Life on the Farm in Texas

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Leonard I. Sidwell

Our Life in Texas

It was on the 20th of September, in the year 1923 that the three of us stepped down from the Pullman Coach of the "Sunshine Express", and stood, blinking and uncertain in the harsh, bright glare of the morning Texas sun.

We had boarded this particular train some 2000-odd miles to the north, at St. Louis, but had in fact begun our journey from even farther distant, at Akron, Ohio. Now, here we were, almost at our destination, for this was San Benito, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

My father was the first to come to grips with reality since my mother, I think, was still bemused by three days and nights of continuous travel and the too-sudden transition from autumn to summer. As for me, I was fascinated by the sub-tropical date palms, apparently flourishing out of the pavements alongside the road, something utterly new in my ten years of life.

"It doesn't look as though anyone is here to meet us," said my father, rather worriedly. "I think I'd better go to the booking office and see if there is any message." And away he went, while mother and I sat down to await events and to guard our modest heap of luggage.

Our being in Texas at all was due to a chain of fortuitous events which began with our departure from Lancashire the previous year. The eye specialist had told Father, then in his 34th year, that no magic prescription would rid him of the recurrent attacks of migraine which had been making most weekends a nightmare for all of us. The only thing for Father, he said, was sunshine – and more sunshine.

This posed something of a problem, since there is little hope of finding such conditions in England. At that seeming impasse my Uncle Arthur, then resident some years in the USA, came forward with what seemed the ideal solution. He would arrange to find a job for my father in the office of a rubber factory there in Ohio, and the summers were long, hot, and, above all, sunny.

So it came about that, some two months later, we set sail from Liverpool in a small 144-passenger ship, and arrived some thirteen turbulent storm-tossed days later in Boston, Massachusetts. From there, after a few days at nearby Lynn, to recuperate, we made our way to Akron, Ohio, where we were met by Uncle who had been as good as his word.

There was on thing, however, which had entered no one's calculations, and that was the possible effect of an Ohio winter on my father. We had not long to wait to find out, for in January, with temperatures of ten degrees below zero, he succumbed and was very ill for some weeks. We all knew then that our "quest for the sun" was not at an end, and appropriately enough it was through Uncle that the next move came. He introduced us to some friends of his, a Mr. And Mrs. Verne Read.

The Reads had, it seemed, been down the previous winter for a vacation in Texas. There they had been taken on a conducted tour ("Sucker Tours", as they were named by the disillusioned settlers, we learned much later) of the citrus groves and vegetable ("truck") farms. They fell in love with all they saw, and with the climate, and needed hardly any persuasion when the estate agent suggested that they invest in a little corner of Paradise. They bought a thirty-seven acre tract of Sugarland, some four miles out beyond the village of Rio Hondo. All this tract had been cleared, the agent said, and half the 37 acres had been planted to young mixed citrus fruit – grapefruit, oranges, lemons and limes. All that was needed was for someone to give a little care and attention to the trees until they came into bearing, and any time to spare from these activities could be usefully employed in planting more trees in the unplanted area. So far, Mr. Read had not found anyone suitable to do this, but, knowing my uncle and being aware through him of my father's troubles, he asked Father if he would like the job, and if he felt he would be able to do it.

Now my father had, up to that time, managed nothing in the horticultural line larger than a small allotment garden in Lancashire, and had never even seen a citrus tree. However, what he lacked in experience he more than made up for in courage. He replied that he was sure he could handle it, and would very much like the opportunity to do so.

And so that was how we came to be waiting for him to come out of the booking office to tell us what he had learned as to why we had not been met by either the estate agent or his representative.

"I got him on the phone," said Father, when he rejoined us, "And he says he's coming over now. Been delayed by some business. Most apologetic."

He was indeed full of apologies when he arrived. He was also very jovial and anxious to please. Would we like anything to eat or drink? No? Then he would run us over to Rio Hondo at once and get us fixed up at the hotel for a week or two until we had time to get ourselves sorted out, and to enable Father to arrange some sort of permanent accommodation for us. So we climbed into his shiny, new-looking car, he engaged the clutch and away we went.

We were soon free of the town, which consisted of only a few roads and streets, housing as it did a population of a few thousands of people, some American, some Mexican. There was a fair-sized Mexican element since the Border was only 30 miles away, at Brownsville on the Rio Grande River.

It was difficult as we were rolling along to form any clear idea of the countryside. I noticed here and there what appeared to be little farmsteads, consisting of a few tilled fields and an orchard of smallish trees with dark green glossy leaves. These, I surmised – correctly – were citrus trees. On some of the farms teams of mules were plodding across the landscape drawing mysterious implements behind them. We hurried past patches of thickly entangled bushes which appeared to be impenetrable, and which were no doubt well armed with thorns. All this flashed by in a kaleidoscopic sort of manner, and almost before I was aware of it we were pulling up at the hotel.

At least, it was called a hotel. In fact it was a wooden building, of dubious and nondescript design – if, indeed, it had been designed at all, and had not perhaps somehow grown out of the damp and fertile ground on which it stood. Even on this sunny day the place contrived to look drab, cheerless and inhospitable, and, had we but known it, this was probably our first peep at "the other side of the coin". Our estate agent friend now began to display a considerable anxiety to be away, and after showing Father the way to the hotel office and promising vaguely to contact him the following day, he was off in a cloud of dust.

When it came down to the question of where we should sleep, it transpired that we would be housed in a kind of clapboard hutment about 20 yards from the hotel. This hut consisted of two soi-disant rooms, one even smaller than the other, if that were possible. The ceiling was very low, with no air space above, so that when we opened the door on this baking hot day it felt like the gateway to the underworld. However, we arranged such ventilation as was possible, and as we were to have our meals over at the hotel, Mother began unpacking. Father went off on some business of his own, and I decided to do a little preliminary and circumspect exploring before the evening meal was ready. We did not know it then, but we were to spend a month in these insalubrious surroundings.

I made one or two interesting discoveries while I was out.

The first of these was the ease with which the cactus thorn came out of the plant, and the painful and obvious difficulty one had to extract it from the flesh. The spines seemed to be tipped with some gummy substance, and would apparently glue themselves into one most venomously, given half a chance. I had found several big clumps of cactus along the roadside, and had been intrigued and fascinated by their large, fleshy leaves. These leaves, as large as tea plates, although roughly oval in shape, were about a half-inch thick, spongy in texture, and seemed to grow one out of the other rather than from a central stem. Over the dull, dark green surface of the leaves grew little tufts, or patches, of these thorns. Well; I knew something about those too, now!

The other thing I had discovered, and which promised to be quite exciting, was that a few hundred yards beyond the hotel ran what seemed to me to be quite a large river, and it was at the moment in full spate. I learned later that it was the Arroyo Colorado, and that, some six or seven miles downstream, it did, in fact, form one boundary of our farm. I was to come to know this river very well indeed during the next three years.

When I returned to our shanty after these explorations, I found that Father, too, was back, and looking rather glum. He had been up into the village to try to make some arrangement for transport on the morrow to take him out to the farm. He had discovered that Rio Hondo was the last point to be served by any sort of permanent road. Beyond here an earth scraper made occasional trips out to a point about a mile beyond the farm. The purpose of this implement was to grade the earth road so that it sloped gently from the center to the ditches at either side. The theory was that the traffic would pack the earth down tight, so that when the rain came it would run off the hard surface into the ditches. In practice there was never enough of the right sort of traffic for this purpose, and the rains were too heavy and prolonged. Consequently, the road became a quagmire, with huge mud-holes at various points. There had been torrential rain within the past few days, and to add to the difficulties the Arroyo had overflowed its banks and caused flooding in places. The road was virtually impassable. Yesterday two Mexicans had tried to get through with a light cart, drawn by two small mules. They were hardly more than a mile out from Rio Hondo when the mules sank into a mud-hole up to their bellies, and were only extricated with great difficulty. It became pretty clear that if Father intended to see the farm in the near future he would have to walk there and back, a distance of about 8 miles. It was a quiet and thoughtful trio which, a few minutes later, walked across to the hotel for dinner.

I can remember little of this first meal in Texas, except that the main items seemed to be a species of parboiled shoe leather, dignified with the name of mutton. I also recall a grizzled, middle-aged sort of man who was sitting by himself at a nearby small table. He was darting little glances at us from time to time, as though trying to satisfy his curiosity, and he smiled at me, briefly, once when I caught him at it.

He was there, already installed when, a little later, we made our way to the sitting room for coffee. In the more relaxed atmosphere there prevailing, it wasn't long before he was talking to Father. He wanted to know where we were from, and what we were doing down there, as it was quite obvious to him that we were strangers, and "green-horns" at that. Though of course he was too kindly to remark on the latter. Father, a friendly sort of soul, was soon telling him all about our journeyings, and that we had come down here to look after some fruit trees on a little farm out on Sugarland. At this last remark, our new friend looked rather puzzled.

"Where did you say this fruit farm is?" he asked father.

"About 4 miles from here, out on Sugarland" replied Father.

Our friend slowly shook his head. "There ain't no trees on Sugarland" he said.

My father seemed to be momentarily nonplussed, as if he were stunned. Then he got a grip on himself, and began to speak to the man as one might to an idiot child, pityingly, and placatingly. He pointed out to him that all this was arranged long ago, that everything was agreed to in detail, and that while he was sure the man meant to be friendly and helpful, quite clearly he was in error as regards his facts. He listened politely to all that Father had to say, and then:

"I've lived hereabouts, man and boy, for over 30 years," he said, "and whatever you say, I know there ain't no trees on Sugarland."

There did not seem to be anything further to be said after this rather final sort of remark, and the discussion wandered off into generalities. Later, when we were returning to our sleeping quarters, Mother said, rather doubtfully, "I suppose he couldn't really be right, Whalley?"

"Of course not – he's just made a mistake, that's all," replied Father. But all the same, I could see he was worried.

Our Life in Texas

The next day dawned bright and clear, and, after breakfast, Father announced his intention to walk out and have a look at the farm. He had a map, but he also knew that the farm was at the end of the spur of railway line, and began at the other side of the corral from the road, and continued on down to the river. So Mother somehow contrived to conjure up some sandwiches and a bottle of liquid refreshment for him, and off he went.

We were to be left to ourselves and our own devices for the day. At least, that is what we thought, but after lunch there came a gentle tapping at the door. Mother opened it and we beheld a couple – obviously man and wife, of indeterminate age - smiling at us in a most friendly fashion. The woman was the first to speak:

"We're Mr. And Mrs. Rogers" she said. "I'm Effie, and this is my husband, Pat." She continued, "You're from England, aren't you – at least we've been told there's somebody from England staying here, and I should think it must be you? Only you see, we're from England, too – at least I am, from Liverpool – Pat is from Ireland."

Mother quickly invited them in, and thanks to the friendly garrulity of Effie, there was not much that we did not know about them by the end of the afternoon. Pat said very little, partly because he hadn't much opportunity, and partly because, as we found out later, he was more of a man of action than of words, and was content to leave the talking to Effie.

They owned a farm along by the nearest irrigation canal, about a mile away. There they grew fruit – about ten acres of it – raised cotton, corn and vegetables in season, and in addition reared poultry and a few cattle. They had been in the Valley for 13 years, and had endured a good many hardships in that time. Pat had been in America longer than Effie, and had spent some years in the corn-belt of Kansas in the North West. He was much older than Effie – nearly 20 years – and was now in his late fifties. They had not seen anyone from "the Old Country" since they had been in Texas, and were so thrilled and excited when they heard about us that they had left the work of the afternoon in order to come and visit us and make us welcome. Although their advice was to pack up immediately and leave. They said that they had intended to go years ago, but had instead somehow stayed on, weathering one crisis after another, and were now so deeply involved that there was not much hope of their getting away. It was a very hard life, they said, especially for a woman.

Well; of course it was excellent advice they were offering, as we were to discover, but we couldn't accept it, as Father said later when we told him. After all, we too were committed, at least to the extent of giving it a fair trial. We owed it both to Verne Read and ourselves.

The Rogers' proved to be wonderful friends for us in the three years ahead. They were, both, generosity itself, and Pat was ever ready with help or advice for Father in the difficulties he encountered. Pat has now been dead many years, but Effie is still carrying on, single handed, for they never had any children. My mother still hears from her each year, about Christmastime, and her old, indomitable spirit still shows in her letters. Not many years ago she survived a hurricane which destroyed most of the farm buildings and either uprooted or broke down most of the trees in a young orchard which was just coming into full bearing. Effie salvaged what she could and carried on. It is only in the last year or two that we have noticed the absence in her letters of the plans she was making to visit the "Old Country". It is a dream which sustained her during many years of hardship, and seems now, alas, to be fading with the years. Although, perhaps, she no longer needs to dream.

Pat and Effie had not long ended their visit to us, by issuing a most pressing invitation for us all to go out and see them as soon as we could, when Father arrived back. He looked hot, tired, and harassed, as well, indeed, he might. Our friend of the night before had been right: there were no trees on Sugarland. Unless, of course, one could count ten acres or so of virgin scrub, or "brush" as it was known here, as trees. This brush was apparently, as I had guessed on our drive to the hotel, an impenetrable thicket, armed with every sort of thorn which could prod, claw, prick, scratch and tear. The rest of the farm had been cleared of brush, but was now smothered with weed growth, in the middle of which was a clump of cactus "as big as a house", said Father. There were no signs at all that any fruit trees had ever been planted anywhere.

