

John

While we 12 grandchildren ate our way through our farm summers, we also threw hay bales, cut weeds, hauled or piled wood or sacks of grain or potatoes, gathered food. Between tasks there was much to amuse us. We swam in a half-dozen nearby lakes, made a raft to sail on the pond, built a tree house in a massive beech in the woods. I loved to smash glass bottles dumped on the stone-pile, especially the gallon bleach bottles.

The huge lawn in front of the house made a perfect baseball diamond, volleyball or badminton court. We played croquet there too. Cousin Ron climbed high into the driveway elms to secure swings with a thrilling arc. We rode horses at a riding stable down the road. A few miles away was a roller skating rink— an Art Deco relic with wall murals of butterfly maidens with Jean Harlow eyebrows.

We could always take a hike in the woods, but we did have to be careful. While there were no poisonous snakes here or poison oak or ivy, nature was still wild here with bear and badger, weasel and fox. We once were tramping through a bog and stepped in a nest of hornets. The swarm followed our screams over a mile home, and stung us each five or six times.

We learned never to complain about rain to a farmer. Rainy days we played games like Chinese checkers, pinochle, caroms on the inlaid wooden board that's still slid behind the sofa. Our older sister read to my brother and I for hours at a time, often till her voice played out. There were fairy tales, myths and legends, and a generous dose of pulp mysteries. We loved the Elcho library— standards were so shockingly lax, they even lent Nancy Drew!

Music was a big part of farm life as well. If aunt Marge was visiting, she might be persuaded to play the old upright piano in the living room. If not, my brother and me would sing while our sister pounded out what chords she could for the old songs in the book under the piano seat. Often we were content just to sing a cappella camping songs on the front porch swing, and watch the rain come down.

When it was cold and miserable, my brother Jim and I might play records. The victrola in the dining room played 78's, and my aunts' old Glenn Miller and Andrews Sisters records from WWII were there. We even dragged Grandfather John's records from the 1910s in from the garage— vaudeville monologues in dialect, "There's a Long, Long Trail Unwinding" in a pinched nasal whine, "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." I imagined how well, in the old

days, Grandpa John must have understood the lyric: "Fortune's always hiding, I've looked everywhere." My brother and I played the scratchy old records till Grandma Florrie must have nearly lost her mind. But, she thought, as long as they're out of trouble.

Grandfather John Follstad was the son of an old man, and himself old before he and Florrie had children. Despite that, Mother remembers spirited family basketball games in the kitchen, a hoop on the wall next to the wood stove. He had long been an active, well-liked and highly regarded member of his community, had served the Town Council many years.

Grandfather John never sat in a chair with a back, he sat at the head of the table on a stool. As a child I had heard enough stories about "Honest John" walking five miles to return a penny to confuse him with Lincoln. I'd heard of Grandfather's vaunted sense of humor, but by the time my brother and I were old enough to know him, we saw mainly stubborn silent rage. The indignities the economics of his time and old age had brought to this once proud man were hard for him to accept.

I now also see Grandfather's frustration at our growing capacity for mischief and his waning ability to prevent it. He said he was keeping us from danger, but we thought that was mostly imagined. Well, I did once have an accident playing in the ruins of a chicken coop. I stepped on the end of a board and the other end catapulted into my face. A nail pierced my eye socket, went in over an inch and just grazed my eyeball. In any case, as Grandpa John entered his 80s he became a crotchety menace to the schemes of suburban grandchildren set loose in the country.

Grumbling to himself, Grandpa would shuffle from one of our favorite forbidden haunts to another, hoping to catch and roust us. He came after us once for pulling down apples in the orchard, but stepped squarely on the wrong end of a rake we'd dropped in retreat. It sprang up instantly to whack him smack between the eyes so hard it snapped his glasses in two. Chaplin couldn't have done it better. Our stifled laughter brought us nearly to tears. "John's got a headache," Grandma Florrie reported, and he sat out the rest of the afternoon.

