FOURTEEN

Work and Play for Farm Boys

AT ANY TIME OF THE YEAR the amount of work that could be found to do on a farm was practically unlimited. At times there were waiting queues of tasks that simply had to be attended to within definite time limits. This meant jobs for everyone, including even the children. They started early in life, with simple chores suited to their years; as they grew older, their responsibilities increased. Many boys after the age of twelve became almost full-fledged "hands," occupied almost every working day when there was no school. Generally, there was little or no compulsion about this; no one was driven or held to rigid work programs. The custom was so general and so well established that everybody, including the young, took it as a matter of course.

A single exception comes to mind, a boy of about twelve. Rebelling at what he considered an endless multiplicity of tasks and a stern family discipline, he slipped away from home one night, walked half a mile to a railroad, and slogged off westward over the ties. The family missed him, but no one worried unduly, assuming that sooner or later he would be back. The second morning they found him sleeping peacefully in his bed. Weariness, hunger,
and loneliness were factors that he had not taken into account at the outset.

As a rule, youthful workers were not paid regular wages, but occasionally they received cash gifts; allowances, as such, were unknown. In many cases they were encouraged to undertake side ventures to earn pocket money and to build savings accounts. All actual needs were of course supplied by parents. Opportunities for play and recreation abounded, and youngsters took full advantage of them. At least my brother and I did. A case in point was our leisurely handling of the task of berry-picking, about the time we reached school age. Gooseberries, blackberries, and raspberries grew wild along some of our fences. When they ripened, Mother sent the two of us from time to time to pick them. We combined the job with such activities as hunting birds’ nests, shying stones and clods at all sorts of targets, exploring the creek for minnows and crawdads, hunting field mice, and lending an eager hand to our dog in chasing ground squirrels—“grinnies” to all local lads. Before the job was finished, we were pretty sure to lie a while in the shade of a tree, eating some of the berries, and abandoning ourselves to total idleness and relaxation.

Once we were sent out with a quart of climbing beans to be planted beside hills of corn in the field. For a while we pushed the seeds into the ground diligently; but the sun was hot, and our thoughts wandered to a variety of things to do that had much more appeal. Finally, yielding to temptation when the task was half completed, we dumped the unplanted beans into some tall grass and went with our dog for a ramble in the woods. It must have been incidents such as this that Dad had in mind when he re-
peated, from time to time, a homely old saying to the effect that one boy is one boy; two boys, half a boy; three boys, none at all.

Boys fared reasonably well so far as spending-money was concerned. They gathered and sold nuts, they marketed surplus popcorn and melons, and they accumulated rags, iron, and bones that brought a little cash from the junkman. One year my brother and I bought hatching eggs and raised a flock of ducks that made us some nice money—we had no overhead, and all of our feed was "for free." If they could be spared from work at home, boys at times went to help neighbors with field work. They were usually paid wages that were current for grown men, a dollar for a day of ten hours. No one then had thought of eight-hour days, forty-hour weeks, fringe benefits, or time-and-a-half or double-time for overtime.

For farm boys there were few idle hours and not too many dull ones. Often, the work they did was hard and tedious, but nearly always they managed to squeeze some fun out of doing it.

There was one job from which not even the most expert fun-finder could extract a single smidgen of entertainment or diversion: That was turning the grindstone, an extraordinarily tedious, monotonous task. Every farm had its grindstone mounted in a frame. It might be kept under a roof but in most cases it stood, month in and month out, somewhere under an apple tree. By means of a hand crank, some hapless lad had to keep the stone turning at a brisk rate and, at the same time, apply water to the cutting face while the grinding operation went on. A considerable number and variety of edge tools had to be sharpened in this manner—in depressed moments this num-
ber might seem astronomic. In time grindstones came mounted in frames that had a seat and a foot treadle with provision for applying water automatically. Many boys regarded that machine as almost equivalent, so far as they were concerned, to the Emancipation Proclamation, for with it their dads could do all necessary grinding without assistance. Later came high-geared grinders with emery or carborundum wheels that did in minutes work for which the old stones would have required hours.

