

# The Robert E. Gard

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# READER

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To Change the Face of America  
*From writings by Robert E. Gard*

Part 3: Robert E. Gard, Storyteller

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# PART III

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ROBERT E. GARD

Storyteller

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*Man's deepest experience of life is essentially solitary; at the same time he desires to communicate to others his moments of intense feeling, his present experience, the rich memories of the past. In the recreating and the sharing of these feelings, experiences and memories the Wisconsin Rural Writers' Association has its being and its meaning. Let us believe in each other, remembering each has tasted bitter with sweet, sorrow with gladness, toil with rest. Let us believe in ourselves and our talents. Let us believe in the worth of the individual and seek to understand him, for from sympathy and understanding will our writings grow.*

*Let us believe that the mark of the cultured man is the ability to express himself competently in language; that this ability can be gained best through study and application of the basic principles of creative writing; that with this study and application grow enlightenment and discrimination; and that the democratic process of government is safest in the hands of a cultured, enlightened people.*

*Let our purpose be to encourage: literary expression; appreciation for the fine arts; cultural aspects of rural Wisconsin life; preservation of the local history and folklore of the passing era; enrichment of our lives through self-education and worthy discussion.*

Creed of the Wisconsin Rural Writers Association 1950

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## NOTES FOR WRITERS WHO ARE DESPERATELY MOVED TO WRITE

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I have used the word *desperately* for that is exactly what most creative writers face when they begin to think about having some kind of career in writing. To any prideful and sincere writer, having just any kind of career isn't enough of a reason. As the French say, *raison d'être* is a deep motivating drive, underlying the whole purpose of a life, a line of action, or a cherished goal. Why? What drives me to do this? Why do I feel so desperate when I consider what I must do? To most really motivated writers, the desperation comes from an inner knowledge that they must do this or die. Nothing else will do. They have to write, and faced with this necessity, they look this way or that for the way to go. What to do? How to hurl themselves into the mêlée? How to make money from their efforts, say what you will about just doing it for the fun. Almost any writer I know has varying degrees of success goals: either he wants to make a living from his writing (or at least to have a following of persons who read and appreciate what he has written), or he wants to achieve some other goals of research or science that may add something to the world's knowledge.

For the writer, society has set up a whole maze of problems. First, introspectively, what does he want most to tell, to interpret? What things in his life are most interesting to him, and which he knows better than anyone else, and therefore can do a better job of writing about them? This he has to come to grips with first, for this is where most writers start. Sometimes a writer will find that he does not really know himself at all. Writers who have limited goals, who simply want to write topical or commercially saleable material for trade publications or newspapers, for example, may see little need for intensive introspection. Still, even those with limited goals will probably discover that in order to judge story possibilities, or to test the worth of ideas and subjects, and even to interpret the necessary research, they must have some basis of

background and experience and knowledge against which they may test the credibility of their material.

And if serious writers face the problem of introspection and where they are, they ought to face it in terms of family, who they are, where they have been, what they believe, and how they attained such beliefs.

For these who have not worried about these things before, and there are some who have not, the facing of personal history and its interpretation is overwhelming. First of all, asking themselves “Who am I?” — “How did I get to this place?” — some still find that they simply do not know who they are, even who their grandparents were, the names of close relatives. They might not even know how their fathers and mothers met, where they met, why they came to



*The frontier gave us images of our strengths...*

this particular place to live, and often there ensues doubt, dismay, and some will conclude that before they can seriously get down to the writing goals they would like to attain, they must first determine, if they can, what the goals and purposes of their parents were. Maybe this doesn't seem so important, to discover family purposes and history, but there is something mixed into all of this that is very important to a writer before he can begin to interpret and describe and make stories about what he has seen, and the dramatic episodes that he can imagine. There is in this an element of pride that can only come from a sense of family, of whys and wheres that may be obscure, and a freedom of looking.

Over many years I have slowly built up a philosophy of writing that depends on my awareness of my own background and of my own sensitivities toward people I have known, whose characters I have been able to deepen,

and of my own ability to find the many angles that underlie dramatic action. I have realized how knowledge of family background has become very important to me. The whole idea of roots, which has taken such a hold on many writers within the last quarter century, lies there in anyone's life waiting to be studied and to be included in the way people are regarded. It reveals how they got to the places where they are and what motivated them to change the land and to leave a transformational mark on land and neighbors. It is not ancestor worship exactly, but it may somewhat approach a deep regard for ancestors. Ancestors people every writer's work, and their shadows fall upon the fictional figures the writer creates. For who indeed can tell completely about his own motivations without knowing whether they differ from motivations of family members who went before him?

Most of us as writers and as human beings have deep respect, though so often unspoken, for our parents and our grandparents, and for the tales they may have told us about how they came, how they worked, what they did and the adventures they had along the way. Somehow they stir a pride in us, and within the stories they have told us lie the germs of stories we may tell, or retell ourselves.

Upon the American land lie the possibilities of search and of seeking. Within our American past lie the shadows of goals we sought and sacrifices we made to attain them. The western movement of people across the breadth of America was not a crusade, motivated by a quest for a Holy Grail perhaps, but within the western movement and the identification of a frontier lay a vast element of our strength as a people.

The frontier gave us images of our strengths and lay behind the struggles of some of our greatest writers to express images and struggles of frontier life. I believe it was the quest for a home place, an identifiable homeland that led to the adventurous questing of our pioneers. They were dissatisfied with what they had in the places where they were, and the tales they heard urged them to set forth seeking a new home where they could better express the urges for new soil, new crops, a new kind of place to raise families, and more than anything, a testing of their strength against the strength of plain and wind and unbroken sod. They had within their vision the thought of schools and churches and towns upon the prairie and perhaps places where new cities would grow too, and within such dreams was there not room for the writer? And also the visionary, the interpreter who saw all the vast urges and the processions and inscribed it? Who identified the struggle that existed in America among classes, and races. Who made drama out of the underlying currents that drove Americans across the land and inspired Europeans to sail from the old country in small vessels, to lie imprisoned below stinking decks for days and days, to suffer illness and much death in the fetid steerage cabins, and to be finally cast upon American shores so long hoped for and so long denied, there to struggle against what seemed insurmountable

odds, until little by little, they inched their way across a continent, searching for the homeland so long promised and so long denied.

It is certainly the stuff of great literature and now, perhaps, rather often forgotten as the vast underlying struggle of the undercurrent of American literature. Let us try now to see and understand and to write, and write, and write.

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## **BARN**

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

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Barns are for boys on rainy days,  
And for men on Sunday afternoons.

Barns are for insects, and farm women  
With egg baskets.  
An old barn board  
Is a memory-sliver of wind and time.

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## THE FLOOD

FROM *The Big One*

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On the evening of the second day of the big rain Tip followed the cows through the squishy pasture. He'd been working indoors on odd jobs all the day, and now he was restless, full of thoughts about Jan, full of worry about the rising river. His mother met him at the barn and together they fastened the wet cows and fed them. "The radio said," Gladys told him, "that a big crest of water's expected on the Neosho tonight. They've even had bigger rains than we up on the Cottonwood. They're afraid the banks north of town won't hold."

"I expect not," Tip said. "Dad wanted 'em to redig that levee years ago. Every floodtime it breaks through."

"I remember how your father urged," Gladys said.

They continued with their chores in silence, listening nervously to the splash of the rain, and when they were finished, Tip said, "I'm going to town."

"All right. Do what you can to help. But be careful."

"I will."

