



## Home sweet home

---

You do not miss what you do not have, but once you have it and then it is gone – that is a different story.

I grew up with cars that had crank windows and got along fine. Thank you. But now I would be lost without electric windows.

Once I left the farm and went off into “the world”, I came to realize we were poor, but never felt that way when I was growing up. We never went to bed hungry. Never wanted for clothes.

I have no recall of my parents fretting about money. I came along before there were credit cards so no balances to pay off. If we could not afford it we did not get it. It was a barter-cash society.

My father had a checking account at the First National Bank in Sleepy Eye. He wrote the checks but never kept a ledger. If he wrote a check without enough money to cover it in the checking account, he would get a call from the bank to come in to deposit money to cover the check. No overdraft charges. No bounced checks.

## Home sweet home

---

I grew up believing people in town were better off than people on farms, but never longed to change places with them. They had an easier life, but being able to roam freely and watch the sun come up over the barn was enough to keep us on the farm.

My home was on a 120 acre farm. The size of farms has been determined by the amount of land that could be managed by a family. When I came along that was 80 to 160 acres. Basically the land that could be managed with horses and a man and woman and kids to tend the farm.

The standard measure of land in the US is acre with 640 acres in a section, equal, in area, to a square mile.

One hundred and twenty acres is just shy of being a 20<sup>th</sup> of a section. It does not sound like much today, but when I was growing up it was sufficient to support our family.

The land remains but family farms do not. Farm places I knew as a boy are abandoned. Razed by bull dozers.

Magnificent barns that dotted the landscape are gone. Ours, like many others, succumbed to the bulldozer.

Groves sit empty. No longer any farm houses to shield from winter winds.

Our farm had about 90 tillable acres, after subtracting pastures, sloughs, and acreage represented by the home site. In my early years, before sloughs were drained and pastures went away in favor of tillable acres, you would hear the call of “slough pumpers” at dusk in summer; one of the many nicknames for the American Bittern.

Life on the farm was not easy. Chores were a 365 day affair. The cows, horses, pigs, and chickens did not take vacations or days off.

## Home sweet home

---

Farming was no picnic for my mother or father, but of the two I think my mother had the tougher row to hoe. My dad had breaks over the year in his routine, but for my mother it was a steady grind, day in and day out.

She cooked, washed clothes, kept the house, packed our lunches, mended our clothes, tended the garden, shopped, and gave us our Saturday baths.

Our house was a standard farm house for those times. It was probably built in the late 1800's. It sat on a stone foundation and had an earthen cellar.

The house faced east and was about 60 feet, slightly down hill from the barn. The house had two entries. The northern most entry, the main entry, came into an ante room (the shanty) off the kitchen. The other entry (rarely used) was into the living room. Each entry had a cement porch, about 6'x6', with posts to support the roof over the porch.

The earthen cellar, home to any number of critters, was used to store canned goods and potatoes. The dark dank environment was ideal for potatoes. Usually the summer's harvest of potatoes was enough to keep us in potatoes until the next summer's harvest.

The shanty was an unheated lean-to on the north end of the house, measuring about 10' by 20'. It housed a Maytag, ringer type, washing machine, a cream separator, and a floor to ceiling storage cupboard.

On the west end of the shanty was an entry to stairs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. In the middle of the shanty floor was a hinged wooden door, measuring about 4x8 feet that, when opened and leaned against the shanty wall, provided ingress and egress to the earthen cellar. There was also an outside entry to the cellar near the entry to the living room; used in the summer to fetch canned goods or potatoes for cooking.

The inside entry to the cellar is what we used when we were herded there by our mother when the weather was threatening. We knew it was bad when our dad joined in the herding.

## Home sweet home

---

For the first 15 years or so of my life we had a wall phone with a couple of bells at the top, a mouth piece in the center, and a ledge at the bottom to rest elbows on when talking. On the right was a crank. On the left was a receiver, a hook to hang it, and a push button.

If you wanted someone not on your party line, you had to call “central” by holding the button down while turning the crank.

If you wanted someone on your line you just rang them up without holding the button down. Our ring was a “long” and two “shorts”.

I mention the phone because it was what our mother used for herding. When an electrical storm was approaching the phone would start crackling. Sometimes barely audible and sometimes, if lightning was close, with a bang as loud as a shotgun. Once the phone started making crackling sounds we knew it would not be long before we would be heading for the cellar.

I hated the cellar. It was dark and dank. You knew there were mice that called it home. Even in the daytime it was dark because the only window was covered to keep light from stimulating potatoes from sprouting. At night it was pitch black if we got herded before my mother had a chance to fetch a flashlight. We would get the all clear when the wind stopped and we could no longer hear rain hitting the house.

The house, without the shanty, measured around 30' x 20'. The first level consisted of a kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. Upstairs had three rooms. A bedroom on the south of the house with a window on the south and east sides. The middle and north rooms had one window each on the east side of the house. The middle room was basically a storage room. The place where things went to die. The north room served as a bedroom in the summer – too cold in the winter. No heat.

We kids slept upstairs, in the south bedroom. It had two beds. Light was from a kerosene lamp, used when there was no moonlight.

