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Harvest Time

by Lenore Salvaneschi

The word harvest evokes a sense of fulfillment and completion. In that sense the so-called fruit cellar in the basement of St. Stephen's parsonage was not only a fitting symbol but also a promise of year-round sustenance and, unwittingly, with its rustic darkroom, a place of preservation which outlasted the lives of those who enjoyed the yearly harvest.

Within a small inner room, perhaps ten by fifteen feet, built against one stone and one concrete wall, the "fruit cellar" contained the apple bin, the carrot bin, the potato crib, the onion basket, the wine cellar of St. Stephen's church, Father's darkroom, and shelves of canned vegetables, fruits, jellies, and marmalades. Since one entered this room from the washroom and walked through it to the furnace room, the smells of suds and wood and coal were mixed with the smells of the damp cement floor, the must of the wine, the sand in which the carrots were kept, the earthiness of the potatoes, the fragrance of apples wrapped in newspaper, the salt-sour pungency of "working" sauerkraut and snipped beans, and the cloying odor of the "hypo" used in the photographic process.

In one corner of the room was a small tarpapered enclosure with a crude sink. This was the darkroom, with its interesting beakers and bottles of chemicals. Along the wall approaching it was an ancient table covered with newspapers on which Father had his printing and picture-trimming equipment. On a homemade table in the center of the room stood the enlarg-

ing equipment. At the far end stood another table with bottles of the very sweet Concord grape wine made by the elders for communion. Under the table were the bins for the potatoes and other root vegetables and the boxes of apples. Along the entire length of the stone wall stood homemade shelves containing corn, pickles, beets, beans and more beans, tomatoes, piccalilli, relish, jams, jellies, apple butter, and marmalades.

Suspended from the ceiling were more shelves. On these were ranged the rows of grape juice, both the ambrosial concentrate which stained the lips in Bacchus-style and the lighter ruby-colored favorite drink for company. Jars of applesauce, apples cut for pie, peaches, apricots, plums, endless quarts of pitted sour red cherries, provision for pies and sauce galore, with even a few containers of precious gooseberries gathered from the timber adding a touch of green to the richer hues of autumn, reflected on the shelves.

For the housewife living in St. Stephen's Lutheran parsonage at Atkins, Iowa, during the second quarter of the twentieth century, harvest time was not really a particular season, it was a year-round activity. Harvest time meant providing food throughout the year, and it meant gathering and preserving that food wherever and whenever possible.

If one were to deal with the subject seasonally, I suppose it would be accurate to say that the harvest began sometime in the spring, not the calendar spring but the farmer spring, February perhaps, with the "Spring Butchering." The term sounds ugly to those

accustomed to shopping in increasingly sanitized urban settings, but to those who took part in it the grim procedure was just one of the normal and necessary occupations of the year. Actually, the parsonage family participated secondhand, as it were, for we had no domesticated animals but had to live in the hope that the more generous farmers would share with us. There were always those who did, bringing nice roasts of beef or pork, spareribs, and a couple of glistening sausages wrapped in clean flour-sack dish towels. The flour sausages made by one family were especially prized for they were both highly seasoned and smoked, but sausages ordinarily were the least choice bit of the butchering, and it must be admitted that the parsonage kids established a mental thermometer of generosity based on the kind of sausage or "real" meat provided during the season.

During the years that I helped my sister on her farm, my most dreaded chore, next to cooking for threshers, was to help with the butchering in the spring and fall. Helping, for me, meant canning meat. The raw beef or pork would be brought in by the men who had done the cruder work of slaughtering and skinning the animal. We women, the hired girl and I, supervised by my sister, would first fry the meat, then place the chunks in jars, fill the jars with boiling water, place them in wash boilers on a rack, fire up the kitchen stove with coal, wood, or cobs, and process the jars in boiling water for the requisite number of hours. After the jars came out, we tightened the lids and turned them upside down until they were cold and could be stored in the cellar. Badly sealed jars had a nasty habit of squirting boiling hot juice onto one's face and hands, but the burns were accepted in the knowledge that one had anticipated the dreaded spoilage. Another way to preserve meat was to "fry down" the pork loins and roasts which were cut in small slices, placed in a stone crock, and covered with liquid lard which solidified as it cooled and preserved

the meat. This fried-down meat, together with salty snipped beans or sauerkraut formed our Monday washday dinner for years, and I shall always associate the smell of steamy soapsuds in the basement with the redolence of salt pork on the kitchen stove.

