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Hillcrest Farm

This is our home...
We cannot live anywhere else
We were born here and our fathers are buried here....
We want this place and not any other....

CECILIO BLACKTOOTH
Native American, Turn of the Century

I remember clouds of blossoms in an apple orchard in late May. I remember puffs of breath from workhorses in winter. I remember the dark, dank topsoil of plowed spring fields. I remember black and white cows grazing on a green hill in summer. I remember meandering cow paths worn by generations of Holsteins. I remember August oat fields rustling and shimmering like golden silk taffeta. I remember the way my father farmed his fifty acres.

My parents' land, Hillcrest Farm, always possessed a history for me. Across the road in the woods by a swamp an old cabin was falling apart, log by log. Our own home was built around a log cabin by farmers too thrifty to tear the structure down.

I also had clues about the Native Americans who lived on the land I knew. My country school teacher, Mrs. Aldrich, told me of gathering arrowheads in a field near our one-room school. An Indian tribe, long gone, had camped there. She strolled the bare fields of spring when the frost heaved up the soil and new arrowheads. I wish I could find my own arrowheads, but my mother says any remaining have been crushed by the heavy tread of modern farm machinery.

My curiosity continued about the people who occupied my father's land before the Europeans came. I knew my maternal German great-grandparents immigrated from Metz and my fraternal Swedish grandparents immigrated from Smaland, but the Native Americans who sculpted the arrowheads were a mystery.

When I was in my forties, I learned about the Native Americans who dwelled on my father's land. Ancient peoples built mounds near Mary Lake--the destination of many of my Swedish grandmother's walks. The lake is even visible from the highest point of my father's farm, but before visiting the Minnesota History Center I had never known of the mounds.

When Europeans came in the 1700s, Buffalo township was filled with huge hardwoods, fruit trees, ponds and mosquitoes as part of the Big Woods growing throughout

Minnesota and Wisconsin. No sign of the mound builders existed, but the Mdewakaton Dakota dwelled there as they had for centuries. The domination of the Mdewakaton was halted by the Ojibwe, pushed west by Europeans.

According to *Buffalo* by Marcia Paulsen, to stop the war between the Dakota and the Objibwe, the US army created a buffer zone between the two tribes--the Dakota to the north and the Objibwe to the south. Displaced Winnebagos from Iowa were placed in the buffer zone. One Winnebago village was located where downtown Buffalo now stands. In 1855 the treaty was revoked, and the Winnebagos were displaced once again to the Blue Earth River area.

No one knows if Dakotas or Winnebagos carved Mrs. Aldrich's arrowheads because the campsite is not excavated. Since the land is near a new high school, its value is said to have tripled. Soon new houses will sprout instead of corn and arrowheads.

All signs of the Native Americans have vanished on Hillcrest Farm, but in the pasture piles of rocks and boulders attest to the hard labor of the pioneers clearing the land. Unaware of their meaning, my sisters and I played on these rocks. A set of three triangularly-shaped rocks became the horse rocks; consequently each of us had her own mount. A group of bigger, flat rocks became the house rocks when we played with the three Aldrich girls, my country school teacher's nieces. With the privacy of an estate, a vaulted ceiling as high as the sky, and a lush green carpet as far as the eye could see, we had a palace no town girl could ever claim.

Years later, I learned of the history of Hillcrest Farm. In 1918 August Williams, my father's uncle, lived in Magnet, Nebraska, like my father's family. August traveled to Buffalo for an unknown reason and bought Hillcrest Farm from John Larson. Although its situation on a hill made it harder to farm, August liked the peat in the meadow. That made superior alfalfa, compensating for the lay of the land. The next year, my father's family followed and moved to another farm south of Buffalo.

My grandmother, Hulda Mainquist, looked forward to being with Anna, her sister and August's wife. Nearby Mary Lake reminded her of Sweden, and not too far from her farm was a Swedish Lutheran church. The Mainquists were the only Swedes among mostly Yankees in their former home of Magnet, Nebraska. Sometimes the Mainquist children were teased for being yellow Swedes in Magnet, but it never happened in Buffalo.

