

## Chapter 1. The Adair County Farms

I loved the farm. I have loved it throughout my life, intensely and perhaps beyond reason. I loved the roosters, their wake up calls in the gray dawn. I loved the hen house, gathering their eggs, and the little "peep peep" of tiny yellow fuzzballs. I loved milking the cows, how they already started home at 5:00 with full udders. I loved the baby pigs and feared the big hogs. Even more I loved the fields of oats when they were ready to cut, golden and heavy. I loved the alfalfa and clover and the smell of hay, fresh cut, drying, or of last year's thrown down to the cows. I loved how the horses crunched on their oats. As I lay in the oat bin and opened and chewed them, I embraced life. The love was primitive, an expression of subconscious well being. I loved the corn rows so tall that I could not reach their top ears. I loved their dried color, yellow, red, brown, kernels arranged by nature's whim on the cob. I was fascinated by the shelled corn, letting it rain through my fingers, and I savored its rough and chewy taste, tough but sweet. I wondered if the horses tasted it as I did.

I loved mowing times--hay, oats, wheat and barley. I loved the relentless rhythm of their coming due. I loved the windmill pumping water in a good breeze. I loved the sheep, especially the lambs' worried bleating. I loved the traditional farmer's machinery, and the horse team, its bridles, reins, halters, and fastening the neck yoke to the wagon tongue. I admired the tractors, the combines, the manure spreaders, the planters, the harvesters and combines, and the hay mowers. I loved to help my grandparents, all four of them, and my aunt and uncle with their work. I marveled at their cream separator, and in their keeping of one part, trading the cream for goods in town, and slopping the hogs with the remainder. I loved the long power belts that drove the oat threshing machine, cycling with one lengthy twist from the tractor to the thresher. I loved loading the hay into the barn, how the horse team would walk away with the rope until the big fork was up and in. I watched it trip, fall and settle into the big red-barn haymow. I loved gathering dried corncobs to fuel the large iron stove.

I loved it all, and still do.

The memories of farming that I carry are of a world now past. Unforseen by me as a boy and by society, farming was changing. I had thought it immutable. For me it was families, my families, living on 160 acres, more or less, growing all those many things, some to feed to the diverse animals, each having their own function for the family, some to trade in town for cash or credit, and some to eat. Farming to me was hundreds of such families living around a town in which manufactured goods could be purchased. I carried this concept of farming with me through schooling, through marriages, through a career in scientific research, and it blooms within me even now as I write. It is a lasting part of the American mythology, even though it vanished while I was not watching. Politicians paid it lip service even while they helped its destruction with embrace of a new political religion—low-cost efficiency. Farmers today are businessmen, no matter how much they too may love the land; and their crops are more like manufactured items than byproduct of family subsistence on the land. Farmers today have the same bottom line, profit, as any industry. They manufacture a product to sell. With cash proceeds they buy their food at supermarket chains just as do citizenry of Chicago or Houston. Their machinery no longer symbolizes the tools of living, as I imagined, but rather capital investment, often huge, with which any manufacturing plant is saddled in its war with economic efficiency.

The images of farming in the old way remained fresh in my mind throughout my life. They imprinted upon a receptive center of my brain, something similar to the newly born animal imprinting its mother. I find no other way to understand the clarity of my images and the affection with which I have always preserved them. But there is probably more that I do not comprehend, some longing that I attach to those images and which endowed them with emotional force, and which may even have obstructed my emotional maturation. In some sense the images and the land *are* the mother. The earth is indeed her sweet breast, as poets and psychiatrists alike have described.

The story of my life and of my family needs those images to begin. Tracing the threads of my life not only explains much of me but also chronicles a changing America. I and my families arose from Adair County, Iowa. On a map of the United States, Adair County is a square, thirty miles on a side, about fifty miles west and slightly south of Des Moines, the Iowa capitol. It lies adjacent to and just west of Madison County, known for its covered bridges, John Wayne's birthplace in Winterset, and for a recent romance novel that is light years from the story I have to tell. Adair County is bounded today on the north by Interstate 80 going due west from Des Moines. Des Moines lies halfway between two great north-south rivers--the Mississippi and the Missouri. Adair County extends on its west end about halfway from Des Moines to the Missouri River. This entire farming region was an aperture toward the western prairies and is still today one of the least populated areas of the United States. Adair County has no cities. Its most populated town is Greenfield, its present county seat, with 2074 citizens. Greenfield lies near the center of that 30-mile square, a town once so renowned for its middle-American charm that it was named in one poll the most beautiful town in America, and was chosen as venue for Dick Van Dyke's film comedy *Cold Turkey*. To Greenfield my grandfather and grandmother Kembery<sup>1</sup> retired from their farm, and in Greenfield my grandfather Kembery worked his last--custodian for the Greenfield Presbyterian Church, earning spending and heating money for his final years.