A FEW COMMUNITIES IN THE region were originally settled mainly by people of Welsh descent. Here, both English and Welsh have long been used in ordinary communication. Welshmen are lovers of music, and many have special ability as singers. The use of the Welsh language is now gradually diminishing, but singing, public and private, is given widespread encouragement and remains a primary interest. Observers generally would agree that this is about the only characteristic that marks the Welsh as different from neighbors of other racial extractions.

Other settlements began almost as miniature German provinces. During a long period, few spoke English. Church services were conducted in German, and children in school were commonly taught in the mother tongue. Succeeding generations, due to intermarriage and infiltration from outside areas, gradually abandoned speech and habits that marked them as Germans. Little now remains except family names to hint of German origins. Many of the first settlers in a few other communities were of Swiss origin. Qualities that from first to last have most noticeably differentiated them are exceptional industry, thrift, and competence at farming and other pursuits.
Among the people about us—on the whole, I believe, typical of the inhabitants of the Black Swamp region—were representatives of English, German, Irish, Scotch, French, and Welsh stocks; but one rarely heard a word of any language but English. Practically all were several generations removed from the Old World. A large proportion were descendants of early settlers of the area who had come from older Ohio counties. Many of the latter in turn were scions of pioneer families of other, older American states. Some could have traced their ancestry back to Europeans who were among the first to establish themselves in the New World.

Nowhere, probably, could one have found a more striking example of the successful functioning of the American melting pot. No Old World nationalism, prejudice, or ideology was in evidence; all were good American citizens and friendly, co-operative neighbors. Practically all were intelligent, honest, industrious, and thrifty. The majority were churchgoers. Among people we knew, Republicans outnumbered Democrats, but that was taken as of little local significance. Almost to a man they could have been classified as rugged individualists. They stood on their own feet, and they wanted it that way. In trouble they stood together. When sickness came, or disaster, help for the unfortunate family or individual was always forthcoming, help prompted by sincere and sympathetic hearts that neither counted the cost nor looked for recompense.

Much of what these people knew had been learned through hard knocks experienced by themselves and their fathers before them. While they had respect for tradition, old methods, and old customs, few revered the old for its age alone. On the other hand, few were disposed to
welcome the new unreservedly merely because it was
new, although most were ready enough to abandon the
old and accept the new when the latter had proved itself
sound and worthy of acceptance.

Nearly all came from farmer ancestry, and their interests
were centered about farms and farming. Land was their
capital and their insurance against the inevitable day of
retirement from productive labor. About all carried fire
and tornado insurance, their policies generally being writ­
ten by mutual companies of which they themselves were
members. Few put any money into life policies.

Food materials were abundant; yet many regarded the
deliberate destruction or waste of anything of this kind
that could have value for any purpose as inexcusable—
even sinful. Most people had a wholesome respect for
money, even pennies. Very few, however, could justly have
been called miserly or niggardly. Money was hard to come
by; they had to get along on cash incomes that today
would seem meager in the extreme. Many things now re­
garded as necessities were then luxuries that could be dis­
pensed with, and many of today's luxuries were unknown.

Practically all had a deep-seated fear of debt, having
been taught by precept and example that often “Poverty
rides on Debt’s back.” Many, however, at one time or
another faced debts, incurred in buying farms or needed
equipment. Once in debt, they strove to whittle their
indebtedness down as rapidly as possible. In the eyes of
most people we knew, nothing so distinctly marked one
a failure as arriving at old age penniless, due allowance
of course being made for circumstances. Contemplating
their own sunset years, they felt that nothing, when those
years came, could be quite so dreadful, so humiliating, or
so shameful as to find themselves at last homeless, bankrupt, and dependent, going to the poorhouse for shelter and a place to die. Judgments tended to be harsh in cases where a fate of this kind clearly resulted from an individual's own laziness, foolishness, or improvidence. The ultimate unhappy predicament of the indolent, "do-less" fellow was likely to evoke more mirth than sympathy. Many laughed at an oft-told tale of a shiftless old character known as Tommy. Neighbor A and Neighbor B, in their wagons, met on the road. As they exchanged greetings, A, seeing old Tommy seated on the floor of B's wagon, inquired:

"Where's Tommy going?"

"Says he's too old to work any more," replied B. "Not much to eat at his place, either. Taking him to the poorhouse."

"Hey, got a bag of corn here," said A. "Tommy can have it. Keep him going a while yet."

