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A Midwest Farm Boy of the 1870's

SHORTLY BEFORE *his death in the autumn of 1945, Judge Oscar Hallam of St. Paul wrote a series of delightful sketches reminiscent of his youth on a Midwest farm of the 1870's and assembled them in a manuscript volume which he called "Bloomfield and Number Five."*¹ *The author was born in 1865 on a farm near Dodgeville in the lead region of southwestern Wisconsin, and there, in Linden Township, Iowa County, he passed his boyhood years. The vicinity round about, with its villages,—Dodgeville, Linden, and Mineral Point,—its churches,—Bloomfield and Laxeys,—and its district schools, is the background for the career of a man who became a prominent Minnesota jurist.*

*Judge Hallam's father was one of a group of farmers from England who settled in the Wisconsin lead-mining district in the 1850's. Joseph Schafer has pointed out that farmers were attracted to the region by the "high prices for foodstuffs which ruled in the mines." Many of them prospered, among them Joseph Hallam, who in 1880 was one of nineteen farmers in Linden Township with annual incomes in excess of two thousand dollars.*² *His son's reminiscences, although they have their setting in a Wisconsin community, tell of institutions and a rural way of life that were common to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and other Midwestern states in the late decades of the nineteenth century. The scenes and events described are a prelude to a career that led to a district judgeship in Ramsey County from 1905 to 1913, and, following that for a decade, to the Minnesota*

¹ A copy of this manuscript, which contains 350 typewritten pages, was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by the author's daughter, Mrs. Cornelia Hallam Miller of St. Paul. See *ante*, p. 55. The present extract is published with her permission.

² Joseph Schafer, *The Wisconsin Lead Region*, 132, 143, 271 (Madison, 1932).

supreme court. For their charming and revealing picture of life in a rural community of the upper Northwest three-quarters of a century ago, the opening pages of Judge Hallam's reminiscences, hitherto unpublished, are presented herewith.

Among the local institutions mentioned by Judge Hallam are Bloomfield, "our church," which was Methodist, and Laxey, which was "Primitive Methodist." To the latter congregation, the judge reveals in one of his later sketches, belonged the Manx settlers of the community, "in fact, the church was named from Laxey in the Isle of Man, from which little mining town all the Manx neighbors of Bloomfield emigrated." With the exception of a few minor changes in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, the narrative that follows is printed exactly as Judge Hallam wrote it. Ed.

BLOOMFIELD AND NUMBER FIVE

Oscar Hallam

BLOOMFIELD was our church; Number Five was our public school. We lived out west of town. Dodgeville was the town. To get home from town, we would go out past the fair grounds, over Bartle's Run, then over Buck Grove Hill turning in at the gate just after crossing the creek and just before coming to the lane leading to the "County Farm." The road was hilly and on the hills the roadway was washed down to the "everlasting flint." It was never a fast road. We made the trip once, in the big wagon, four and a half miles in one hour flat, but it was fast work. We had to do it to catch the train. . . .

In 1848 Joseph Hallam and Mary Wood lived and were employed on the same estate in County of Rutland, England. Leasthorpe was the name of the estate and the owner Ayscough Smith. All trace of Leasthorpe and the Smiths is gone and I am unable to tell the exact location of the estate.

Joseph had been born on the farm still known as the Hallam Farm at Greetham. I believe the family left the farm or the farm left the family in his early years. He said little about his experience on

the Hallam Farm. He had memories of Greetham, and Greetham Feast often came back to his mind.

Mary was born at Nasington, a place hard to find on a map. Her father was a stonemason.

Joseph and Mary married and came to America. Joseph had been a gardener at Leasthorpe and he had had valuable experience in intensive tilling of the soil and they planned to go to America and secure a farm home of their own, and somehow, I never knew why, they singled out the Mississippi Valley and in particular the recently admitted State of Wisconsin.

The journey was a long one. There were no clippers to make the ocean in a few hours, nor planes to fly from the coast to the Mississippi Valley between meals. There were not even available steamboats or railroads. It took six weeks in a sailing vessel to cross the Atlantic to New York, then there was a river boat trip of I know not how many days, up the Hudson to the Mohawk Valley, then a change to a canal boat for the trip through the Erie Canal to Buffalo, then another change of boats for the trip through Lake Erie, Lake Huron, and Lake Michigan, to Milwaukee, a little city with quarrelsome East Side and West Side, which had been incorporated three years before. Dodgeville, for some unknown reason their objective, was still more than one hundred miles away. Stagecoach was the best means of transportation and the "Military Road" which extended from Milwaukee to Prairie du Chien, and which had been opened during the Black Hawk War in 1832, was the only reasonable road to Dodgeville.