The state of affairs which had been discovered led, during the next few days, to a certain amount of heart searching and head scratching by Father and to a good deal of correspondence, in the way of telegrams and letters, between himself and Mr. Read. In the end it was decided that we should stay on, and for the time being we were to get the cleared part of the farm under cultivation as soon as possible. We were to grow "truck" crops in the spring, and follow on with cotton and corn in the summer. As and when time allowed, we were to clear the remaining land. This would probably be at the end of the year when the crops were off and the plowing had been done. Mr. Read would himself take up with the land agent the mystery of the invisible fruit trees. I never knew the result of his investigations, but there were still no fruit trees on the farm when we left.

Once it had been decided to proceed with the venture, Father then had to set about the job of housing us on the farm. This he did by coming to some arrangement with a local carpenter. This man would do the actual building, and Father would act as laborer and general factotum. So, as soon as the mud dried sufficiently in the mud holes to allow once more the passage of traffic, Father and the carpenter set forth each day from Rio Hondo, perched high on a wagonload of timber, bound for the farm.

While these building operations were in progress, Mother and I passed the time as pleasantly as possible, and one day walked out to the Rogers' farm. They were delighted to see us, and were proud to show us around the place. The house and farm buildings were on a pleasant site near the canal, this latter factor being an enormous asset in a climate as hot and arid as this. Along the canal, too, grew some fairly tall trees which cast a welcome shade over the house. Almost all trees down there were small and scrubby; there is too little permanent moisture in the ground to support lush growth. The farm buildings, which housed the stock, and the granary were in a fairly good state of repair and preservation. The house, by contrast, was very down-at-heel and had clearly never seen a paintbrush. It was significant that, where money was obviously tight, Pat had spent more of it caring for his livestock than in making life easier and more attractive for himself and Effie.

Out on the farm itself we saw the orchard – citrus at last! I had the long-awaited pleasure of picking an orange off the tree. The skin was a pale yellow and very thin, and the fruit was rather tightly packed. To my surprise, and I confess, slightly to my disappointment, the juice was so sweet as to taste almost like sugar water. Pat explained that the cause of this was the properties of the rich alluvial soil for which the Rio Grande Valley was famous. The Rio Grande has always been an errant and wayward river, changing its course many times in its long history and bringing with it rich deposits of silt from the uplands. Even now, he said, the river was still restless. Not so long ago a new pumping station had been built on the riverbank, to pump water out of the river into a large reservoir, or "Resaca", to be used later for irrigation and domestic purposes. One morning, soon after the station had begun operating, the authorities awoke to find the river had gone, and the station was high and dry beside an empty riverbed. The river had moved several miles overnight, and a special canal had to be dug to the stranded pumping station.

He advised me that if I found the orange too sweet to try a grapefruit, and handed me one. It was perfection. The sugar, which had seemed over sweet in the orange, counteracted the higher acidity of the grapefruit, and the resulting flavor was absolutely delicious. Anyone who has tasted a Texas grapefruit will never again eat one of those half-ripe, often wizened grapefruits one buys from a shop, and which one has to soak in sugar over night to make them edible, without a deep sense of dissatisfaction and deprivation.

From the orchard, Pat took us to see what was clearly an object of some pride to him; his concrete-lined main irrigation ditch. This was a raised ditch, or concrete channel banked with earth, rising above the farmland to a height of about three feet. It was about four feet wide, and the channel ran the length of the farm, beginning, of course, at the canal. Thus, when he wished to irrigate his land, all Pat needed to do was to open the sluice at the canal, thereby filling his concrete channel, and then open such smaller sluices in this channel as were required to irrigate the required section of his land. With the head of water at his command in this raised ditch he could irrigate the whole farm in a short time if he wished. He said the project had cost several hundreds of dollars, but had been well worth it in time and energy saved, and in being able to get water to his crops just when they most needed it. Of course the water was not free; when you wished to irrigate your land you went into Rio Hondo to an office there and ordered, by the acre, how much water you required. You were then granted permission to draw off water to that amount. What check, if any, was made to see that the quantity used did not exceed that ordered I do not know, but in our own subsequent experience of irrigation no one ever appeared to investigate this possibility. A bill was eventually sent for the amount ordered, and that, apparently, was that.

Finally, Pat took us to see his pair of workhorses. They looked to be fine big animals, strong and hard working. To me they looked enormous, and I now suppose them to have been shire horses. These were the only workhorses we ever saw down there, as mules are usually preferred. They stand up to the heat much better, and can keep on working longer without showing signs of distress. On the other hand the mule is much more stubborn and uncooperative than the horse, and it was for this reason and for a genuine love of the animal that Pat used horses and worked them only within their capabilities, according to the weather. He was sure that he got through as much work this way as he would have done with mules over a longer period, that he enjoyed it more and saved himself from a lot of bad temper.

A few days later, Father asked me if I would like to go out with him to see the farm. I could go on the wagon with the carpenter and himself, and spend the day as I wished, helping where I could, or exploring a bit. I was delighted, and could hardly wait to be off. Father must have known that I should be much too interested and excited to be of much help to them that day for he said no more about work, and we were soon jogging on our way.

I was thrilled as we left the last houses of Rio Hondo behind to think that, at last, I would see the farm, and I looked eagerly about me, anxious to miss nothing of interest or any landmark on this momentous journey. Not, as it transpired, that there was much to see. We passed through very flat countryside for the first two and a half miles until we came to the first house. Most of the fields showed signs of cultivation, but there were several patches of brush, some of which came up to the road. As we approached this first farmhouse, the road began gently to slope upwards, and, as we crested the rise some half-mile farther on, I could see in the distance, about a mile away, what I was sure must be the corral. Peeping over the top of it was the wooden shingle roof of our house, glowing redly in its newness. As we descended the incline, I barely noticed two farmhouses on the left and one on the right, though these would be our nearest neighbors. At last the corral: we passed it on the narrow side, by the unloading ramp, then over the railway line (no need to worry about trains, this was the end of the line and the arrival of a train was an Event) and there we were, with our half-completed home in all its glory!

“Glory”, perhaps, was an extravagant description, as I came to realize when I had time to examine the structure. It was a box-like affair, consisting of one room and a porch. The room was about eighteen feet wide by twelve long. At this 12′ point came the dividing wall between the room and the porch, into which it opened. The porch ran across the width of the house, and was six feet long, this completing the box. At this stage in the construction the frame work was completed, the roof on, and the carpenter was now engaged in putting on the outside walls of overlapping weather-boarding, or “ship-lap” as it was called. There never were any inside walls, except the dividing wall, nor any ceilings; simply the roof space. The porch was boarded up to about 3 feet, and screened from there to where the roof began, on all three sides. A screened door led outside, and a solid one to the main room. There was a back door in the far corner of this room. My bed, when we later moved in, was along the six-foot side of the porch opposite the screen door. The screening was not very effectual against mosquitoes, as I soon discovered. Nor did it work well as a rain shield, and more than once I lay in bed with the rain blowing across my face. In a hot climate this can be very pleasant and refreshing, provided the rain is not too heavy!

The main room became, perforce, kitchen and scullery, dining room and living room, as well as bedroom for Mother and Father. Space had to be used in economy, and Father this day already had this in mind, and also the need for financial economy, as he busied himself making cupboards and furniture. In all, he made the table, my bed, and various folding chairs, as well as shelves and cupboards.

Incidentally, the whole house was supported off the ground by concrete blocks about 18 inches high. This kept the house high and dry during the heavy sub-tropical rainstorms, and also gave us a chance to combat the hordes of insects (of which ants were the most numerous and persistent) which subjected us to constant attack. We frequently poured kerosene around the blocks, and this helped, but the pests got indoors, somehow, whatever we did. We were at least able to keep them off the table, and this we did by standing each table leg in a little dish of water.

When I had examined the house to the full, I decided it was time to have a look around, and that I would start with the corral.

As I crossed the railway line, and approached the corral, I could see that it was built on the lines of the old western stockades. It was in the form of a rectangle, some fifty by two hundred feet at a guess, and the perimeter consisted of fairly close-spaced stout wooden posts, some six or seven feet high. At the far end from the unloading ramp was a gate through which the animals could be driven out of the corral to their destination. As I climbed up the boards which were nailed to the posts and looked down into the corral, I could see in imagination the whole area filled with milling, restless animals. I did see such scenes in fact later on; some were happy and entertaining, but one in particular was sad to the point of tragedy. Perhaps I may digress, or anticipate the story a little, at this point to tell of these.

When the horses came; these were the gay times. Out past our farm towards the mouth of the Arroyo, over the last irrigation canal, across the desolate salt marshland, and beyond the Anaquitas lay the sprawling ranch lands of one Mr. McKie. His ranch was famous for miles, as he raised on it only horses, and his shipments of them in and out were always funneled through the corral. On the day a shipment was due, Mexicans from miles around began to forgather at the corral, and by the time the horses arrived there were dozens of exited figures perched on top of the posts. Their excitement and shouting infected the horses – these wild, untrained, unbroken, rugged little ponies which were so invaluable as tough, tireless saddle horses – and they stirred around in the dust, jostling and pushing each other. This movement of the animals gave the onlookers a chance to examine them from every angle and to decide which one or ones they would like to buy. When Mr. McKie arrived the bidding began. As a horse was sold its markings and general appearance were mentally noted by one of Mr. McKie's cowboys, who then went off with the new owner to the corral gate. There the cowboy would enter the corral, mounted on his own horse, and twirling his lasso. One end of the lasso was fastened to the horn of the saddle and the other, at the end of the coils of rope, formed a slip noose to be thrown over the head of the selected horse. To identify, and cut out from a milling herd of perhaps 60 excited horses, one particular animal, and to lasso it first time required considerable skill and judgment, but I never saw a cowboy miss. As soon as the wild pony felt the rope settle over his head he was off as fast as he could go. While the lasso was thus unreeling the cowboy set his pony to take the strain, so that the fleeing horse was usually stopped with a jolt which threw it to the ground, with the breath whistling in its constricted throat, inexorably squeezed by the lasso. It wasted little time before scrambling to its feet again, and plunging off headlong in another direction in the vain hope of getting away. After a few of these struggles, with the inevitable result, and feeling temporarily exhausted due to the fight for breath, the pony would come to a trembling standstill. Before it had time to recover it was taken out of the corral, a saddle was quickly and deftly strapped on, and a cowboy was in the saddle. Immediately the horse went into action to try to dislodge him. Up in the air it would rear, pawing the air with its forelegs, then down with a spine-jarring jolt, then arching its back and bucking and pitching and kicking while the cowboy held on, now gripping the horse with his knees and again digging his heels into its flanks while the onlookers impartially encouraged both horse and rider with loud shouts of "Yip-Yip" and "Yippee!" After a little while of this fruitless effort to unseat its rider the horse would usually submit, and stand fairly quietly. It might display a sort of token reaction the next time or two it was saddled and ridden, but it was by now virtually "broken", and knew that man was his master. A really nasty, mean, bad-tempered horse will sometimes attempt to lie down and roll over on his rider, but such animals are rare and the cowboys take care to watch out for them. This buying and breaking-in of animals would sometimes go on for hours, so that on such occasions the corral became more of a show-ring than a temporary pen for animals after or pending shipment. There was certainly no doubt that the Mexicans enjoyed every minute of it, although it seems likely this was not how the horses felt about it!

It was in the early part of our second summer that the cattle shipments began to arrive. In the north western part of the State there had been an unprecedented spell of dry weather; a dry winter, followed by a long, dry spring. The pasture shriveled and burnt away, watering places began to dry up, and the cattle began to starve. The farmers and ranchers delayed shipping out their cattle partly in the hope that rain would fall and still save them, and partly, too, because of the cost of transporting cattle hundreds of miles. However, the rain did not fall, and it became a case of moving the animals or losing them all. So, the boxcars began to bring their pitiable and heart rending cargos to the corral. The poor beasts, already starving and emaciated when they were herded aboard, some days before, had fared badly. Presumably to keep down transport costs, shippers had packed too many of them in each car, so that some of them which had been too weak to rise had after a time been trodden by the others and were either dead or dying. Calves, too, had been born on the way, and with little or no milk to be had from their mothers they were doomed to die before they reached their destination. As each boxcar was unloaded, and the last animal to leave of its own volition had tottered down the ramp, the cattlemen entered the cars and removed the remaining pitiful corpses. There were sometimes four or five in one car.

No one had the time, nor probably even the thought, to deal with these bodies decently and hygienically, although of course there came to be many of them after a while. The method of disposal initially adopted was to hitch them to a pair of mules and drag them off into the nearest bit of brush. The theory was that coyotes by night and buzzards by day would effectually do the scavenging. Unfortunately there were either too many bodies or not enough scavengers, with the result that within a few days the stench of putrefying flesh hung heavy and nauseating over the countryside, and it became a nightmare to go outside at all. Protests from ourselves and neighbors poured into the Sheriff's office in Rio Hondo, and, after a further delay of a few days which seemed an eternity, some one came out and buried the carcasses and we could breathe freely again.