She watched him get out the Chevy, and waved to him as he spun the wheels on the slippery drive. He intended to go first to the library to see Jan, but when he reached town he saw a stream of people moving toward the river bridge, and he parked the pickup and moved along, too.

He came up to the bridge and immediately saw Solomon and Luke Jones standing against the bridge wall watching the water.

"Howdy, kid," Sol said. "Ain't the ol' Neosho a sight? Won't be no fishin' for a spell now, I reckon."

"I bet that ol' turtle's washed down to the Gulf of Mex now," Luke said.

"Do fish wash on down in a flood?" Tip asked, thinking of the Big One and wondering whether the flood would carry him away, too.

"Who knows?" Sol said. "Some say one thing, some another. Anyway, me and Luke saved our boat yesterday. But I reckon our shack's under water by now."

“Been there before,” Luke said. “Ain’t that river a sight?”

The water, they could see, was pretty well up to the tops of the bridge girders. They stood at the wall in the half-dark, looking down at the water and watching it suck down under the arches.

Driftwood, hunks of timber, and barns and trees bumped against the bridge, and now and then a log or piece of building would be sucked under.

The whole bridge was vibrating. Over against the railing, across from where they stood, a small group of people had stopped to watch something in the water. Tip and the Jones boys walked over and saw a white chicken sitting on top of a small outhouse. The house was bobbing and whirling around and the chicken was shifting and balancing with the movements of the building. The chicken was wet and exhausted. The house spun for a short time, then the suction began to take it. It turned over on its side and the chicken gave a little jump off the shingled roof. The chicken got onto the side of the house just as the end of the house began to go under the bridge. The sucking pulled it down, and first, as it went, slowly, the chicken climbed to the higher part. The house went faster and faster, and the white chicken dug its toes desperately against the side. Then there was nothing at all for it to hold on to. The edge of the house went under, and the chicken clung to it until the water covered its feet and legs. Then it spread its wet wings and opened its bill. It lay on the water a second before the sucking took it down.

Tip turned away, feeling sick. They followed a group of men over to the west end of the bridge where there were several big trucks lined up. It was getting quite dark now. For the moment the rain had stopped. Big mosquitoes began whizzing around. Tip and the Joneses joined the men standing beside the trucks.

“What’s goin’ on?” Sol asked somebody.

“Don’t know. Repair work, I reckon.”

After a while a lantern was lit and set on the platform of one of the trucks. The county engineer, a fleshy, red-faced man, got up on the platform and made a speech. He said that the dikes along the west side of the river above Dunbar were weakening from the smash of the waters and that the dikes would have to be strengthened or the water would probably smash through the whole west side of town. He said that he would like as many workers as could crowd on the trucks. Most all the men climbed immediately onto the truck platforms then and everybody was all jammed in pretty close.

The truck motors started, and the vehicles bumped off. They went along the edge of the river for a way where the banks were high, then cut off across the outskirts of Dunbar where the banks were lower and some dikes had been scraped up. Tip and his friends were pushed together at the back of one of the trucks.

“Ain’t a flood a terrible thing?” Sol said.

“Yeah,” said Luke.

“But it ain’t as bad as a drought. I seen this country when there weren’t enough water to grow a blade of goose grass.”

“A flood is worse,” a man backed up to them said.

“It ain’t neither,” Solomon said.

“Every time,” the man said. He was a little fellow with a sour, thin face.

“I seen this country,” Sol said, “so dry that when a guy faints, you got to throw a bucket of dust on him to bring him to.”

“I still say a flood is the worst thing.”

“You want to make somethin’ out of it?” Old Sol yelled.

“I don’t wanna fight,” the little man said.

“Then shut up. A drought is worst than a flood.”

“A twister is the worse thing I ever saw,” Luke said.

“A twister is bad, all right,” Sol said.

“It ain’t as bad as a flood,” the little man said.

“Like blazes it ain’t!” Sol said.

“A flood’ll tear up all the way down a watercourse,” the little man said, “and way beyond the course of that river, too, the cricks’ll be raisin’ cain and beyond the cricks the sloughs’ll be rippin’ up, and beyond the sloughs there’ll be the ditches cutting through all the fields in a time of bad rain. A flood’ll tear the belly out of a whole country. A twister, now, ain’t so bad.”

“A twister is terrible,” Sol said, “but it ain’t as bad as them little dust whirlwinds that’ll come acrost a field, one right after another, seems like, sweeping the ground till it’s slick enough and hard enough to be the floor of a Kansas City dance hall. It’s them little winds that’re the bad ones.”

“A flood is the worst thing,” the little man said, closing the argument.

They were all quiet for a while. The trucks bumped and churned on gravel and spun in mud. The hot motors sent gases through the floor boards. The men clung to one another and coughed and cursed. They swung up to the dikes across a chunky gravel stretch, piled off the trucks, and went to the river.

There was just a little light left in the clouded skies. The men could see the waters dimly and hear the veiled chum of the Neosho. The seeping edges of the river were at their feet along the dikes, and already wetness was spreading through in a few places.

Above, there was lightning in the skies, and the booming of the thunder rolls seemed to come faintly down the valley and to increase in volume as they rolled near. The thick grasses and reeds at the river’s edge clung against Tip’s clothes, and he thought, never realizing that his thoughts were like the words his father used when he spoke about the Kansas land: The grasses know the violent things that come from the sky. The grasses make frantic movements against their tethering roots in a twisting wind. They have seen splintered cottonwoods

and white human faces lifted to skies opened by strange lightning. And the grasses have felt the pour of rain that has mashed them against the earth and made the river speak louder and louder against the bluff. The grasses have submitted summer fibers to great stones of hail and have known, again and again, the blizzard winds and the thin, fine snow. The grasses have seen how men fear the skies and how they have put their strength against the skies in a contest that goes on forever. The eyes of the men and women of the middle of America know the sky intimately, as they know the earth, and the grasses know why there is such violence from the skies and in men. But men almost never know.

The thunder, at last, seemed to roll on top of the great flood like vast wheels set loose on the rock floor of a mighty cave. The men gave back from the edge of the flood for a moment until somebody lighted some lanterns and set them on the platforms of the trucks.

The county engineer jumped up on one of the trucks.

“Spread out along the levee, men. We’re going to sandbag her. The sand trucks’ll stand about here, and we’ll sandbag down-river about three hundred yards. This here is the weak spot where the river curves in.”

The engineer said for them to space out along the dike in a line so that they were close together, and so that they could easily pass the bags as they came down the line. Tip and the Joneses spread down-river. They kept moving until they got to the end of the line. The Jones boys were like that. They’d go just as far as anybody could go. And Tip felt the same way. Against the light from the lanterns standing on the trucks they could very faintly see the beginning of the line of men.

At the end of the line it was very lonely. Tip had never felt so close to nature, to the wild force of it. Luke was on one side of him and Sol was the last of the line, on the other side. A smell arose from the flood: of earth in churned solution, of boiling sand.

In a little while the bags of sand started coming. Up at the head of the line the shovelers filled bags as fast as a whole line of men could carry them. There were a lot of volunteers filling bags, and other fellows were wiring the tops. Then the bags were passed down the line. They came in a heaving, grunting stream, and slowly the dike’s top had a line of sandbags, then a second row behind that one.

The men worked for a long time, and along about eleven o’clock a rumor floated down the line. Sol whispered to Tip that the crest was expected about midnight.

“What you whispering for?” Tip said.

“Blast if I know,” Sol said.

“What’ll happen if this here dike busts?” Luke asked.

“I reckon we swim home,” Sol said.