This was the usual route from London to Dodgeville. Arriving at Dodgeville in the summer, Joseph found work in the harvest fields and other farm activities. In Dodgeville, Lizzie (don't call her Ann Elizabeth), our oldest sister, was born June 30, 1849.

Dodgeville was only a temporary abode. There was always the thought of a farm and they did soon buy from Canute an eighty of land with a log house on it. Canute, an old "cruiser," had acquired the land from the United States Government. That log house served as a family home for twenty years. In that log house seven children were born, Alfred on April 27, 1851, Johnny, March 1, 1853, Joe, or

"Boy Jody," November 9, 1855, "Little" Mary, January 1, 1858, Lou, April 1, 1860, Willie, January 5, 1863, and Oscar, October 19, 1865.

I remember well the old log house. Originally it was a rectangular affair with a gable roof, one large room on the first floor, another room in the loft, and a kitchen at the side. Additions were made from time to time. In front were two large Balm-of-Gilead trees and close by and on the north was a wonderful grove of mixed trees, including plums of a variety which I always loved. I was very fond of those Balm-of-Gilead trees. Many years later, when we were planning trees and shrubs for our city home, I told a horticulturist the story of the old home and I told him that I wanted at least one Balm-of-Gilead tree. He sensed the difference in setting between a two-hundred-forty-acre farm and a sixty-foot city lot and said to me, "You had better let those Balm-of-Gilead trees of which you are so fond, remain a memory. They will not be so delightful a reality on your city lot." I followed his advice.

Through hard work, indomitable pluck, and rigid economy and thrift my parents prospered. They added a second adjoining eighty, partly because of a stream of water which Father always thought every farm must have. Then they added a third adjoining eighty to take in a beautiful field. Some of the farm was wooded, but it was expected that in due time this would be grubbed to make farm land. I said "grubbed" not "cut," that was the proper way to clear land. Good husbandry demanded that with plenty of "woods" not far away, a tract of "woods" should be obtained to supply firewood for the home, posts for fences and rails to be split for rail fences or "worm" fences as poets used to say. So one hundred and sixty acres of "woods" were acquired back of Harker's two miles away; there we did cut, and from there we, myself included, did haul firewood, posts, and fence rails in winter time.

I loved that old farm. I loved that little stream. You could ford it or you could jump it. In summer I preferred to paddle through it with my bare feet for I was economically unincumbered with boots or shoes from May until October, so I could paddle comfortably. Many a time I fished in that stream. I caught chubs as long as your index finger. There was not then any minimum limit of size fixed

by law. That creek was, in fact, the "head-water" for the Pecatonica River. It had its source in a spring on our farm. A little down stream from its source and just inside the gate leading to "the lane" as we used to call it, and as the stream was about to leave the farm, was another spring. This was a wonderful spring. It furnished pure, cold, spring water for our home, for Number Five District School, a quarter of a mile away, and commercially, if you will, it was in time used to cool the profuse supply of milk that the farm produced. The spring still bubbles as ever, but its patronage is gone.

I have said my parents prospered. They managed always to have an income. But it was exactly One Hundred Per Cent an earned income; not a dollar was ever made by luck or chance. They planned and they executed. They planted early in the spring, they cultivated diligently in the summer. They garnered and threshed at proper times in summer and fall. They plowed and fertilized in the fall, for the next year's crop. They greased harness on rainy days. They chopped wood, shelled corn, and fanned grain on winter days.

And what things that farm produced! My Father, in times of apparent stress, often said, "We must live on what the farm produces." We never quite did that; he never supposed we would. But I have never known a farm which came so near to producing the necessities and luxuries of life. There were cattle for beef, cows for butter, milk, cream, curd, and cottage cheese, hogs for pork, sheep for mutton and wool, a line of poultry complete, with chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, pigeons, guinea hens. There were guinea pigs for ornamental uses only. There was wild game — rabbits, squirrels, prairie chicken, wild ducks, wild geese, and multitudes of wild pigeons with no restrictive game laws. There were crops of wheat, oats, flax, rye, barley, and corn. There was every conceivable vegetable — melons, cucumbers, pumpkins, potatoes, turnips, rutabagas, carrots, parsnips, onions, artichokes, asparagus. There were all of the berries, strawberries, red and black raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries, currants, red, white, and black, plums in great variety and, as a real climax, the best two-acre orchard I have ever yet seen. There were Astrachans and Duchess in July, the luscious St. Lawrence in August, Snow Apples and Autumn Strawberry in September, Russets, Northern

Spy, and Ben Davis for winter; then there were Tolman Sweets, Sweet Pears, and Pound Sweets, the best ever, and several varieties of delicious pears. The things necessary to be added for any luxurious meal were not many and not expensive.