Uncle John, Hulda's and Anna's brother, bought the farm from the Williams, but he was forced to sell it to my father's parents due to bad land speculation. Two years after my father's father died, in 1931, my father started working for his mother on Hillcrest Farm.

He farmed and gardened Hillcrest Farm until his death at age 84 because his life was rooted in the soil and the seasons. His favorite time of year was spring when the last dirty patches of snow melt away. It looked like Mother Nature forgot to mop up her mess.

When the snow was long gone and the grass was grown enough to withstand grazing, Dad let the calves and their mothers out from the barn into the pasture. Since the winter calves had spent all their lives in the calf pen, this was their first taste of physical freedom. As they left the barnyard, they ran down the hill, kicked up their legs and waved their short, furry tails in the air. Sometimes their mamas forgot themselves and kicked up their bony behinds, too. Dad showed this spectacle to me alone one fine May day.

While Dad liked to see the snow go, he didn't like naked black soil. He wanted to see something growing. "I guess I'm like an Indian. I don't like to see bare ground." As Dad and I rode horseback together in the spring, we liked to see the neat rows of bright green corn sprouting against the lush black earth. A dog--Buck, Sam or Lucky--followed, usually disappearing out of sight and then returning to us from his exploration.

Dad liked planting corn with the hope of a good weather and a good team of mules in the spring. Dad gently guided them in their tasks and sometimes let them schedule the rest and lunch breaks. Allowing mules such privileges might seem sentimental, but telling a mule to work when it was tired or hungry was useless. In turn, the mules performed their work reliably and steadily--for the most part.

One spring when they ran away, Dad couldn't stop them, and he fell forward from his seat in the back into the heart of his corn planter. He was dragged a distance, and big, red bruises spread all over his body. His corn planter suffered loss, too. Although Dad looked hard and he knew his land, parts of his corn planter are buried forever in the black soil.

Dad got distasteful orders from his doctor to stay in bed and not plant corn. Like most farmers, my father didn't like to sit still for more than an afternoon. Farmers are not good long-term convalescents. However, May is an even worse time to be confined because farmers want to get their crops planted as soon as possible to provide time for ripening before the first fall frost. Despite the terrible timing of the mule's runaway, my father forgave them quickly because even the best of animals fail. It took longer to convince him to follow the doctor's orders.

Dad liked the gentle plodding of the mules' hooves on the soft earth, the low-pitched jingle of the harness, and the steady mechanical rhythm of the corn planter. He tied the lines of the mules' harness behind his back and guided the corn planter with his hands. One spring his brother Roy helped with planting corn. Dad would go back and forth once, and then Roy took the lines. When Roy returned, Dad took the lines. My mother said, "Those were two happy men."

My sister Laurie tried planting corn, but since she couldn't drive the mules straight, her row was crooked. Dad chuckled and Laurie slipped off the corn planter seat. She said, "I thought Dad might be embarrassed if his neighbors saw he had crooked rows of corn."

Dad took pride in what was called checking corn (planting corn in an even grid pattern). He told me one spring he checked seventy acres of corn for himself and a couple neighbors. That was more land than he owned. It took a lot of skill to earn his neighbors' trust to check their corn. If the corn wasn't checked properly, it would be pulled out when it was cultivated (weeded by a device that dug sharp spades in the ground and pulled by a horse or tractor).

Checked corn was planted in an even grid or checkerboard to be cultivated both east-west and north-south. This was important because chemical weed-killers did not exist. My father was fond of pointing out that eliminating chemical weed-killers could reduce pollution. His brother Roy said that in horse-cultivators, farmers rode closer to the ground and got more weeds than in tractor-driven cultivators.

It was a precise process that required a good team and a good teamster. A wire with regular knots was set in the ground for each row. The row always had to begin in the same position between knots to keep the planting even. Each knot triggered a device in the corn planter which dropped a seed. If each row was not begun in the same position, whole rows of corn would be lost in cultivating. It was just as important the mules or horses walked in a straight line.

Dad said farmers were careful how they checked corn, not only for the sake of the farm crops, but for their professional reputations as well. On Sundays after church, farmers would drive their families across the countryside and note which fields were checked with the most skill. I have a feeling my fathers' were among them.

