THIRTEEN

The Fall: Full Job Quotas

Farmers cut most of their corn and set it up about “galluses” to form shocks that they might classify as “ten hills square” or “twelve hills square.” The work was all done by hand, the stalks being cut off with a knife essentially the same as the all-purpose machete used in jungle lands. This was one of the hardest jobs on the farm. It involved lugging heavy loads of ear-burdened stalks, quite often over ground that, due to tangled weeds, could hardly have been more difficult for walking. Moreover, those September days, more often than not, were about the hottest of the year. Only by cutting and shocking could corn fodder be preserved in good condition for use as winter forage for livestock. (On the farm the word “fodder” was not used in the broad, general sense to include all coarse food for domestic animals; ordinarily, it was applied only to the mature, dry corn plant, usually minus the ears.) Another reason for putting the corn into shocks was to clear the ground so that wheat could be sown in it.

Each fall, soon after the corn had been cut and shocked, the ground was broken up with harrows and winter wheat was drilled in. One spring we found large patches of dead
wheat plants; in other parts of the field the plants were pale and puny. We were aware that the Hessian fly (so named because it was believed to have been brought to America in straw used by Hessian soldiers who aided the British in the American Revolution) was the villain in the piece. This was the only time I ever saw fly damage to wheat on our farm. Farmers at that time knew that late sowing could prevent or reduce damage to wheat by this pest but they had no means of knowing just how long to hold off; no doubt we had sown too early that time. Beginning several years later, the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station each fall has determined the safe sowing date—it comes after the fall generation of Hessian fly larvae has entered the "flaxseed" or pupal stage in which, usually, the insects remain dormant through the winter. The date, which varies with latitude and, from year to year, with weather and other local conditions, is relayed to wheat growers by the county agricultural agent.

Corn husking began as soon as the ears were dry enough to be stored safely, ordinarily in early October. This was a tedious, monotonous task because each stalk had to be handled individually; yet it could be moderately pleasant when the fodder was just damp enough to be soft and pliable and the ground remained dry. Opening and removing the husks were aided by a husking peg or a hook, attached by straps to one hand. (Some stripped away all silk and shreds of husks, figuring that these nest-building materials, if left on the ears, would encourage mice and rats to establish themselves in storage cribs. Men who set records for fast husking, however, never bothered about this.) As we husked, we piled the ears on the dry
spots where the shocks had stood. The fodder, tied in bundles, was set up in big shocks. The corn, later gathered in baskets and dumped into the wagon box, was hauled from the field. A broad, short-handled scoop shovel was used to toss it upward six or eight feet into the storage crib. After disposing of a load or two, the shoveler would have welcomed enthusiastically a mechanical elevator such as farmers now use, for shoveling was a fatiguing job that put a continuous strain upon muscles, particularly those of the back.

About the time husking began, we picked our supply of apples for winter. There were six or eight apple trees and one pear tree that had come with the farm, all with trunks ten to fifteen inches in diameter. Some were at least thirty feet high; no effort had ever been made to induce a low, spreading growth by pruning. Two or three of the trees had living crossties three or four inches in diameter, the ends of each having been grafted years before into lateral branches, one opposite the other. These grafts, intended to prevent spreading and breaking of the branches, were the only ones of the type I ever saw. In the bark of the huge branches of all those old outsize trees were numerous circles of round perforations made by sapsuckers and other species of woodpeckers in quest of burrowing larvae. Among the most numerous of all our birds at the time were the redheaded woodpeckers, more given to devouring fruit and the eggs of other birds than to foraging in bark for grubs. Though excessively noisy and quarrelsome—the ruffians of the family—they are very lively, interesting creatures. In recent years they have almost disappeared. Poisonous sprays may have had much to do with this, but I have been assured by a qualified
observer of bird life that the automobile has been the principal killer; on roads the birds fail to yield the right of way.

We had only two varieties of winter apples, Russets and Romanites (I have never seen the latter anywhere else). All of the apples were rather small because no fertilizer was applied about the trees and because thinning of the newly set fruit, as practiced by professional orchardists, was out of the question, due to the size of the trees. Although no spraying was done, the fruit was remarkably free from insect and disease damage.

After the picking was done, we shook from the trees a full wagonload of apples for cider. With enough barrels on top of the load to hold the cider, we would set off for the cider mill in town early the following morning. No matter how early our start, we always found ahead of us at the mill apple-filled wagons in a line a block or two long. They moved forward slowly, each driver in turn shoveling his apples into the hopper of the grinder, then waiting until his cider was pressed and transferred to his containers.

One barrel of our cider was reserved to be converted by natural processes into vinegar. We placed it, bung up, in a shady spot. With long straws thrust through the little air vent near the bung, we boys drank the sweet liquid by the quart. We were certain that there never was a beverage quite so delectable, chilled, as it was, to just the right temperature. Within two or three weeks fermentation made the cider unpalatable. Soon after that, we turned our attention to frozen apples knocked from the trees. The barrel with its remaining contents was transferred to the cellar where it “worked” and eventually became vinegar.
We had a neighbor or two who cared little for sweet cider; to them the stuff was not really potable until the fermentation process had gone far enough to give it a stiff wallop. They had their cider pressed late in the fall, kept it in a moderately warm place until it became “hard,” and then rolled the barrels to an outside shed where it was cold enough to check further fermentation. They drank it throughout the winter.

