

These notes are about my "growing-up" years as a city kid ,transplanted to an uncle's 1930's farm every summer.I had loving parents, but it was life in the country ,with compassionate,fun loving relatives , that also shaped my later life.

Carol Bacon

SWINGING OVER THE CREEK

My best "early young years were spent on a small farm on the far edge of Steuben County....I am looking back a long way but it is still a very real part of my memories...I will be 86 this summer, and I was a young girl, not quite a teen ager, when my Uncle John, a big jovial man decided to sell his business in Mishawaka and settle with my Aunt near farming cousins of his. The late 1930s were modern by Fort Wayne standards...I went in winter to a big school, and we had a fairly prosperous suburban life. But John's farm area had no electricity yet! So the farm house and the whole way of doing things was really in a time warp and in many ways could it have been a century earlier .

The farm house was four square, large airy rooms, and a big country kitchen..my Aunt had been a farm girl, and was back again at a big iron range...great baked goods!...hand -tub laundry, no indoor plumbing, and a cold pantry and dirt basement for canned goods, and pies....John had a really a small farmstead of twenty or so acres, let out for corn, plus two cows, two goats, a flock of chickens, one sow and piglets.... and a horse for me! And Guinea fowl on the fence as warning "sirens.!My horse was my great passion, and every day I rode, visiting neighbors for miles around. John's cousins had a big farm three miles away and it was an easy stop for lemonade...In no time we had added a horse and a foal or two....I rode four miles for shoeing to the next village and Mr Hand fired up his great forge and would make four custom shoes for "Dukie"..I still remember the special ring of the hammer on the anvil as he did the shaping....

I liked my independence in the country, and my relatives really opened another life for me ..each summer a "tent show" would set up in a field and every night for a week, another play was on..this was probably not great theatre, but considering that entertainment was mainly homemade on the farm, it was a treat! Or we could go to three different villages for free shows....an old movie was projected on the side of a general store, plus a cowboy serial..halfway through, lights went on for shopping....In post recession times, it was fun entertainment...streets were blocked off and we sat on blankets with locals, catching up on news.

During summer, local groups had ice cream socials, piling high big dishes, full of "heavy cream"-ice cream, and since John had relatives, we also were invited to reunions...lots of visiting on a farm house lawn, endless food, and big hand freezersful of different ice creams..About weekly, we would drive to a "big" town for shopping....John had a really old Hudson terra plane car, and we were never sure we would make it there and back! My mother said that he had had beautiful cars and horses as a younger man, so this was a mystery..he also used its backseat for hauling grain and piglets at times!

John and Mary had had no children of their own, and I benefited from getting some of the fun things that they dreamed up ...the farm yard was on a very high bank over the creek. I arrived once from the City to find a swing suspended from a big elm..I really was terrified because it was a long way down from that swing seat to the water! I heard that my Aunt had swung awhile, lost momentum, and spent hours waiting for rescue..too much of a "fun" thing! John and I brought home an old sleigh..it had newspapers on the seat from 1880, headlining "Florida as Utopia if Someone Can see its Worth"! We had some good winters with it, using Daisy, John's old mare. But neighbor boys wrecked it in a stony field... We did have several nice buggies, and a lady's carriage with a fringe on top..In those days my relatives were unconcerned about me driving my little brother three miles to the village for ice cream! Once in awhile, though, a wheel would come off or bend and Uncle would come to wherever in town we had tied up, and find blacksmith or carpenter to do repairs

My Aunt really was not too isolated in some ways...every week, a grocery truck would drive in well loaded with canned staples and for baking and canning supplies....no fresh produce, because the farm gardens in summer and fall supplied all that was needed...I visited Lily and Laurie, John's cousins when they were deep into canning for the winter ahead....their big kitchen was steamy with the fragrance of big kettles of tomatoes, corn, apples, and even pot roasts! All was done without electricity, the old way, during those hot summer months, then stored away in the cool basement for winter.

We had wonderful pies and rolls and soups on the range...but occasionally a bakery van came by..we always found something great, especially caramel iced pastries, and cinnamon bread..Mary made cloverleaf rolls for her Sunday chicken dinners, and the old favorite, a pudding of layered bananas and crumbled nabisco cookies!..maybe a country version of English Trifle?

But there was another side to life in the country and it helped me really understand that many people did not have my advantages...John had a good friend, Tom, and his family.. he was a tenant farmer for a prosperous local man, and he barely made a farm living.I got to know the three children, and shared some good times with them.Once John and I were invited for supper and all that was on the table was oatmeal....we refused kindly, and I was quite shaken by it..I had not known these things...that poverty was real, and that people with so little could be so generous...

When my City school was on vacation, 800 students, I had a school day with those children..I got to ride their old horse along with them, to a brick one room school! Each row was a grade, and the teacher had older children help younger kids on lessons...the front desk had a stove nearby, and kerosene lanterns on a side table. At the end of their school year my family and I were invited to a special event in the village to hear the "progress report" from each little school!

We had had fun in the haymow and barns at Tom's farm when I was young, but I saw less of the family as summers went by..the children had more work to do for neighboring farmers...a tragedy happened..to Allie, the youngest, who fell through the trap door, or hay chute, in the haymow and became paralyzed..John said the family had no insurance, and very little money for her care.I knew that my Aunt often had Tom's wife come to help her in small ways, and then I understood that the family would not accept charity outright.

John took me one day to visit a young widow.Her husband had died in a tractor accident ..I will never forget the fragrance in the little farmhouse....every available table and ledge held a black raspberry pie from a neighbor..

In the country everyone one went to an auction...small farms were going out because the recovery from the recession was slow . It was a courtesy to go whether you bought or not, though John was keen on bidding for boxes of unknown contents, upsetting my Aunt!At one auction, the elderly farmer sat in the window of his bedroom and watched the last of his possessions go ..I had not had any experience with things like that...my grandparents were still quite young..Again John paid his respects to the old fellow, and bought an old chair he really didn't need..

The next village had a pharmacy, gas station, and grocery store, and a cafe popular for its one pinball machine and great high calorie breakfasts!But also across the street was a little shop John always went to first...I did not know why for a long time.On the shelves were a few canned goods, spaced far apart, to make it look as if there were more items than there were. On the other wall, a lending library of assorted books and paperbacks, rental at 2 cents a day.. At the young couple looked so old and worn....the new grocery across the street was going to drive them out, I could see.John had

retired from the grocery business, and wanted to lend moral support to the poor fellow.

As the war years moved forward, electricity did come to the farm. I was sorry to see that the huge elm by the barn had been cut down for the wires. Now there was a radio in the kitchen, and an old washing machine by the stove. It became harder to get gasoline for the trip from the City. When I was 16, the horse we had raised from a foal died from a virus. I lost a great part of my life. My Uncle decided to sell the farm, and he and my Aunt moved to share his cousin's big farmhouse. I had learned so much about generosity, not just the kind within families but generosity toward others. I owe a debt to those years. I wish my children had had that privilege. Once I asked my Mother why John had sold the farm after just a few years, and she told me that it was because I could not be there anymore... I hope he knew how much that meant to me!

I have many more stories about that time, about the black couple who had a Sunday cafe on their farmhouse porch for "Southern" chicken dinners the farmers loved. About card parties on cold winter nights, about wedding couples serenaded by noisy-pan beating. About annual gypsy gatherings. Maybe another letter! Carol Bacon July 1, 2014