The mention of sauerkraut suggests a paragraph on that subject alone. I can never remember a time in my life when I appreciated that seemingly indispensable, and indisputably German, dish. Perhaps my dislike had something to do with Mother's impatience when she had to take time out to skim the scum off the sauerkraut as it was fermenting; the sour-salty smell as she lifted the big rock from the overturned plate on top of the fermenting mass in the crock was not the fragrance of pine forests. The harvesting of the cabbage was always done in the heat of the summer, probably on a scorching July or August day. Early in the morning Father cut all the best heads of cabbage in the garden, trimmed off the outer leaves, then brought the white, still sweet-smelling heads to the shade of the grape arbor behind the house. There the sharpened butcher knives were used to cut the heads in fourths. These were then sliced on a narrow wooden object known as the sauerkraut cutter. The shredded cabbage was placed in big stoneware crocks in layers — a layer of cabbage, a layer of salt, until three-fourths full. These crocks were hauled into the cellar, where they were first placed near the drain used for wash water. Here Mother could more easily dispose of the liquid as the sauerkraut fermented. Finally, when the fermentation had stopped, she would place the kraut in big glass Mason jars and seal them. I assume the jars went through a hot-process canning bath. I do remember the finished product with its yellow color and pungent odor as the acceptable combination with pork and potatoes for a complete dinner, and not only on washdays.

To resume the harvest of meat. Many of the farmers did not care for such organs as the



The author's younger brother, Robert, helping his grandmother, Gesche Rickels, cut apples in 1926. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

heart, tongue, or liver of the animals they butchered, but Mother gratefully received those items and made excellent entrees from them. Other less than choice cuts of meat she utilized in scrapple, which was fried down and then placed in stone crocks, to be sliced and fried for supper or occasionally for breakfast. Jars of mincemeat were canned from oddments of meat, and later-day store-bought products labeled mincemeat have absolutely no resemblance to the delectable fillings my mother prepared for the Thanksgiving and Christmas pies.

As the calendar spring approached, the real canning season began. Since this was before the day of the freezer, the first big crops of fruit were the strawberries and rhubarb. Sometimes we were lucky enough to harvest

berries from our own patch. It was not often that we had enough to make into strawberry sauce; usually our crop was carefully salvaged for strawberry jam, that deep garnet delight which filled the first small jelly (old pickle) jars, which we covered with melted paraffin and carried to the basement. Together with the strawberries we often harvested the rhubarb and combined it with strawberries in marmalade, or just canned as many jars of it as we could gather for "medicinal" sauce in the winter. We never attempted any *peistengel* (pieplant or rhubarb) wine; even the task of making grape wine was left to the elders of the parish.

After the strawberries and rhubarb came the cherries. How many sour cherries we pitted in the sultry June days, the cherries floating in the dishpans of cold water from the pump. The pitted cherries were placed in jars, together with sugar and water, and processed in laundry boilers, or sometimes cooked in the big bread kettle and ladled, boiling hot, into the scalded jars. Spoilage was always a problem; with food poisoning always a threat, there was great concern over having the jars carefully scalded just before any food was put into them.

Early apples, especially the Duchess, and later the harvest apples, came after the cherries. These were gathered in our orchard and cooked into crushed applesauce, or quartered applesauce, or made into jelly, the pulp boiled down and left to drain overnight in a flour bag attached to a pole supported on a pair of chairbacks. The next day, God and weather willing (too damp, no jelling), the combined liquid and sugar produced a beautiful clear apple jelly. Apple butter, after much cooking and stirring on the hot stove, with a bit of cinnamon added, provided still more variety on the jelly shelf. Then came the plums, which also produced a rich purple preserve and the most beautiful jelly of all, a deep ruby color. Peaches were next, usually bought at the store in bushel baskets. These had to be scalded and peeled

one by one, then placed as whole as possible in quart jars together with one peach pit for flavor. After sugar syrup was poured in to fill the jars, the three-hour process in the wash boiler completed this harvest.