The country miller ground our own wheat into flour, and we were sure to get our bran.

In winter we would kill an ox from the herd. We used the trimmings. We had tripe for dinner. We had suet for pudding. We had hide, hoofs, and horns to sell. We would sell, or exchange for future delivery, three quarters, hang one quarter in the cold shed, where it would freeze and remain frozen and fresh until consumed.

On proper occasion, we would kill a pig. Again we would use the trimmings, tripe, feet, ears, head, and tail. We would cure our own bacon and ham and "render" our own lard. In summer we would kill a fatted sheep or lamb; one quarter we could consume while still fresh, three quarters we would distribute among neighbors under a diplomatic lend-lease arrangement by which we would receive in due season a similar quarter in return. This we always received. I never heard, however, of any claim for differential in weight.

In summer we would always have the opportunity of procuring fresh fish. This, with certainty, though not with regularity. Every now and again an itinerant vender would come down the lane from "head-lane," noisily calling "fresh fish." Sometimes it was sturgeon, sometimes catfish, always from the Mississippi River. He had a refrigerated box, the only one I had ever then seen. I thought the whole system was very wonderful. Butter, eggs, and poultry we always had in plenty. And who ever ate such plum preserves, jellies and jams, gooseberry pies, currant pies, raspberry pies, blackberry pies, scalded cream, meat pasties, plum pudding, and saffron cake. We were well nourished. The table was always abundantly supplied with plain but wholesome, well-cooked food. We never found occasion for discontent. We liked that life.

Our family grew to seven. Then "Little Mary," six and a half years old, died of "lung fever." She was "Little Mary" to Mother as long as Mother lived. It was a year and a half later that I was born, bringing the number again to seven.

Enlarged family brought demand for a larger house and, with reasonable prosperity, by the time Lizzie became eighteen, it became possible to build the "new house." It was a good frame colonial home. Three rows of pine trees led to the "lane" one hundred yards away. It was a really attractive farm home. A "picket fence" from the house to the "lane" next the easterly row of pines was Mother's dream, but her dream never came true. A "gravel walk" between two rows of trees, according to the popular fancy of that day, was another unrealized ambition.

In the boys' room on the second floor, there were three beds with cord springs and straw mattresses. The straw mattresses were changed every fall from the fresh straw after threshing. They were good comfortable beds. They proved to be large enough for three boys in case of necessity. Proof of that fact was often furnished and many a time I, as the littlest, was chosen to sleep in the middle, without logical reason as it seemed to me.

The girls' room, also on the second floor, never required more than one double bed; with pardonable discrimination it was a feather bed.

The spare room was little used. No guest ever slept in it. In fact, there was no bed in it, no furniture except a rag carpet rug, a chair or two, and the old "coffer" which came from England, whose heavy lid always had a broken hinge.

Any man guest always slept in the boys' room and any woman guest in the girls' room.

In the commodious sitting room on the first floor was always a good wood stove, and a drum in the girls' room above, through which the smoke pipe passed, served to temper the winter cold in that sleeping room; a stove in our parents' first-floor room, with a similar pipe and drum, performed a similar service for the boys' room.

The big "dining room" served the family well. A dining room it always was, with its square table for eight, when the two side leaves were up. You could make it nine by putting three children on one side, but usually if more than eight were present, the necessary number of children starting with the littlest were deleted and sent to the long table by the wall under the clock. In summer a rag carpet was spread over the painted pine floor, a small heating wood stove was

set up for emergencies and a comfortable dining room-living room was the result.

The cook stove then did service in the "back kitchen," a substantial lean-to, but not fitted for winter use. In the winter the carpet in the dining room came up, leaving the painted pine floor uncovered, the cook stove came into the dining room, and the big living room-dining room did the service of kitchen as well.

Somehow my most pleasant memories cling to the winter life in that big room. We loved to sit around the old wood range. We loved to see the "scalded cream" crust on the large pan of milk on the stove. We loved to take the "skim" that gathered on the already skimmed milk as it was heated on the stove for the calves. We loved to pop corn, "pull" candy, boil furmity at the big cook stove. We loved to play "authors" around the big table in winter evenings. "Euchre" and card games played with "playing cards," with which euchre was played, were considered wicked. Dancing was not countenanced, neither square nor round, though most of the critics did not know the difference. Above all we loved to hang our stockings at Christmas behind the stove pipe, which, of course, must be set up when the stove was there. All in all the room was a most comfortable place to live in. There was no paper on the wall, but it was always clean and well white-washed and that served the purpose well. The Christmas season centered around that big room. It was there on the evening before Christmas that the Christmas turkey, already scalded, "picked" in the "back" kitchen, was brought in to be drawn and stuffed and, the next morning, cooked. It was in that big room that the big Christmas Plum Pudding was made and the superb lemon sauce was prepared. It was in that big room that the "Christmas Cake," that is the indispensable saffron cake, was mixed and kneaded. Remember this "Christmas Cake" according to the custom of the community was sent around like Christmas cards are now sent out. Easily a score or more of neighbors were on our list, and we were on theirs for return courtesy. Of necessity, therefore, the "batch" must be large. So the big churn was brought in from the "dairy" and in the churn the mixing and kneading was done.

