

Chapter 10 - THE FARM AGAIN

Between the Plow Handles...Dorothy's Chicks...Her Threshing Triumph...Old Doc Passes....Shocked by a Dinosaur...Hog Business...Economic Bump...Corn at \$1.80...The Expensive Speech...Nickel an Hour...The Horse Lifter...The Star Salesman...The Martin House...Farm Bureau Organizer

Ben and Dick leaned into their collars and pulled the plow smoothly through the black earth. The bronzed grackles, their iridescent plumage fresh in the sunlight, searched for grubs along the new furrows. Yellow breasts with black crescents flashed as the meadowlarks sang cheer-i-o-s from the fence posts. Killdeers tinkled along ahead of the plow and vesper sparrows ran through the stubble. A turkey vulture circled overhead. Bobwhites whistled from the pasture.

Between the plow handles, I felt free again. No more concern about coaxing advertisers; no more exasperating struggles with the print shop's balky gasoline engine, nor with the vagaries of the grumbling old press; no payroll to meet come Saturday afternoon! All bills paid, and no debts!

I had no doubt that those furrows would eventually lead to some amply satisfactory end, but also no idea as to what the end might be. To be free, to be confidently at work was enough just then.

For me this was the home neighborhood to which I had merely returned from an absence. If I had been concerned about the adjustment for Dorothy, who had never before spent more than a brief visit or so in the country, I need not have been. She soon made friends with the women of the neighborhood. Vigorously and competently she took on the duties of a farmer's wife. I laughed at her for using a long-handled pitchfork to lift a setting hen off the nest, but she got it done.

She set the old 120-egg kerosene incubator. One forenoon when I rushed into the house on some urgent errand and was about to rush out again she called: "Mac, look here at what I've got!" A hundred fluffy baby chicks nestled in boxes by the kitchen stove. With no more than a glance I said, "Yes, I've seen chickens before," and trotted back to the barn. For that unappreciative remark upon her first major achievement as a countrywoman she never forgave me.

When threshing time came, however, she received her accolade. Threshing dinners were a bit competitive, and as a new cook in the neighborhood Dorothy knew she was going to be judged. When old Stimp Bloodworth, the expert bundle pitcher, paused with knife in one hand and fork in the other to look up at her from his plate, his black eyes gleaming over his beard, and broke the silence to tell her "That's good eatin!"; she knew she had passed with flying colors. Later, when the county agricultural agent always seemed to manage to reach our place just

before noontime, she could be sure of it. He had the whole county to choose from.

Old Doc had grown too old to haul the buggy. He spent his summers lazing in the pasture and occasionally worked up a little gallop, whether to prove his youth or to limber up his old muscles we never knew. Through the winters he was content to stand in his warm stall. The March day came when he could no longer rise to his feet. He was thirty-four years old. The veterinarian pronounced him past all help. We were all wet-eyed and quiet as we made ourselves busy at separate tasks that morning when faithful, gentle Old Doc was gone.

For a time we impressed old Nora, a fat and slow old farm horse, into transportation service. Father was thoughtful about taking us in his car frequently enough for shopping and business errands in town. Shortly, though, a few sales paid for a Model T Ford touring car and thereafter we traveled as proudly as anyone else.

The summer passed busily and the winter went quickly as I fed and looked after a carload of western steers. By early April the beeves were fat and sleek. "Let's go down to Pittsburgh and see them sold," Father proposed. Never having seen Pittsburgh nor the market there, I agreed gladly. The transaction at the stockyards took only an hour or so. "Our train doesn't leave until evening. Shall we go to a show?" Father asked. He seldom missed a chance to see stage entertainment. I showed him the figures I had put down. "These cattle have brought exactly \$26.58 more than we paid for them at Ada last fall. That's our pay for fourteen acres of corn and a year of work. "I don't think we can afford to go to a show," I said. "We had better find something free. Let's go out to the Carnegie Museum. That will cost only carfare."

He laughed and to the museum we went. As we strolled into the first great hall we were startled by a huge mounted skeleton. Farmer-like, we paced off its length, Father on one side and I on the other. As we met under the enormous jaws he said, "Gosh! That thing's bigger than our barn!" "Eighty-four feet, I made it," I said. "And the barn is only seventy-two feet. He would have to curl his tail before the doors could shut." Then we found the sign that described the skeleton as eighty-four and one half feet long. It was a *Diplodocus*, a species of dinosaur.