At this Tommy eased himself up lazily, peered over the sideboard at A and asked, "Is that there corn shelled?"

"No, Tommy."

The old fellow turned to B with an air of resigned finality and, as he settled himself as comfortably as he could on the hard boards, drawled in a listless voice, "Drive on, then."

Most farmers worked early and late to get their farms well fenced and well drained, to keep their soil in good tilled, and to provide comfortable homes, good barns, and so on. They tried to lay by some money for the purpose of aiding their children to get a start in the farming business when they married. This became increasingly difficult as the population grew, as land values went higher, and
as share-the-wealth legislation became operative. Ordinarily, a young man with an ambition to own a farm started, with what financial help his parents could provide, by buying horses, livestock, and necessary farming equipment for the operation of a rented farm. If he managed well, he would be able within a few years to become a full-fledged land-owning farmer. In pre-mechanization days the average farmer was content if he had eighty to a hundred acres, about all that he could handle well.

Generally, a farmer's children counted a great deal more as assets than as liabilities, for they aided with innumerable tasks that had to be done. Boys were assigned outdoor jobs; girls assisted their mothers. In case there were more girls than boys, the girls helped with work indoors and out. If, on the other hand, boys predominated, inducing them to do housework was likely to be a difficult undertaking—often a hopeless one. In a few homes the children were allowed to grow up without much attention to standards of conduct or moral or ethical principles. In most other homes the parents were firm believers in the adage "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Actually, the rod was used only on rare occasions and as a last resort. In no observed instance did the maintenance of discipline in such homes give rise to permanent resentment or bitterness on the part of any child.

My father and mother and many of their contemporaries used the names "Pap" and "Mother" in speaking of, or to, their parents. A few used "Father" instead of "Pap." We children and others of our generation were taught to say "Pa" and "Ma." Occasionally "Papa" and "Mama," abbreviated to "Pop" and "Mom," were heard. Late in the 1890's, nearly all of the boys of our community, with surprising
unanimity, began substituting “Dad” for “Pa.” There was no known objection from fathers to the newly adopted name. Apparently, they sensed that it signified no disrespect or lack of affection and that the kids were just following the popular trend. At this time “Mom” enjoyed increased popularity. Girls showed some reluctance at first to adopt the innovation, but soon most of them fell into line. The change seemed to come suddenly and spontaneously—helped along no doubt by the herd instinct. From that time until this day, it appears, a considerable proportion of American fathers have been “Dad” to their offspring and mothers have been “Mom.” Exactly how this custom originated and what caused its rapid and widespread adoption have always puzzled me.

Until the children grew big enough to help, most farmers had to hire hands, particularly in the busy seasons. Some employed men the year around. A few families kept hired girls throughout the year, but in most cases jobs were open for girls only in the busiest seasons or when a new baby came to impose additional tasks in a farm household. In no case did employment as a farm hand or as a helper in the house appear to lower caste or reflect upon these young men and women. They were treated as members of the family, not as menials. A young man who came one time to service our parlor organ reflected something of the prevailing democratic attitude in this connection. He told of having “kept company” with a young lady who entertained what he considered high-toned, aristocratic ideas. “When I marry,” she told him, “I’m going to keep a hired girl. No drudging for me.”

“When I marry,” came back the young man, “I’m going to marry the hired girl.”
No farmer was very rich, few, very poor. Among the wealthiest were men who had inherited good farms and managed well. Oil from wells on the property of some put them on Easy Street. Although most of the real wealth was produced on farms, a considerable part of it had a way of gravitating to town. Owners of grain elevators, most of whom had moved to town from farms, as a rule did very well indeed. They bought farmers' products, then sold them needed supplies, making profits when they bought and when they sold. Hardware stores, lumber yards, and implement dealers enjoyed a lucrative business with farmers, Bankers, most of whom contributed constructively to the development of the area, fared well in dealings with farmer clients.

The fortune of one of the town's richest men came primarily from the timber that farmers hauled in and sold to him. As owner of a factory that made wood products, he was among the largest employers of labor in the entire region. He contributed liberally to local charities, but this did not serve to allay the general feeling that he was a heartless driver of the men who worked for him, exploiting them and robbing them of rightful fruits of their labors to enrich himself.