## Home sweet home

---

Heat was from the stovepipe from the space heater in the room below, usually sufficient except when the wind was from the south. Part of my bedtime ritual was to have a glass of water neatly placed on the window sill of the south window. When the wind was from the south and the temperature was zero or below, the water would be a frozen blob by morning.

The main room of the house was the kitchen. Light was from an Aladdin lamp that hung over the kitchen table. The lamp had a long glass chimney. The light intensity was managed by turning the wick up or down. The wick was round and inside a mantel, fragile to the touch. Turn the wick too high and you got black soot on the chimney.

The better light was from a Coleman lamp like the lantern used for camping. Some of our neighbors had Coleman lamps, but not us.

Other than the kitchen, lights were from kerosene lamps. Fixtures on the dining room table and bedroom dressers. The nice thing was that you could see if they needed to be filled. The tank on the Aladdin lamp was metal so you had to rely on weight as to when it needed to be refilled. If you guessed wrong it would run out of fuel and you would be sitting in the dark until it got refilled or you headed to bed.

The light for doing chores was a kerosene lantern. It also required the “lift test” to determine if it needed to be refilled. Guess wrong and half the chores were in the dark.

The standard wick for the kerosene lamps and lantern was a flat strip of braided cotton about 8 to 10 inches long and 1 inch wide. There was a knurled knob for turning the wick up or down. Basically wicks would last forever so long as they were always immersed in fuel. What did them in was when the lamp went dry. Then the only light you got was from the burning wick.

Every now and again wicks had to be trimmed to keep them burning even. Without trimming they developed horns usually on both ends of the wick causing them to “soot up” the chimney.

## Home sweet home

---

The only “running” water in the house was from a pump in a corner of the kitchen to draw soft water from a cistern behind the house. Our answer to the Culligan Man.

Drinking water was from a well about 30' from the house.

The well was 3' in diameter, about 25' deep, enclosed in ceramic tile, and covered with a heavy wooden platform. It never went dry and is still in use today, but there were a few occasions in dry weather when the water came out “cloudy” after extended pumping.

When my mother needed water for cooking or drinking she went to the well and pumped, summer and winter. If my dad needed water for livestock he disconnected the pump handle and pumped with a gasoline powered John Deere engine.

I remember the engine well because it was the site of one of my first accomplishments. I learned to start it by watching my father. One day, when he was gone and my mother was busy in the house, I put my observations to a test. To my surprise on the second try the thing popped to life. A great accomplishment – for which I caught hell. Life is so unfair!

The mainstay of the house was a wood fired cook stove. Ours was a Sanyo. It had an oven, a 20 gallon reservoir (on the right) for warm water. The fuel was anything that burned; primarily wood and corn cobs.

Above the stove were two warming bins. Below the door on the front for fueling was another larger one for removing ashes.

The heat from the stove was a blessing and curse. In the winter a blessing because it warmed the kitchen, making it the coziest room in the house. In the summer a curse – because it warmed the kitchen when cool is what you wanted.

The biggest fear in the winter, when the stove was going full blast, and the wind blowing from the northwest, was chimney fires. We never had one, but my mother lived in constant fear of one.

## Home sweet home

---

In the winter the kitchen was too hot for mother and cold for my dad. He was always “firing in” over my mother’s objections. The fact that she was busy working and my father was laid out flat on the “day bed” made no difference to him.

You could tell when it was below zero by the kitchen windows. Ice in the corners meant it was below zero. If the bottom window was covered in ice it was at least 20 below.

Our baths were in a round 35 gallon tub. In the summer we filled it in the morning from the well and took baths in the afternoon after the sun had warmed the water. In the winter the tub sat on the floor in the kitchen filled with soft water heated on the stove.

Clothes washing was usually a Monday chore. It started with my mother placing an oblong 20 gallon tub on the stove and then filling it with water from the cistern. If it was winter the kitchen stove was already going. If it was summer she would have to get it going.

After the water was heated she would lug, pail after pail, to the washing machine, in the shanty. The machine was a ringer type Maytag with a center agitator. When a batch of clothes was sufficiently “agitated” my mother ran the clothes through the ringer. Then, with clothes pins in an apron, she took the clothes to hang on a line behind the house. Her dryer was the outdoors, summer and winter. I remember as a child being amazed seeing my father’s overalls frozen stiff when she brought them in from the line. The operational meaning of “freeze drying”.

Life changed sometime in the late 40s when we got electricity. It was like we had died and gone to heaven. Thank you FDR for the REA!

Eventually we ended up with all the “finer” things of life. A TV with rabbit ears with only three channels. An electric range. An electric washing machine. An electric radio and a Kitchen Aid mixer!

## Home sweet home

---

And a dial telephone. Still a party line to be sure, but much better for rubbering – the favorite activity of my father in his later years - because now he could sit and rubber. Much better than having to stand with the crackling phone.

All that but no indoor plumbing and the same way of supplying water to the house. We kids, on several occasions, offered to pay for plumbing but my parents would have none of it. Parental pride or they liked it as it was?

Indeed my parents were scheduled to move to town a week before my dad died. I do not know if either of them were happy about the move but of the two I think it was hardest for my dad. He checked out a few days before the move with a fatal heart attack.

---