After I had examined the corral to my satisfaction, I decided to follow the cart track which led past our house, down one side of the land and, so Father told me, terminated at the Arroyo. Alongside this track and to the left of our land was a bank of earth about six feet high, thirty feet wide at the base and a yard across at the top. This too extended down to the Arroyo and was a levee erected, no one quite knew when, as an attempted protection against flooding.

It took me some while to get to the river, as I stopped to look at things on the way. I came across a black snake, about three feet long, which rather alarmed me. Had I known it I need not have worried; they are in fact harmless and helpful to us, for they live chiefly on insects, small vermin, and other snakes, including such poisonous ones as rattlesnakes. Like most snakes they enjoy eating a frog if they can catch one, and the screams of the poor frog as it is being swallowed alive are dreadful. The first time I heard this happening I had no idea what it was, but the appalling high-pitched scream which suddenly rent the air terrified me. It sounded just like a small baby, shrieking in excruciating agony, and, trembling with fear at the shocking cry and in dread of I knew not what horror I should find, I went to investigate. I found the snake, which was swallowing the frog hind legs first, and by this time it had worked its way up to the frog's abdomen. As I stood, temporarily fascinated and undecided at the strange sight, the snake gave a sort of undulating gulp at the frog, which again screeched out in anguish. In swift reaction against the cruelty of Nature I seized a stick which was lying conveniently nearby, and fetched the snake a few sharp whacks. It disgorged the frog, which, to my surprise, hopped off apparently unharmed. I heard this cry of "frog in extremis" several times afterwards and never overcame that feeling of revulsion against the unthinking and unwitting cruelty of the snake.

I continued my way down the lane, and presently arrived at the Arroyo. The river at this point was about 300 feet wide and had, over the years, cut itself quite a deep channel so that it was some 25 feet or more down from the surrounding ground level. The river itself was quite deep; just how deep we never discovered, although Mr. Read, who was a very strong swimmer, made several attempts to find the bottom but failed although he was under water for some time.

When I had poked around by the river for a little while I found to my surprise that it was lunchtime, and so returned to our house where I chatted to dad while we ate our sandwiches.

In the afternoon I had a look down the boundary at the farther side of the farm, and this took some time as it was much overgrown and difficult to penetrate. I did eventually find myself once again at the river, along which I walked to the lane, and so back to the house. The farm was an almost perfect rectangle, with the shorter sides at the corral and river, with the latter boundary curving away slightly with the river at the farther end from the lane.

This was almost the last day of freedom for me for a while, as I had already been away from school too long. Rio Hondo School was, at that time, a small wooden structure, but this was replaced within the next two years by a fine, two story brick building of good proportions. These schools I attended, when and as I could, during the next three years.

The qualifying phrase in the forgoing sentence was necessary because there were times when lack of transport or exigencies of farm work made school attendance impossible. The latter obtained only very rarely, when there was a temporary labor shortage. The former occurred more often, depending on the weather. When the roads were in a passable condition, we had a school bus which would run out to the last farm, about a mile beyond ours, and collect all we children on the way back and return us after school. I remember it had a Ford engine, and a large wooden body with some very hard benches for seats inside. I would sit beside the driver, on the floor, with my feet out of the open doorway and resting on the step. How I managed not to be flung off onto the road as we bounced and lurched over the uneven surface I do not know, nor can I now understand why the driver allowed me to sit there, but he never protested and of course I felt myself to be no end of a daredevil on this perch.

When the bus could no longer get through, things became difficult. It was hopeless to try to walk on the churned-up road, but at first those of us who lived on or near the railway line did walk to school along the embankment, although this meant, in my case, a walk, there and back of 6 or 9 miles, and two of the boys lived that extra mile out from me. We did this walk for a few days and then these boys decided they had had enough of it. They called for me as usual, but before we had gone a mile I had been persuaded (too easily, alas!) into playing truant for the day. We had our lunches with us, and were soon gathered around a small fire the boys had kindled in the brush. They introduced me to the cigarette, which, while it made me feel very daring and rebellious, also made me wonder how anyone could enjoy smoking. We left our campfire at a time to reach home when we were expected. As the pattern had been set, so we continued playing truant for the next two or three days until the inevitable happened. The school authorities began to make inquiries about our non-appearance at school, and the horrible truth came out – at least, some of it! After the subsequent dust of retribution had settled, it was decided that a special school train should be run out to the end of the line for us until the road was open again as it was, perhaps, too far for us to walk after all. Later, when I had my pony and the bus was off for only the odd day or two at a time, I would ride to school and tether the pony to a tree near the school. He was able to find enough grazing around the tree for his needs, and I could keep an eye on him from my classroom window.

By and by our house was ready for us to move in, and this we did with a minimum of further delay.

Immediately we were in we were beset by the problem of a domestic water supply. The nearest suitable water was in the irrigation canal, half a mile away. This, although originally pumped from the Rio Grande, had time to settle in the Resaca and on its slow-moving journey through the canal and was comparatively clean – and in any case, we had a small sandstone drip filter for drinking water filtration. The Arroyo water was lightly salty, due to tidal action, was frequently turgid due to heavy rain, and was in any case so inaccessible as to be quite useless as a water supply.

As we were still only in residence at a marginal level, and as this was a problem requiring urgent solution, emergency measures had to be taken. To this end Father contrived to knock up a rather crude sled, complete with metal runners. On this conveyance he mounted a wooden barrel, and to pull the contraption he bought a broken down old horse. He did not intentionally buy a worn out animal; it was, I know, due to ignorance, and what Father mistook for docility was, as it turned out, no more than the resignation born of old age and a low diet. We ironically but quite innocently named our acquisition Prince, for he apparently had no name before he came to us, and we optimistically hitched him by means of a singletree to the sled and set off to the canal.

I must give Prince his due – his spirit was willing enough, and so perhaps in a sense he was not so misnamed after all. We proceeded at a cracking pace with the empty barrel, and retained this speed more or less all the way there. It was something of a tedious job to scoop the water out of the canal, but eventually the barrel was full and Father gave encouraging words to Prince to move off. The horse confidently moved forward in the traces until he came up against the deadweight of the new load, and then he stopped. Then he leaned against the collar to take the strain, and after a good deal of floundering and heaving he got under way – for a few yards. There he stopped, to regain breath and strength. After he seemed a bit quieter, we again urged him on. By now he was well aware of the load behind, so this time he really lunged forward, sloshing water in all directions with the sudden jar. By this stop and go method we eventually arrived home – with a barrel half full of water. Prince was worn out, but revived a little after a feed of oats.

After this experience, and until we could get a small cart, we made two trips each day, only half filling the barrel each time. Prince managed this quite well, and the two trips took no longer than that first one. We did not settle this water problem until the following spring, when we were able to have an underground concrete cistern constructed. Then, when we irrigated, we were able to divert water into the cistern to fill it, and pump it out as required by means of a hand pump set in the wooden inspection cover. The cistern was quite big, and held enough to keep us well supplied with water for weeks.

The next week or two after moving in Father spent in cleaning the cleared land of weeds and cactus, burning the rubbish as he went, and while he was busy on that a barn was being built for us near the house.

The barn was a sprawling all-inclusive sort of building which was intended to house the stock and implements as we acquired them. The middle part was open like a Dutch barn, and at one side were four stalls. Behind these and also under the main roof (which was of corrugated iron) was the granary. This building in a building was made of stout, close-fitting timber, to keep out any possible predators who might come after the corn and cattle-cake, and was of much better construction than out house! At the opposite end of the open part of the barn was a small shed, and this was later used as a garage.

As Father came to the end of his clearing and burning programs, he realized the next job was to get the ground plowed, so he went off to have a talk to Pat about it. Pat gave him a few lessons on how to handle a plow and a "middle-buster", which is like a double plow in that it pushes the soil away on both sides simultaneously, and is used for making furrows. He also went with Father and helped him to buy one of each of these and their replacement spares, and then together they went to look at something suitable to pull them. In the end Father decided on a pair (or "span") of ex-army mules, one male and one female.

Mules, as I have indicated earlier, are somewhat unpredictable in their behavior, and are usually characters in their own right. Pete, our male mule was at this time reputed to be about 8 years old, and from the permanently lugubrious expression on his face seemed to have been everywhere, seen everything, and to be thoroughly disillusioned. The only time he displayed any real animation was at feeding time, when it became abundantly clear that there was still something to stir him out of apathy. He was also slyly work-shy, but more about that in a minute.

Jinny, the female, was a larger, more strongly built animal and only about half the age of Pete. She was really a fool for work, and threw herself into it with great verve and enthusiasm. We found that it was advisable to give her plenty to do, otherwise she became rather mettlesome. When in that mood she would play hard to catch if she got loose, or if she had been turned out to graze in open pasture. You might spend an hour or more trying to pen her in a corner, and she would come out with hoofs flying every time until she was tired of the game and would then suddenly become docile and allow you to walk up and put on the halter. Or, perhaps, as you were walking near her head she would take a bite at your arm or body, and very painful such a bite can be, too. It seldom breaks the skin, but leaves a nasty graze and bruising for some time afterwards. Or, again, if she felt like it and you were behind her – either when she was in the stall, or if you were hitching her to some implement – she would suddenly lash out at you with the nearest hind hoof. This was the worst of all, and could be really dangerous. She tried it unsuccessfully on Father several times until one day she kicked him on the leg. She did not catch him a really damaging blow, but it was painful enough and upset him enough to make him to lose his temper more completely than I had ever seen, or would ever again see, in his whole life. Trembling, and livid of face, he took Jinny and tied her up short to a post, to restrict her ability to move except in a circle. Then he got a thin bamboo cane, about four feet long, and set about lashing her across the hindquarters with it. He carried on for about five minutes, until the cane was in shreds and his temper had been spent. Of course the caning had not in any way been cruel, since the cane was thin and the hide of the mule was thick. All the same, there was no doubt that it stung her and she did not enjoy it. It was a long time before she forgot it, and I cannot remember her ever again attempting to take liberties with Father.

Pete, as I have said, was inclined to "dodge the column" whenever he saw the chance. One of his favorite methods was rather subtle, and it was some time before it was discovered. When he and Jinny were working in double harness he would contrive to walk a step behind her. This meant, of course, that she was taking the strain first and thereby doing the bulk of the work. Being by nature an eager sort of worker she was no match for Pete in craftiness, and did not seem aware of any injustice or inequality of effort. He was finally caught out by Father who noticed that the nose of the plow showed an irritating and tiring tendency to turn towards Pete, and he deduced correctly the reason for it and how it was taking place. From then on Pete occasionally felt an admonitory flick of the whip as a reminder to pull his weight.

He also had a most inconvenient absent-mindedness to work when he was in single harness. He would start off reasonably briskly, but after a while his footsteps would begin to flag as though he had forgotten the point of it all. If he received no further urging he would gradually come to a halt, ostensibly to think over what he was doing and where he should be going. From this to a nice, quiet doze was but a short step, and one easily taken if he was not stopped.

Towards the end of that first plowing there occurred an incident which showed us for all time what characters these mules were, and on what a firm basis rests the simile, "as stubborn as a mule".

Father had been plowing every day for two or three weeks, and each day he stopped at 12:30 to have lunch and feed the mules their midday oats. This particular day, by lunchtime, there remained only a few more furrows to plow around the headland to complete the whole job. Rather than start again after lunch on the same work, Father decided he would carry on until it was finished. There remained about three more furrows to do as they came once more up to the house as 12:45, and as they passed the house and came opposite the barnyard the mules stopped. Father clicked his tongue at them to "gee-up", but they continued to stand there, patiently. They had decided it was lunchtime and were waiting to be un-harnessed from the plow. When encouraging noises had no effect, Father decided sterner measures were necessary and gave them a few flicks with the whip. These were equally ineffective, and I was called out to try leading the animals, but it was all to no avail. Eventually, as if to put an end to any further argument, (and I can assure you it did!) Pete simply sat down there in the traces. Father graciously admitted defeat (for it was impossible not to see the funny side of it) and unhitched them. Pete at once scrambled to his feet, and the pair of them trotted off to the barn for their corn. After lunch the plowing was completed without further trouble.

While the weather remained good and the road open, we were able to get to Rio Hondo and back fairly easily. This enabled Mother to pile up a reasonably good stack of groceries and kerosene oil against the time when travel would be impossible. Only once did her store prove inadequate, and that was during our second winter when the roads were impassable for weeks. On that occasion she and I walked to town along the railway and she carried a great load of groceries all the four miles back, while I carried the paraffin.

Milk and butter were quite a problem for her initially; bread she had to cook herself. The milk problem was temporarily settled by using tinned, unsweetened milk, but she knew that when the way to town was closed we should soon be eating dry bread unless something was done. There was, in fact, only one thing to be done, and that was to buy a cow. All our neighbors had a cow each for their domestic use. No one had any surplus for sale, for there were no dairy farms. The land was too valuable as arable land, and even had this not been so the transport difficulties were insuperable. So each family had its own cow, and was thus independent except for the short period when the cow was down-calving, when the tinned milk again came into its own.

