred to keep his pawpaws for home consumption. At any rate, that is what eventually occurred after we had treed and collected two possums, and the devious course of the hunt had completely confused me as to our location.

The patch symmetrically surrounded one of the limestone sinkholes so prevalent in that part of Putnam County, and such pawpaws as remained were delicious. Pawpaws collected, green and hard, as early as August will, after being packed in grass and stored in a warm place, eventually ripen to a delectable yellow pulp, but the flavor is never so fine as that of tree-ripened fruit that falls at its own sweet pleasure. We ate our fill and carried home a hatful for the rest of the family to enjoy next day. Fifty years later I remember it clearly; I remember also that I have never been on another possum hunt.

Rarely, a heavy snowfall changed the entire picture. October snows usually were rollicking affairs of big flakes and short duration, presaging winter pleasures-to-be without any of their attendant bitter cold. An October snow also meant a rabbit hunt—not a serious, all-day affair, but a practical project lasting just long enough to get a couple of bunnies for the table. Almost as good as the rabbits themselves was the joy of tagging along and smelling the fragrance of black powder from father's old, big-eared double gun.

During long evenings redolent of woodsmoke and burning leaves, we ate popcorn, apples, cookies, sorghum taffy,

and drank fresh sweet cider in the kitchen, enjoying the welcome warmth from our black iron, wood-burning range; or, we played noisy games of flinch on the dining room table, by the light of two coal oil lamps. Life seemed so friendly, so safe, so very, very good in October.

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#### SO WELL REMEMBERED—NOVEMBER

While some holidaying and amiable dolessness could be condoned in October, November was all business. . . . Not that it was dour or puritanical, it was merely that playtime was over and there was a mort of work to be done. Even when Indian summer lingered or returned briefly, there was never quite enough time to get everything secure before real winter arrived.

Being a good husbandman, father had little patience with those who waited until supplies were exhausted before replenishing the various stockpiles which represented our maintenance materials: hay, ground feed; wood for heating-stoves and kitchen ranges; fence wire, staples, nails; and medicaments, liniments, and nostrums for livestock ailments.

Daily, then, the team and wagon was busy from morning till night hauling grain to the mill, there to trade a part for the ground feeds needed for swine, cattle, horses, and chickens; or hauling in a haystack to fill the void which several months feeding had created in our hayloft; or hauling cord after cord of seasoned split cookstove wood or heating stove chunks to fill our woodshed to capacity; or using a big sled to haul several loads of fodder from the shocks to pile along the feed lot fence on the south side of the barn where, when the weather was unsuitable for day-long grazing in the woods pasture, cows and horses could get a modicum of exercise and considerable forage out-of-doors and yet be somewhat sheltered from the wind.

And when the bins were full and nothing remained to be hauled, then there was fence to repair, harness to mend, tools to sharpen and store for next season, and just when it appeared that there would soon be nothing more than the

daily chores to demand father's time, our supply of soft soap would be reported as alarmingly low. That was a situation which would never have worried me, for I hated the sight, smell, and taste of the slimy stuff, but my voice wasn't even the equivalent of one crying in the wilderness.

All summer, wood ashes from the cookstove had been regularly deposited in the soap barrel. This was not just a barrel, it was an institution. Set on a slanting, raised platform, the barrel leaned forward rakishly but never tumbled. Over the ashes contained therein, cistern water was poured daily to lixivate the grey mass and drip a red-brown lye into a huge iron kettle. When a gallon or thereabouts of the liquid potassium carbonate had been collected, it was time to make a batch of soap, and soap required fats in large quantities.

Although scraps of fat had been saved in a stone jar for months, there never seemed to be enough, which caused much serious discussion between father and his parents. I am quite sure that all the talk was purely ritualistic with the conclusion foreordained, but it was conducted with solemnity and judicial attitudes appropriate to the grandest of projects. Which in a way it was, for the question was whether or not to kill a hog in November.

Because hog killing belongs to February, I shall treat it here with a light touch, stating only that it was better than anything else that happened in November, but not so good as the major-league butcherin' three months later. We ate fresh pork with gusto but gave large amounts to neighbors with the unstated, but clearly understood, idea that they would reciprocate before many weeks had passed. In reality a corollary, but ostensibly the reason for the November slaughter was to obtain enough additional fat to make an adequate amount of soft soap—reasoning which is not far removed from that in Lamb's delightful dissertation on the oblique approach to roast pig.

Without going into the complete technique of soap making, be it said that the making of our soft soap involved boiling fats and lye in an open iron kettle out-of-doors in a spot between orchard and berry patch flanked by a lilac bush and fairly well sheltered from wind. Which was a good thing, for grandmother invariably picked the worst day of



the week for soap-making. An interesting feature of the process was the test applied to determine when the mess was sufficiently cooked; it was the insertion and hasty withdrawal of a chicken wing feather and inspection of its condition: if only the bare spline remained, without any trace of feather, the soap was done!