They kept on working. The sandbags seemed to come faster and faster. The trucks were hauling sand as rapidly as they could make the trips to town. Every so often somebody would take a lantern and examine the water level. It was coming up all the time, and about a quarter to twelve there was a big, sudden rise. One minute the water was safely below the sandbags, then it was up with a rush around the lower bags and coming across in the lower places.

Men up the line began to shout, and Tip felt water squish under his feet. The bags seemed to come faster, and the rows at their end were growing. The lightning flashed every once in a while, and the bodies up the line were in an instant, fevered motion, then the darkness after the flash was blacker, and there was only a sense of grasping arms and heaving bodies.

The yelling increased at the head end of the line, and the cry began to spread, "Everybody out!" "Everybody out!" Some of the men near Tip began to fall back from the dike and move toward the head of the line.

"Shall we go?" Tip asked.

"Better," Solomon said.

"I'm gone," Luke said.

They stepped backward off the levee into the rapidly filtering water that was already beginning to swirl and have a current pull to it. It was well over the tops of their shoes. The men ahead of them suddenly began to run and as they started to run, a sort of panic seemed to take hold. To Tip there seemed a quick, fearsome terror in the night now and in the terrible force of the river. His weariness was suddenly gone. In his imagination flood fingers were breaking through here and there, all over, to cut him off, to catch him, to drown him. The water of his friend, the quiet river, had become a living monster, a real thing with sucking arms. He thought of the white chicken. He thought of himself alone in the middle of the flood with his arms spread out and his mouth open. He thought of Jan in the quicksand.

He began to run, too. It was hard going in the water with the rough ground under it. He lost track of Sol and Luke, but a man ahead fell down and Tip stumbled over him. The man grabbed Tip by the ankle and they struggled. A couple of other runners hit them and they all lay in the rising water and thrashed around. They all got up, finally, and ran some more.

The trucks had their motors going and men piled on. Tip couldn't find Sol and Luke. Everybody was yelling. The group Tip was with tried to pile onto one truck that was already full. The men in the truck shoved them down. They tried other trucks and were finally assimilated. The water was around the wheels when the trucks churned finally back toward Dunbar.

On the way they passed some small houses and a resident of one came running out. It was an elderly man who ran alongside the truck and shouted. He wanted to know if they had stopped the water and if it was all right to leave his

family in the house. The cries and the motions of the men on the trucks, visible from the lights behind, told him clearly that the water had broken through. The householder stood a second, then he whirled and ran. Tip could just see him leap up his front steps as the dark cut him out.

The trucks came to the bridge, and there was a bunch of people near it—a silent and sad group. A few of the folk carried household goods. Some of the women had kids in their arms. Tip got off the truck and walked across the bridge and could feel the jar of the heavy pieces of drift striking it. He stood a moment at the far end of the bridge, and pretty soon Sol and Luke came along.

“We figured you was drowned” Sol said.

“He won’t drown if he can swim like he can run,” Luke said.

“And I reckon I know how he can swim,” Sol said.

“I was pretty scared out there,” Tip said.

“Me, too,” Sol said. “And I been on this ol’ river all my life. Maybe,” he said slowly, “a flood *is* worse than a drought at that.”

They stood at the bridge for a little while and watched the people. They were coming across slowly and when they got across they almost always turned and looked back across the river. Sol lighted his pipe.

The three were bedraggled, covered with mud. They had lost the game to the river, for the water was already in the north part of town, and there was nothing much anybody could do. The houses in the low places would be full of water in the morning and there would be a time of waiting for the water to go down. People would stream back across the bridge then, and poke around in the mud on the floors of their houses, or look at their ruined gardens and lawns and fields. The thought of it made Tip sick. He said, “I’m going home.”

“Me an’ Luke, too, after a while,” Sol said. “We’re beddin’ down in the courthouse.” But Tip knew that the Joneses would stay around the bridge all night, listening to the river.

He got the truck, and drove by the library. It was very dark, very lonely, and again he had the thought of the library swallowing Jan; and the thought persisted as he drove home.

But there was another disturbing idea, too. The doubt lay hard in him that he would ever in all his life hook the Big One. The flood seemed to be sweeping the likelihood of it further and further away.

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## HARRY'S TRUCK

FROM *The Only Place We Live*

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We get into Henry's truck and head off across the field where we will leave the truck and go afoot into the woods. I never tell Henry what it is I love best about nights in the woods. I guess my feeling for going out really is the chance it gives me to remember: things and stories come back in the night-woods. I feel, see, touch the faces of people long gone, my mother, how she nursed me when I was sick, sitting there beside the bed in the low chair, singing something old and the night coming up around the Franklin house. All of the past things do come back in the night-woods. But maybe Henry don't feel things as deep as me.

It's a funny thing: when I am out in the woods at night with a good friend and neighbor like Henry Jackson, it is as if the whole world is mine. I can believe anything I want to, be anyplace, or remember just about anything that happened. And I love to do this. I'm not a great one for daydreaming or dallying during the day, but if there is a small moon over the woods at night, and night sounds all around, something inside of me takes over. I'm me but I'm not me, I am like everybody I ever knew and they are right there beside me. People are mortal, but still they're not in a way, or not in the way they think they are mortal. When I die I would like to recall all the beautiful things I have seen all my life. That's some kind of immortality; that's the way I figure that folks are in their imaginations. That's why people are immortal, to be able to see and feel all in one moment everything they are, or what the land is, or has been.

We live in a land of small sloughs and marshes in the flatlands back away from the rivers; places of small water, and mud banks and reeds. There are large frogs that rest in against the banks.

Henry and I follow the river's edge to the place where the limestone bluff rises. There is a trail we know well. The trail follows the bluff, then rises



*... but if there is a  
small moon over  
the woods at  
night, and night  
sounds all around,  
something inside  
of me takes over.*

through a crevice, and follows the shoulder up higher and higher, until at the top the trail emerges high above the valley. It's from up here that we can see the far, far shape of the hills and the moon rising. If it were day we could see the bridge across the river.

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## THE HUNT

FROM *Wild Goose Country*

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The man's name was Perry Caldwell. Joe Malone was his friend, and Joe heard the story from him. Caldwell had, all his life, been fascinated by accounts of hunting adventures, and when he was a boy, had read anything he could find in the local library, or in adventures in paperbacks, about the pursuit of game. There was something in his nature, he often believed, that drove him to an appreciation of the wilderness, the hunt, the successful chase. He would like to have been born in a generation when young men went west to adventure and to hunt. A lot of his time as a lad had gone to the making of instruments of projection: slingshots made of a V fork and a handle, cut from the smaller branches of a tree, slung with rubber bands from an inner tube, and containing a leather sling cut from old shoe leather. Or he made many kinds of spears, of straight reeds growing in the lower end of the pasture, or of bamboo, old fishing poles, or carpet poles. These he learned to fling with power and accuracy. He created bows of hedge wood, and of hickory, and collected straight branches of willow or dogwood, or sometimes his folks bought him slender dowels for arrows. He had never seriously tried to kill anything with one of these weapons, though he had many times discharged the slingshot and arrows in the general direction of birds or cattle, pretending that they were elk or buffalo. Once when he was about eleven, he had made a short hunting bow, about like the ones he had read the Indians used to hunt buffalo on horseback. And he'd ridden bareback, on one of the farm work horses, to discharge homemade arrows at old Peggy, a brindle milk cow.