Brownie, as we named our little cow, was no great beauty perhaps, but she was a most docile and affectionate creature. By her coloring, she must have had Guernsey in her ancestry, but what regrettably spoiled her appearance was that whereas her right horn curved upwards as it should, the left one curved down.

When she came to us, she was reputed to be yielding nearly four gallons of milk per day. Father knew nothing about milking, but the previous owner of Brownie gave him a short lesson in the technique. For the first week or two the inexperienced fumbling produced considerably less milk than we had hoped to see, but gradually Father improved and the yield increased. Brownie was most patient throughout, although she did turn her head once or twice to look at Father reproachfully with her big, liquid brown eyes when he had perhaps been, unintentionally of course, a little rough in his efforts. Once he had become thoroughly proficient, he produced the suggestion that it would be a good idea for me to learn how to milk and look after the cow. Then if he were ill, or was away for any reason, I could get on with the job. So I began taking lessons, and very soon discovered that there was more to milking than merely grabbing a teat and pulling at it. Actually, the motion is more in the nature of a combined squeezing and stroking carried out in one operation. You begin operations by washing the udder and teats in warm water; this cleans them and clears the openings at the end of the teats which may have become clogged since the previous milking. You then take hold of two opposite teats, and apply the motion alternately and rhythmically to each in turn. The idea is that, starting at the udder, one should coax and squeeze the milk down and out through the teat. It is a technique not easily explained, and requires practice to be understood and mastered. In the initial stages it means "crampy" fingers, and frequent stops to flex them. To complicate matters, too, you have to gain the cooperation of the cow. If you hurt her, in your inexperience, by pulling or pinching, or if you take so long that the animal becomes tired of it all, she is quite capable of kicking out and upsetting you and the hard-won milk you have managed to obtain up to then. She may refuse to let you try again, and kick every time you attempt to touch her. Alternatively, she may hold back her milk in the udder, and refuse to let it down until you have regained her confidence. I felt decidedly proud the first time Brownie produced a pail full of milk for me, though the pleasure was dimmed a little when it transpired that this skill had earned me a full cowman's job. Father thankfully handed that chore over to me. From then on I had full responsibility for her, staking her out to pasture, giving her extra feed as required and milking her twice a day.

Mother by this time was reveling in a land which was flowing, if not with honey, certainly with milk – and, to a lesser extent, with eggs, as we had acquired a few laying pullets from Effie. Effie, too, had taken Mother in hand and had shown her how to make butter. This was something of an art, but after a few initial partial failures Mother soon got the knack. So we now had milk, butter, and eggs, and as Mother had always been a good cook we soon had reason to feel that things were beginning to look up.

We were all so busily occupied that we were scarcely conscious of the passage of time. Winter proved to be nothing, compared with what we had always previously known winters to be. For a week or so there had been a cold wind blowing from the north (they were in fact called "northers"), and during that time there had been a little frost. The citrus growers had lighted the "smudge fires" in the orchards for a night or two. The dense, black smoke from these kept the frost from settling on the trees and damaging them. Apart from this short spell of cold, we had a pleasant, dry winter and Father was able to get his land cultivated and sewn, ready for the spring vegetable season. And when spring did come, very early, there was so much to do that we just did not know what to do first. Even poor Mother was called into the battle, so that she was working in the fields for a large part of each day, only breaking off to prepare meals. I think it was at this time that the first seeds of rebellion were sown in her mind, though they were not to bear fruit for another two years. I think she realized that while we should not be likely to find ourselves in want, it would involve long hours, hard work and even drudgery, and that there was unlikely to be a time when we should be able to slacken our efforts.

There were two main factors which were responsible for this state of affairs. The main one of these was the shortage of markets of sufficient size and nearness to absorb the perishable produce of the Valley. The other, of almost equal importance, was the lack of regular, reliable labor to work in the fields. These two things made life a constant struggle for all settlers, or would-be settlers, and many of them returned whence they had come, broken in the effort to carve out a new life in the "Land of Promise". I think I can honestly say it did not break us by the time we left, but this was no doubt only because we had no money invested, whereas some of the people we met had risked their life savings and were now too old to want to start again elsewhere. It is worth looking at both these factors more closely to get an understanding of what was wrong down there in those days.

First – the lack of markets. If you were to take a map and look for the Valley, you would find it down almost at the tip of Texas. If you then looked for towns of any consequence, you would find the nearest some hundreds of miles away – such cities as Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio and Houston. It is well to bear in mind, too, that their population was much smaller then, and that around them, and between them and the Valley lies many a vegetable-producing farm. This was the crux of the matter; if these local and semi-local farms had good crops they could (and did) saturate the market with vegetables at a price against which we, with our higher transport costs, could not hope to compete. This meant that we in the Valley were forced into the ridiculous and degrading position of hoping that some misfortune would befall their crops – late frosts, insect attack, blight, in fact anything – and would leave ours unaffected, so that we could cash in on the shortage of the crop or crops concerned. Since we had no magic crystal ball to enable us to see into the future, to know which, if any, of their crops would be thus affected, we were forced into growing something of everything. The problem, and the gamble, was how much of each crop to grow. No one could forecast which crop would sell well, which not so well, and which not at all. So we tried growing differing quantities of them all at different times, but we always seemed fated to have the most of what was not selling, and the least of that which was. We heard of the occasional lucky grower (the sort who might nowadays win the Irish Sweep or a first dividend in a football pool) who had made a good guess and had planted a few acres of what turned out to be the scarce crop of the year, and consequently made a small fortune. It did not happen to us, or to anyone we knew.

Not that we did not try; we tried cabbages, onions, carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, squash, eggplant, okra (gumbo), sweet corn, sweet potato, watermelons, cantaloupes, sweet peppers, beans, and various other things, but many of them were partially or entirely wasted – together with the money for the seed, and the time and effort spent in their cultivation. One year we grew four acres of perfect lettuces. There they were, row upon row of beautiful "heads", and we were unable to sell any of them. I staked Brownie amongst them for several days to eat her fill until she grew tired of them: the rest were plowed back into the ground. At the same time people in cities such as New York and Chicago, two thousand miles away, were paying all kinds of fancy prices for lettuces, which were almost unobtainable.

On another occasion we had several acres of cabbages, and although we knew there was not a ready sale, we had to see if we could not dispose of at least some of them. So one morning Father and I cut a ton of them and loaded them into the wagon. As he had several jobs to do on the farm, Father decided to allow me to take the load into Rio Hondo. He instructed me to go to the railway station and there, on a siding, I should find a boxcar. At this car would be the agent for a firm of vegetable commission agents, and I was to take whatever he offered for the cabbages and help to unload them. If there was no sale I was not to bring them back, and should dump them somewhere on the way home. It did not take me long to hitch up Jinny and Pete, and we were soon off, with me perched high on top of the wagon. I found the boxcar without much difficulty, and confidently drew up alongside. The agent unenthusiastically selected a couple of cabbages off the load and squeezed them, pressing in his thumbs as hard as he could. Although I was unable to see any impression he made on them he said they were too soft, and that he did not want them – so that was that. I waited until we were out of the town, and then tied the reins to the slatted superstructure of the wagon. This left my hands free while the mules plodded homeward, and I pitched the cabbages into the roadside ditch as we moved along. These were the only cabbages we cut that year; the rest putrefied in the fields.

Father could never resign himself to accepting this shocking waste of good food, and as a lifelong Socialist he was continually turning over in his mind thoughts of producers' cooperatives and similar schemes. He felt that with a little more cooperation and less competition in the growing of crops better balance could be achieved in production, and that cooperative marketing would lower transport costs. If there was a surplus of some crop in the Valley, in spite of these measures, and that crop was suitable for it, then it should be canned at a cooperative cannery. Most crops could be preserved in that way. To Father, these ideas seemed to make good common sense, and he thought everyone would benefit by their application. To our various neighbors, to whom Father tentatively ventured his opinions, the mere idea of cooperation was anathema. America was, and still is so far as I know, the main bastion of free and unrestricted individual enterprise and regards any other way of life with horror.

The only interest he could arouse was in one or two farmers who expressed themselves willing to participate in a somewhat watered-down version of the cooperative marketing plan. Their idea was that two or three of them (in the event, there were four of them including Father) should share the expense of hiring a refrigerator car from the railway. By means of this car, which had a large compartment at each end packed with ice, they would be able to ship the produce many hundreds of miles farther north than usual, to arrive in really fresh condition. This way, they might open up new markets, and should get higher prices. Father, no doubt reflecting on the improbability of his larger ideas meeting with much response, and feeling this to be a step in the right direction, agreed to take part.

The venture turned out to be no more than a qualified success, and was not repeated. Most of the partners felt that the financial risk they had been on was more than they had initially expected it to be, and greater than they wanted to incur again in view of the modest return they had enjoyed. Most of the things which had gone wrong might have been foreseen, and some avoided, but foresight is rarer than hindsight, so let us see what did happen.

First of all the refrigerator car arrived at the corral a day earlier than expected, and in the evening instead of in the morning. This meant that no one was ready with vegetables to begin the packing, and the car stood all that night and half the next day before serious packing began. All this time the ice had been steadily melting away.

Then the loading of the car took longer than had been expected. The deliveries to the car came slowly because of the dearth of labor in the fields, and the actual stowing away of the produce turned out to be a more formidable task than had been anticipated. The different vegetables were packed in crates and boxes of varying shapes and sizes, and as no one had any previous experience of the job, these containers were moved all around the car in an effort to insure that the maximum quantity had been stowed on board. By the time the car left on its northward journey nearly half the ice had gone.

Near panic set in for the partners when the car was overdue at its destination. It finally rolled in two days later than expected, and had evidently been shunted on to a siding somewhere in spite of the large notices pasted on it proclaiming that the contents were perishable and delivery must not be delayed. The consignees, who had been empowered to sell the vegetables on a commission basis, wired this news to the worried growers, and further said that as the ice had all melted and the produce was showing signs of deterioration, he was forced to sell it immediately for the best price offered. Fortunately this turned out to be better than could have been obtained locally, and when the balance was struck it came out slightly on the credit side. Father felt that, with the experience gained and with better organization, another venture would go well but he was alone in this belief, so there were no more cars venturing forth.

Our Life in Texas

If the settlers had been people with large families they would no doubt have been self-sufficient as regards labor to run their farms. In point of fact, none of our neighbors had more than two children, and several of them had none. No doubt the characteristics of the settling explained this. As already shown, the sort of people who had come to the Valley were those who had managed to save enough money to buy a parcel of land, and who had meant to carve out a new and better life for themselves with their own hands in a new land. This meant that those who came had, with few exceptions, been from a fairly narrow section of the population. They were working-class folk, who had worked hard and saved hard, and after many years had accumulated enough capital to take the plunge. Had they chosen to have a large family there would have been little chance to save money, and they would have been most unlikely one day to find themselves in Texas.

For these reasons, too, many of them were no longer young when they hopefully embarked on their adventures. For instance, our nearest neighbors Mr. And Mrs. Stecker, were in their late fifties and had no children. The Stamms, who lived almost opposite the Steckers, were in their late forties and also childless. Maynards, farther on had one son, Newells had one, Schnieders none, and so it went on.

This, of course, made it inevitable that whenever crops were to be hoed or thinned, or gathered then it was necessary for most of us to seek extra labor. There was no American farm labor to be obtained, since there were no farm laborers in the usual way as in most other rural communities. This meant that we had to rely upon the Mexicans for such help as we received.

Most of the Mexicans who lived in the area were nomadic squatters who had drifted over the border at some indeterminate time in the past. They were peasants in origin and habits, they had few possessions and no education and were simply and almost sublimely unambitious. Their philosophy was very accurately propounded to Father once by one of them who had at one time received some little education, and could speak English fairly well.

"You American people" he said, "You like a nice house, nice clothes, a car, lots of things to eat, books, and all kinds of things like that. All these things cost lots of money, and to get this money you must work very hard all the time. So you never have any time to enjoy yourselves or do anything."

"Now we Mexicans" he continued, "We do not want or need all these things. When a young couple gets married, all their relatives come and help to build them a house. With a wooden framework of posts cut from the brush, with roof and walls and beds made from the bulrushes cut from the ditches along the irrigation canal, and with the floor of packed down earth, the job is done in two or three days. Then a collection is made to provide them with a few pots and pans and bedding, and perhaps someone will give them a goat to start them off so that they will have milk, and future meat. Then with a few cobs of corn, perhaps "borrowed" from a nearby farm, so they can make tortillas, they are set up for food. All they need now is a bit of money, once in a while, to buy tobacco and a few extras. This is how we like to live; we just work a little, to buy the few things we cannot get any other way, and when we have this necessary money we stop work and enjoy ourselves until it has gone. We like to sit in the sun and talk a little, sing a little, laugh a little, eat and drink a little, smoke a little and sleep a little. We are then very happy and contented and envy no man, for what could be a better life?"