As a kid, I liked the summer ritual of putting up hay. The noise of the machinery, the change in the fields, and new company was all for the having without even going down the road. One boy my father hired, Denny Husom, even gave me a ride on his motorcyle.

For my father it offered an opportunity to escape the isolation of mechanized farming. With horse farming, individual farmers usually didn't have enough horsepower, manpower or equipment to do many tasks by themselves. With mechanized farming, farmers didn't need each other, with the exception of haying, combining and putting up silage. Roy and my father shared a hay baler, thus lessening their investment in farm equipment and providing an opportunity for company as well.

When the alfalfa bloomed with purple flowers, Dad listened to WCCO for the weather report the next three days. He sat at the kitchen table and cocked his ear to the radio. My sisters and I sat silently because this was something important--not like a Northwest Orient ad or the songs "Danke Schein" or "Yellow Bird."

When Dad was fairly certain it wouldn't rain, he called Roy to come over to hay in three days or so. Then he cut the hay with his mower, producing powerful scent like a field of freshly mown grass. Then he ran the rake over it to lift the grass for drying and form it into rows for feeding into the hay baler.

If the weather stayed good, he called the neighborhood high school boys or perhaps his grandnephews in town to help with the haying. The young men looked forward to using their newly acquired strength to do men's work and earn wages--usually a dollar an hour. My dad always had enough help so no one would work too hard in the hot sun.

For my part, the young men were exciting. Our home and our neighborhood were dominated by females. I had two sisters and no brothers, and my country school had only two boys. There were the three Aldrich girls, two Sellin girls, two Meyer girls and three Johnson girls our age, but none had approachable brothers. We usually spent our holidays with Uncle Allan and Aunt Valdis and their only child at home, Linnea, another girl. Even our dog and our riding horses were female, and Dad didn't even keep a rooster or bull. Dad had no complaints--he liked women.

Our isolation from males made me helpless in front of Pat Johnson. One haying day, I made cookies and Kool-Aid for the afternoon snack. I didn't stir the Kool-Aid enough so the powder sank to the bottom of the pitcher. Dad and Roy were too polite to say anything, but not Pat Johnson, a neighbor boy. He laughed and teased me. I was embarrassed and bewildered even though I was old enough to make cookies. In a way haying brought me out of the isolation of my world as much as it did my father's.

When I was in sixth grade, my mother started attending college classes. I became the family cook because I was the oldest. I also helped in the house because I was trained first, while my sister Sheri helped in the barn. My early training eventually led to a major in home economics, but I envied my sister because her work outside seemed more exciting.

As an adult, I wanted to help Dad with haying, but I was never home at the right time. Finally one August evening, Dad was putting up straw, and I got to drive the tractor that pulled the hay baler that pulled the hay rack. Dad started the tractor, showed me how to turn and explained the hand signals.

It was so much fun to work together--a feeling I never get with my computer in my office cubicle. When he made his hand signals, I could see all his gold fillings--even from the tractor--because he was so happy. Later, he proudly told my mother I did a good job--which she relayed to me. I felt like a real farmer's daughter. Maybe Dad felt like he had a daughter who was a farmer, too.

In the fall my main connection to the farm was the apple orchard. When my mother had three little girls, she made twenty-eight quarts of applesauce in one day from those trees. (She explained that she made her first batch of applesauce before breakfast.) In high school, I made apple pie and apple butter from those trees as well. When I picked the apples for my recipes from my parents' orchard, I felt connected to the sky, the earth and thrifty farm homemakers before me.

Recently, Mom, Dad and I made homemade pies--with hand-mixed and hand-rolled crust--for the freezer. Our record number of pies on one afternoon was twelve. I decided to go for quantity because no matter how many pies we made we only had to clean up once. Mom and Dad didn't argue.

I assigned Dad to peel the apples with the mechanical peeler because I believed men tend to object less to domestic tasks if they involve tools. I also assigned him to pick apples because he would learn to pick the best apples for the peeler. My mother's job was to mix the filling and assemble the pie crusts and filling. She fluted the edges of the crust with her two thumbs as skillfully as any state fair blue ribbon winner. While every crest in the crust was the same size, it was clearly made by a fine cook and not a machine.