Off this big room was the "buttery," where not only butter but

eatables of all kinds were kept, and what a place it was for clandestine resort between meals, for there were always cookies, pies, bread and butter, plum preserves, jelly and jams. The china was kept there too. It was mostly of the variety, "J. & G. Meekin," or "T. & R. Boote," or "Ironstone China"; sometimes it was chipped.

The "buttery" seemed like a very public place to hide Christmas gifts, and yet that was one of its uses. Once Willie thought he was very smart when in early December he discovered an "Injy rubber ball" wrapped and placed in some recess of the buttery shelf. He let me in on the secret and we were very happy as we clandestinely bounced that ball on the floor, but not so happy when on Christmas morning the rubber ball did not appear. I never knew why and, of course, could not inquire.

Above the big dining room was a loft where seed corn was dried and shelled. The entrance was by ladder from the outside, a ladder which boys with strong arms loved to climb hand over hand from beneath. Corn was always shelled by hand. A machine sheller was thought to injure the kernel, so by brushing two ears together we human corn-shellers shelled every winter several bushels of seed corn, the whole next summer's supply.

The sitting room had a good rag carpet on the floor. It had a hair-seated sofa and hair-seated chairs. There was always a musical instrument, successively a melodeon, an organ, and a "Beatty" square piano. There were pictures on the wall, there were "Lincoln and Washington," the "Twins Awake," and "Little Jenny," sweet girl face with black curls and holding a dog. All were framed with glass. The sitting room was finally papered with gold leaf paper on white background. This had been Mother's ambition for many years. It was finally realized. The room was papered by Hankins, a paper hanger from [Mineral] "Point." Hankins also papered the best bedroom, the girls' room, and the hall. Hankins was my friend. I remember as he papered the hall, a violent dispute arose among the children as to who should have the shavings from the border. "Give it to the little 'un, give it to the little 'un" promptly ruled Hankins. Since I was the "little 'un," Hankins' decision was quite satisfactory to me.

The boys' room and the spare room were never papered. White-

wash answered the purpose well. The home was always well kept. An ample cistern furnished soft water for domestic use. It was pure to drink and was used for drinking when it was not convenient to bring water from the spring.

There was no running water or sewer in that home, no gas or electricity, no steam or hot water heat. These things were not known then even in the towns.

I am not familiar with primitive forms of artificial light. I do not know what kind of lamps either the wise or the foolish virgins had, nor do I know the kind of oil which the wise virgins had in their lamps. My memory goes back only to the tallow candle. Every household in Bloomfield and Number Five in the 70's had a "candle mold." This consisted usually of a brace of twelve tubes, each with the inside molded to the shape of a candle. One end was accordingly pointed and in that end was a small opening and through it a "candle wick" could be threaded and it was so threaded. The other end of the mold was open. You must have provided yourself with tallow from some sheep and the tallow must be heated until it will pour into the open end of the mold. Then you should set the mold where it will cool, and you soon have one dozen tallow candles, and if you have properly waxed the inside of your tubes, your candles will be easily removed.

All in all this was a cheap form of light. A dollar would furnish tallow for many candles. But we did not have much light. A twenty-five candle power light, that is the light of twenty-five candles burning in one place at once, would have run into more expense. One candle power at a time was our custom.

Kerosene lamps came on in the 70's. They were considered expensive because kerosene was not cheap. They gave a brighter light than a candle, if you kept the lamp filled and if you also properly trimmed the wick.

For outdoor use lanterns were used. We had no flash lights or head-lights or tail lights. Of course, the lantern might serve as a head-light or tail light. The earliest lantern that I knew had a candle, which was fitted into a socket. Later developments substituted a kerosene tank and a wick for the candle. We were not bothered with bulbs or batteries, but sometimes, as in the case of the "Pious Rabbi"

the "saucy wind" would put out the light. Gas lights, the next development, were never known at Bloomfield or Number Five, nor even at Dodgeville or Mineral Point. These came and they have gone. They have now passed out so effectively that a ten-year-old boy has been heard to ask "What is a gas jet?" The more primitive candle has made a comeback.