Well, whether or not you would agree with this simple philosophy, I am sure you will understand how very difficult it made the hiring of labor. If the Mexicans had any money they would not work, for the idea of saving for a "rainy day" was just as alien to their thinking as was the prospect of trying to improve their economic status. I recall the case of one inexperienced farmer who was so thrilled at having managed to hire a worker that, thinking to encourage him to stay and give of his best, he paid him half his wages at mid-week. The man did not reappear for work until two days later. He had been into town during that time with his family, and had spent the money on ice cream and root beer and in generally providing enjoyment for them until all the money had run out, whereupon he had to return to work to earn some more.

On another occasion one of our neighbors had managed to hire two young Mexicans to assist him in hoeing his cotton. He had hoped to inspire them by setting an industrious example, but by the end of the morning he realized that his plan was not working. His new hired hands had taken things very easily, talking and joking and making quite a social occasion of it. Somehow he had managed to control his growing annoyance and impatience, but after lunch when they returned to the field he could not refrain from saying:

"Well, boys, what do you say if we do a bit of work now", putting some emphasis on the penultimate word.

That was enough; the "boys" did not reply, but looked at each other and, in the unity of mutual assent, threw down their hoes and walked off the field. The farmer saw neither of them again, and had to manage the hoeing by himself.

Father was luckier than many of our neighbors with regard to the labor problem. Living in a clearing in the brush, between our farm and the canal, was Joaquin and his family, which consisted of his wife and two children, a boy and a girl. Joaquin was to be relied upon to work, when he felt like it, for Father, and sometimes his son, who was around twelve years of age, would come too. They were not prepared to work every day, of course, but were always agreeable to work for us rather than anyone else. Whether this was because they liked Father or because we were their nearest farm I do not know, but they were a great help at cotton picking time in particular.

I once went to visit them at their home in the brush, and was received with great friendliness and pleasure. It was one Sunday morning, when I was down at the bottom end of the farm looking over the cotton plants, that I suddenly conceived the idea to pay them a visit. I had the mistaken notion that I could take a shortcut through the brush and be there in a few minutes. It took considerably longer than that by the time I had made several detours around the thorny entanglements. I would no doubt have lost my sense of direction due to these divergences, except that from time to time I heard Joaquin's little donkey, or burro as they are called, start to bray. As I approached the clearing the dog started to bark furiously, so my arrival was well announced and Joaquin came out to greet me. He was obviously delighted to see me, and introduced me to his wife. She could speak no English, but by then I could manage a few words of Spanish so we were able to converse a little. She told us that she was just grinding some corn and would be making some tortillas in a few minutes, and that I must stay and have some. I watched her for a while as she made her preparations.

The grindstone was like a mortar and pestle, consisting of a large, hollowed-out stone, and a stubby, cylindrical grinding stone. She stripped a couple of handfuls of hard, ripe yellow corn off the cobs and teased them into the hollow in the stone and set to work with the grinding stone. In a short time she had reduced the maize to a coarse powder. To this flour she added salt and afterwards sufficient goat milk to enable her to pat the mixture out into the small flapjacks, or tortillas. These were then placed on a grid over the hot ashes in the fire to cook. Joaquin suggested that, while the cooking was taking place, I might like to have a look around his place, to which suggestion I very readily agreed.

There were two buildings, both of the usual rush-roof and dry mud floors construction. The main one, outside which Joaquin's wife was busy making the tortillas, seemed to be the kitchen-cum-living room and was furnished with a rough table and benches. As there were no windows, the open doorway had been made quite wide to permit the entry of plenty of light. The other building was the sleeping quarters, and was suitably subdivided to house the whole family. The beds had mattresses made from dried rushes, and looked very comfortable, and, as they could be easily and freely changed, were no doubt clean and hygienic, too. Here again there were no windows, but as light was not as important for the bedroom the doorway – again open – was of normal width to permit a little more privacy.

Joaquin then formally introduced me to the burro and the dog. The former was a little, tubby, contented sort of character, who apparently did little to earn his living except occasionally take the family to town in the small cart. However, with a fair amount of grazing nearby and a sufficiency of corn to be had by a little light-fingered borrowing, the cost of his keep was negligible and he could hardly be properly regarded as a luxury.

The dog, by contrast, was thin to the point of emaciation, and was no doubt half starved. Joaquin was clearly fond of the animal, and the dog was fond of him by the fuss they made of each other, so I could only imagine that they were both used to the state of affairs where the dog's ribs showed through his skin. The animal existed on scraps left over from the family's meals, and rather scanty they no doubt were. Meat, in particular, was very scarce – partly because of the price, but mainly because of the distance one had to go for it, into town, and the impossibility of keeping it for long in a hot climate.

Finally, Joaquin showed me his two nanny goats, one in milk and the other dry and in kid. So they had milk for the present, and the prospect of a little meat and more milk for the future.

This represented the whole of Joaquin's possessions, as he led me back to the fire where his wife had just finished baking the first of the tortillas. She handed me one, steaming hot. It was palatable, though a little chewy, and I found that two were as many as I could eat. My hosts seemed disappointed at my lack of appetite, and to avoid the risk of offending them I asked if I may be allowed to take one or two home for my parents to try. This suggestion proved to be a great success, so after thanking Joaquin and his wife for their hospitality, I was seen on my way home, clutching the tortillas. They proved to be very tough and indigestible when cold, and I am afraid they were mostly wasted.

It was inevitable, as I have remarked earlier, that, due to the lack of sufficient and reliable labor, Mother too would be called upon at times to work in the fields. She was not built to withstand either heavy physical labor or excessive heat, but she really worked like a beaver at vegetable harvesting time. She and I were then busy, day after day, in pulling and bunching onions, carrots, beetroot and turnips, cutting and packing lettuces, and picking and crating tomatoes. The tomato crates arrived in sections, and it was my job to nail them together. When we had sufficient produce packed to make it worthwhile, Father would break off the work he was engaged upon and run it into town. He could not spare the time to help us gather and pack the vegetables as he was busy preparing the land for, and in planting the cotton crop.

About this time on that first year Pat and Effie came over to see us one Sunday in their old Willys-Overland car. In a basket in the back was a little, quivering bundle of black and white, all for me. This puppy dog, one of a litter just produced by their collie bitch, was sired by a mastiff and had the short, smooth hair of that breed. I was delighted with both the dog, and the wonder and surprise of having him. I named him Rover, and he grew into a fine-looking dog, though never, of course, reaching his father's size. As he grew up, he became my constant companion and friend, and we went everywhere together. Wherever I went, there he would be, hunting and snuffling around to see what he could turn up, but always near enough to keep his eye on me to see that I did not go off somewhere without him. In the morning when I came out of the house I would whistle and he would come rushing out of the barn, tail flashing back and forth in ecstasy.

Of course, on the days when I went to school he would be content to remain at home with Father until I came home again, but if Father went anywhere he expected to go, too. This led to an amusing incident on one occasion.

It was during the time when the road was impassable for motor traffic, and the train service was in operation for us school children. Father had some business in Rio Hondo which required urgent personal attention and he somehow obtained permission to travel by the school train. As he and I left home the first day, Rover automatically started to follow us. We ordered him to go back, but he required some persuasion to do so and was not a little baffled and annoyed about it. We boarded the train, which shortly started off. I happened to glance through the rear door, back along the line, and saw, to my astonishment, Rover chasing after us. Father and I went out on the observation platform and shouted to him to go back, but he was either too far away to hear, or deaf to our orders. However, as the train gained speed he gradually receded into the distance and we assumed he would soon lose heart and return home. The four-mile journey was soon over, and Father and I were standing on the platform having a few final words together before separating to go our different ways when I realized that he was no longer paying attention to what I was saying. I glanced at him and saw that he was looking with incredulity down the line whence we had recently come, and I turned to see what was the cause. There, about 300 yards away, was Rover – still running as fast as his weary legs would carry him. As he came nearer, we could see that his concentration was fixed upon the swiftly disappearing train which was by now on the way to San Benito. He had eyes for nothing else and would have passed us by had we not both, with one accord, shouted to him as he came by the platform. Never have I seen any other animal come so quickly to a halt as did Rover that day when he heard us call. He staggered over to the platform, on to which we lifted him, and lay at our feet, wagging his tail, grinning from ear to ear, and, with tongue lolling from exhaustion strove mightily, with much panting, to get back his breath. I must admit that, although he had been rather disobedient, we were a little proud of him and had not the heart to be cross with him. He spent the rest of the day with Father.

As that spring gave way to summer, we became more and more preoccupied with the cotton crop. We also had plantings of corn, sorghum, and alfalfa, but as these were for feeding purposes and in the nature of field crops they did not need much attention.

After Father had finished drilling a few rows of cotton he set me on a job which I thoroughly enjoyed. He had borrowed a small, light mule and had hitched her to a plank which was about six feet long and nine inches wide. The idea was that I should stand at the rear end of this plank and drive the mule slowly up and down the rows of newly planted seed, thus compressing the soil, conserving the moisture and making a firm bed for the plants when they germinated. I had some trouble at first with the problem of balance, but with the adaptability of the young I was soon master of the technique and enjoying myself immensely.

Once these jobs were completed there was no more to be done until the crop was high enough out of the ground to go through it with a hoe and thin it to a plant density commensurate with the need to allow sufficient room for each plant to develop full growth. Plant growth varies a lot according to the kind of season – in a wet one I have seen them grow over four feet tall and bushy in proportion, but when this happens all the plant strength has gone into this woody growth and the cotton yield is small. A good plant would not be more than three feet high by approximately two feet across, so one thins out the plants with this in mind.

As the plants grew, we continued to go through them periodically with the hoe and the cultivator, to keep down the weeds and to preserve a good mulch in order to prevent the evaporation of the moisture from the soil. We always hoped for some, but not too much, rain at this stage.

When the plants reached full growth, the flowers began to appear. They were a delicate pale yellow, of a poppy-like texture, though not so large. As time progressed, they turned pink and then shriveled and dropped, leaving the small young bolls to develop. It was then that the boll weevil was likely to be active, and a careful watch had to be kept for it so that if it appeared in any quantity suitable counter measures could be quickly adopted. The weevils attacked the young bolls, depositing their eggs therein. The grubs which hatched from these eggs fed upon the bolls, which in consequence either dropped off the plant or were deformed and thereafter developed only partially.

At this time, when the cotton plant was about half way through its life span, we normally had the best weather of the year. The skies were blue and cloudless day after day, and the sun shone warmly down. The really hot weather did not arrive until later, and then temperatures soared. I once placed a thermometer in the sun at midday, while we were indoors having lunch. When I examined it afterwards it was registering 130 degrees. Fortunately for all of us, we generally had a cool breeze blowing inland from the Gulf of Mexico and even on the hottest day one could feel comfortable in the shade. Not, of course, that we had much time for such luxuries as resting in the shade, but it was nice to know that, if the heat did remain unbearable, one could obtain a little temporary relief this way. There were just a few days in the summer when the breeze slackened, and on those days it was too hot to work at all. Poor Mother always found the heat too much for her and would become more and more red, hot, and exhausted as the day wore on. Father seemed to soak up all the sunshine he could, and to thrive on it. I enjoyed it, too, except for one summer when I had prickly heat which nearly drove me mad with the itching. I would writhe on the floor, and rub my back up against the doorposts in a sort of frenzy. Eventually Mother discovered that a sponge-down in vinegar and water afforded me respite, and the itching finally ceased altogether.

As the cotton ripens, the plant and the bolls begin to turn brown. In a good year there should be quite a lot of these bolls on each plant, and each boll would be about the size and shape of a ping-pong ball. An un-ginned bale of cotton weighs around 1,500 pounds, and a good yield would be three to four bales per acre.

When the bolls are fully ripe, they burst open into four sections, from which the cotton hangs suspended. The seeds are enmeshed in the fiber, so the whole has to be picked together and the component parts separated later at the gin. The crop is now ready for picking, and the fields exhibit the characteristic snowy whiteness.

Our crop was ripe for picking almost before we were ready, and Father had to rush about to engage all possible labor. Joaquin and his son came, and one or two others whom Father found. There was also himself and me, and Mother was delegated to weigh the cotton as the pickers brought it to the wagon. This latter function served a twofold purpose; it enabled Father to know when he had enough raw cotton aboard the wagon to form a bale, and also kept a record of the quantity picked by each person. As payment to the pickers was at a rate per 100 pounds (in those days, $1-$1.25), this information was most essential. A really good man could manage to pick from 200 to 250 pounds a day, and so earn a decent wage.

These figures naturally did not apply to me except insofar as Father had promised me a rate-per-hundred, too, to encourage me a bit no doubt. Anyway, as I picked up my sack that first day I had few expectations of setting any new records. The sack appeared to be enormous. It was, I suppose, about five feet long, made of strong, white canvas, and approximately 18 inches wide. There were white tapes attached at the open end, so that one could tie the sack around one waist. The opening was a foot or so lower down on the top side. This was to enable both hands to be left free, so that as the cotton was picked it could be put behind ones back, into the sack.

