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Ruth D. Hein

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A Town Girl Becomes a Farm Helper

by Ruth D. Hein

WHEN I ASKED, "Why do you cap the shocks of barley?" the boys who lived on the farm answered, "Because it only has a beard and not a cap, and so it's bald-headed."

In their perspective, I must have asked a lot of dumb questions as a town girl. Dad was a minister in Van Horne in Benton County, Iowa, from 1925 into the 1940s. Since I was the middle child with two brothers and two sisters, not all of us were needed to help at home. I was the one who liked to cook and bake and work outdoors more than I liked to read or embroider. That's how it came about that when I was about fifteen I was spared from family duties and for several summer vacations around 1940 I worked instead for two farm women.

Being a town girl, I didn't know one grain from another — except for corn. When I took lunches out to the men and boys in the fields, the blades scratching my bare arms and neck was a clear sign that it was a cornfield I was running through. But knowing which field was barley, which was oats, and which was timothy was beyond me — until the boys told me that barley was bald-headed. "That's why we cap the shocks," they explained. I never was sure if they weren't just joking with me.

I worked for Paula and George Werning and later for Walter and Ilma Schminke, two Benton County farm families who were related to each other. I soon learned that mealtime, especially on the Werning farm, was full of delights. One treat was a bowl of garden lettuce with real whipped cream and just the right amount of vinegar and sugar. (I had to learn by trial and error how much vinegar was just enough.) And I was surprised to find cake or leftover pie on the breakfast table along with fried potatoes and bacon and eggs. Of course,

we finished the meal with homemade sweet rolls. I learned to make huge pans of raised cinnamon or pecan rolls. No one seemed to mind, either, if I experimented with prune, apricot, peach, or apple coffee cakes. Healthy appetites put good food in constant demand. At mealtime in the summer kitchen, the radio was usually tuned in to the news and weather. But no matter what we were listening to, when all of us were seated and ready to fill our plates, a hand reached out first to turn the radio down while we joined in asking God's blessing on our meal and on us.

Never had I, a "p.k." (preacher's kid), tasted beer. But when neighboring farmers finished harvesting their summer crops, they held threshing parties. They usually had beer and food at these get-togethers. I overcame my built-in inhibition when everyone assured me that on the farm, at the threshing party, it was okay to try the forbidden. My taste buds soon told me beer was pretty bitter, and a taste was enough. But in the tasting, I felt like one of the crowd.

AS A HELPER on the Schminke farm, my courage and confidence were boosted considerably by the responsibility of arising at 4:30 A.M. to build a fire in the summer-kitchen range. I learned to start it with paper, cobs, and then wood. While the fire built, I went out to pump water from the well to fill the reservoir. At just the right time, the damper on the range had to be closed

Opposite (front row, from left): Lois, Lenore, and Elaine Schminke, daughters of Walter and Ilma Schminke, on whose farm the author worked in the summer of 1940. Author Ruth Ullerich Hein holds Ruth Schminke, born that July. Dolores Werning is in the center.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR

to cut down on the draft. Occasionally the roaring in the firepot and stovepipe scared me a little, but I grew accustomed to it.

On Mondays, I used the fire to heat a copper boiler full of water for a huge washing that I hung out on clotheslines by the garden. Later in the week, the fire warmed a dishpanful of bread dough that I had set to rise near the stove. By late afternoon on baking days, ten fresh loaves would stand in line cooling. Magically, one usually disappeared, in buttery slices before supper.

Ten-year-old Dolores Werning and I did a lot of the work together on the Werning farm. But one thing Dolores didn't like to do was to wash one part of the cream separator. A ring of casein had to be removed first by running one or two fingers under it to loosen it from the metal cup. The casein was smelly and slimy. I was stuck with that job, and it always felt especially good to be finished, after all the milk pails, cream cans, and separator parts had been washed, rinsed, and set to dry on the fence in the fresh air and sunshine, ready for the next milking.

THE WERNING FAMILY included two boys about my age. I often heard popular tunes being whistled from the barn at early-morning milkings, and I always imagined that the songs were chosen especially for me, a teen-aged girl hauling in water for the day from the well in the front yard. The whistling made me feel noticed. (Maybe though, they whistled in January, too, when I wasn't there.)

The boys delighted in teasing me. Many's the time my apron strings were untied "accidentally" while I was helping set a meal on the table in the summer kitchen. Yet if a bucket of drinking water was spilled on the floor in the process, someone always helped mop it up and get more water. Working in the summer kitchen was a little like living in a summer cabin: we didn't really have to mop up all the water or sweep up all the sand or grass tracked in from the yard. It was a relaxed, casual way of living amidst the hard work of summertime.

In the Werning family, the parents expected

us to rest when they did, right after lunch. The younger generation found the front porch the coolest place at noon. We sat in rocking chairs to read or stretched out on woven scatter rugs. In the evening, when the day's work was done, we carried the rugs and porch pillows out to the front yard, where we could wind down in air that cooled before the house did. We all talked, sang songs, and enjoyed the time together. We kids were all in our growing-up years, but in the friendly company of the parents sitting in their lawn chairs, nothing more happened than a few stolen handclasps beneath each other's porch pillows.

On Sundays the Werning and Schminke families and other relatives often had gatherings in the nearby town of Newhall. Each family brought food and all the kids. I gradually met enough of the clan to feel at home with them, and it seemed to me that there was more to life than going to my own home (all of five miles away) for the weekend. I had discovered the companionship of friends my own age. After church there were the big potluck dinners followed by conversation and finally, in mid-afternoon, the baseball games.

ALTHOUGH THOSE WEEKENDS did wonders for me as a person, they didn't add to my monetary income. The first summer I worked on a farm, my pay was three dollars a week. It eventually increased as high as five dollars a week, depending on my responsibilities. I saved the money for my upcoming tuition at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls. (Of course, tuition was then as minimal as the wages.)

I realize now that those summers prepared me for college in more ways than financially. I adjusted to being away from home, and I gained valuable work experience that proved useful in a similar job during college working for a Cedar Falls family for three years for room and board. Through association with good people, I had learned a great deal, developed a strong sense of self-worth, and made long-lasting friends in my summer jobs on family farms. □