Contemplation of the terrific strength of that mixture makes me shudder right now! The wonder is that any texture remained to the clothes exposed to its ravages, or that tender young eyes, ears, and hide were not permanently impaired by careless application of soft-soapy rags. Maybe the threat of washing out a mouth with soap means little today, but it was stern punishment in my childhood.

To many, November symbolizes Thanksgiving and pumpkin pie. Thanksgiving was a minor holiday in our community, and it was not until I learned, a quarter of a century later, the trick of adding freshly ground white pepper to pumpkin pie that it ever became more than an edible oddity to me. November was the month when we went solidly on our winter diet of all items previously harvested, prepared, aged, and deemed now ready for full enjoyment.

From the cellar came such staples as canned beans, beets, peas, and tomatoes; such bin-stored vegetables as celery, potatoes, turnips, parsnips, onions, cabbage, salsify, squash, and pumpkins. And from the smokehouse came smoked meats, pickled beef, headcheese, liverwurst, brined pork, sausage, tenderloin of pork, and beef—all fried and laid down in lard—home-rendered lard, of course. From pantry and cold store room we drew dried fruits, sulphured apples, flour and meal milled from our own grain, wild honey, sorghum, jellies, butters, conserves, jams, and preserves, milk, cream, butter, clabber cheese, sugar and condiments. The cistern was situated in the summer kitchen so when inclement weather made it unpleasant to go outdoors our womenfolks could find the essentials of gracious living under roof and within walls. This arrangement made for a close-knit family life and a *Gemütlichkeit* without equal.

In November occasionally appeared an anomaly in the form of a man who rode to hounds and carried the peculiar name of Chicken Leg Smith. Origin of the name is unknown to me, but I know that it carried a disreputable taint of some

sort. He wore no scarlet coat nor, in my opinion, were his hounds of royal lineage; but he rode, and he had hounds. His appearance filled me and my little stock dog with fear which manifested itself by our scampering quickly to the security of the latticed porch, where from behind the shelter of a sere clematis vine, we watched his progress across grandfather's lower pasture. To the best of my knowledge, that ended the matter for my dog, but it was otherwise for me. I had recurring nightmares wherein I fled in terror across eery fields with the somber figures of Chicken Leg and his slaving hounds gaining ominously.

Perhaps he was only a lonely romantic, an anachronism sublimating his yearning for the Good Old Days, and he might have lived harmlessly for many a year to become a brag piece for the next generation had he been able to manage his domestic affairs as well as he managed his hounds. Regrettable to tell, however, his wife became enamored of a local cattle buyer, with tragic results. For while buggy riding on a quiet back road, the erring pair were confronted by a suspicious husband, and in a blaze of shotgun and revolver fire, Chicken Leg became deceased. I do not know what happened to the relict, but the cattle buyer continued to buy cattle for years thereafter. There may be a moral here somewhere; most likely it is just that November has no time for frivolity.

Through the soft lens of time, November appears to have been an honest month, neither too sedate nor too giddy. It had humor where humor was needed, and smiles for those about us; and if it lacked the poignant ecstasy of May or the reminiscent color of October, it made ample amends by sparing us December's bitterness and the chigger-tormented heat of July. It had its high moments, too. Once as I was returning home after sundown across a sodden field of tangled, bleached-out corn stalks, a strange bird flapped wearily up and departed with an unfamiliar, bumbling flight, a black silhouette against the dull afterglow, leaving me with a confused memory of a weird round head, preposterously staring eyes, and improbable, long, straight beak. It was the only woodcock I ever saw in Indiana.

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## SO WELL REMEMBERED—DECEMBER

If November was not dour and puritanical, December was both. And lowering, harsh, arbitrary, morose, brutal, vindictive, and pitiless, too. Maybe I didn't know all these words, but I knew their composite connotation on the calendar. Even though December gave us Christmas and its holidays, it gave them grudgingly.

With icy blasts and unrelenting ferocity, it froze the combs from chickens in their house, killed whole coveys of roosting quail, and sealed the drinking places of both wild and domestic animals. Or, with sub-zero blizzards and iron-hard frosts, it made bitter business with man and dumb brutes alike, till laughter ceased and friends plodded silently past each other on drift-choked county roads, too cold to give a cheerful greeting.

It was on one of those cheerless days that I shot Aunt Mary. Aside from the fact that it gave me a base point from which to reckon time, I recall nothing else of value or pleasure derived from the event. On the contrary, it left me with a profound sense of disillusionment concerning the reliability of oral contracts and the ability of female women to listen to reason. It happened thus:

From the kitchen window, I observed Aunt Mary, warmly clad, watching my uncle preparing a horse and buggy for her use. Perhaps she was going somewhere, I am not sure; I am sure that she did not go anywhere in the buggy that day. Bored with indoor confinement, I picked up my air rifle and stepped out on the porch. The wind was painful. I called something important to Aunt Mary who heeded me not. I called louder without getting a response. Finally, I yelled that if she did not answer me I would take a shot at her. To which—and of this I am positive—she snapped impatiently, "Go ahead and shoot."