In all my miscellaneous reading I had never learned that dinosaurs had ever existed. The discovery shocked me, and so occupied my mind that I almost forgot about our unprofitable cattle-feeding winter. To find in my knowledge a gap wide enough to hide a dinosaur was humiliating. If I were so ignorant as never to have heard of dinosaurs it seemed probable that I could be equally illiterate in other and perhaps more significant areas.

The next winter our cattle made a fair profit. Digging through studies farm economics, I found that a bushel of corn could produce about twice as much pork

as beef, and proposed that we abandon cattle and concentrate on hogs. Father was quite willing, although he pointed out the comparative considerations.

"Cattle make a market for our roughage, the corn fodder and hay, which hogs can't use so efficiently. Feeding as we do in winter does not conflict with fieldwork in spring and summer. Cattle give us a lot more manure. But if you would rather work with hogs that's what you ought to do."

We fed a few cattle again but began to acquire registered Poland China breeding stock and to build up a hog herd. Father enjoyed cattle. He soon knew each individual steer in a shipment and all winter watched with keen judgment to see whether each animal met his early estimates as to how it would do. I found an equal pleasure in knowing the swine herd.

I admired the intelligence of hogs. It exceeded that of the cattle and horses. No hog willingly did anything which he did not understand to be in his own interest. Given a choice he was expert in balancing his diet. He never overate his digestive capacity. Given the opportunity he was clean, in fact the cleanest of farm animals for he was the only one who would not foul his own nest.

At farrowing times I watched into the nights to prevent mothers from laying upon newly born pigs, and to see that none became chilled before he had a chance to start to grow. More than once a little fellow, found stiff and nearly breathless in the early morning, was brought to the kitchen. Dorothy would wrap him in flannels, watch him carefully as he warmed by the stove or on the oven door, and feed him warm milk with a spoon. Usually by noon he would be back with his fellows ready to push for his share of maternal bounty. We sought to raise at least eight pigs per sow.

The autumn of 1920 brought a new experience. That spring we had a good start with several fine early litters. I planned to make them weigh 200 pounds or more by early October, and to sell them then ahead of the usual fall break in prices. By early August the pigs were sturdy, healthy shotes. The price then was 22 cents per pound. I knew they would pass the 200-pound mark by October first, and had begun to calculate the returns. October came and the shotes had reached the 200-pound goal. But the price was no longer 22 cents; it was 11 cents. That made it sharply clear that forces far beyond one farmer's control could make or break his agricultural fortunes.

Another great new area for more education was presenting itself. I didn't realize that the Federal Reserve Board in Washington, alarmed at postwar inflation, perhaps not aware as to how far-reaching the effects of its powers might be, had taken steps for the contraction of credit. Over-extended ranchmen two thousand miles from Ohio had been compelled to sacrifice herds to meet their bank obligations. Midwest farmers had had to put animals on the market to pay off the ninety-day notes that normally the banks would have renewed. The price of beef

crashed and prices of hogs went down. The generous returns of my August calculations were cut in half.

During the first summer on the farm, the summer of 1918, I had found hours to tramp the forty acres of pasture that lay along the north side of the place. The dozen acres nearest to the barn were adequate for the milk cows and horses. I proposed that we fence off the larger end, clear out the stumps and remaining trees, and add another sizeable cultivated field to the farm. "It will produce enough," I argued, "to hire a man. Then I can give better attention to the hogs and have a little more free time."

Father and I were operating under the usual "fifty-fifty" landlord-tenant arrangements. He furnished the land, paid the taxes, bought half the seed and fertilizer, paid half the threshing bill, maintained the buildings and fences. I furnished the equipment and labor. We divided the proceeds of all sales half and half. I saw that our volume of sales had to be increased before I could afford a full-time hired man. Without such a man I was certain to be tied continuously to the farm routine. The agreement was not only customary but in this case more than fair because Father contributed his own labor nearly every day. He preferred work to idleness. That fall, for the first time since Father had owned it, corn was sold off the farm. It had been his policy to sell no crop except wheat; everything else left the place wrapped in the hides of livestock. This time, with the twenty-seven new acres, we had more corn than we could expect to feed, and corn was in great demand. Buyers gladly came for it and paid \$1.80 a bushel. "Son, you will never see \$1.80 corn again," Father said. "That's a big price. We can afford to sell some." He was right for more than two decades ahead until war and inflation returned.