For apple butter, cider was boiled in a large copper kettle until it was reduced to a fairly thick syrup—no one, it appears, ever thought of using anything but a copper or brass kettle for this purpose. A quantity of good cooking apples, peeled, cored, and quartered, was added to the syrup, the simmering contents of the kettle being stirred with a wooden paddle until cider and apples were perfectly blended. Ordinarily, no sugar or spice was added. The finished product had a piquant flavor and a reddish brown color, tending to darken with age.

Several walnut trees on the farm bore prolifically. The nuts began dropping off about mid-September; it was easy to shake off all that remained on the trees. We removed the pulpy hulls by pounding with a hammer as we held the nuts on a stone or block of wood, or we might drive them through a hole in a plank. Either way, it was a tedious job; and the juice that abounded in the pulp dyed our fingers a rich, deep brown. Some of our friends maintained that squashing ripe tomatoes and washing one’s hands in the juice was the sovereign method for freeing them from the stain; others pooh-poohed this idea, declaring pontifically that the only really effective treatment was to insert the hands in a calf’s mouth and allow the animal to suck at will. We tried both methods at one
time or another; neither produced perfect results. We decided that the best thing we could do was to go about our regular business, and in a week or two our hands would regain their normal hue. After some experimenting one fall we found that we could save much time and avoid most of the stain by tightening the gears of the corn sheller and running the nuts through it. As they came from the machine, we spread them where they would dry in the sun. After thorough drying, separating the nuts from the shredded pulp was an easy matter.

Gathering hickory nuts involved a lot of pleasant tramping through leaf-strewn woods, resplendent in gorgeous autumn colors. Some alertness was required; if one failed to watch the hickories closely and get at them as soon as they were ready, someone was sure to beat him to the harvest. We could get the nuts off some of the trees by "bumping." To bump a tree, one selected a fairly heavy fence rail, walked ten or fifteen feet from the tree, poised the rail horizontally above his head, and ran full tilt to ram the end of the timber against the tree's boll. This would not work if the tree was a large one; in that case one had to climb high into its branches, shake vigorously, and beat off the nuts with a club. One sunny September afternoon a city-bred aunt, with several women friends, drove out from town to go hickory-nutting. We rustics had a hard time avoiding outright laughter at the expense of the city slickers; they had brought with them a coal scuttle and a small shovel, naively believing that harvesting the hickories was a simple matter of walking under the trees and scooping them from the ground.

Often we searched for beechnuts, which, though small, are exceptionally rich and delicious. Occasionally, we
found a few among the fallen leaves under a tree, and we might pluck some from the boughs. But with the best of luck we rarely gathered more than a handful or two; the canny squirrels beat us to them. We had walnuts and hickory nuts to nibble at all winter. Surplus nuts were sold to grocers in town. We might get two dollars for a bushel of good hickories. We were lucky if we got a dollar for a bushel of walnuts—product of the labor of two boys during about two full days.

If a cornfield bordered upon a wooded area, we could always be sure that many hills would be destroyed by squirrels. They would dig out and eat the newly planted seeds or pull out tender young shoots, still attached to the parent grains. They were also fond of eating at the ears when they were in the "milk" stage. Viewing the damage, we would vow determinedly that the score would be evened come squirrel-hunting time in the fall. Usually, we gave several days to the evening process, but without marked success. Squirrel stew was commonly regarded as a perfect food for invalids and convalescents. It happened occasionally that a local Nimrod, tired of humdrum work, would shoulder a gun, even in a very busy season, and take to the woods, excusing himself on the pretext that he wanted to shoot a squirrel for a sick friend.

For a long time there was no closed season on any game, but little hunting was done in the r-less months. Quail abounded, and many enjoyed shooting them. The main interest of farm boys was rabbits. They bagged them at every opportunity in fall and winter, tramping through fields and woods with dog and gun. Several times a week, the average lad would eat fried or roast rabbit
with gusto. A small culvert that ran under our driveway near the road was a favorite rabbit retreat. We looked into it frequently, and if one happened to be hiding there, one of us held a bag at one end of the duct while the other prodded the bunny out with a pole. Dressed carcasses were commonly hung outdoors overnight to freeze. This was supposed to remove the “wild” flavor and improve the meat.

The men of a family in our neighborhood always had one or more coon hounds. They made long trips occasionally to trade dogs or to buy replacements. Often in fall and winter, they invited parties of friends to join them in coon-hunting jaunts at night. All hands reported these hunts as providing capital fun and excitement. They netted little else, for this was quite a while before coon-skin coats had been found so essential on college campuses, and few of the hunters had any pronounced hankering for coon meat as an article of diet.

Although missing from the scene in our time, passenger pigeons, said to have been more numerous than any other birds in their far-flung range over the eastern United States, were at one time common in the Black Swamp region. It is recorded that migratory flights, which might continue for hours, almost shut out the light of the sun. They settled into trees in chosen roosting places in such numbers that big branches and even sizable trees broke under their weight. Men and boys slaughtered them on a wholesale scale by clubbing them as they slept. Hundreds were cooked and eaten, and surpluses were fed to hogs. Forays against them were everywhere so persistent that they rapidly dwindled in numbers. An individual believed to be the last survivor of the species died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.