I made the crust because it's tricky, but I had training and practice as a home economics major and Helen Mainquist's daughter. You had to put in the right amount of water--which varied--and be careful not to stir it too much. If the crust was too moist, it would stick to the rolling pin; if the crust was too dry, it would crack.

When we finished, the kitchen was a mess with apple peels and cores and flour. My apron was covered with flour, too. We cheerfully cleaned for we had harvested the bounty from the apple trees planted the first summer of my parents' marriage.

When I was younger, my parents performed other farm rituals to prepare our home for winter. My mother's cellar was filled with a rainbow of jars containing her peaches, peas, plums, grape jelly, rhubarb conserve (a jam with walnuts), tomatoes, tomato jelly, tumeric pickles, watermelon pickles, crab apple pickles, apple butter, apple jelly, and applesauce. The shelves of shiny, clean Ball jars filled with produce contrasted with the rough, hand-hewn stone walls of the cellar. My mother's harvest seemed like buried treasure.

In September my father harvested potatoes, carrots and squash from the garden and carried them in the cellar. He put the carrots in a bushel basket of sand and the apples in the well pit to preserve them. All this produce came from my parents' garden and orchard in late summer and early fall. When summer came again, the jars would be empty and wait for harvest, just as my father's hay mow would be empty and wait for harvest.

My father threw chunks of dry wood through a window into the wood house until it was filled. In the winter, he carried the wood from the wood house to the wood burner in the kitchen oven. While my father was still dressed warmly, he carried the ashes out. One day it was so cold the windows were frosted and the light in the kitchen reflected the white frost. I played on the kitchen floor near the wood stove because it was warm there. When I looked up, I saw my father in his brown leather jacket and plain broad face. I felt so lucky my big strong father carried the wood and the ashes out to protect me from the cold.

My two sisters' and my bedrooms had no heat other than the heat that rose through the register in my youngest sister's bedroom. Consequently, we always slept with at least two heavy wool blankets on our beds. When my mother bought us soft plaid flannel sheets, I felt lucky because as soon as I got in bed I was warm. Before my body heat had to warm the stiff percale sheets. Once my body was in a fetal position, I didn't budge until morning.

My father lined straw bales along the foundation of our house to insulate it. He also piled straw on my mother's flower garden to protect her plants from the harsh cold. When Mary Wrynn, a first-grade teacher, stayed with my family, my father always warmed up her car in the morning to protect her from the cold, too.

The hay mow in the barn protected the straw and hay to bed and feed my father's dairy cows. The hay mow also provided me and my sisters a seasonal playground. We crawled through narrow secret passages in the bales and built forts by stacking them. Our most famous hay fort was five file bales high, higher than we had ever built before. The three Aldrich girls helped us, and Annette, the oldest, suggested calling it the "Lalapoluza" after the huge Bridgeman's ice cream treat.

For my younger sisters and me, the winter meant new sports as well as a new playground. We lay in the snow and spread our arms and legs to make snow angels. Sometimes we made snowmen and snow forts. The best part was when the snow formed a hard crust and we walked on drifts nearly as tall as we were or even taller.

My parents always made certain we had ice skates so we could skate on the nearby ponds and stream with the neighbor girls--the Aldrichs, the Meyers and the Johnsons. Sometimes Dad surprised us by putting on his skates and joining us on the ice.

As a teenager I wanted to test myself. One warm winter the snow melted, flooding south side of my father's meadow. Then a quick freeze created a skating rink over an acre in size. I raced from one end of the rink to the other to challenge myself.

I became bored with testing myself and decided to test Mother Nature instead. I crawled under the fence to the pasture. Tufts of brown grass poked through the ice, and large air bubbles were visible beneath. I intuitively knew air bubbles mean thin ice, but I didn't let it bother me. I was a teenager; nothing would happen to me.

I did fall through the ice. Since the water was no more than a foot deep, only my skates and the bottom of my red stretch pants were soaked. The water was cold, but I worried more about what I would catch from my parents than about catching pneumonia. The cold didn't scare me because as a farm kid I often took physical risks--swinging on ropes, climbing up trees, and jumping down hay stacks, but my father always became furious when his daughters endangered themselves because he felt it was his duty to protect the females under his care.