About the middle of summer, with good luck, we might make a trip to the timber, the sand ditches along the Maquoketa timber. There, in Aunt Zene's Hollow, we picked gooseberries, sour tiny green marbles, to make a few jars of extremely acid, piquant sauce to provide a pie or two. We usually prepared a few jars of jam also, but the gooseberries were very small and the picking of stems and tails was a most "*kniblich*" task. Gooseberry harvest had its excitement, however, for coupled with the job of picking the berries from their prickly foliage was the fear of finding a rattlesnake coiled under the bushes; the warm slopes on which the berries grew were a favorite sunning place for rattlers. Aunt Zene always brought the "houn' dogs" with her when we went berrying and carried a hefty stick to get the jump on any snake we might encounter.

In the fall there were more apples to can and some pears, if we were lucky in getting some from the farmers. Then, whether fruit or vegetable — present-day supermarkets never seem to know how to shelve the canned product — there was pumpkin to preserve; Mother sliced up the huge globes, cut off the rind, cleaned out the seeds, cut up the meat, cooked it, mashed it, and then stuffed the jars with the golden pulp, carefully processed for harvest pies.

The richest fruit harvest of all came in September when our rows and rows of Concord grapes were ripe. Many of the clusters were used, as already mentioned, by the elders of the congregation to make the communion wine. I can remember the almost intoxicating fragrance of the juice and the buzzing of the bees over the skins and seeds deposited near the back gate after the elders had finished the press. Since there were so many rows of grapes in our yard, we still had plenty left for our own harvesting. Dozens of two-quart jars were one-third filled with carefully selected and washed



The parsonage's lush vineyards provided enough Concord grapes each season to make not only the congregation's communion wine but substantial quantities of grape juice for the Rickels family's own use. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)



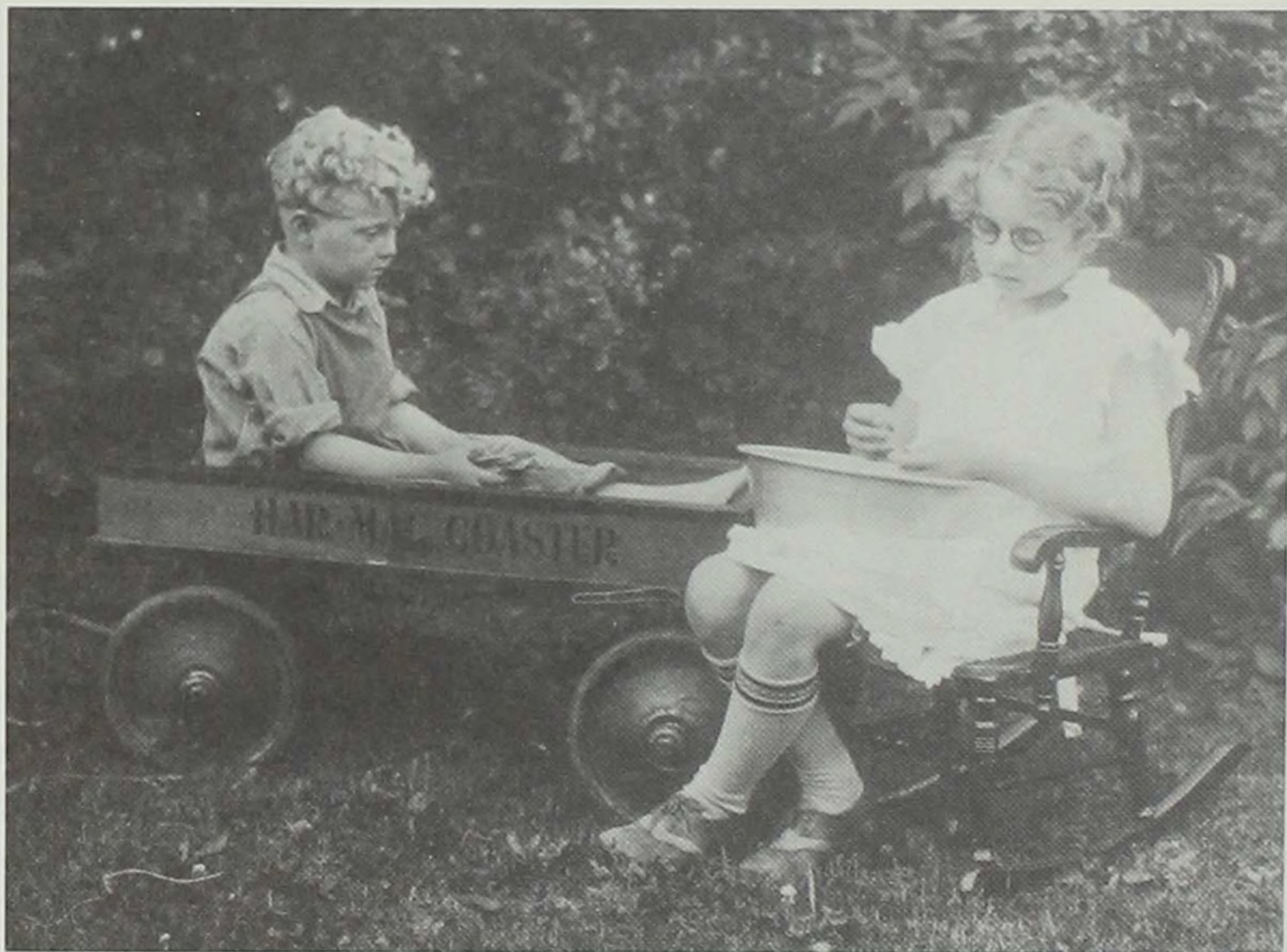
Mrs. G. Rickels cooking at a new range in the parsonage, c. 1930s. The faucet at the left drew water from a tank attached to the stove. The tank, together with the stove's reservoir, provided the only hot water in the house. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