None of us would have believed this at the time, but being kept busy and having a limited amount of money to spend was undoubtedly a good thing. Under such circumstances one learns to make good use of time; he tends to become resourceful, and he improvises to provide diversions. My brother and I collected thick pieces of bark from mature cottonwood trees, ideal material for all sorts of whittling. From some of it we carved boats that we launched and sailed in puddles after rains; lacking puddles, we sailed them in our watering trough “seas.” Many a whistle did we fashion from willow twigs or pumpkin leaf stalks. We built small wagons and sleds, and a wooden engine that would run when we turned a crank. We even built a toy threshing machine that would thresh wheat (one head at a time) and a small baler that turned out miniature bales of hay. We made some of the tools needed for certain kinds of work—all a bit crude, but they worked.

One day I found a magazine advertisement offering a book, “Every Boy His Own Toy Maker.” That, I decided, was just what I needed; so I mailed a dime, and back came a small paper-covered pamphlet containing instructions for making a variety of items. Our reaction to it was
rather negative because it seemed quite vague in spots, and it called for the use of several materials we had never so much as heard of, such as logwood, deal, teakwood, and draper’s boxes. We did get from its pages instructions for making a telephone set, using as transmitter-receivers two tin cans with both ends cut out, a cord connecting the leather diaphragms, cut from an old shoe and tied over one end of each can. One really could talk over the contraption, but, considering our unaided vocal powers, it could scarcely have been regarded as a necessity.

We once built a kite that, for us, was of heroic size. We cut the frame from light basswood and pasted heavy wrapping paper over it. A long, heavy tail was attached, and binder twine was tied to the stout bridle cords to serve as the control string. It stood six feet high, and the way it flew would have delighted the heart of any boy.

Not all of our projects were successful. One time, for instance, we undertook to make a wooden bicycle, fastening the parts together with nails. Results, naturally, were far from satisfactory. Efforts to make a cash carrier to run over a wire track, like some we had seen in stores, likewise ended in failure.

From time to time we seined minnows from the creek and transferred them to the watering tank—nearly always, we had some there. Often, we speculated as to how long it would take them to grow to “whopper” size. Actually, none ever grew noticeably. We put into the water long hairs from the tails of horses, naively believing that, as some of our friends said, they would develop into living horsehair snakes. We always had a dog. It is very doubtful whether anything was ever invented that can equal a dog as a source of fun and entertainment for a boy on a
farm; and dogs and farming fit together as if expressly made for each other.

Charlie, a lad several years older than we, spent much time at our house and, as a young man, made his home there for a few years. He was a genius at getting fun out of everything he did. It seemed to us that no one could equal him when it came to inventing exciting games and making toys. Probably no kids ever had more fun than we did when, with practically no effort, he induced us to chase him, in and out between buildings, over fences, around, under, and into trees. He made for us cornstalk fiddles and taught us how to play them with cornstalk bows. He cut out straight sections of elderberry stalks, punched out the central pith, and made us popguns (chewed paper wads served as ammunition). He taught us how to make leather slings with attached cords, essentially the same, no doubt, as the sling that David used in felling Goliath. We slew no giants, but we hurled countless small stones high into the air. A little later, we learned from schoolmates how to make slingshots, using wide rubber bands attached to wooden forks cut from trees. With these much greater accuracy was possible. Under Charlie's tutelage we cut slender, springy "water sprouts" from apple trees and whittled the smaller ends to sharp points. By impaling a green apple on such a stick and swinging it at high speed through a long arc, we could throw it with great force. One could not control these shots effectively, but the range pleased us no end. Charlie initiated us into the brotherhood of gun lovers when we were quite small by buying for each of us a long-barreled, wicked-looking cap gun, modeled after big six-shooters of the West. We bought and fired so many paper caps
that we soon found ourselves bankrupt. Next, he found some dry, straight-grained hickory and fashioned bows and arrows for us. He labored manfully to teach us archery, but we never acquired much real skill. Undiscouraged, he made us a crossbow, but it never worked well. It was something of an experimental model, and he never got around to correcting its faults.