I walked the length of the meadow and up the hill. Luckily it was a warm day--at least by Minnesota standards. I sneaked back in the house so my parents wouldn't find out. Teenager or not, I knew better than to tell my parents I had done something so stupid. I still skate, but not on thin ice.

One special winter day, my mother made hanging baskets from empty grapefruit halves. She filled them with a peanut butter mixture to feed the birds, and Dad got out the step ladder and hung them in the apple tree outside the kitchen window. Soon birds darted from basket to basket as big soft snowflakes quietly drifted from the sky. I thought I had the best mother in the world.

In later years my father and mother didn't do as much preparation for winter, but Dad continued to place straw bales along the foundation of the house and put up wood snow fence (a fence made from laths and wire to stop drifiting snow) along the driveway. My mother canned applesauce, whole apples, and crab apple pickles because my father liked them. Sometimes, I can still hear my father chirp, "Winter's coming! Winter's coming!" in pleasant anticipation of the farm rituals.

Now that my father is dead, the farm has changed. There is no wood snow fence; my mother doesn't can apples. I hope someday I can repair a grain wagon that has rotting wood and bowed sides and perhaps I can mount it on my father's runners for a winter ride behind a team.

Large, noisy tractors tread the soil my father once quietly and gently cultivated with his mules. The soil is packed, and the earth worms are crushed, making it harder for sprouts to make their way from the earth to the sky. The ancient cow paths faded away because the fences are no longer secure enough to pasture cattle. The wood parts of my father's horse-drawn equipment are rotting, and the metal parts are rusting.

What could I expect? That if I scratched "MAINQUIST" deep enough in the soil that the wind would never blow it away. I knew it would end someday, but I never believed my healthy, 84 year old father would die and take his farming with him.

I think about the Native Americans who were exiled from the forests and lakes of Buffalo to the prairies of Nebraska and the Dakotas. Their grief must have been much greater than mine because their loss was arbitrary and unfair while losing my father is a sorrow almost everyone must bear. However, our losses were similar in one respect. When the Native Americans were pressured to farm on the prairie instead of hunt in the woods, they lost a large part of their culture, just as I lost much of mine when I lost my father.

File name: neighbor

Working with the Neighbors

Dad often said people became neighbors by working together. He regretted that people are isolated because they no longer continue this custom. Even though farm labor before mechanized agriculture was hard and repetitive, it gave my father fond memories. He said,

Otten, Westphal and I shoveled [snow on the road] together. Sometimes we wouldn't shovel and we'd just drive our bobsleds to town. One time we shoveled pret' near a week before we cleared the road. It was hard work, but when we got together we visited.

We took turns hauling cream cans to town, too. We'd take cream in three times a week a week in milkcans. (The skim milk was fed to the hogs.)

Down in the pasture, Buskey and me [sic] cleaned out dirt that had settled in the ditch. We worked at that pret' near a week so the water would run better.

When threshed, we took a hay wagon and a team of horses. That was neighborhood. We threshed with Herman Westphal, Jim Aldrich, Burt Bjorkland, Frank Aldrich, and Walter Denny. We switched from one place to another. That was quite a few men.

We took a team to pick up the shocks in the field to haul them in. There were two men with the machine--an engineer and a separator man. We figured about six teams and then men to take the grain away and put it in the grainery. The engineer drove the tractor and helped the separator. I was always hauling bundles of oats from the field.

The horses minded the guy who was driving them. He could talk to them from the ground. The horses got used to it; they got trained. One team, Buck and Belle, went so good. Sometimes the horses wanted to go into the oat shocks to eat them. They'd run over them, maybe.

The women made lots of food, and they gave the men coffee and sandwiches in the afternoon. That took a lot of food and quite a bit of help. Women had some help in the kitchen so there were at least two women in the kitchen. At Burt Bjorklund's they had three women in the kitchen. Sometimes the women would do it by themselves. They made pie, meat, potatoes, vegetables.

We always ate in the dining room. We washed outside before we came in the house. We put out a basin with water and towels.

Dad talked about governor's whistle on top of the threshing machine. It was the signal of upcoming excitement. He could remember watching all the teams of horses pulling bundle wagons coming up the roads. He said the horses could remember where the water tanks were on each farm of the thrashing ring from late summer to late summer.