grapes. Water was added and the jars were placed in the basement. After a certain number of weeks a beautiful magenta liquid formed the grape juice which we served our guests the following summer. Sometimes we also served the concentrated kind, made from the juice of the boiled grapes, strained, combined with sugar, then cooked again and bottled in smaller wine bottles, producing the ultimate heady essence of autumn.

Vegetables — oh, there never seemed to be an end to the vegetables we canned, from the first bean of the season to the last

bread-and-butter pickles and the last ear of corn and goosenecked squash. Father planted one patch of beans after the other. *All* my summers were punctuated by a new patch coming into harvest. There was nothing my brother and I bemoaned more than this constant burden of sowing, weeding, and picking *beans*. Green snap and yellow wax, string and pole and limas — we had them all, and canned them, usually with salt and vinegar or snipped, in brine, a process similar to making sauerkraut, or dried for soup or for *more* bean patches the following summer. Rarely was there a week throughout the whole growing season when there were not some jars of beans cooling on the kitchen cabinet counter. Bean-canning seemed almost a daily accompaniment to the other household work. And then the cucumbers: sweet pickles, dill pickles, bread-and-butter, seven-day, sweet-sour, tiny sweets, watermelon rind, beet — you name them, we canned them. Housewives vied with each other for new pickle recipes and were famous for them. Then there were the relishes and piccalillis — I still don't know the technical difference — but I can remember the ingredients, the tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, green peppers, and corn that went into them: green and white, red, yellow, variegated, they were among the prettiest jars on the fruit cellar shelves.

Tomatoes were almost as much a bane as beans so far as my brother and I were concerned, but how my parents rejoiced in their abundance. There were dozens and dozens of quarts of stewed tomatoes, and many jars of tomato juice — no doubt but what this ascorbic acid contributed to our health in the winter-time. Every afternoon in September when I came rushing home from school, I seemed to encounter the salty-acid smell of tomatoes stewing in the big kettle, grape juice dripping from the twisted flour sack, or relish being brewed. There was a sense of gathering in, of well-being and fulfillment which I could not



The author and her brother, Robert, shell peas on the rear lawn of the parsonage in July 1927. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

then have identified as being almost pagan in its "worship" of the gifts of the earth.

