ALTHOUGH ENGLISH GRAMMAR had been taught for a good many years in rural public schools, much of the language heard about us was far from grammatical. There were some, including a few ex-teachers, who could speak good English, but in everyday conversation they tended to fall back upon the homely lingo of the majority; it seemed that they didn't want to be regarded as stuck-up. In our school—probably fairly typical of regional rural schools—a sizable proportion of each class approached grammar with almost total indifference. To some extent, at least, this appears to have reflected parental attitude—one boy among my classmates, encouraged by his father, refused to have anything whatever to do with the subject.

Probably few of the words and expressions in common, informal use were actually indigenous to the Black Swamp. For the most part they were imports, having been brought in by settlers who came from outside areas, far and near, or having been picked up from time to time by local people in contacts with inhabitants of other regions. Naturally, a fairly large number of colloquial words and phrases applied specifically to the business of farming. A good many were
pointed and picturesque. Some figures of speech had a grotesque quality, some a quaint tinge of humor. References to proverbs and epigrammatic sayings that are the common heritage of users of English were frequent.

In local parlance anyone or anything considered quite insignificant or of little worth was “triflin’,” didn’t “amount to nothin’,” or, perhaps, might be “the last joint on the tail end of nothin’.” At the opposite extreme one “set store” by something highly prized or greatly admired. If there was something he disliked, he might try to “get shet” of it.

One who failed to get on well because of obvious laziness or other personal fault was a “no-account,” or he didn’t “amount to a hill of beans”; in an extreme case he might not “amount to powder and lead to blow him up.” A man regarded as lazy was likely to be classified as “not very workbrickle” or as “do-less.” Some would say of a person naturally slow and deliberate in action that he was “too slow to catch cold” or that it was necessary to “set stakes to see him move.”

Of an individual considered very stubborn, some would say that he was “stubborn as a mule”; others might assert that “if he fell into a river he would float upstream.” A closefisted, grasping man, it was said, was “tight as the bark on a tree” or “would skin a gnat for its hide.”

When a man or boy wished to assure another that he was giving him full moral support, he said: “I’ll stand your backin’ till your belly caves in.” The fellow who asked for quarter in any rough contest “hollered cavey.” A boy, boasting of his prowess at fistcuffs, might assert that he could lick a prospective antagonist “with one hand tied behind my back.” The classic response, in case the lad appeared lacking in physical ability to make good his boast,
was: “Yes? Where do you bury the ones you kill?” If someone, especially a boy, proposed for himself a task likely to tax his ability, he might hear the remark, usually bantering: “I’ll bet; you’ll do wonders and cat blunders.” A playful threat of physical violence might be couched in some such form as “I’ll tan your hide,” “I’ll warm your jacket,” or “I’ll whale you.”

Occasionally, someone said: “I like t’died.” This could mean that he had been greatly embarrassed, highly amused, or ill. Now and then, we heard some moderately well-to-do man say: “It’s no disgrace to be poor but it’s kinda unhandy.” One regarded as seriously lacking in worldly goods was “poor as Job’s turkey.”

When one agreed to work for another, he “hired out.” An employer “turned off” a worker when he discharged or fired him. To “hoe a crooked row” was to labor under disadvantages. Anyone who sought to speed up work by demanding extra effort from others was “cracking the whip.”

Even as the boss in a city factory may send a green apprentice for a “board-stretcher” or a can of “striped paint,” the rural joker might assign a naive helper to look for “spotted pig tracks” or a “left-handed monkey wrench.”

Questioning the soundness of an individual’s judgment and understanding, some averred that he “didn’t know beans” or “didn’t know putty.” Others, putting it more bluntly, declared that he “didn’t have sense enough to come in out of the rain” or that he “didn’t have sense enough to pound sand in a rat hole.” Referring to one who appeared unobservant, some opined that he was “blind in one eye and couldn’t see with the other.”

A girl’s boy friend was her “feller” or her “beau.” In case she dismissed the chap, she “gave him the mitten.” If, on
the other hand, they married, they “got spliced” and began “trotting in double harness.” One was left to “dance in the hog-trough” if a younger sibling married before he did. A wife regarded as dictating family affairs “ruled the roost” or “wore the britches.” A wife became a “widow woman” if her husband died.