One place full of allure was the "old house." Grandfather had built it in 1904 when he first cleared and settled our land. When John and Florrie built a new home on the property, Mom and her sisters were at first allowed to play

in the empty house. But John soon had a more practical use. He built bins on the first floor for crop storage.

Though Grandfather took a dim view, nothing felt better than to squirm about in the deep heaps of golden oats on a hot August day. The cool grain boiled around my arms and between my fingers. But it was the upstairs we found most fascinating—our own haunted house, on those occasions when the coast was clear. Since there was no attic in the new house, anything saved ended up here— if it could survive the vermin that swarmed when the oats were in storage. This aspect only added to the excitement.

The windows had long been shuttered. In the dark, a shaky scoop of light from a flashlight led us up the broken staircase to heave open the heavy door. We picked our way through a dim and menacing clutter, past the sleigh, root beer barrel, washtub wringer, the old victrola to our favorite attraction. In the farthest, darkest corner, the remains of Grandfather's raccoon logging coat hung on Grandma's Edwardian dress form— its torso gored with mouse nests. Hopefully a twitching tail would be hanging from a tattered furry sleeve to send us skittering back down the stairs in silent screams, not wanting to get caught.

Grandpa John banished us completely from the barn, but we all loved playing in the haymow. Half its floorboards were missing, and few of them were even nailed down. The structure's poorly limed stone foundation had crumbled many decades before. On windy days the whole building would creak and sag and howl as we lay on the prickly hay, the blackness above us spiked with bright shafts of light from cracks and knotholes. The great spidery claw of the old hay fork shifted restlessly on a rotting rope high in the dim gable.

My brother Jim and I were piling hay bales at the edge of the loft one summer day to hide a fort. As I pulled one more bale from beneath us, I stepped down onto metal with a hollow sound. Under my feet was the arched and slatted lid of every treasure chest I'd ever seen in books, or imagined. We felt guilt along with excitement— did careless play reveal some forbidden secret? Was this the reason Grandpa kept us away? We didn't even look inside the first time, but we were back at the next opportunity.

Behind our hay-bale wall, we scooped with our hands at many years accumulation of dusty straw and dried clover blossom. Our digging revealed a large old steamer trunk, then a second one next to it. They were both red with rust, embossed with vine patterns and bound with wooden staves. The latches

had long been lost. Jim and I both loved archeology, and for us this was like the opening of King Tut's tomb.

The lids of compartments inside were covered in ornate paper with medallions of old-fashioned ladies. From inside them spilled a mad jumble of letters, books, newspapers, celluloid shirt collars and jewelry, oil lamps, piles of mounted photographs and odd old negatives of glass. Nothing had been touched in fifty years. To Jim and me that day, these chests served to sate late childhood's lust for buried treasure.

Grandfather John sat out his last years on the sunny back porch or in the rocker next to the kitchen stove, slowly losing touch with our world. He would shout orders to oxen, threaten to kill the deer he saw in an empty field, or ask for one of his brothers, now all long dead. Florrie said, "If he doesn't stop calling the cows we'll *both* go crazy." But he could no longer keep us away from the barn. It took years of secret pilgrimage for my brother and me to savor the treasure those chests contained.

Grandpa John and his brother Bernhard had packed these two trunks when they left Norway with their parents for America in 1887. During the 20 years the bachelor brothers kept house together on the frontier of their new homeland, they filled the trunks with personal effects and souvenirs. Eventually when John married and started a family he hauled them from the house and left them in the barn— a forgotten fragment of a time long passed.

"Wanna go look in the trunks?" became standard parlance between my brother and me. In the end we had to get Mom and Dad to help rescue our treasure when, in our grandparents' last years, they rented out the barn for hay storage. The renter wanted to make room for a few extra bales, and dumped our treasure trunks on the stone pile.