He wasn't bloodthirsty, exactly, it was just that he loved the idea of hunting. Like most farm boys, he acquired a small rifle when he was about twelve, and a shotgun when he was fourteen. He hunted rabbits, and many times shot quail out of coveys at the corners of Osage Orange hedgerow. His hunting adventures weren't especially thrilling, or even very interesting. The game he shot was

faithfully cleaned and eaten. His folks insisted on that. But the long Saturday rambles in the woods and fields with a few companions, and a lunch to cook over a campfire, set permanently in motion his urge to be in the woods, in nature, and to carry along a gun in case there might be something to shoot.

In the country where he was raised, there were no wild ducks or any wild geese. Once in awhile the geese flew over his part of the country in their migration cycle, but he never got to shoot a duck or a goose.

When he went to college, he had little time to hunt, and he left his guns at home. He worked very hard to get an education and became an excellent student. After college, where he majored in business, he went to a job in a Wisconsin city not very far from the Horicon Marsh. He became a minor executive in a large manufacturing business, and as time went on, he became more and more able to go and come when he wished and to have time for recreation. He grew familiar with the countryside, took hikes with business companions, or with his wife. He became fascinated with the wild geese which gathered in the fall



*He wasn't bloodthirsty, exactly, it was just that he loved the idea of hunting...*

and spring at the Horicon Marsh, and in October and November, spent several Saturdays watching the birds, studying them through binoculars and making notes about their habits, their patterns of flight; and he sketched them a little, for he had taken up drawing and painting as hobbies. His sketches were rather good, though he confessed to everybody that he was just a silly amateur. He painted several pictures of the marsh settings—with reeds, water, clouds, and wild birds in flight. He loved the way geese came down onto the water and was quite successful in catching them in dramatic attitudes. He actually sold several of his paintings for very modest sums and gave others away to admiring acquaintances. He loved the way the birds wheeled, how they seemed to change the angle of their wings as they came in, how they kept their eyes always on the water, or the earth as they descended to landings. He grew to love the birds, and when he thought about his attempts at art, he considered himself a painter of wildlife. He joined several ecology organizations, and groups banded together to improve and preserve the environment. He was one of the most enthusiastic members of the local Audubon Society in his city.

The wild geese had never stirred him as a hunter until one evening, when he was at the marsh with Dick Pine, a business associate.

Dick had said, "Every time I come here I want to shoot at them."

"Do you really?" Caldwell asked. "Could you train a shotgun on 'em and keep your conscience?"

"Sure. Somebody's got to hunt. They'll all die of overpopulation."

"Honest?"

"Absolutely. Ask any scientist."

"I'd rather just study them, paint them."

"Well, you should learn to do both, hunt and paint. Most wildlife artists have been hunters, too, you know."

"Have they really?"

"Of course."

Caldwell wasn't sure this was all that true, but he accepted it. The next time he came to the marsh, the geese looked slightly different to him. He wondered how the old Indians who had once inhabited the marsh would have regarded the birds. Maybe in their time they appreciated them too, but he imagined that the Indians had chiefly thought of the birds as a source of food. He could picture the Indian hunters slipping up on a flock, concealing themselves, disguising themselves with clumps of grass or branches, finally rising, flinging off the camouflage and drawing bows to their fullest, letting the arrows go into the startled, honking birds.

The idea of the bow and arrow and the wild geese fascinated Caldwell. He remembered the thrill of making bows and arrows in his youth, and how he had cherished the notion of someday owning a real hunting bow.

He told Dick about his boyhood hunting urges one day at lunch, and Dick said, "Well, you know very well you can buy any kind of a bow you want. Maybe you'd get a kick out of bow hunting. You ought to satisfy these boyhood desires—you'd be missing something if you didn't get a bow and do a little hunting."

The idea kept moving around in Caldwell's brain, and one day he did stop in at a sporting goods store. He looked at the bows they had there, talked with the clerk about the best kind to purchase, and the best arrows to choose. The clerk asked him whether he was interested in deer hunting, and Caldwell replied that he wasn't sure what, if anything, he was going to hunt, but he'd been interested in bows since he was a kid. The clerk sold him a hunting bow and about twenty arrows, several with cutting steel tips, and few with less dangerous target points. He loved the feel of the bow and the sleek, straight arrows, recalling how he had struggled to get straight wood and to fasten chicken feathers to the shaft of homemade arrows. These store ones were quite a different matter; when he got home, he went out into the large side yard, put up a target, and began to practice.

The bow was unbelievably strong. The arrows sped swiftly and surprisingly true. He grew more and more interested and tried to get his wife to try, but the bow was too strong for her to pull, and she gave up after a try or two.

He did not give up, and over the next month bought other equipment and more arrows.

"Well, when are you going to try it on something?" Dick asked.

"I doubt that I'll ever shoot arrows at anything living."

"What'll you bet you don't?"

"I don't know why I should."

"Because you can't be a successful artist if you never hunt birds and animals. You can't catch the true wild spirit of game birds without hunting them. It's something in the blood that gets into the hands and the way you interpret."

"I think that sounds like hooey."

"It's not. Believe me. If you hunted, your art would get better."

Caldwell talked about Dick's theory with his wife. She said it sounded like a bunch of nonsense to her, but Caldwell wasn't sure. He recalled the thrill of hunting rabbits, squirrels, even crows, and he wondered if he could recapture the boyhood thrills if he hunted now. His wife said no, he couldn't. That was water over the dam, and he was a fool to try to ever recapture boyhood pleasures. He wasn't a boy any longer. She thought there might be a lot of older fellows trying to recapture and relive youthful pleasures; she didn't think it could be done.

Now when Caldwell went to the marsh on a Saturday, he looked at the geese in a different way. He hadn't told anyone, but he'd entered the goose hunter lottery, and the state had awarded him a permit and a tag. The law said he was entitled to kill one goose, and in his own mind, Caldwell had decided

to kill a goose with an arrow. He had heard of it being done, but not so many bow hunters had done it. The old Indians had done it plenty of times. How else could they ever obtain the bird. But did they shoot geese on the wing, as the law said you had to? He didn't know, but he supposed the old Indians were so good with bow and arrow that they could easily hit a flying goose. As an experiment, he wanted to try, partly because it would be quite a thrill to draw an arrow at a goose in flight, and partly because he thought he might use the experience as the basis for some kind of a painting. Some hunter, who was fond of the bow, might pay a lot of money if he could just capture the pose, the feeling of the flight, the attitude of the bird, and catch something of the wild thrill that was in the mind of the hunter.

He scouted around the marsh area, waiting for the opening of the goose season and wondering where the best place to hunt might be. He knew you just couldn't hunt anywhere. The marsh area was a closed zone. Even bow hunters had to follow the same rules as the gun hunters. He knew that he had to hunt in a goose blind. He went finally to a large farm where goose blinds were advertised. He found the manager in the barn, and the man invited Caldwell to have a beer.

"Sure," the manager said, "we do get some bow hunters here once in a while. They have a great time. They all say the same thing: that the only real thrill in goose hunting is with bow and arrow. One guy last season got his goose on the second shot, and his wife got hers late the same day. They were really happy. They said it was the greatest thing that had ever happened to them. Both of them said that. And do you know, they said it made their marriage seem more satisfying."

"I can't see how that could be caused by shooting a goose," Caldwell said.

"Well, that's what they said. Both of 'em. Said they talked it over in the blind."

Caldwell felt a little foolish, hearing stuff like that, and it didn't interest him. It seemed very juvenile somehow, but he couldn't get out of his head the idea that if he could see a goose flying above him and could draw an arrow on it, that something like an insight into art might happen—just something between him and the goose, a sense of the universal that he might transfer into a painting. And there was something else, he admitted. A feeling that the slaying of a goose, high up in the air by an arrow loosened by himself, might be self-fulfilling. He thought that the thrill of the hunt was there in him still, and the hurling of a projectile was a definite part.