Confronted by a problem that appeared extremely difficult, some said they were being “stumped” or “up a stump.” A man who “figgered,” “calculated,” “lowed” he would do a certain thing was proposing or planning to do it. If he meant to waste no time about it, he said it would be done in “about three shakes of a dead lamb’s tail.” In case the proposed undertaking might appear a little pointless or silly, he said he would try it “just for devilment.”

A man working very hard felt that he was “working like a dog.” One subject to continued harassment and trouble was said to “live a dog’s life.” A notably dishonest person might be described as “crooked as a dog’s hind leg” or referred to as a “slippery customer” who “could hide behind a corkscrew.” Anyone who tackled a job vigorously “sailed into it”; if he stubbornly refused to give up in spite of all discouragement, he “held on like a pup to a root.”

To “eat high on the hog” was to live well. “Hogging off” could mean either slipshod harvesting of a crop or allowing hogs to eat a crop on the ground where it grew. To go all out or commit oneself unreservedly was to “go the whole hog.” One who put on a front or made an ostentatious display was “sticking a fat hog.”

To talk irrelevantly or to argue from a false premise was to “bark up the wrong tree.” When something altogether unexpected happened, total surprise was expressed by saying, “You could have knocked me over with a feather.”
One who found himself in a very embarrassing situation said, "I could have crawled through a knothole." A chap who had been given a sharp reprimand said the fellow who gave him the treatment "gave me Hail Columbia" or "read my title clear." One who was held rigidly to strict rules said he had to "walk the chalk." When someone was thrown altogether upon his own resources, folks said it was a case of "root, hog, or die" or that he had to "paddle his own canoe."

A few times it happened that someone, feeling sure of the identity of a caller who had knocked at the door, responded with the inelegant flippancy occasionally used when members of the family or intimate friends were involved: "Come in if your nose is clean." Immediately afterward, he suffered acute embarrassment when the visitor proved to be a dignified stranger.

Meat at all tough was "tougher than a boiled owl." An article fresh from the store was "brand splinter new." Anything that seemed exactly right for a certain use was "just the kicks." If something upset a plan or made a project go awry it "played hob" with it. To "get on with the rat-killin'" was to proceed with the work at hand. In a heavy downpour it might be either "raining pitchforks with saw-log handles" or "raining cats and dogs."

A person who optimistically anticipated the successful outcome of an undertaking was "counting his chickens before they were hatched." Some, feeling that the game was not worth the candle, would declare: "It's too much sugar for a cent." Now and then, a fellow with a decided conviction might offer to "bet two cents and a brick watch." To indicate that any one of several procedures could be used to a given end, a more or less standard statement was:
“There’s more than one way to skin a cat.” Anything moving menacingly toward one was “making for him.”

Anyone who became haughtily indignant was “riding a high horse.” He “ripped and snorted” in case he lost his temper to the extent of resorting to violent speech or action. One who seemed to show his authority unduly was said to be “feeling his oats.” The chap who appeared to have an exaggerated opinion of his own importance was “too big for his britches.” The urbanite was a “dude” or a “town feller.”

One who lived in the country was a “sod-buster,” a “country jake,” or a “clodhopper.” If either happened to be youthful and appeared forward or over-confident, he was likely to be labeled “brash” or “fresh.”

In case a visitor came unexpectedly at meal time, he might be a welcome guest at the table, but with the distinct understanding that he had failed to “get his name in the pot.”

A baby was “nussed” either when it was suckled or when someone held it in his arms. A crying child was “singin’ broadmouth.”

Housewives straightening a disordered room might say they were “redding it up.” As applied to laundry work, rinsing occasionally became “renching.” As many expressed it, teachers “learnt” children, they rarely taught them. To these people a child in school was nearly always a “scholar,” not a pupil or a student. A few called an axle an “ex.”

“Let alone” was extensively used as the equivalent of “not considering” or “not counting.” Occasionally, we heard “ary” used for “either” or “any,” and “nary” for “neither” or “not any.” “Tit for tat” commonly served as the equivalent of “an eye for an eye.” “Liable” and “apt” were used,
more or less interchangeably, to indicate likelihood or probability. A few habitually applied the adjective "immense" to about everything that to Theodore Roosevelt would have been "bully." "I reckon" was widely used in lieu of "I think," "I believe," "I presume," or "I assume"; "I reckon so" in response to a question was equivalent to "yes." "Expect" and "suppose" were generally overworked, being substituted for "assume," "presume," "believe," or "imagine."