In a pamphlet we found in the trunks, published in 1896, John's oldest brother tells his story of coming to Elcho, and ultimately bringing the entire family to America.

At 18, Grandfather's brother Anton came from Norway to work in the Langlade county lumber camps, to save money and buy land. The Follstad family had been paying tribute to the king to farm a plot beneath Follestad mountain since 1396. To Anton, the opportunity to cancel that eternal debt by owning land was a legacy to the next 500 years of Follstads that was worth any sacrifice.

Anton came to Elcho in the fall of 1885 to visit cousins when "the fine hardwood timber, rich soil and beautiful Otter Lake" took his eye. He bought 80 acres of forested land next to his cousins, and alongside the lake.

"In the spring of 1887 I came to Elcho to start farming, with little knowledge of tilling the soil and not very good health but with good will and a mind made up to stick to it" he says. He cleared two acres for a log house and planted, by hand with a grub hoe, a plot of potatoes— which he found grew very well.

In response to Anton's letters home, full of dreams and plans, three of his brothers came to join him and help assure his success. Anton finally brought over their parents, Johann and Maren, and the two youngest boys, Bernhard and my grandfather John, by the end of the year.

Grandfather John was only ten when they arrived, but his father Johann was already 60. The Follstad brothers would haul 80 thousand feet of hardwood logs to mill that first winter, and John was expected to help. They cut as much for the next three years to clear land enough for planting.

In the family's tiny cabin snow blew in on the sleeping children in those first winters, before they built a larger log home on the lake. A few years later the family's combined efforts allowed them to build a comfortable Victorian farmhouse. By 1894 Anton was able to conclude,

"I now have twenty acres of land cleared and part of it stumped. I have an interest with my brothers in a team of horses and three milch cows, and I have always sold my produce to lumber camps and families at good prices."

As the Follstad brothers married, they all bought and cleared land nearby. They encouraged family friends from Norway to follow them, and a close-knit settlement was born. Their cousins the Solbergs ran the first store in Elcho from the loft of their cabin. Follstad farms were known for their meticulous fields and beautiful barns.

Anton wanted to document the Follstad family's new life in America. When he took up photography it was still a complex process with arcane chemicals and glass negatives. In summer his subjects were the bounty of his fields, elaborate family picnics, and boating, swimming and fishing at the family cottage. In winter he photographed hunting parties, logging camps, or Christmas trees covered in candles.

Several Solberg cousins were professional musicians, so gatherings were rarely without musical performances or sing-alongs. The Follstads

entertained each other often in their busy Victorian parlors. In Anton's photographs they look rather like a desperate claim for civilization pitched in the rude wilderness.

Grandfather John went away to business school in Milwaukee, then returned in 1900 to buy land adjoining Anton's and build a small house. Brother Bernhard bought the property next to that and moved in with John. The two youngest Follstad brothers became partners in their own cedar logging business.

John had started working in the frozen cedar swamps the winter he was 15. He knew the work well. From age 20 to 40 were John's carefree bachelor years— handsome, courted by the ladies, dashing in his full-length raccoon coat. In a photo he sits confidently astride a sleigh-load of 40-foot logs bearing down an ice road, his horse's flared nostrils firing blasts of steam before them.

Great-Uncle Bernhard and Grandfather John's business prospered. They shipped Follstad logs for telegraph and telephone poles a thousand treeless miles across the prairie, as far west as Texas. They were survivors in a hard and dangerous profession, and wore their scars like scapulas. A horse's kick once threw John backward onto an upright branch that pierced him. He had to take the train— standing— to a hospital in Green Bay, 100 miles away.

An accident in 1901 was nearly fatal. One of the huge saw blades used to trim logs came loose and sailed through the air just as John bent over to tie a shoe. It ripped a two-foot gash deep in the muscles of his back. Had he stood up, it would have cut him in two. Discomfort from the scar lingered for the rest of his life, and was the reason he preferred his stool to a chair at our table.