He paid the club man ten dollars to reserve a place in a goose blind, and because the season wasn't open the manager took him out to see the place where he would hunt. It was a kind of box built above ground, and it had been cleverly camouflaged with cornstalks. It reminded Caldwell a little of

*“It reminded Caldwell a little of Halloween, someway—it was sort of like a cornshock, but there was something about it that had a festival feel...”*



Halloween, someway — it was sort of like a cornshock, but there was something about it that had a festival feel, a waiting feel, as though when the hunting season opened, the life of the blind would become part of a fantasy.

“This is the best place,” the club manager said, “right here is where the line runs, the line that a lot of geese follow out of the marsh. You know, geese are creatures of habit, and follow the same track if they can. You’ll get to shoot at geese here all right. And, too, this one is by itself. Don’t want those hunting arrows falling onto hunters, do we?”

“Think my chances of getting a goose are pretty good?”

“The best.”

Caldwell tried the blind for space, to see whether he could shoot from it, and found that he could. He’d have to be careful not to jostle a partner in the blind, and the manager said there would most certainly be somebody in the blind with him.

“It will probably be a gunner,” he said. “I doubt that another archer will be out. If somebody does come, of course, I’ll put him in here with you.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind who comes.”

On the morning that the goose season opened at the Horicon Marsh, Caldwell got up very early so that he could be there before daybreak. His wife got up too, though he urged her not to, and fixed his breakfast. She watched as he put on his outdoor clothing: a hunting outfit with a red jacket and hat, and watched him take the bow out of its leather case, flex it, and examine the case

of arrows.

“Do you expect me to cook a goose if you should hit one with that thing?” she asked.

“Either that or I’ll give it away.”

“I probably won’t cook it. I don’t think I could bear to do it. I don’t see how you can even think of shooting one. If I didn’t know you couldn’t do it with an arrow, I’d probably throw a tantrum.”

“It’s aesthetic with me,” Caldwell said.

“Well, I hope you keep it an aesthetic experience. You don’t really strike me as a natural hunter.”

“I’m an artist. I’m doing this in the cause of art.”

“OK. I’ll be waiting. But I don’t understand why you have to shoot at geese to paint their picture.”

“Well, it’s kind of deep.”

And it wasn’t all that deep either, he knew. Really, he guessed that he simply wanted to go out and kill a wild goose. It was probably as simple as that—to feel the uplift and sensation of hunting, of loosening a bolt, of hitting, of watching, of retrieving.

“Goodbye,” Caldwell said.

His wife watched him go to the car.

The drive to the hunting club wasn’t very long, and Caldwell got there about an hour before the opening. Men were standing around the barn, inside and out” talking, laughing. Many had cups of coffee. The club men called out names, marked them off in a book, and the hunters were hauled in a station wagon two by two, or four by four, out into the field. The morning gave good promise of being fair; there were few clouds, and the moon, far down, seemed to throw wavy shadows as the wind moved the willows around the barn. A couple of wardens wandered among the hunters, joking, giving information. The guns of the hunters were all in cases; the men described their equipment, bragging sometimes about what a particular gun would do, what shells they used, what size shot. It was like moving soldiers out to a front-line, Caldwell thought, and he regarded his own participation with satire: me, the longbowman, ready for the fray. They called his name, and he walked out to the waiting station wagon.

“Gotta hurry,” the driver said. “We still got quite a few to get out there.”

“An awful lot of guys in there,” Caldwell said, “Are they all going to hunt geese?”

“Ain’t many left got a blind reserved. They’re hoping they can get one after the first geese are killed. Can’t shoot but one goose apiece, you know.”

“Yeah, I know that.”

Caldwell couldn't see the woman very clearly in the dim light. She looked slender, and he couldn't tell anything at all about her age. She had a heavy jacket on, and a leather cap.

"I guess I didn't expect to meet any lady hunters," Caldwell said.

"What's the matter. Think we're the weaker sex?"

"Oh, no."

He couldn't think of anything more to say, and the car moved out along a track at the edge of a field, then across a corner. They passed several blinds, and at a far edge, came to the blind they were to occupy.

"We figured you bow hunters ought to be together," the driver said.

"OK. Thanks," replied Caldwell. He was very uncomfortable now and wished he didn't have to go into the blind with the woman. She took her equipment out, and she was slender, he could now see for certain. Her age? He couldn't tell, but she had a sharp, definite voice, and her statements were all positive declarations.

"It's going to be a fine morning," Caldwell said stupidly.

"Who cares? I'm here to hunt geese."

The car moved away, and the woman went to the blind. She pulled the cornstalks at the entrance aside and stepped in. "Not too much room in here."

"Any room for me?"

"Well, you paid for it didn't you? Come on in. Get settled. When the birds start coming over, we don't want to be screwing around."

She had taken off her jacket, and he could see more what she was like. She looked about thirty, short hair under her cap, a rather attractive face, he thought, very determined, and a sharpness about it, too, in the thin, small mouth. Her speech was about the same as her face: positive, clipped. He got established at an end of the blind. The box was about six or seven feet long, not very wide. The top was open, and there was a narrow bench along one side.

He took out his bow and placed arrows out where he could easily get them.

"Have you hunted very much?" Caldwell asked.

"Damned right. All over. Even out West. Mule deer. Northern Wisconsin plenty. I've shot eight deer."

"Really?"

"Three of them through the lungs. I got one through the heart."

There was a silence. Caldwell didn't know how to respond. He felt nervous and uncomfortable and wondered more and more why he had come. He couldn't respond in conversation on hunting on the woman's level. He knew that for certain. He laughed nervously.

"What did you say your name was, ma'am?"

"I didn't say. And don't call me ma'am. I'm not the housewife type exactly." Caldwell laughed again. "I thought your name might be Diana."

“Why?”

“Well,” Caldwell said, feeling very silly, “Diana was the goddess of the hunt. From what you said—.”

“Never heard of her. My name’s Louise.

Yours?”

“Perry.”

“OK, Perry, bring over the birds.”

“You hunted geese much before?”

“No. First time for geese. I want to see how good I really am. Good challenge, getting one on the wing.”

It was what Caldwell had thought, too, but the way she said it turned him off. He guessed it was just target practice for her, and maybe something else, like shooting a deer through the lungs and enjoying it. Far down across the field a shotgun boomed, then another.

“I guess the season’s open,” Caldwell said.

They waited. It became lighter rapidly now. Far away he thought he could hear the sound of geese. Guns began to boom more often. He couldn’t see anything in the sky through the top of the blind, but he sensed movement, expectancy, all around him on the earth, and a kind of urgency in the sky, as though something great and terrible was about to occur. He heard the geese then, quite loud and, he thought, quite close. His companion had strung her bow, fitted an arrow, and was searching the skies with such intentness that he almost forgot to get ready himself.

“Come on,” she said, “what’re you waiting for, mister? Think they’ll fly into the blind so you can catch them by hand?”

He strung his bow and selected an arrow. She kept hers fitted to the string, in position, tense. A little time passed. No geese flew over them, but the guns were going all around.

“Where the hell are the birds,” the woman said.

Caldwell wished desperately now that he were somewhere else. The nearness of this priestess of the hunt dismayed him. He had always thought of hunting as a pleasure, a thing to be engaged in for the joy of it, never as a humorless, stressful activity, where a bullet, or a shotgun charge or an arrow must inevitably fill psychological needs of the hunter. The game itself was of little moment, and he had the feeling that she would be equally satisfied with birds, deer, or possibly even men.