I tied on the sack, and started off enthusiastically. I found the picking great fun at first, and although at the beginning not very deft I improved quite quickly. After a while my back began to ache a bit, and I straightened and had a look at the sack to see how it was filling. There seemed to be some appreciable bulk already, and I felt encouraged enough to put my foot in the sack to compress the cotton, to make more room, as I had been taught to do. By the time I had done this there seemed to be very little after all, and I realized that a lot of work and backache lay ahead before I should accumulate any significant poundage. By the end of the day, I had picked 40 pounds, and managed to increase this to around 60 on subsequent days. The money which I earned from this, Father put in the bank for me and by the end I had some $35 or more standing to my credit. Alas, during the following winter the bank closed its doors and swallowed all but a few dollars of this hard-earned money. It was very many years before I could again bring myself to trust a bank, and preferred to keep any monies in cash when I had any!

Since Father could naturally pick cotton more quickly than I, it became my job to take the full loads to the gin while he remained behind to pick more and to supervise the others. Because of the lightness of the crop, a load of 1,500 pounds of it occupied a lot of space in that wagon. To accommodate it all the wagon had extensions some six feet high which could be slotted in, so that I was perched high in the air on a comfortably soft seat as we set off for the gin in Rio Hondo.

At the gin, there was only one suction chute, so that if anyone was ahead of you it meant patiently waiting until their load was off. When my turn came I had to drive the wagon so that the chute was suspended over the center of it. Then an operative would come and manipulate the chute, which acted like a huge vacuum cleaner and sucked the cotton out of the wagon into the gin. Inside the gin, the cotton dropped onto several rows of needle-like teeth, which, being agitated rapidly to and fro, plucked and teased the lint away from the seeds. These seeds dropped to the floor of the agitator and were conveyed away to be sacked. They could be retained for replanting, but most farmers preferred fresh seed each year and sold those obtained from their own cotton to be made into cattle cake for stock feeding purposes. The cotton lint was sucked from the agitator to the baler on the floor above. There the lint emerged from the pipes in great fluffy clouds into the bale where it was compressed by a huge plunger constantly moving up and down. When all the cotton from the load had been ginned, steel bands were fastened on the bale whilst it was still under pressure. When this had been done the pressure was released and the bands were made taut by the expansion of the cotton, and the new bale was then weighed. According to this weight, and the current rate per pound, I received a check from the gin office in payment and then set off home for the next load.

There were, of course, other enemies of the growing cotton in addition to the boll weevil, but the most fantastic onslaught was made during our second summer by an invasion of Army Worms.

These were not, in fact, worms at all, but only so named; they were actually a brown caterpillar, rather short and stocky in shape. They had derived the sobriquet of "army" from their method of attack. They came in their hundreds of thousands – in fact, millions – in a solid line, devouring every green thing in their path. Nothing would stop their awful progression in the quest for food. If the leaders came to an obstruction they would not hesitate or deviate, but would throw themselves at it, with their brothers pressing hard behind, and on, and over, them if necessary. If, for instance, the moving hordes came to a ditch containing water, the leaders would plunge in, followed by the others, who kept coming, so that the pile of drowned bodies eventually rose high enough out of the water to permit a passage for the remainder of the caterpillars. The big, fierce, red ants battled with them and dragged hundreds of them off to their nests, but no losses suffered by the caterpillars seemed to have the slightest effect on their numbers, there were so many of them.

When we first knew we were threatened by them, they were two fields away. The farm next to ours was rented to two young Mexicans. There were no buildings on the farm, so these two brothers, Celedonio and Francisco, lived at home with their parents at the Anaquitas, a settlement some five or six miles away. In consequence of this appreciable traveling distance they always grew crops which could be left untended for a fortnight or so at a time. They were therefore unacquainted with the fact that the Army Worms had invaded their cotton crop, so nothing was being done to halt the tide of destruction which was rapidly advancing towards us. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to take such measures as we could to minimize the damage the worms would cause when they did arrive. This meant treating the cotton crop with some kind of poison, which would kill as many of the caterpillars as possible, and with this end in view, Father made up some Bordeaux Mixture. This is a powder consisting of lime and Paris Green, and it has to be dusted on to the cotton plants. To save time, which by now was precious if we were to get in ahead of the foe, Father hit upon a novel – and probably unique – idea for scattering the poison. He filled two muslin bags with the powder, and tied one to each end of a stout bamboo pole which was about six feet long. I was deputized to ride on Pete up and down between the rows of cotton, balancing the powder-scattering contraption across his back, and shaking it as we progressed. That way we could cover two rows at once.

As soon as this plan had been decided upon, Father wasted no time in putting it into operation. We arose early the following morning, and, just after dawn and while the dew was still heavy on the cotton leaves I was astride Pete and we were plodding up the rows. It was a quiet, still sort of morning and the powder settled on and adhered to the damp foliage perfectly. With Father at the end of the field, ready to affix large bags of poison to the ends of the pole when necessary, we made very good progress and were finished sooner than we had expected. We went back home to breakfast with the comforting feeling of having done a good job in record time. Two hours later it began to rain, and it rained all day, washing off all the poison. Within four days there was nothing left of our cotton crop except the spiky skeletons of stalks offering mute and forlorn evidence of the havoc which had been wrought.

Our Life in Texas

When we had been on the farm a few months, it became obvious to Father that he needed some means of transport a little more handy and rapid than the mules for those odd journeys into town which always seemed to keep cropping up. Then, too, Mother wanted something a bit more comfortable than a wagon in which to travel, and we all hoped to go visiting or out on pleasure occasionally. Thus it came about that we acquired our first motor car, a flivver, one of the old Model T Fords.

This vehicle was as temperamental as the most pampered prima donna, and behaved with an infuriating disregard for our convenience and feelings. It was a touring car, and far from new when Father bought it. It had been built before the invention of the self-starter, and therefore had to be cranked.

The starting procedure was almost a ritual. Firstly it was necessary to see that the "gas" and "spark" levers were set correctly. These were located just below the steering wheel, the idea being that their settings could be altered while the car was in motion. Thus the speed could be varied by pushing the gas lever up or down, and the engine, or spark, timing advanced or retarded by the other lever. The choke control came out through the radiator and terminated in a loop, so that the richness of the mixture into the carburetor could be controlled while the engine was being cranked. The usual practice was to set the gas lever about a third open, and the spark well retarded. If the latter were not done there was a distinct possibility that the engine would kick when cranked, and could easily break ones wrist. When these preliminaries had been attended to, the next thing was to pull out the choke control, and, holding it out, proceed to turn the crank handle slowly three or four times in order to get a rich mixture into the cylinders. Next, the choke was pushed in, and one or two quick, short pulls on the crank should cause the engine to burst into life. Then the job was to rush around to the controls before the engine died, advance the spark and jiggle the gas lever in order to warm up the engine and thus keep it going.

All this, theoretically, was what should happen. Where our car departed from theory was at the point where it was supposed to burst into roaring life. All too many times we dressed in our Sunday best, ready for a few hours with Pat and Effie, or, more rarely, expecting to enjoy a Saturday afternoon in San Benito, only to find that Lizzie was feeling uncooperative. Mother and I would sit hopefully in the car while Father went through all the motions, but all in vain if this was an off day for Lizzie. I have seen him, on such an occasion, remove and check the spark plugs and coils, see that petrol was flowing properly, and finally crank until he had exhausted himself without the engine having fired once. Sometimes this non-starting was a passing show of temperament and often after this kind of thing the car would, next day, start at the first time of asking. There was, however, a more subtle deviation in which it occasionally indulged, and when this happened great patience and perseverance were required from Father.

As will have been observed, there were several factors involved in the starting routine; the settings of the spark and gas levers, the amount of choke, and the number and type (i.e., slow or sharp) of turns of the crank, and I have indicated the prescribed requirements of normal starting. Lizzie had abnormal ideas about this and would, without warning, suddenly change the combination so that Father would have to experiment for hours to learn the new one. This new combination may operate for weeks, only to be suddenly changed again.

This fickleness gave rise to an amusing incident during our second summer in the Valley. Mr. Read and his family were spending a few weeks holiday nearby, and on this particular day Verne had gone with Father in the Ford to Rio Hondo. Father was the last to complete his business and as he started off to his final call, Verne called after him to say that he would start the car, ready for Father's return. To this Father agreed, but due to his preoccupation with the business in hand, he forgot to give Verne the key to the latest starting combination. As a result, when he returned to the car some fifteen minutes later, he found Verne, who by now was sweating profusely, furiously plying the crank handle – all to no purpose. A few interested spectators had gathered and were giving encouraging and conflicting advice. Father tapped Verne on the shoulder and gently motioned him aside. Then he seized the crank, gave it two slow half-turns followed by one quick one and the engine started immediately. The expression of stupefaction and exasperation on Verne's face was really worth seeing.

Strangely enough, in spite of all its unreliability and idiosyncrasies, the old flivver never let us down when we were away from home. The only time we had to walk back was once when we were hopelessly stuck in a mud-hole about two miles from Rio Hondo. We had to abandon the car for four days, until Father had time to go with the mules and pull it out. Jinny and Pete had their own back for this a month or two later. Their reins had been tied to the back wheels of the car for a few minutes while we were in the house having a cup of tea. Suddenly we heard a loud sound of ripping and tearing, and rushed out to the porch to see what was happening. The mules had torn great pieces out of the canvas hood of the car, and Pete was placidly masticating a strip of it, some 18 inches of which was still dangling from his mouth. Even after this disaster we kept the Ford for a while, but it was eventually replaced by a newer and more reliable Dodge tourer.

Soon after we had moved out to the farm I had begun an agitation to have a pony. I had marshaled all my arguments about how handy it would be for me to be able to ride with messages to our neighbors, or to go into town or to school on horseback whenever any of these things should be necessary. Whether it was the force of these arguments, or whether it was because Father was naturally kindhearted, I do not know, but he agreed that if I could find a suitable pony at a reasonable price, and would agree to look after it unaided, he would buy it for me. I was naturally delighted, and immediately set about making inquiries.

The first result of these was that a Mexican whom I knew but slightly turned up at home one day leading a little roan mare. He said he had heard we were looking for a pony, and we could have this one cheap. She was, he said, very quiet, and just the sort of animal for a beginner. We could have her for a week to try and if we liked her he would then discuss the price with us.

She was all he claimed as regards docility, and I very quickly learned to ride. The part I found most difficult was that she did not seem to respond very well to the bridle and bit. Our neighbor Celedonio said the reason for this was that she had been trained to "neckrein", and had probably seldom worn a bridle. He demonstrated how this neck reining was done, and it was simplicity itself. All that was needed was to make a small loop in the tethering rope a couple of feet from the point where it was fastened around the pony's neck, and then to slip the half-hitch thus formed around her nose. The remainder of the tethering rope was coiled so that it could be held conveniently. Celedonio showed me, when I had mounted the pony, that I should have the rope passing from her nose along the left side of her neck, and the coil held in my right hand. Then, if I pulled on the rope with my left hand, she would feel the pull on her nose and turn in that direction. If I instead pressed the rope to the right against her neck, she would move to the right. She responded readily to this, and I subsequently learned that most of the ponies down there were trained this way. It was very convenient to be able to untether a pony, slip a half-hitch around its nose, hop aboard and ride away; that is if the ride was not too long. If it amounted to a ride of several miles, it was certainly wiser to go in the saddle rather than bareback.

I discovered the truth of this in rather a painful way. On this particular day Father had asked me to call in at the Water Office after school and to order four acres of water for the following day. I regret to say that I forgot all about his request. When I told him of this he was most annoyed and said that as it was imperative that we should have this water the next day, I would have to return to town immediately and order it. I knew the Water Office would soon be closing for the day, so I did not wait to saddle the pony but simply rode off on her as fast as she would go. I succeeded in my mission, but the chafing I endured prevented me from sitting comfortably for days thereafter.

Within a week of acquiring the pony I found she had a serious fault which her owner had failed to mention. She suffered from a weakness in her left foreleg, and although it was not always evident it caused her to stumble at times. She always managed to recover herself without falling, and because she did so and because she was so affectionate and sweet-tempered, I was tempted to keep her in spite of this weakness. Very likely I would have done so had I not received a shaking-up one evening after she had been with us about three weeks.

I had ridden over after tea to see a friend of mine who lived on a farm a mile away. As it was not far, I had not troubled to saddle the pony and had gone bareback. As we were returning home I urged the pony into a canter. She was quite willing, and we galloped leisurely along. Then I heard some noise behind, and, thinking it to be someone following, I half turned to have a look. It must have been at that instant that the pony stumbled. I had no chance to save myself, and the next thing I knew I was weakly climbing out of the ditch beside the road. Luckily I was only bruised, but felt badly shaken; so much so, in fact, that I walked all the way home, leading the pony. I felt somewhat recovered by the time we arrived there, but when Father heard what had happened he insisted that I did not ride the pony again. He instructed me to tell the owner to collect the pony and then for me to look elsewhere for another one.

Within another few weeks I had another pony on trial. This was a rather handsome chestnut colored mustang gelding, his only marking being a single star on his forehead. He was sound of limb and had a good turn of speed, and at the price of $40 was quite cheap. Father said I could have him and should find him a suitable name. With his marking and the State in which we lived the name almost chose itself and he forthwith became known as Lone Start Ranger. Regrettably he and I never became really close friends because he had not a truly friendly nature. His originally wild disposition seemed never to have been completely tamed. He was liable to attempt to bite me when I tightened the saddle girth, and would sometimes try to kick me if I went too near his hind legs. If he managed to slip his halter, or otherwise free himself, he was very difficult to catch. He would allow me to get within a few yards of him and would then suddenly toss his mane, kick out with his back legs and dash away a few yards. It was sometimes an hour or more before he became tired of this and I was able to catch him.