Farm people found a good many uses for hickory wood in addition to making bows and arrows and smoking meat. They chose shellbark in preference to pig hickory. This hickory, when straight-grained and well seasoned, is quite hard and strong. It was cut into suitable lengths, then split and whittled to the approximate desired shape. Final form and smooth finish were produced by patient scraping with pieces of broken glass. Among items thus made were ramrods for muzzle-loading guns and handles for axes, mauls, mattocks, adzes, and the like. Hickory husking-pegs with a leather loop for attachment to two fingers of the right hand were widely used before factory-made steel pegs supplanted them. I once saw a much used tobacco pipe that a local smoker had whittled from hickory.

The St. Marys River flowed some twelve miles south of our farm. It was a small, sluggish stream, overgrown with brush and brambles, and its water was polluted by wastes from nearby oil fields. Although by no means a promising stream for the angler, we could not be satisfied until we got to go and try our luck there. The first visit, when our party caught nothing but a small carp or two, should have discouraged us, but it didn't. For a long time we looked forward in eager anticipation to the next trip. We even made a small wooden kit and put into it, with the fishing tackle, knives, forks, spoons, salt, and
pepper, so that we could cook and eat our fish fresh from the water. We took it along when we next went to the river, but it proved to be only superfluous baggage—no one caught a fish.

A sudden heavy rain one July day brought our creek brimming full and flooded low-lying adjacent ground. Like ducks, we made straight for those pools and started wading. In a low spot I felt something under my bare heel that I was sure must be a fish. Cautiously slipping my heel aside, I seized the "fish" between thumb and finger. Lifting it out, I found I was holding the head of a snake. That reptile must have been both astonished and immeasurably gratified at the suddenness and utter wholeheartedness of its release.

The best swimming spot we could boast was in a creek several miles distant. Although this was little more than a mudhole, it attracted groups of youthful swimmers every warm day. Big rains would quickly bring this creek bank-full of roily water. It was deep then, with a swift, powerful current, an exciting challenge to the best swimmers. A boy might learn to swim by watching his friends in the water or by listening to their talk between swims. Some, like pups or ducklings, just jumped into the water and swam. However the knowledge may have been acquired, practically every boy knew how to swim in some fashion. All went in naked—for years none of us so much as saw a bathing suit.

A doctor living in a neighboring river town had two small sons. Knowing that it would be impossible to keep them out of the water, he decided that for their safety and the parents' peace of mind, both must be taught to swim. Accordingly, he supplied them with bathing suits and went with them to the river, prepared to give them
a comprehensive lesson that thereafter would assure their safety in the water. When they neared the bank the boys—the elder only six—dashed ahead and, to his utter amazement, dived in and swam like fish.

One summer we talked Dad into buying us a bicycle. This was supposed to be a partnership machine, but my brother derived very little pleasure from it; he became disgusted with tire troubles, which began soon after we started using it. Its single-tube tires were attached to the rims by cement that would let go without warning. This allowed the tire to creep on the rim until the valve stem tore, setting up a leak that could not be repaired. More often than not, this happened when one was miles from home. A good many boys, singly and in little groups, rode for the fun of it; but bicycling was by no means an unalloyed pleasure. Not only were the tires subject to frequent mishaps, but the roads we had at the time were poorly adapted to riding.

As our house was centrally located, it was often the gathering place for a group of neighborhood boys on Sunday afternoons. A favorite pastime was hide-and-seek in and about the barn. Even more fun was pitching horseshoes. We put in many hours at this, and most of us became proficient at tossing ringers. Occasionally, we engaged in a Spartan contest with buggy whips: Two boys would stand facing each other, about two paces apart, each holding a long, lithe whip with which he lashed the other about the legs. The blows were laid on with increasing force until one or the other—usually the boy with the thinnest pants—called “enough.”