“Look,” she cried suddenly.

Above them the sky was instantly filled with geese. They were quite low, and huge. Their wings stretched, necks far-out, and each body a part of the dynamism of the V of the birds. He saw, in that instant, the leader, a large bird, and he fixed his arrowpoint upon it, drawing back and back. He never knew

when he released the arrow. Entranced, he saw it go, saw the flight up and up, saw its movement and direction and felt the speed of it, saw it fly well behind the bird, and forgot the arrow as the bird flew on, out of his vision. He knew that he had missed by a long, long way, and the sense of the miss did not make him unhappy. He turned to the woman, thinking that the flight of the birds might have made her relaxed, but she swore at him, violently and brutally.

“I saw you do that,” she cried. “You jostled into me. Keep your own damned end of the blind. You spoiled my aim. ‘Who the hell do you think you are?’”

“Sorry,” Caldwell said, amazed.

“Keep away from me. Stay there now. Stay out of my way.”

The birds were coming over again. Caldwell couldn't have reached for an arrow had he wanted to. The woman fascinated him, and he watched her as she lifted the bow and drew the arrow back. The flight was a little higher than the other, but there were more birds. Her eyes were fixed and her lips moved as she sighted upward, and he saw her release the arrow, and the cry she gave was wild, primitive. Upward her arrow had transfixed a goose. He saw the final end of the action: the shaft protruding through the thrashing body, the wings beating to hold the body aloft, the struggle to lift, the lessening strength, and as an obligatto to the struggle with death, the voice of the woman cursing, elated. The goose fell, faster and faster, and Caldwell, watching, wondered whether he would have observed with the same feeling of horror, if his own arrow had transfixed a bird. He saw nothing in the action that inspired any feeling of art. The bird's body crumpled in a mass of feathers and action that was without grace or beauty.

But the woman was screaming with pleasure and she kept crying, “My first arrow! First! How'd you like that, huh, huh?”

And as the goose came to earth and lay on its side with the shaft of the arrow sticking up, the woman tumbled out of the blind and rushed to it. It wasn't dead, and he could see how the bird struggled as she came to it, seized it by the neck, twisting and pulling. Caldwell thought he heard the bird give one short, agonized honk.

He took his bow and arrows and stepped out of the blind and walked away. As he departed, she called, “Hey come back! I want to see you get one. I got mine. Look!”

She held up the goose, but Caldwell didn't stop. He fled running, back toward the clubhouse.

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## WILDFLOWER ROAD

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

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This wild flower road in back country—  
It's a falltime scene, color in purple and gold of gold,  
Wild grasses cast in bronze, and brown, opened weed pods,  
Wind in a dry rattle of summer death  
Among unleafed boughs.

I, walking here, bring to this roadside setting  
My own memory of splendid boyhood responses.  
I am alone to observe the death of summer,  
And later I will walk this road  
To witness the advent of a starker season.

The roads here are meant for solitude.  
They wind the hillsides swinging up;  
And at a small crest cut the shoulder,  
And stop and look backward into the deep valley  
And thread of a dark river.

Along this road almost no human sign.  
I seek nothing and man has small relationship to me  
Only the way I respond is filled with question.  
People have been my reason for life,  
But on this country roadway in autumn  
There is enough of meaning.

Only myself a sounding harp for wind,  
And devourer of roadside flowers and autumn dyes.  
I see a mailbox beside the road, I pause.  
Mailboxes are as country weathervanes  
Testing the directions of people. I have seen them  
Mounted in rural-fanciful ways on plows;  
On an upthrust snake of logchain; welded on an old pump  
That I suppose once watered thirsty cattle.  
I have noted mailboxes on posts from Sears,  
On knotty, crude, lengths of unbarked pine.  
Mailboxes are of people and mailboxes  
Are tokens of human hopes and fears;  
These I know well. But here I pause:  
This box is an old one and the name faded some  
I cannot read it—Morgan or Miller,  
Impossible to tell. But a bird has been here  
This morning and the door is open.  
There is already a sprinkling of grass and down.  
Tomorrow the mailman may disturb  
A nest-building bluebird; let me trust  
That no mail merely addressed to occupant  
Is deposited in this lonely, small, sanctuary.

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## THE PLAQUE

FROM *University Madison U.S.A.*

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On the front of Bascom Hall is the plaque that states the university's traditional credo of academic freedom:

*"Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."*

The quotation, taken from a report of the university's Board of Regents in 1894, is cast in bronze and bolted to the entrance of Bascom Hall.

The statement was issued at the conclusion of the trial of a university economist, Richard T. Ely. It was Ely, in a letter written for Theodore Herfurth shortly before Ely's death, who definitely established the authorship of the declaration.

"The words were undoubtedly written by C. K. Adams [seventh president of the university]. Adams told me so himself, and the internal evidence bears this out. It was a style natural to Adams," Ely wrote.

Professor Ely had come to Wisconsin as one of America's most distinguished political economists. He had freed himself from orthodox free-trade economics and had pioneered with a realistic, inductive approach to the subject. A state superintendent of public instruction published in *The Nation* a scathing, excoriating, and denunciatory letter accusing Ely of fomenting strikes in Madison.

A committee set up by the Board of Regents to investigate the charges, on September 18, 1894, submitted its report to the board, which not only exonerated Ely but also "heralded the board's devotion to academic freedom," with the following statement:

*As Regents of a university with over a hundred instructors supported by nearly two millions of people who hold a vast diversity of views regarding the great questions which at present agitate the human mind, we could not for a moment think of recommending the dismissal or even the criticism of a teacher even if some of his opinions should, in some quarters, be regarded as visionary. Such a course would be equivalent to saying that no professor should teach anything which is not accepted by everybody as true. This would cut our curriculum down to very small proportions. We cannot for a moment believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, or that the present condition of society is perfect. We must therefore welcome from our teachers such discussions as shall suggest the means and prepare the way by which knowledge may be extended, present evils be removed and others prevented. We feel that we would be unworthy of the position we hold if we did not believe in progress in all departments of knowledge. In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead. Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.*

Herfurth reveals that the casting of the declaration into bronze and its erection at the university generated almost as much heat as the charges that brought the declaration.

Although the university class of 1910 had the tablet cast, the memorial was not affixed to Bascom Hall until 1915 because of friction between the class and the Board of Regents.

On June 15, 1915, the tablet was erected and dedicated. President Van Hise spoke at the ceremony:

*The principles of academic freedom have never found expression in language so beautiful, words so impressive, phrases so inspiring. It was 21 years ago that these words were incorporated in a report of the Board of Regents exonerating a professor from the charge of 'Socialism' that was brought against him... And from that day to this, no responsible party or no responsible authority has ever succeeded in restricting freedom of research and teaching within these walls.*

The plaque was rededicated in 1956 after it disappeared from Bascom Hall, apparently as a prank, and was recovered through an anonymous phone call.

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## A BRIDAL BOUQUET

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

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A bridal bouquet of white thornblossoms  
Plucked from haws on a Wisconsin hill,  
Was the wish of this woman  
Who desired to be wed  
On the very, very high land  
Above the Wisconsin River.

She was indeed wed by a caring man,  
She in patched blue jeans and gingham shirt,  
Holding white hillside flowers:  
The whole tableau  
Against a blue June morning sky.

I can't say I ever saw a more radiant bride,  
And her young man whose hair was long  
Tenderly aided his aging mother  
Over stone and goat meadow,  
While in junipers round about  
Waxwings uttered a wedding  
Serenade.

