

Our Nary Mansion

From 1930 to 1943 we lived in the house that my grandfather built about 1910 and where he lived with my grandmother and father for about 10 years. The house was smaller then with two rooms downstairs and an attic. It was enlarged in 1930 when we moved to Nary from Sioux City, Iowa and built two rooms in a lean-to type addition on the south side. The attic was divided into two rooms and used by Virgil and Luella as bedrooms.

The walls of the downstairs rooms and the attic were covered with cardboard from packing boxes and had colorful wallpaper attached to it with a paste made of flour and water. The space between the wall and the cardboard proved to be a haven for mice that used the space for transit tunnels and for living quarters. The flour paste must have provided a source of sustenance because there was a continuous sound of scratching and chewing until we discovered mouse-bait. One unfortunate mouse that scratched and rustled a little too long was tracked and killed by my father by stabbing through the cardboard with the scissors, leaving a trail of small holes across the wallpaper that ended where a hole was gouged in the cardboard and the mutilated mouse removed.

Two wood stoves heated the house: a large iron range in the kitchen and a “barrel stove” in the living room, which was simply a 55 gallon drum that had iron legs, a door and a stove pipe fitting bolted to it. There was a small alcove behind the kitchen range that was by far the warmest place in the house, where I would often crawl for privacy and warmth. The barrel stove would glow red if enough wood was thrown into it. I had a scar on my wrist for many years when I burned it by pressing in too close one cold winter morning. For added warmth on the coldest nights our mother would cover us with old overcoats. The kitchen was the warmest room in the house but a bucket of water sitting in the corner would often freeze solid overnight.

It was my job to keep the wood box in the small porch adjacent to the kitchen filled with wood that was sawn from the poplar trees that grew like weeds around the farm. Popple, as we called it, is a poor fuel, especially if it is green, but we never stayed far enough ahead of the supply to allow it to dry out and season. Consequently, we tossed wood into the barrel stove when still green and listened to

the hiss of steam as it slowly and reluctantly burned. One of the strongest memories I have is of Virgil seated at the dining room table reading aloud to us by the light of an Aladdin kerosene lamp as the barrel stove crackled and emitted a pleasant warmth.

Each autumn the popple trees were cut into stove lengths with the saw rig (a large circular saw blade connected by a drive belt to an old Model T engine mounted on a trailer) and were thrown into a pile that assumed a pyramid shape that rapidly covered with snow as the winter progressed. Although I was told repeatedly to dig through the snow at the base of the pile to remove each ice-encrusted block of wood, the temptation was usually too great and instead of digging in the snow at the base, I would climb up the side of the pile and toss down blocks of wood to fill the woodbox. But woe unto me if the woodbox ran out of wood on a cold winter night. It happened too often I'm afraid. My father once remarked that the only time the woodbox really had enough wood was on Christmas Eve, which I'm sure was true given my usual lack of enthusiasm for this job.

A drafty outhouse sat a hundred feet from the back door. Two useful implements were kept in the outhouse: an old broom to sweep snow from the bench seat and a large wood club to reduce the size of the frozen stalagmite that slowly grew upward throughout the winter.

At a 45 degree angle of a line to the outhouse and slightly further from the house was the well that supplied water for the household and for the livestock. At 200 feet it was one of the deepest wells in the region but also one unable to produce a strong flow of water. A windmill that sat on a knoll a hundred feet above the well-house supplied the power by a set of cables to raise the water to the surface. A 5x5 foot excavation, about six feet deep was made around the 2 inch well pipe. It was lined with large rocks cemented into place and covered with a wood platform that had a trapdoor. The purpose of this was to protect the well pipe from freezing during the winter. A wood plug that was inserted in a small hole drilled into the well pipe at the base of the excavation was removed on cold nights allowing the water to drain out. Then when the windmill (or hand pump) brought water to the surface the plug was reinserted. A serious problem occurred if we forgot to remove the wood plug and drain the well pipe in the evening (or if the temperature

dropped below -40 F and the pipe froze even below the drain hole). The well pipe could be thawed with a blow torch, or by burning a forkful of straw stacked up against the pipe. I preferred the latter method because the blow torch used gasoline and always scared me. But burning straw also was hazardous. The well house caught fire and was destroyed when Donnie attempted the burning-straw method. When the well pipe thawed we were greeted with the welcome sound of water spraying out of the drain hole. But now the wood plug had to be reinserted which required holding your breath long enough to climb down into the smoke-filled well and finding the drain hole in the thick, acrid smoke. A few times I could not hold my breath long enough and just barely got out, choking and coughing.

It was also my job to carry buckets of water from the well to the house, a job I avoided whenever I could. One summer day in about 1938, I was working on my bicycle in the backyard, ignoring my mother's pleas for a pail of water. Virgil, who had been deathly ill for several months with a burst appendix, suddenly appeared in the doorway and said, "you get that water". He had been bedridden since the onset of his illness and had a frail and ghostly appearance. Needless to say, our mother got her pail of water within a few minutes.

Virgil lived in this house from 1930 to 1942 when he was drafted into the army. All the books he listed in his daily journal were read in the kitchen, dining room or in his bed upstairs. Most of his daily journal was likely written at either the kitchen or dining table.

Wendell Tangborn

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