We never thought our home was lacking in conveniences. We thought it quite up-to-date. With its white exterior and green shutters at the end of the rows of pines it was quite attractive.

Clothing used was always comfortable but not expensive. We always had a Sunday suit, a Sunday hat, a white shirt, and a paper collar; when that new invention came out, some preferred a celluloid collar. In a large family of boys a modified law of primogeniture prevailed. That is the oldest would get the new suit, wear it until outgrown by him, and then it was passed down to the next and passed again if need be until it was worn out, so that the littlest had a limited amount of new clothes and if by chance he acquired something new as a hat, it behooved him to be alert lest the new might be abstracted from him and an old one substituted.

Another custom should be mentioned. Dresses might, of course, be homemade. Home making of boys clothes was not so easy in a busy household of many boys. Tailors were considered too expensive for boys' clothes. Ready-made store clothes also would run into money. A "tailoress" might be the remedy. For example Susie was a tailoress. She was considered a good one. She had no overhead. She would work at the house. You would get her when she was needed and take her home when she was through. She could make coats and trousers for boys. Her pay was reasonable. The result was economy. We boys did not consider the system a classy one and never did broadcast the fact that our new suit was "tailoress made" but we submitted to the system.

There were no crop failures in Bloomfield or Number Five. Crops were usually bountiful, prices were low, even in greenbacks, the paper money of the day. \$3.50 a hundred for hogs, \$4.50 for beef cattle, 25¢ a pound for wool, 10¢ a pound for turkeys, 10¢ a dozen for eggs, 14¢ a pound for butter were fair prices in the 70's. Greenbacks, I said.

Yes, we had paper money, even in five, ten, twenty-five and fifty-cent denominations, until resumption of silver for fractional currency in 1875.

Amusements there were but they were not expensive. There were no automobiles or airplanes, but plenty of horse-drawn wagons. There were no radios, no movies, no theaters, of any kind. Dodgeville once had "Uncle Tom's Cabin," with two Topsyies and two Marks, once the "Cantata of Queen Esther." Mineral Point once had Moody and Sankey, Jake Hoofstittler, the temperance lecturer, who had reformed thirty-two times, came to both towns. The schools would now and then put on a show consisting of speaking of pieces and singing of songs.

There was the annual Bloomfield picnic and there was Laxey picnic and sometimes a picnic at Dodgeville, Linden, or Survey, and there was always somewhere a free celebration on the Fourth of July. There was an occasional circus but attendance at that was discouraged on economic grounds, and, in fact, the institution was considered as a questionable moral influence. There was the County Fair, which was an indispensable attraction. There was a Christmas tree at the church at Christmas and there were surprise parties at reasonable intervals, and there was an annual "Tea Meeting" at the Dodgeville Methodist Church. There were games. There was croquet in summer. There was skiing or snow-shoeing in winter.

We had toys. We always had a homemade sled and a homemade "little wagon."

We would always build a dam in the creek and make a "pond" for swimming in summer. Skillicorn's creek was, however, much better than ours for that purpose. It had better banks. There was no skating, the pond was not pretentious enough for that and rinks were simply not made. Therefore, we had no skates. The Christmas season was a happy one but not an expensive one. There were feastings, but save for the plums for the pudding and the condiments, the farm supplied the well-laden tables. Santa Claus always came. Candy, nuts, and a pocketknife in the Xmas morning stocking gave complete satisfaction, and insured a perfect day. The sentimentalism of the "birthday" was not overlooked. I remember one particularly happy

birthday. I remember none of the presents, perhaps there were none. I received no messages of felicitation. I do not remember my age on that particular birthday, but it was expressed by one digit. There was no extraordinary expense of any kind. But I remember that in the candlelight of that October evening, I was the guest of honor. It was corn-husking time. Maybe Dickie and Johnny and Susie and Frank were there, at least there were some such people there. I do remember the high spots of the dinner. We had fried potatoes, first mashed, then fried to a brown in the old frying pan and then turned upside down, my favorite dish. Then there was a fruit cake which I was permitted to cut and pass. All in all it was a banquet to be remembered. It left a childhood impression which will last a lifetime.

At school we played ball and other games. In winter evenings the "spell down" at school was thrilling and Number Five would sometimes challenge Number Four or Survey to a team contest.

This was the American way of life in rural Bloomfield, Laxey, Number Five, and Number Four at the three-quarter post of the nineteenth century. Farmers quite uniformly had plenty and they accumulated. Only the shiftless failed to succeed and even they had plenty.



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