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# WISCONSIN IS A KALEIDOSCOPE OF CHANGE

FROM *My Land My Home My Wisconsin*

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It is the human struggle that is important in Wisconsin: the devotion of families to the welfare of the Wisconsin land. The course of the struggle is not hard to follow: from the earliest settlers with their homestead problems, the stubborn sod, the loneliness, the hard labor, often the advent of death from disease or overwork. It is easy to appreciate the man with the simple farm instrument, toiling to make his home, his place, and a future for his children. Out of that struggle came the Wisconsin spirit, and the Wisconsin Idea... a better life for everybody, a chance at books and education, at a cultural side to life, an inspirational side, a religious side, certainly a fun side. The struggle can be seen in earlier parts of the story of the Wisconsin farm. But what did the struggle mean? What did it become? Were the settlers successful? Did they achieve what they worked so valiantly to accomplish? What of the family? What of the land? Are the values of determination, hard work, regard for land and for neighbors still there? What of the youth, the vital young who gave the land its flavor and ultimate meaning?

In answer, there is a kaleidoscope of achievement, of development, of meaning. First the youth left the farm. The cities were the benefactors. The farm and family life suffered. And there were the machines that grew larger and more efficient, spawned from the simple ones made by Wisconsin inventors in the days of the primitive reaper, the plow. One man could ultimately do as much as twenty, using the machines. And the cattle improved to purebred herds on every side, and the farms grew larger, with fewer farmers. Was all this what the Edwin Bottomleys had in mind? What has happened is fascinating and paradoxical. Wisconsin has become the leading dairy state and is known far and wide as a home state, a neighbor state, a state of beautiful farmlands; and the kaleidoscope, in order to understand, is put together from the memories, the statements, the hopes of many persons from all parts of the state. The spirit

seems to be there still, though the pioneer cabins are all gone now. And there is something else... a sense of largeness, as though the land has taken on a mysterious dimension that is bigger than life. Wisconsin is the land where the image of rural America grows, waxes, and spreads itself in the eyes of the world as the state where achievement of the farm has grown almost beyond belief. But now it is a different world and we search for motifs from the past, cherishing them:

The prairies now are nearly all gone. Along old railroads are some prairie plants, undisturbed; and the wild growths are not trampled. In a country cemetery on an old prairie acre, there is still a bit of the tall, tall grass, and at times the winds weave it into patterns of strange memory.

The valley below where I stand is one where settlers arrived on a June evening in 1856. The Norwegian who led them carried a staff of locust wood. This he suddenly thrust deeply into the sod and cried, "We have here our home! It will be here, in this valley! Here I'll leave my staff until it takes root in the good soil." And, as they say, the staff took root and became a shade for the old man when he reached ninety.

I do not know who lives down there now; or whose cattle are upon the hillside. I know that once a family of seven arrived on that flat by the creek, and built a cabin and broke sod for a crop of Indian corn. Now the hillside herd is large, great black and white Holsteins with swelling udders. On that hillside there was once only one beast: a thin, brindle cow newly dried of milk.

When you envision the people coming from Europe and from New York State and New England and Virginia and Ohio, and you stop a minute to remember what they went through, how they worried through the wheat-growing era, and got dairying started, and raised hops, and improved the cattle and horses and sheep and hogs... all of that, struggling all that time. And they learned about better seed and more economical ways to farm, then struggled through World War I and the Depression and finally achieved the success story, where you can be successful on the farm if you follow the right prescriptions and have the right machines and cattle... It isn't hard to identify the struggle, the clearing and breaking of the land, but are the people still there? The struggling people, the family people, the ones who created our state and national strength and traditions. Are they, or the spirit of them, still there?

They do live on, for the spirit of Wisconsin grew out of experiences of the early families and their descendants who found their strength in the land. Generation after generation, leadership in the community and the state has come straight from the family, the home, the values of home.

Farm homes were gathering places. New methods developed at the university were synthesized and exchanged there when, from time to time, the Extension people would drop in... Soy Bean Briggs, Jim Lacy, Ranger Mac, Tom Bewick, Verne Varney, Warren Clark, Henry Ahlgren, Rudolph Froker, Dave

Williams, Bruce Cartter, Nellie Kedzie Jones, Abby Marlatt, Almere Scott, Edith Bangham, L. G. Sorden, Walter Bean, Ray Penn... Many others of the great ones who took a personal interest in the farm people would just drop by the home place to see how things were going. That was the way it was done; the whole thing evolved in one crucible... experts, farmers, all devoted to the same end: the betterment of a condition, of the land, of personal life. Community problems, farm problems, and community culture were what concerned them.

When meetings were held in the schoolhouse or the town hall, folks came from all over the countryside to discuss matters important to the farmer, or to the farmer's wife, or to his kids. Sometimes their concerns were expressed in the form of plays, usually obtained from the university, that told about the problems of the dairyman producing milk and cheese, or about a farmer raising chickens or geese or marketing produce, or about the farm wife saving up her egg money to buy a piano or organ.

The plays were done with lots of humor and fast action. Sometimes "Old Brindley," the all-purpose cow, was portrayed onstage by boisterous farmers covered with a large cloth and holding a painted cow's head. The plays were entertainment and more. They furnished a good reason for the busy farmers and their families to get together. The men would come in the evening to build a stage in the school or in the hall or outside. To some it was a great honor just to pull the stage curtain, to make the simple scenery, or to put up the lights—often just bulbs in tin cans, if there was nothing better. It was all part of the rural community spirit.

In the background of the entire rural Wisconsin way of life was what had happened. To understand the Wisconsin of today, one must appreciate the courage, determination, humor, and awareness of home and home place that accompanied the transformation of the land.

In working on this book, we talked to many farm people who helped shape this agricultural setting. All of them found it necessary to speak of the past before they could put the present into any perspective. All agreed that a world of work, suffering, and idealism lies behind the way it is now in rural Wisconsin.

As we approach the end of this story of the Wisconsin farm, we almost expect a crescendo to build toward a crashing finale to illustrate the beauty and dignity of man on the land. Although the potential of the big chords is there we have the bigger farms, larger machines, better cattle, and an understanding of how it all came to be—we can't quite hear the great stirring music that would represent the tremendous victory of Wisconsin men and women on the farm. The struggle of the past we can see—the man with an ox team breaking prairie, building a new log house, or wrestling a subsistence living from the land. But the drama of ultimate success—well, where is it?

Is it one lone man in a vast milking barn with a line of a hundred fine cows and a multitude of hoses and wires and pipes? That has some visual interest, but it isn't quite as emotionally satisfying as an old lady sitting at a cow's flank on a three-legged milking stool, a kerosene lantern hanging above her in the barn on a winter's night. The modern picture is almost too big, too perfect, too technical.

The one thing that is not technical in itself is the Wisconsin family. As we recall the past again, we see that the family depended on horse power and manpower. The machines on the farm were quite simple and there weren't many of them. An average family looked upon forty acres of land as just about all it could possibly handle. In one typical family whose surviving members we talked with, there were three boys and a girl. The father's game plan each year was to clear and to bring into production an additional five acres. That product seemed to take about all the time the family had, beyond chores and the work with land already cleared. Even in the first decades of the twentieth century, agriculture was often reminiscent of pioneer days. Most farmers still had walking cultivators, some of the more affluent farms had riding ones, and the boys contested to see who could cultivate five acres of corn in a day, or who



*The Scandinavians who came to settle in Polk County were attracted by trees, rivers, and lakes. They got those, and rocks!*

could plow one acre of land with a walking plow. The father depended upon his family much more than is true today. It took all the boys to clear those five acres. There just were no shortcuts.