I shot. Shot just as Aunt Mary leaned forward in such a manner as to draw her heavy skirt and coat tight across that portion of her anatomy nearest me. The results were stupendous.

Aunt Mary was not considered to be particularly athletic; she was more the indoor type. Still, she jumped straight up

higher than the average college athlete could, and this feat was accomplished from an awkward position, static and unprepared. She also yelled and moved swiftly toward me. Indoors, my disillusionment began to form and rapidly crystallized. None of the jury, which included my usually just Grandmother King, even listened to my logical defense that I had permission to shoot. It would have been folly, even madness at that moment, to have added that considering the range and a strong cross wind I had made a remarkable shot.

There were compensations for the tribulations of December, of course. Partly from need, but more from rebellion against December's tyranny, we grew closer one to another within our clan. There were fewer visitors and more family talk. An item in the Greencastle *Weekly Banner* might provide material for days of discussion. Even my own activities sometimes received undivided attention—when, in a spontaneous burst of enthusiasm, I visited grandfather's rabbit trap and, unaided, tried to bring its prisoner back alive. The favor was somewhat less than welcome due to my error in clumsily allowing the rabbit to escape. Grandfather, forcefully but ungrammatically, told my father that I was "not to touch no rabbits in no traps at no time." Such a pronouncement would leave me entangled in a web of syntax now, but it was depressingly clear at the time.

Not even December could spoil Christmas. Nor keep hordes of relatives from spending it with us. For me, it was wonderful, but in retrospect I think that my mother could have done with less. Unlike most of my friends, I had two living, healthy sets of grandparents as well as uncles, aunts, and cousins innumerable. Furthermore, the two basic families lived close enough that an hour's drive with horse and buggy sufficed to transfer me from one pleasant milieu to the other. With a quilt under us, two or three hot bricks beneath our feet—feet double shod in arctic overshoes—lap robes and comforters muffling our overcoated forms, the trip was crowded but not too uncomfortable. Intriguing to me were the frost whiskers which formed on our horse's muzzle and, to a lesser degree, on mother's fur piece where her warm breath touched it. About the time the bricks ceased to be a comfort, we arrived.

There was always a tree, and always it was cedar whose pungence increased in the heat of the house to an ecstatic odor almost overpowering when we entered from the gelid outdoors. Almost overpowering, too, was the array of gaily wrapped packages tied to and spread beneath the star-topped, tinsel-and-ornament-bedecked tree. Within the wrapping there was apt to be something only mildly interesting, but the mystery compensated somewhat for the anticlimax. *So geht's im Leben.*

Soon came the proverbial Christmas Dinner, supposed to astound all eyes by its plenitude and richness. With one exception, though, I do not recall that Christmas provender was any better than our usual Sunday dinner—like the old sourdough who after a lucky strike in the Klondike ordered a thousand dollars worth of pork and beans with the irrefutable explanation, "You can get more but you can't get anything better," I was used to the best. The exception was candy.

Candy was bought in amazing quantities; we also made it, but homemade candy did not provide the same kind of thrill as that I got when gazing popeyed at a dozen boughten varieties displayed in bowls, baskets, tins, boxes, plates, and sacks all over the house, with never a prohibition against gorging myself sick by gluttony. Such things were expected and viewed leniently at Christmas time. As others might fritter away unjustifiable sums for fireworks or children's toys, so my family spent freely for sweets. Perhaps our Boone ancestors had yearned mightily for a lump of brown sugar or a dollop of long sweetening to ease their wilderness privations, and perhaps the craving passed down to us.

Being peculiar at an early age, I was never disappointed by my Christmas presents. The majority of them were either handkerchiefs or books, and I just happened to like both. Being chronically afflicted with a cold in my head, I stuffily used bales of handkerchiefs with one hand while clinging happily to a book with the other.

Certain relatives with more imagination, or more discernment, gave me presents of distinction, such as toy dogs, clowns, whistles, watches, knives, whips, and huge marbles with candy stripes, improbable white lions, or cathedrals

blown in the glass! From this array, mother unobtrusively withdrew from circulation a few toys at a time and produced them dramatically when time hung heavy and I was a burden to those about me. Specialists in child psychology might profitably note that I found my second encounter with these toys just as new and exciting as the first.

Surprisingly, though, my most vivid December memory is not of Christmas, nor yet of the heartless weather, but of the evening star, ineffably beautiful above leafless branches limned black against a sullen afterglow.

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