For all that he was still a little wild, he had received a good training in herding cattle, as I discovered rather painfully one day. It was a day upon which our cow Brownie managed to pull up her tethering stake. Having done so she decided to pay a visit to a young bull whom she had heard bellowing in the distance, and she set off at a determined trot along the road to Rio Hondo. Ranger was handily nearby, so I quickly slipped a half hitch around his nose, popped onto his back, and set off in pursuit of Brownie. I had no preconceived plan of action, but as the cow was by this time some distance away the best idea seemed to be to skirt the corral and to take a diagonal course across the plowed field at the other side, and by this means to intercept her. As we crossed the field it became apparent to me that Ranger had grasped the idea, and that he knew more about how to deal with the situation than I, so I left it to him.

He made for a point in the road about five yards ahead of Brownie and there stopped, so that he was across her path. Unfortunately I was not prepared for this sudden halt, and was propelled forward on to his neck, finally ending up in the roadway. As I ruefully rose from the dust I somewhat sheepishly looked at Ranger, and you can believe me when I tell you that he was thoroughly disgusted with my incompetence and plainly showed it by the expression on his face. Brownie, of course, had seized her opportunity while all this was taking place and was now once more well on her way. We eventually caught her outside the bull’s paddock, but it took all morning to get her away and home again, and her bellowing and that of the bull was deafening.

Alas, soon after this event we lost Brownie under somewhat tragic circumstances, and we were never quite sure of the cause of her death.

During most months of the year it was the practice to put the animals out to pasture day and night. This enabled them to graze when they wished, and as the nights were warm there seemed to be little risk involved. On this night I had tethered Brownie to one of the posts which supported the barbed wire fence along the top of the levee. She had a 30 foot grazing chain and I made a loop at the end and dropped it over one of the posts. This permitted her a useful semi-circle for grazing, and she was feeding quite contentedly when I left her for the night.

Somewhere around two o’clock the following morning an unexpected and very violent thunderstorm blew up. It was overhead before we had time to do anything; the rain cascaded down, and the lightning flashed and the thunder cracked simultaneously. This went on for two hours or more, by which time the ground outside was inundated and water was pouring down the lane on its way to the Arroyo. I thought of Brownie and comforted myself by reflecting that, although she was probably not enjoying the storm much, she was safe enough on the higher ground of the levee.

When I stepped out of the house in the morning and looked down the levee, Brownie was not in sight. Water was still rushing down the lane as I splashed along to see what had become of her. As I came nearer to the place where I had left her the previous night I could see the chain still fastened to the top of the post. It led over the top of the levee, so she must somehow have broken through the fence and be down the other side of the bank. She was indeed down there, as I discovered a few minutes later. She lay on her side, with her head facing upstream in a torrent of floodwater. Her abdomen was swollen with the water to the size of a barrel, and she had been dead for hours. I was horrified, and ran home as fast as I could. Father was very upset, too, when he heard the news and went back with me to see her and to decide what was to be done. He examined her, but could find nothing to tell him what had caused her death. We originally thought that she might have received an electric shock along the wire fence and chain, but discarded this theory when we found no trace of burning anywhere on her. She may, I suppose, have received a comparatively slight shock, sufficient to stun her, so that she fell in the water, and drowned. Or she may have died of fright - we never knew. Father arranged with Joaquin to have her buried, and because we could not manage without milk ad butter for long we soon had a Brownie No. 2. She was bigger than the first Brownie and gave more milk, but none of us somehow ever felt so sentimental about her as we had about our first Brownie.

As time and pressure of work permitted, we were sometimes able to take a few hours off and have an outing somewhere.

One of the first of these was a trip to Point Isabel on the Gulf of Mexico. I had wanted to go there ever since I discovered that, on a still night, I could hear the waves swishing on the shingle when I lay in my bed on the front porch. We weren't able to travel by road directly as the sound traveled; no such roads existed and we had to go miles out of the way. In the end it was decided that we would go with Pat and Effie in their car. For one thing, it was bigger than out Ford, and decidedly more reliable. We left Rio Hondo around 9:30am, and, after losing our way once or twice we arrived at Point Isabel just before lunchtime. The beach was deserted, and, with black clouds beginning to pile up in the sky the day became overcast. We thought it wise to eat our sandwiches before starting to explore, in case the threatened rains came. We had scarcely finished lunch when the first drops fell, and it soon became apparent that we were in for more than a shower. We had hastily gathered our belongings and were seated in the car. After a little while Pat said we must abandon our picnic and set out for home immediately before the roads became impassable. We were reluctant to do so, but knew that already we should skid and slide around on the mud and that if the rain continued we may well be stuck completely. We eventually arrived back at the Rogers' somewhere around nine o'clock, wet through, and with Pat, Father and me covered in mud as a result of having to push the car at various times to help it out of a mud-hole.

On another occasion we went to Brownsville and from there across the Rio Grande River in a rowing boat to the town of Matamores, on the Mexican side of the river. I had a look around the town and remained with some friends while Father and Mother went with my friends' parents to see a bullfight, as an experience. They left after seeing the second bull killed, sickened by the gory spectacle. What had upset them most was the sight of the blindfolded horses walking around the arena with their intestines hanging out where they had been gored by the bull.

In such a climate we had our share of blood-sucking pests – fleas, ticks of all kinds, chiggers (which were so small as to be almost invisible, and which burrowed into the softer, more vulnerable skin, until they got under it and the skin broke out in itching blisters), and, always, inevitably, mosquitoes. We always had a fairly large residual number of these, but on one occasion we had an invasion.

One hot afternoon as I stepped down from the porch, pail in hand, ready to start the late milking, I heard a low humming sound in the distance. It sounded like an approaching airplane, and as such machines were a rarity in those days I paused to see if I could locate it. The humming grew louder, but still I could see no plane. What I did see was a huge black cloud, which, as it came nearer, blotted out the sun. There was something very peculiar about this cloud, I thought. It was very large, and compact, yet it was an isolated cloud; there were no others in the sky and there was no general appearance of a thunderstorm around. Suddenly, I realized that the humming (now very loud indeed) was coming from the cloud itself. Within seconds the air was thick with millions of mosquitoes, and I instinctively dropped the milking pail and dived back into the porch. I looked out at the animals; they were frantic. Jinny and Pete were milling around in their stalls, ineffectually kicking and poor Brownie was running up and down as her tethering chain permitted, furiously licking herself everywhere she could reach and flailing her tail at the same time. Something would have to be done quickly to give them relief.

Hot as it was, the weather would have to be ignored, and I donned an all-enveloping oilskin raincoat and sou'-wester, and a pair of rubber boots into which I could stuff my trouser legs. Finally, I applied insect repellent to the remaining exposed skin and went out to the barn to make a bonfire. When this was going well I threw onto it some green vegetation, to make plenty of smoke, and turned the animals loose. As I had hoped, they instinctively went and stood where the smoke was thickest and where the mosquitoes would not follow. We kept this fire going day and night for three days, and took feed to the animals there. At the end of this time the mosquitoes disappeared as mysteriously as they had arrived, and we never saw anything like it again. We were all extremely relieved to see them go, for life had been miserable for us all during this period. The animals were nervous and difficult to handle for a time, and I had trouble from my wrists which were red-raw due to the chafing they had received from the oilskin which I had been forced to wear whilst out of doors. It had been particularly painful for me at milking time.

In addition to the troubles we had to suffer from the depredations of insects on the crops, we also had trouble from some of the larger birds – mainly from the crows. They were particularly damaging when the seeds had just been sown – they dug them up and ate them – and later, when the plants were still small, they pulled them out, looking for insects.

Father became rather annoyed about this, and cast about for some way to frighten them off. Scarecrows worked for a little while, but the birds soon became used to them and returned to their destructive ways. Pat said the best thing to do was to shoot a few of them, and that, moreover, he had an old shotgun which Father could have. When he produced the gun, he found there were still two old shells in the barrels. He tried to get them out, but found they could not be moved. He was quite sure they had been fired, and pointed to the firing caps, which had been dented, as proof of this contention. To make it certain beyond doubt he took the gun outside, and, thumbing back the hammers, he clicked the triggers several times. Nothing happened. Father was not very keen on firearms, nor on killing warm-blooded creatures, but he thought that he could at least make some noise with the gun and thus frighten the birds away. So he thanked Pat for the gift and brought it home.

With plenty of work to be done there was no time to spare for a long while, and the gun stood idle in a corner of our house. Then, one day, some months after he had been given it, Father suddenly decided to look it over and to see if he could remove the old shell cases. It was a very wet day, so he took it out on the porch to work on it. He removed the barrel from the stock, and seated himself on a low stool. Then, with the barrel between his knees and with the "business end" of the barrel resting on the floor he started to work on the shell cases with a hammer and small chisel. Gently tapping under the outer rim of the first one, he soon succeeded in loosening and removing it. The case was blackened and empty and he laid it aside and began to work on the next one.

Suddenly there was a deafening explosion; in the confined space of the porch the heavens seemed to have been split asunder. Father and I were transfixed and speechless for a long moment which seemed forever. Finally, and dimly through the ringing in my ears, I heard Father asking if I was all right. I replied that I thought I was, and was he? He thought that he was, too, but by now we had recovered a little from the shock and set about seeing if we were as unharmed as we thought. I was, but Father found he was bleeding from the thumb and forefinger of his left hand where the chisel had been torn out of his grasp when the "dead" cartridge had exploded. That raised the question of the present whereabouts of the chisel, and just then, to my horror and apprehension, I saw it sticking out of the toe of Father's right boot. He removed the boot, and found that the point of the chisel had cut through his big toe to the bone – he was yet to feel the pain from the injury when the numbness wore off. Had he not been wearing stout leather boots, the chisel must have cut off his toe. That it elected to stick in his foot and not in his head – or mine, for that matter – is just one of those many lucky escapes from death or serious injury which most of us experience during a lifetime. That was the end of guns for Father; he threw the quasi-lethal weapon away and the crows were allowed to continue with their forays.

The Arroyo was always a great attraction for me, although I was forbidden to go too near it alone. It was, as I have remarked, very deep. Even close to the bank the water had a depth of four feet, and a couple of yards out it would have been well over my head. Until the second summer I had been down on the riverbank only a few times with Father when he had been fishing. We did not catch anything of any size, although we were assured that there were plenty of fish in there, and that some of them were very big ones, too.

When the Reads came down on their holiday Verne, who was a keen swimmer, quickly decided that something should be done to improve the amenities at the Arroyo. Accordingly, he constructed a swimming platform. This was about a yard wide, made of wood, and jutted out from the bank some eight feet or so, at which point it was supported by two long posts which had been driven into the riverbed. Wooden steps led down into the water off the end of the platform.

During that summer I learned to swim, under the tuition of Verne. I am sorry to say that I was not at first a very obedient pupil, as he insisted that I must learn to swim with my head under water before attempting to swim with it out of the water. This did not appeal to me at all, and for a while I was rather stubborn and uncooperative about it until he finally gave me an ultimatum; either I did as he instructed, or he would wash his hands of me. This seemed to instill a bit of sense into me, and from then on I did as I was told. As a result, I soon learned to get around a bit, and before long was allowed to swim with my head out of the water. When Verne decided I was proficient enough, he suggested I might like to attempt to swim across the river and he would accompany me in case I got into difficulties. I was all in favor of the idea, and we set off. I found it not too difficult, but was looking forward to a short rest on the other side as we neared the bank. Verne had other ideas, however, and no sooner had my feet touched the bank than he turned for the "home" shore again and called to me to follow him. I had no choice, though I had a few misgivings about my ability to do the return trip without the "breather" for which I had been hoping. For all that, I reached the platform without mishap, and I certainly had plenty of confidence in my ability thereafter, thanks to Verne.

The country across the Arroyo was wild and virgin brush, inhabited only by wild animals. There were no bridges to give access to this territory, but occasionally someone would venture across in a rowing boat. Sometimes such a person would be after honey from the nests of the wild bees, or, perhaps, he would be a hunter on the trail of the wild pigs. These pigs were small, rather lean animals possessed of an uncertain temper, and it was considered sport to hunt them. More infrequently a trapper would venture across the river, looking for places to set his traps to catch the opossum, the raccoon, the skunk, and other fur-bearing animals. The pelts of these animals were valuable and good prices were paid for them. One or two of the trappers were amateurs, to whom the skill involved in trapping the animals was of more interest than the reward from the pelts.

Such a one was our neighbor Mr. Baker. His home was in Indiana, far to the north, where he owned a very productive gravel pit. He and his wife had a house built on the farm next to ours, and here they came, every winter, to enjoy themselves quietly away from the ice and snow of the northern winter. Mr. Baker made no attempt to farm his land, and let it remain in its natural state. Here, in these pleasant and peaceful surroundings, he enjoyed himself for a few months each year boating, fishing, hunting and trapping. He and I became very good friends, and were partners one day in a most unusual and remarkable expedition.