He was right about most things, and we seldom failed to come to easy agreement on the farm operations. His generous willingness to let me take the lead in an occasional new venture made our relationship a pleasant and happy one. He was willing to let me make a mistake occasionally, expecting that I would learn faster that way.

One mistake left a deep impression. As soon as corn began to come up it was the practice to go over the field with a spike tooth harrow. This turned thousands of tiny sprouting weed seeds up to the sun and killed them. I had expressed some doubt about the necessity of this job, but he had convinced me by showing a handful of earth in which the sprouts were numerous.

The commencement speaker at Ohio Northern in Ada that spring was to be Senator James E. Watson, my eloquent Indiana friend, and I was anxious that we all go to hear him. The exercises were to begin at 2 p.m. I had a few acres of young corn yet to harrow and had gone out early that morning expecting to finish by noon. Although I had pushed the horses hard, about an acre and a half

remained unfinished when noontime came. That much, I figured, I could easily complete in the late afternoon after we returned from town.

We heard the speech. It was not nearly as eloquent nor exciting as those I had heard from him in Indiana political battles. Before four o'clock we were caught on the way home in a May thunderstorm that delivered a deluge. The cornfield was too wet for more harrowing. More rains followed. By the time the ground began to dry it was too late for the harrow. The foxtail grass gained such a start that cultivators could not cope with it. When the corn ripened those few unharrowed rows bore only nubbins in an otherwise good crop. I had never heard so expensive a speech!

I have mentioned Father's inclination to be employed at something useful. One mild winter morning he drove out to help with some project we had planned. While we were having dinner at noon a blizzard set in -- a cold swirling snow that put an end to outdoor work for that day. After the meal I turned to a desk job. I presumed that Father would read until the weather calmed enough to ease his drive back to town. About three o'clock I discovered that he was not in the house. I started to the barn to look for him where a tinkling sounded in the workshop. He was standing at the bench with a hammer, straightening bent and rusty nails on the piece of railroad iron we used as an anvil. "Dad, you're not making very big wages at that job, are you?" I jibed. He faced me and grinned. Hammer still in hand he dropped his arms and looked straight at me. "Son, I've always thought that when I worked I would like to make a dollar an hour. But I would rather make a nickel an hour than to do nothing and make nothing."

A new series of hired men began to occupy the old house north of the orchard. First came Edward, a genial powerful mulatto whose gentle, nearly white mother kept house for him. He told us he was strong enough to lift a horse. Bending himself low under old Nora, who weighed about 1450 pounds, he tested his position until she was balanced and then raised his shoulders until her four feet swung free from the ground. Nora showed less surprise than we did.

Every visitor to the farm was welcome if he did not take up too much time. The prize among salesman was a handsome blonde lad who came trudging out to the cornfield one forenoon. I stopped the cultivator and let the horses rest until he came up. When he was twenty feet away he called out, with no preliminary greeting, "D'yuh wanta buy a map?" "No," I said, "I've got maps." "This is a nice one." He carried no sample and offered no hint as to whether the map showed Hardin County, Ohio, the U.S., the world or the universe. "No, I've got maps enough to paper a room." "I guess you don't want one then." He stood a minute as though choosing where next to try. "How far have you walked this morning?" I asked. "From Alger." That was about six miles. "How many maps have you sold this morning?" "Ain't sold none." "How many did you sell yesterday?" "Didn't sell none. Sold one the day before, though." "You have picked out a pretty tough

game, haven't you?" He pondered a moment before delivering his clincher. "Yeah, I guess so. Who in the hell wants a map, anyway?"

We enjoyed our neighborhood. Kindly, friendly and interesting folks lived all around us -- Runners and Powells, Shanks's and Mathews's and many others. Old Sam Philips, erect and neat, silver of hair and beard, was a favorite. Dorothy and I invited him to our house for dinner on his eightieth birthday. He made the occasion memorable by remarking that he frequently wondered how people felt when they got old.