A man in town, who fitted almost perfectly the description of Longfellow's hero who labored in a smithy under a spreading chestnut tree, shod our horses and did all our blacksmithing. He was a fast workman, putting in long hours every day, but jobs flowed in so fast he could never get ahead of them. Working altogether with hand tools, he could make and repair practically anything in wood or steel. He could build a sound, sturdy wagon, but he rarely got a chance to do so; farmers kept him too busy.
setting tires, making new wheels, tongues, spokes, felloes, hounds, and reaches for their old wagons. Jointers and shares of plows had to be sharpened from time to time. Points wore down so that new ones, commonly made from worn-out, hard-tempered rasps, had to be welded on and forged into shape. A large amount of such plow work fell to the lot of our blacksmith.

Another local blacksmith built a few wagons that farmers liked so well that he had to give up about all of his other work and specialize in wagon-building. In time he began building buggies also, and eventually converted his shop into a small manufacturing establishment. Wagons built by Studebaker, later a manufacturer of automobiles, were widely used in the area. Others came from other big factories, some in Indiana, some in Ohio.

No one appears to have been very consciously influenced by the couplet “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Yet early rising was an established custom. When one began early in the morning and put in a long, full day at work, it followed that he had to retire early in the evening to get a full quota of rest and sleep. The average bedtime was around nine P.M. Many arose regularly at five each morning and started the day’s activities, much of the time by lantern light. If a man failed many times to get out at about seven in the morning to work with his team in the field, after doing the milking and other chores at the barn, his neighbors were likely to wonder whether, after all, he might not be a little lazy and “do-less.”

Waking lazy farm hands and sleepy youngsters to get them out in time for breakfast was often something of a
problem. One man had a hand who seemed to be lulled into sounder slumber at each successive morning summons to rise. One morning, after this had gone on for more than a week, he called repeatedly without results. Exasperated, he went to the young man’s room, threw down the covers of his bed, and dashed a cup of cold water over him. This had an electrifying effect. It made him a little angry, but he managed thereafter to get up at the first call. Another man had two strapping sons who were not unduly fond of work but had a passionate love for hunting. Rumor had it that their dad sometimes resorted to a ruse to get them stirring. “Boys,” he would call, “get up—fine mornin’ for quail.”

Probably it could not be proved that early retiring and early rising actually contributed greatly to the health, wealth, or wisdom of anyone thereabouts. There is no doubt, however, that under conditions that made so much human labor necessary, those who started early in the morning and worked industriously through long days prospered as they could not have done otherwise.

We never knew of a Christmas tree being set up in any home in the community. There were family gatherings, though, and always bounteous dinners in the true Christmas tradition. Gifts were provided for all, especially the children, but they did not appear in anything like the profusion of later times. They tended to be simple and comparatively inexpensive. Some practical-minded parents inclined strongly toward giving useful, needed items, such as articles of clothing and school supplies. Youthful recipients of such gifts naturally took a dim view of this, feeling that sooner or later all would have come to them,
Christmas or no Christmas. We children found our gifts on Christmas morning in shoes or boots or in stockings nearby—no one we knew hung up his stockings. Fancy gift wrapping was unheard of. Holly, mistletoe and special decorations rarely appeared. No one we knew had a yule log for few fireplaces were then in use.

No one in our family ever had a birthday party or a birthday cake, as such. Birthdays were observed only to the extent that each of us could always count on a birthday “licking” from brother, sister, or schoolmate, one resounding whack for each year, plus “one to live on and one to grow on.” Birthdays were accorded similar treatment in other homes except that occasionally one of our friends, on his own initiative, would get up a party for himself.

Church weddings were somewhat rare; most couples were married in the home of the bride. The bride might have a bouquet, but, as a rule, no other flowers appeared. Guests wore their best Sunday clothes—no one had formal attire. One time when I was about twelve, I was helping Uncle Cal gather and burn fragments of stumps in a newly-cleared field. On the eve of a wedding at the neighborhood church, he invited me to go with the family. I demurred, arguing that I had nothing to wear except my rough work clothes. Since everyone else wanted to go, I found myself talked down and dragooned into going.

Uncle Cal seated me beside him in a prominent place near the front of the auditorium, my coarse shoes, dusty pants, and work-stained jacket standing out conspicuously. In the midst of the ceremony, I thrust my feet under the seat and knocked over the janitor’s dustpan and broom.
that, by some devilish chance, had been left there. The clatter was horrendously loud and distracting, but no one seemed to mind it half as much as I did. At that moment nothing could have pleased me more than for the floor beneath me to suddenly collapse and drop me into the dark, neglected basement, where I might lie buried under debris, the deeper the better.