It was a day late in the year, and, most unusually, we had had a heavy fall of hailstones during a storm which had come up in the early morning. I had nothing to occupy myself because the land was too wet for any work to be done. After breakfast I whistled for Rover and asked him whether he would like to go for a walk. I inferred from the excited barking and furious tail wagging which this question provoked that he would, so we set off down the lane. As we neared the Arroyo it idly occurred to me that it would be interesting to see whether the storm had made any difference to the flow of the river so soon afterwards. Accordingly, we made our way along to the top of the bank and I looked down on the river.

For a minute I could not believe what my eyes told me, and I shut them in disbelief. When I opened them again and the picture was unchanged, my reason told me it must be true, however improbable it seemed. There, floating on the surface of the river, and apparently dead, were literally thousands of fish. There were fish of all sizes, from tiny sticklebacks to great things whose name we never discovered, some three to four feet long. They were scattered all over the surface of the river, but were thickest nearest the banks, where, presumably, they had been carried by the currents. I scrambled down the bank to get a closer look at them and discovered that they were not dead after all, but appeared to be only stunned or numbed in some way. They were able to move their tails sluggishly and were breathing, though only in a very shallow way, and were obviously unable to swim. Most of them were lying on their sides.

When I had made this preliminary examination, I wondered what to do and the only thing I could think of was to run home, post haste, and see what Father had to say about it. He was naturally most interested in this phenomenon when I told him, and said that he would go down and have a look. He also suggested that it would be a good idea for me to ride over and tell Mr. Baker all about it. As a sportsman he would be keenly concerned as to what had happened to the fish, and would no doubt wish to take out his rowing boat to make an examination.

He was busy eating his breakfast when I arrived, but when I gave him my news he lost all interest in food and insisted on going down to see the sight at once. From my description of the behavior of the fish, he was afraid they had been poisoned somehow, and was most concerned as to the cause of it and of the effect it may have upon the future fishing. When we reached the river at his boat-landing the fish were still there, though I noticed that some of them appeared to be showing more signs of life than any I had seen earlier. Mr. Baker had a close look at some of them, and came to the conclusion that they were not poisoned but were apparently stunned in some way. He said he was satisfied that they would recover, and that they were perfectly fit to eat. He and I quickly hopped into his boat and pushed out into the river, where we spent an hour or so rowing around and in hauling aboard the biggest fish we could find. By the time we had finished, and had very nearly a boatload, many of the fish had recovered completely and the river was once more beginning to look bare. Mr. Baker insisted that I take home two of the biggest fish we had gathered, and repeated that we should suffer no harm in eating them. He showed me how to fasten the two fish together by means of a short piece of rope with a stick tied to each end. This stick was put through the fish’s mouth and out through its gills. Ranger took a very unenthusiastic view of these two fish (both of which were at least three feet long) when he saw me approaching, and at first would not let me mount. Finally I did manage to scramble on, but he was most upset by the fish slapping against his sides and I had a difficult time in handling him all the way home.

Mother cooked some very appetizing meals from the fish during the following few days. We were all a bit doubtful as to the possible ill effects we might have to suffer the first time we ate some, but when we found there was indeed nothing to fear we really enjoyed it, and welcomed the change of diet. Oddly enough, no fish such as these had been seen before nor were seen again while we were there.

As to the explanation for this unusual occurrence, no one was ever quite sure. The most feasible theory was that the fish had been numbed by an infusion of cold water in to the Arroya, due to the hailstorm. Within a distance of three miles, with our farm as the center, there were no less than five irrigation canals which emptied into the river – more than along any other comparable stretch of it. The inflow of cold water from these canals must have been sufficient to provide the temporary shock from which the fish had been suffering.

By the time the third summer since our arrival came round, our life seemed to have settled into a routine. Work on the farm followed a regular pattern with the vegetable crop in the spring, closely followed and to some extent overlapping with the cotton and corn of the summer and early autumn. After these came the preparing of the ground for the spring crops, and the cycle began again.

Father, I knew, thoroughly enjoyed the life; and, for a man, I'm sure it was a satisfying one. The hard physical work in the out of doors, much of it done in the hot sunshine, had done him a lot of good. In spite of the worry of the disposal of the crops, and the constant battle against the insect pests, he looked much more fit and happy than he had in the years before we came to Texas. Also, of course, in a farming life one is always looking forward. There is always tomorrow – and next year – for which one must plan, so there is never any danger of stagnation in thought or action. This, I am sure – this looking forward to tomorrow – is vital to the good health of us all, and certainly there was a vitality and alertness now in father which had been lacking in the old days.

For me, too – and possibly for me more than any of us – the life was a happy one. I had Rover and Ranger, and with them the opportunity to wander and explore the countryside, and there were always new things to find and to see. There was school and work on the farm to occupy me, Brownie to look after and to milk, and the Arroyo to swim in.

Mother was the one member of the family for whom Texas had proved to be unrewarding, and there were good reasons for this.

The main one of these was that she was physically unable to stand up to the intense heat of the climate. Her sweat glands seemed to be in some way deficient, and instead of perspiring and thereby cooling she became more and more red and hot until it looked as though she must explode. She would come out into the fields to help when the need was great and the labor was scarce, but as the day became hotter she would be forced to retire, exhausted.

Her housework involved quite a lot of hard work and drudgery. There was the constant baking of bread, cakes, scones, buns and so on to be done. All these and all other cooking had to be done on the oil stove, and I have earlier mentioned the fact that the oil had to be carried from Rio Hondo on at least one occasion. All water had to be carried in and out, and although Father and I tried to spare her the fetching and carrying whenever we could, Mother often had to do this herself.

Particularly from a feminine point of view the sanitary arrangements were somewhat rudimentary. These consisted of the traditional "rude hut", located some little distance away from the house, set over a hole in the ground. As necessity demanded the hut was moved from time to time, but this disposal system left much to be desired.

Work apart, life was also dull for Mother. Few people in those early years owned a radio set, and we were not one of them. There was no library available, and a newspaper came our way only occasionally. Our only real link with the outside world was the postman. He would bring a few letters sometimes, and, once a year he brought the latest catalog from the large mail order stores, such as Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward. Mother and I spent many hours poring over these, choosing the things we would buy if we had the money, and also the things we could afford to buy – most of the latter being, of necessity, clothes.

Finally, and perhaps, in a way, most important, I think Mother grew tired of the lack of beauty of the life. It was all very crude and primitive. There were no inner walls to the house, so nothing could be done to improve them. There were, of course, no carpets. The furniture and furnishings were all home made, and there was nowhere any sign of luxury or gracious living; everything was governed by necessity. Mother could, I am sure, see herself becoming worn and embittered after a few more years of such a life. As there seemed little prospect of the life itself changing much within the foreseeable future, there was only one thing to be done and that was to leave it before it became too late – as it had done for Pat and Effie.

How long it took Mother to convert Father to her point of view I do not know, but once he had made up his mind to anything it was as good as done. And so it came about that one day I learned we were to leave the Valley and return to the north as soon as arrangements could be made for the disposal of the stock, and for someone to take over the running of the farm.

For some time one of the Garcia brothers, Celedonio, had been wanting to get married to his school-teacher fiancée but had been unable to do so because of the lack of a house. Father now remembered this and realized that Celedonio would no doubt be delighted to take over from us, for he would be able to marry immediately and, with the help of his brother Francisco, would be able to run the adjoining farms quite comfortably. He was indeed pleased when Father asked him, and said that he would be very glad if Mr. Read approved. Verne seemed to be quite satisfied with the proposed arrangement – though he was sorry to see us leave – and it was settled that Celedonio would take over after he was married, and would move into the house within two or three days of our leaving.

For several reasons my parents decided that we would return north by car, and not by train as we had come. The Dodge was in good running order, and it would be cheaper to drive if we camped out all the way (Father bought a lean-to tent which fitted to the car) so this was decided upon. There was no particular hurry called for on the journey, since Father this time had no job to go to and would have to look for one on his arrival. He had always wanted to visit Corpus Christi on the Gulf, and we had invitations to spend time with friends and relatives in Birmingham, Alabama and near Indianapolis, Indiana. We may never have another chance to visit such widely scattered places and this was yet another good reason for doing it while we had the time, and, thanks to the car, the opportunity.

I was most worried as to what to do about Rover, who by then was a fully grown dog some two and a half years old. Naturally, I very much wanted to take him with me at first, but Father soon persuaded me of the folly of this. He said that Rover would not be able to stand the cold in the north, and would probably die of pneumonia during the first winter. Even if by some miracle he did not, he would not be happy to wear a collar and have his freedom curtailed when he had previously run about as he wished. I could see the truth of these arguments, but with a sinking and hollow feeling growing inside me, because I knew he and I would miss each other terribly when we were parted – as I could now see we must be for his ultimate good.

Fortunately for all of us, Celedonio said he would very much like to have Rover as his dog. They knew each other quite well with Celedonio being on the next farm. Rover and I had often been over there to see him when he was at work on the farm, and had even been out to the Anaquitas, where he lived, to visit him once or twice. Celedonio said he would come over to the house to feed Rover, twice a day, after we left, and to see that he was all right, during the day or two before he was able to move in to our empty dwelling. It seemed to be the best possible arrangement, and I tried to resign myself to it.

There was much to be done before we were finally able to leave. Father had to clear up all the outstanding work, so that everything was straight for Celedonio to take over. In addition to this, our possessions had to be sold, and Father decided that the quickest method of disposal would be the best. This meant a sale by auction, and thus taking a chance on what prices things would fetch. Father engaged an auctioneer for a day in early September, and had printed a stack of handbills advertising the sale. He and I spent one day in running around the neighboring countryside, tacking bills at eye-catching levels to whatever supports we could find.

The day of the sale dawned clear and bright, and vehicles began to roll up in encouraging numbers. The sale began around half past nine, by which time there were some thirty-odd people present. In spite of this reasonable attendance, bidding was not very brisk; the exhortations of the auctioneer did not produce any great response, and it soon became clear that we were going to lose money by the sale. Evidently many of those present had come to see the fun rather than to bid, and Texas was not going to be any more generous to us on our departure than she had been on our arrival. Even Ranger did not command a very good price, though he was in excellent condition and I rode him around in front of the crowd to show him off.

By four o'clock in the afternoon it was all over, and I know my parents were disappointed at the result. Still; this was the end, and all that now remained for us was to depart. Father had business with the auctioneer and the bank, in connection with the sale, to attend to in Rio Hondo before we finally left the Valley. This he intended to transact early the following day, and then we could be on our way. To enable him to get this business over as soon as possible, and to give us an inauguration into our mode of life to come during the next three months, he had made arrangements to enable us to pitch camp in Rio Hondo that night.

So, no sooner had the last of the auction crowd left the farm than Father drove the Dodge around to the porch door in order to load the last few of our possessions. Everything except that which was in daily use had been loaded the day before. By the time the loading was completed the rear of the car was piled up with things to a height above door level, and I could see that there would have been no room for Rover even had it been otherwise possible for him to come. He was nowhere to be seen, for he had gone off somewhere on his own when the crowd of people – which he disliked – had begun to gather. I was half relieved and half sad that he was not there, for although I felt I did not want to go without saying goodbye to him I had been dreading it ever since I knew the parting had to come. I whistled for him rather half-heartedly and he did not come. Father, sensing how I must be feeling, suggested it might be better for all of us if we left at once. Rover, when he did return to the house, would think we had just gone out somewhere and would wait for us. Then Celedonio would come and feed him, and bit by bit he would forget all about us. While I doubted whether he would forget me very soon – any more than I should forget him – I had to agree that it was probably better not to wait around, and I climbed sadly into my eyrie in the rear compartment. Father started the car and drove carefully over the culvert, across the railway line, past the corral and out on to the road to Rio Hondo for the last time.

When we were two or three hundred yards along the road, I turned to peer through the rear celluloid window for a final look at all that which had become so familiar and dear to me in those three years, and which I should never see again. What I did see, to my consternation and agitation, was Rover chasing after us as fast as he could run. He must have been somewhere around all the time we were preparing to leave. He must have sensed that, with all those people around at the sale and the subsequent emptiness and desolation, something was seriously amiss, and he had elected to keep away until things were back to normal. Then when he heard the car move off his instinct would have told him that here was a situation he could not understand, but that he must keep close to us.

For a moment I sat there staring at him, watching him pounding along, as though I were hypnotized, and then, suddenly, I knew what I had to do. I leaned out of the side window:

“Rover! Rover! Go seek!” I yelled.

He faltered in his stride, and slowed.

“Go back! Go home!” I repeated, sounding stern because of my fear that he might disobey me.

He came to a standstill, sat down in the middle of the road and cocked his head to one side, a picture of forlorn bewilderment.

I watched him sitting there until he gradually faded from sight, and, when he had finally gone, for the first time I felt the appalling emptiness and loneliness that life can hold for us. The thought that I should never see him or any part of that life again – and perhaps, even, the subconscious knowledge that I should never again see the boy who spent three years there – seemed to hit me like a hard physical blow. Tears suddenly filled my eyes, and I laid my head in my arms and wept for the whole cruel, heartless world.