Words ending in "ow" were often given instead an "er" termination; they became "beller," "holler," "winder," etc. Numerous words were misspelled and mispronounced. Some of the most common were rhubarb (rubber); radish (reddish); jaundice (janders); and mush (mersh). One often heard the "musk" in "muskmelon" and "muskrat" pronounced "mush" or "mersh." To some, sumac was "shoemake." "For" was commonly pronounced "fer"; a supposedly clever answer to the question, "what fer?," was "cat fur to make kitten britches."

One of the most common infractions of the rules of good English was the use of the double negative, such as: "You hain't seen nothin.'" General use of "hain't" and "ain't" made them practically standard words. Many habitually bungled verb forms. They used "seen" for "saw" and almost invariably put "done" where "did" belonged. Very often "knowed" crowded "knew" out altogether. Case forms of pronouns tripped a great many, not a few of whom should have known better; one often heard such phrases as "with he and I" and "me and him went."

There was a strong tendency to maim present participles by prefixing an "a" and dropping the final "g." Such words became "a-comin'," "a-workin'," etc. The speech of a little group at school, children of the only Welsh family in the
district, stood out in marked contrast with that of other pupils because in every instance, when they used such words, they omitted the "a" prefix and sounded the "ing" very distinctly.

Following are a few of the more common words that made up local vocabularies. Although nearly all of them have been recognized and listed by lexicographers, some perhaps would not be generally accepted or approved as polite, refined English.

**Brash** (adj.), rash or impudent, also brittleness in timber; **breachy** (adj.), applied to a horse or a cow that could go over or through a fence; **britches** (n.), pants; **budget** (n.), valise, satchel, or package; **bulgine** (n.), locomotive or other steam engine; **crowbait** (n.), a decrepit horse; **dauncy** (adj.), indisposed, under par physically; **dingus** (n.), an unfamiliar object, a gadget or "gismo"; **doodad** or **doofunny** (n.), same as **dingus**; **drizzle** (n.), light rain; **dumbhead** (n.), a stupid fellow, an ignoramus; **Dutchy** (adj.), odd, slovenly, unstylish.

**Fetch** (v.), to bring; **fizzle** (n.), failure; **frogsticker** (n.), a dilapidated pocket knife; **galluses** (n.), suspenders for trousers; also four hills of corn tied together as the foundation for a shock; **galoot** (n.), an awkward or ignorant fellow; **gaumy** (adj.), smeared; **goo** (n.), anything sticky or messy; **green** (adj.), unsophisticated, inexperienced; **gum** (n.), either rubber, or a section of a large hollow log; **heaver** (n.), a horse with heaves; **hoof** (n.), one's foot—also used as a verb: to "hoof it" was to go on foot; **lickety-split** (adv.), moving fast; **lizard** (n.), sled for moving timber or stones; **mossback** (n.), an uncouth fellow, a dweller in a backwoods hinterland; **mouthy** (adj.), loud, over-talkative; **mudboat** (n.), same as lizard; **necktie** (n.), a
yoke to control a breachy animal; *pack* (v.), to carry; *peart* (adj.), bright, lively; *plug* (n.), an old horse; *polecat* (n.), a skunk, or a base, contemptible fellow.

*Rain hen* (n.), turtle dove; *rassle* (v.), wrestle; *rig* (n.), buggy or machine; *roof rabbit* (n.), cat; *saphead* (n.), a green or ignorant person; *shoat* (n.), a pig; *skedaddle* (v.), to flee or run; *snoot* (n.), one’s nose; *soldier* (v.), to loaf or dally; *somers* (adv.), somewhere; *trotters* (n.), one’s feet; *turnip* (n.), a cheap watch; *water brash* (n.), indigestion; *whale* (v.), to whip or flog; *whopper* (n.), a lie or anything large; *windy* (adj.), applied to a loud, boastful person; *yaller hammer* (n.) the flicker.