In case someone knew where to find a nest of bumblebees, everything else was called off for the exciting pleasure of a “bee fight.” These bees commonly established
themselves in nests that had been built by field mice. No doubt, in most cases the mice had abandoned their homes voluntarily; in others, we suspected, they had been driven out by the bees. The nest might be in a clump of grass, under a pile of boards, in an old stump, or in a log. Usually we discovered nests by accidentally stumbling upon them or by kicking into something close enough to jar them. The colonies consisted ordinarily of a queen and a dozen or so workers. In the nests we found small leather-like pouches or cells, most of which contained larvae. In some were stored a few drops of crystal-clear honey; others contained beebread. We should have allowed the bees to go about their business unmolested, for they play a very important part in the pollination of clover and other useful plants. Ignorant and unmindful of this, we killed scores of them purely for the fun and excitement of fighting them.

Having located a nest, we armed ourselves with paddles and challenged the bees by punching a stick into the nest. The reaction was immediate, determined, and incredibly fierce. The bees, boiling with so much anger that one could smell very distinctly the characteristic bumblebee odor, poured forth to defend themselves and their home. They flew straight toward us at top speed, and we went into action with our paddles. When one saw a bee coming at him, he tried to swat it down; if he failed to see it coming, that was his hard luck. We learned that once a bee was down it was smart to crush it where it lay, provided that no other bee was attacking, for more than one of our warriors got stung by bees supposedly dead. In case a bee was not at once disposed of, it continued the attack until either it jabbed home its stinger or was put out of action. Occasionally, when there was no immediate de-
cise gain by either contestant, the boy would take to his heels, slapping and batting furiously at the bee, in hot pursuit. It was at this stage, generally, that the bee scored, and the beefighter became a casualty. When the last of the insects had been disposed of, we would cautiously pull the nest apart, squeeze the few sweet drops from the honey cells, and swallow them.

Sooner or later each of us got stung. There was a sharp pain at the instant the venom was injected and for a few seconds afterward. For most of us there was no aftereffect except a slight temporary swelling at the punctured spot. One fighter among us was so susceptible, however, that a sting on his lip one time caused his entire face to remain grotesquely swollen for a full day.

I was once helping a neighbor in the hayfield when the loader carried up with the hay a nest of bumblebees. The infuriated insects flew at the men on the load like jet fighter planes, all meaning business. One fellow slapped wildly right and left with his hat; he was stung several times before he could roll to the ground. His brother stood calmly, not moving a muscle. The bees buzzed menacingly about him for several minutes, but he was not stung. Since then, I have followed his example, standing motionless upon encountering either bees or wasps; they never attack me.

As so many boys do, our little group fell into the error of believing that we had to learn to smoke. We tried rattan “cigars,” cut from the stalks of old buggy whips. The slight appeal they had to begin with quickly ebbed after a puff or two. We gave corn silk a whirl, in the form of cigarettes wrapped in newspaper. Neither the taste nor the aroma satisfied, but we thought those fags did produce
dandy smoke clouds. Dried leaves of catnip or pennyroyal weren't too bad in a pipe or cigarette. They had an agreeable smell and made plenty of smoke; but any thinking man would have agreed with us that the taste was anything but enjoyable.

The payoff came when we filled our clay pipes with some coarse blackleaf tobacco that we found curing in a shed at an old tile mill. This had just about everything except pleasing aroma, mildness, and agreeable taste. Some of the boys, when they recovered enough to think of tobacco without becoming sick again, started buying "Bull Durham" or "Duke's Mixture" and rolling their own. Now and then, someone would buy a pack of factory-made cigarettes, but his conscience pricked him cruelly at every puff. "Boughten" cigarettes, it was widely proclaimed, were "coffin nails"; and all of us had been warned repeatedly that they were among the most effective tools in the devil's comprehensive assortment. Some of the boys compromised by learning to chew tobacco—a majority of men about us were chewers; only a small number were regular smokers. Generally, they preferred pipes. Cigars as a rule were reserved for special occasions and were often used then by men who were not regular smokers. A good cigar cost a nickel. Some, offered at two for a nickel, were commonly called "two-fers." A few old ladies smoked pipes. Half a dozen boys became regular pipe smokers; several settled for hand-rolled cigarettes. A few tried earnestly, but they could not tolerate tobacco in any form. To mask telltale breath odor, some youthful smokers considered it politic to chew gum at times; others bought and used "Sen-Sen Breath Perfume" in the form of little black squares, sold widely in small envelopes.