Nearly always, following a wedding, refreshments were served at the home of the bride; or there might be an elaborate dinner. In some cases parents of the bridegroom, some time later, would honor the couple at a reception marked by a gorgeous dinner at the young man’s home. Such receptions were known as “inares.”

No wedding was complete without a belling or “shivaree.” At a home wedding, the belling might come shortly after the ceremony. If the couple managed to give the serenaders the slip, they were pretty sure to be belled soon after they returned from the honeymoon. Cowbells, horns, tin pans, conch shells, horse fiddles, and shotguns—sometimes even dynamite—were used to make a frightful din. Occasionally, someone carried in a dinner bell or a buzz saw to be beaten with a heavy club. In most cases bellings were stag affairs, but at times girls joined in the fun. The serenade continued until the bridegroom appeared and passed out cigars, with candy or other confections if girls were in the crowd.

Most conch shells were family heirlooms that at one time had been used to announce dinner to men working in the fields. In our time only the dinner bell was used for this purpose, the shells being kept as curios or ornaments that could be pressed into service as door stops. The dinner bell, of cast metal, with a rope attached to its
crank, was commonly mounted on a post near the kitchen. The post was supposed to be of such a height that the bell could be heard at far corners of the farm. The bell was used not only to summon men to meals but to sound an alarm in case of emergency. One could identify all the bells in the neighborhood by their tones. The need for them having diminished or ended altogether, these bells are now fading from the farm scene, going to serve as “door” bells for town houses or to become items in antique collections.

There were no funeral chapels such as those of later times. Practically all funeral services were held in churches, preceded by a solemn tolling of the bell. Nearly always, the music, provided by a small choral group, was as sadly funereal as could well be imagined. The funeral sermon was rarely less than an hour in length.

It was customary for a group of friends and neighbors of a bereaved family to sit up all night in the home where the body lay. At such gatherings, which were never referred to as wakes, the visitors entertained themselves by low-toned conversation, which at times might become quite lively. Nearly all napped a little now and then. Pie, cake, and coffee were served. There was never any liquor, never any boisterous or unseemly conduct.

Several men and youths of our community were widely known as swappers. They were never happier than when they could work up a deal with someone, and the more “boot” they could wangle, the happier the transaction made them. There was little actual misrepresentation or cheating, but such clever psychology was applied that
one who swapped with a real expert would do well always to keep his wits about him. Even with that precaution, he stood in danger of losing his shirt. Most of the trades were pure barter, in which one exchanged on a fair basis some article he no longer needed for some other that would be useful. If the items swapped were not clearly of approximately equal value, there might be a great deal of jockeying and parleying to reach an agreement on relative values and determine just what amount in boot one trader should receive from the other.

One of our neighbors, a man named Jesse, was quite fond of swapping. He was so good at it that several times professionals who swapped with him came out second best. He came one time offering Dad a big key-wind watch for a small stack of hay. It happened that Dad didn’t need the hay and, as he then had no watch, they made an even trade. That heavy Waltham was an excellent timekeeper. Dad carried it daily for many years. A short time after this transaction, Jesse traded Dad a calf for a pig. A few days later, Jesse passed the field where Dad and his hired man, John Coon, were husking corn. Dad reported that John was calling the calf “Jesse.”

“Pig’s named, too, Bill,” replied Jesse. “We call him Billy Coon.”

At school one day I swapped a fountain pen for a watch. The thing was running all right, ticking like an alarm clock at the time the exchange was made. When I pulled it from my pocket a few minutes later, it had stopped dead as the most lifeless of mackerels. I found that if I gave the case a quick clockwise turn and held it horizontally, it would run for several minutes—that explained how I had been taken in. I contacted Jesse, and we soon
arranged a swap, the watch for a .22 caliber rifle. When I later fired the gun, powder blew through a hole burned in the breechblock and scorched my face, making me gunshy for months. Both parties to that deal were cheated.

Not long after we moved into the new house, a friend of the family who sold musical instruments drove in with a new parlor organ. Whether by accident or by design, that visit was most happily timed so far as sales possibilities were concerned, for our parents had been giving serious thought to getting the three of us started with music. The salesman brought the instrument into the house, demonstrated its tone, and launched into his sales talk. When he named the price, Dad admitted that it seemed fair enough but countered with a proposal that a fodder chopper, which he no longer needed, be accepted in a trade. The man conceded that he could use the machine, since he lived on a farm. So the organ was swapped for the chopper, plus an agreed amount of boot.