At the Grange we had frequent dinners, debates, a minstrel show, a mock trial and other diversions. Dorothy and I were not active in the Huntersville church, but we joined with a lively group of the younger members who organized to build up the Sunday school. Our town friends liked to come out for occasional picnic suppers. For one of these I lighted an old stump in the pasture to make a fire for cooking wieners and warming the prepared dishes. No rain had fallen for weeks and I was afraid to leave the stump burning. The fire extinguisher needed refilling so I brought it out from the house. As I turned the valve the hose slipped from my hand. John Lantz, the telephone company manager, stood in line of squirt. His silk shirt and most of his trousers disintegrated. Fortunately none of the acid from the extinguisher spray struck him in the face.

We planted ornamental shrubs around the house and lawn, and took pride in the appearance of the farm. Wild life was not abundant though we tried to offer it some encouragement. Toward the end of April the first spring I noted a solitary purple martin sitting atop the windmill, and resolved that if he came scouting for a home the next year he would find one. During the following winter I built a two-story eight-compartmented house and found a long pipe on which to mount it. One rainy spring morning the hired man and I set the base of the pipe against a gatepost and started to heave the house into position. As it was halfway up I glanced over my shoulder and there, having arrived unseen, was the year's first martin actually riding up with the house. He spent the day looking it over, disappeared for a day or so, and then returned with a colony of his associates to adorn our premises for the summer.

Don Campbell, still editor of the *Republican Gazette* at Lima, called me over to handle the telegraph desk on special nights. I liked doing that but found no temptation to return to the daily press.

I answered the telephone one January day to be told it was a long distance call. "This is H.P. Miller of Sunbury," the voice said. He was one of the state's best-known farmers. "We are organizing a Farm Bureau in Ohio. We are asking some substantial men to leave their farms to solicit members in other counties. We are paying them \$10 a day and expenses. Could you report to Bucyrus Monday for a week's work in Crawford County?" For \$10 a day just then I should gladly have

reported anywhere: the hired man was reliable and Dorothy was not afraid to stay alone. "If I do get afraid I will drive in and stay with your folks."

The Crawford County campaign for Farm Bureau membership, one of the earliest in the state, had been fairly well organized in advance. Each membership salesman was met every morning by a picked local farmer. Together they called upon as many of the man's neighbors as the day's time permitted. The dues were \$10 a year. We were expected to collect cash if we could; if not, to get the farmer to sign notes for three years. The week turned out to be bitterly cold. Many in the German neighborhoods were skilled in sales resistance. The farmer often managed to be found in the chilliest corner of the barnyard and to be oblivious to hints that we could talk better in a more comfortable spot. We pointed out that organized farmers could develop cooperative marketing methods, buy cheaper, sell more advantageously and exert more legislative power. All of this has since been well proven. Many farmers were skeptical. Results usually depended more upon the influence of the neighbor who was driver for the day than upon the persuasiveness of the visiting solicitor. We managed to sign up five to a dozen or more members a day, and before long the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation was an effective going concern.

I joined other crews in Henry, Hancock and Seneca Counties. Seneca was especially well prepared in advance and our daily totals rose. I was for a few minutes the champion membership solicitor in the state. I had brought in twenty-seven membership applications with all the checks and notes to match. The crew manager went over the report unbelieving until he added up the evidence. He promptly called the state director and shouted the news, and put me on the line to receive congratulations from Uncle George Cooley. Hardly had I hung up when another man walked in and laid down twenty-nine applications, beating my record by two. My championship had lasted about thirty minutes. Next morning I was called home to direct the organization work in Hardin County.

We decided to launch our campaign with a countywide banquet on Saturday night. I learned that the state Federation had employed an executive secretary. He was to take office on the Monday following our dinner. He yielded rather unwillingly to my suggestion that, as his first Farm Bureau undertaking, he should come to Kenton to address our dinner. He later organized and became president of the Nationwide Insurance Company, president of C.A.R.E., Inc., and a highly influential American, Murray D. Lincoln. The campaign itself came off satisfactorily

Our county Farm Bureau shortly set up a livestock shipping association. Shipping at cost, with a percentage deduction for the managers, we began to net one to two cents extra a pound on most of our livestock. The Farm Bureau's cooperative activities have grown to great proportions and in sales, purchases and insurance have been helpful to farmers without, apparently, diminishing the opportunities for efficient private entrepreneurs in the same fields.

The farm meant work, and fun, and what we thought was good living. Each year showed some progress. And we never knew what might turn up next. What did occur was totally unsought and unexpected.