The most precious vegetable of all was sweet corn, especially Golden Bantam, so toothsome that we children begrudged any kernel which was enjoyed by guests or imprisoned in jars. Eagerly we waited for the first meal of sweet corn, usually ready by our sister's birthday, July 22. Thereafter we enjoyed ears of corn alone with butter and salt as a frequent dinner. In the fall, in late August or after school had started, I would be requested to help my sister can sweet corn. While I hated the task, my mother, who often joined us, rejoiced in this special harvest. Very early in the morning we were out in the wet cornfield, picking the milky ears. The blades of the corn cut into our hands, the corn silk tickled our necks and cheeks. Sometimes the men had time to do this part of the work for us. Then they would bring in bushel baskets of ears. We sat out in the shade and husked the corn. Once the ears were cleaned of husks and silk, we dipped them in kettles and wash boilers filled with hot water, slipped them quickly into cold water, then sliced the kernels from the cob, an endless

slippery task. The cut kernels were packed in sterilized jars, salt was added, hot water, and once again the boilers were used and the cookstoves fired up. Three hours of boiling I think it took until we could remove the jars from the racks and seal them. Mother loved to see the pints (used instead of quarts because spoilage was more frequent with corn and the loss would have been greater) lined up with their beautiful gold — Golden Bantam — and white — Country Gentleman — kernels. Only now can I appreciate her joy; then I thought only of the heat, dust, steam, sticky floors, flies, and dead-tiredness that represented corn-canning every year.

The root vegetables, onions, carrots, rutabagas, parsnips, turnips, and kohlrabi were usually dug before the first frosts, potatoes somewhat later, when the ground might already be cold and probably muddy from autumn rains. The potatoes were put in a big bin in the basement; onions were stored there in bushel baskets or boxes; carrots and the other root vegetables when we had them were buried in sand in boxes and buckets. Kale, early peas, dandelion greens, and

asparagus were enjoyed fresh in our household but not canned. It is a pity that we knew nothing about zucchini; it took an Italian husband to introduce me to that versatile vegetable. The flower heads of dill were gathered and hung upside down in bundles, but garlic and herbs such as rosemary, thyme, and basil which now seem indispensable were also unknown to us.

Included in the harvest which we garnered in the fall were the nuts: black walnuts, butternuts, hazelnuts, and hickory nuts. The walnut and butternut trees were either in our



Mrs. G. Rickels baking bread in the parsonage kitchen in March 1933. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

yard or in a grove nearby. In October the brown and green fruit fell from the trees. Then we gathered it, shelled off the outer wrinkled shell, inevitably dyeing our hands while doing so, and laid out the rough black fruit to dry. When dry, the nuts were cracked by Father in the basement on an old sadiron. All of us helped Mother pick out the kernels for cakes and cookies. Our favorite was the hickory nut, which we found in the Maquoketa timber or bought in pecks from the timber folks. The kernels were the most difficult of all to pick out, but we felt rewarded in the exquisite taste which we savored annually in one hickory nut cake, baked traditionally for Father's November birthday. During winter evenings Father would often crack the hazelnuts by the kitchen stove while Mother mended and we children studied around the kitchen table.

In our year-round harvest, probably nothing was more of the essence of the earth than the whole wheat we bought from one of our parishioners. We ground the wheat in a hand coffee mill, soaked it overnight, and then cooked it the next morning in a double boiler. Served with Jersey cream and milk brought fresh in a little pail each morning from our neighbor, it provided the most satisfying breakfasts I can recall. Whole wheat and rye-graham flour, bought at the Amana Colonies, furnished bread for us throughout the year, and in the wintertime cracked cornmeal, also from the same stores, appeared over and over again as cornbread served with bacon for a favorite evening meal.

Amidst all of the household activity centering in the "fruit cellar," it was surprising that Father was able to carry on his hobby of photography. But in the end, although the bins and bushel baskets have long stood empty, and the Mason jars have become a collector's item, the photographs produced in that small area still remain to illustrate the business of a parsonage household dependent upon a year-round country harvest. □