The country itself—in this instance, northwestern Wisconsin—was heavily timbered. It was virgin timber, basswood, maple, hickory, elm... hardwoods. Father and sons blasted the stumps with dynamite. The blasting was almost continuous at times... both stumps and rocks had to be cleared away. The Scandinavians who came to settle in Polk County were attracted by trees, rivers, and lakes. They got those, and rocks!

As the family grew, the farm expanded to about a hundred acres. By the time the boys were grown, there was a stone fence all the way around the farm, and every stone came from the fields. The boys used stone boats to move those rocks, and every field was crisscrossed with the sledge tracks.

Although the family possessed very little material goods and by today's standards would even have qualified for welfare programs, they didn't think of themselves as poor. When the father and his sons and daughter and wife struggled with the task of clearing the land, their income was perhaps four hundred dollars per year or less. When there was no money at all, they simply took eggs to town to trade for sugar and coffee. Everything else came from the farm.

But no one suffered from lack of food. Before the boys did morning chores and went to school, they'd have a cup of coffee or milk and perhaps piece of bread. About seven o'clock there would be breakfast: always oatmeal and thick cream, fried potatoes, fried meat, a slab of pie and sweet bread. There was always a coffee break at midmorning with cookies brought to the field by mother or daughter. The big meal of the day was at noon: potatoes, meat, other vegetables, nothing very fancy but lots of it. There would always be afternoon cake, rolls, and cookies. They'd have supper around five, usually before the chores, and before bedtime there would likely be another snack. Seven or eight meals a day! At least that's what this Swedish family did.

But that kind of struggle on the land is mostly over now. The land in Polk County has all been broken. The farms there are good. People have a lot more material wealth. When they look back and try to put it all into perspective, they sometimes do so in football terms. Folks in Wisconsin used to know that the Green Bay Packers talked a great deal about pride. It was pride, they said, that made the Packers the kind of team it was in the Lombardi days. Certainly the one thing that all the Swedish, Norwegian, German, the other ethnic groups and old American families in that part of Wisconsin had was pride. They wanted to prove to the world that they could make their own way without help from outside agencies.

And this attitude led to faith in themselves and faith in the land. Faith in the rural areas is still very strong. The urge to have an education, to struggle

for it, not just have it handed over free, is still there. And there is pride, too, because the farms in Wisconsin are still family ones, and the same family values operate there. The farms are bigger, and there aren't nearly so many of them. The whole family may not be involved in the operation because it simply takes a lot less manpower than it used to. In 1830, to produce one bushel of wheat by hand took more than 255 minutes. Today, with a four-wheel drive tractor and combine, it takes one-half minute.

Remember that it was the land that originally drew the people to Wisconsin. People left Europe because they had no opportunity to own land. They came to have their own place. They lived through the pioneer struggle, they attained education for their children, and finally they became better off and were able to buy machinery and to put up silos and have superior cattle. They created the farm state we have today.

The farm family is what made Wisconsin a friendly, neighborly, tradition-conscious state. The family is the important thing about Wisconsin, far more important than the cow, or nutrition, or animal husbandry or agronomy. The meaning of this book lies in the kind of people who came to Wisconsin, and in their families. They played together and worked together and evolved a whole social structure. They arranged social gatherings to help one another in the harvest, to raise barns, and to support one another in times of illness, death, and disaster. Many a farm today is in the hands of its Depression-day owners because the neighbors came to the 1930s auction and "bid in" the farm for a dollar... and dared the local authorities to say otherwise. The folkish proverbs by which our forefathers sowed and reaped, the songs they sang, the religions they practiced—all are a part of the Wisconsin way of living, and of the spirit of this state. In many families these traditions have been passed down generation by generation.

Certainly one of the wonderful aspects of the rural "Wisconsin Idea" is that young people really are returning to the land. It's basic with Americans to want land, to have it, to farm it, to love it. They do actually say, in Wisconsin, This is my land, my home, my Wisconsin, because the land is so essentially theirs. And the young folks are coming home again. On many farms there is still an old dooryard tree standing, where the families once gathered on Sunday afternoons in summer. And when families come home now the old tree, perhaps a hundred years old, will mean a special thing: that the young people and the old are coming back to the homeland where their folks started it all.

This is the great meaning and the mighty crescendo, the Wisconsin theme repeated again and again. Wisconsin is still a family state. The farms large and small are mostly family farms. It isn't just a woman and a man and a plow any more. Things have gone way, way beyond that. Yet the spirit is the same, and we sense that the spirit that arose from struggle will become stronger, more pervad-

ing. Technology? Sure, we've got that in abundance, and far fewer farms, but faith is there. It is faith in the land, faith in man and man's strength and his will to survive. It is faith in the past, and faith that the Wisconsin farm country still has a potentially powerful future. It is also faith in God and in the nation. That hasn't really changed.

A lot of the farm places are really beautiful. The desperate human struggle isn't there any more, not like it used to be. But then, maybe that's good. The thing that does remain is the "spirit of Wisconsin," or as the preachers used to say: "Lord, we are neighbors. We have a duty to one another." If times are changed, so be it, but the faith of people has not changed very much. Not really. We are doing different kinds of things, no doubt, but the spirit of the family on the farm, the home, the whole knowledge that Wisconsin is a home state, a neighbor state, and that people here are home folks. That's the great thing, and a thing we'll never lose. It is too deep in our bone and muscle and our blood. There is the climax of the story... the swelling of the symphony... us, a people... a farm state, a farm people, a Wisconsin people!

Then, for closing, it is a hope for the future, for a fulfillment of human struggle, in a new land, in a new dream...

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## I AWOKE ONE CLEAR MORNING

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

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I awoke one clear morning and said  
I will certainly do something great today,  
I will move a mountain  
Or at least cause a bell to chime  
Celebrating some minor victory.  
Instead, near Spring Green,  
I crossed a star-flowered prairie,  
Sat down in the middle of tall grass,  
And simply stared upward  
At white clouds in a spring sky.

A Wisconsin meadow  
In spring,  
With shooting stars  
And sweet star grasses,  
Can make a fulfilled astronomer  
Of any earthbound, astral,  
Day seeker.

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## THE NEED OF WISCONSIN EARTH

FROM *Wisconsin Sketches*

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The need of Wisconsin earth  
Is man's hands  
To crumble and make smooth.

The need of earth  
Is a woman dropped to her knees  
To sense reality of grass.

The need of earth  
Is a landing of birds  
And the freeing of water.

The need of earth  
Is a man's hope of crops  
And of his proud steps among new growth.

The need of earth  
Is wilderness left  
In uncut fence corners.

The need of earth  
Is the shape of man's mind  
Searching the meaning of earth.

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## **To A CHILD...**

**FROM *An Innocence of Prairie***

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To a child everything is available. There are no boundaries of ownership. To the innocent possession is not from greed but from wonder and love. One night I took my grandson to the top of a hill near our house. The moon was very bright and seemed quite near. The small boy reached for it, and apparently caught the moon in his hand; at least his hand was tightly closed when he reached it out to me. I opened his fingers, accepted the moon gracefully and put it in my pocket. He immediately took it out. We began a game of catching the moon, putting it into my pocket, taking it out and putting it back into the sky. One hundred and ninety-nine times we caught the moon and every time it was an experience of glory to him. Then he offered the moon to a stranger who walked by, and who did not understand that a gift of great price was freely offered, and so missed a timeless moment of celebration.