A COLD BLUE haze filled the air on the autumn morning of 1894 when we started to school for the first time. John and Henry Beargrease and their sister Mary were sitting on the porch step waiting for me long before breakfast. They had come a good mile out of their way from the Fond du Lac Indian Reservation so that I need not walk to school alone.

Over the clearing lay a heavy frost, so thick and white that, when we turned to look back, just where the path met the forest road to Grandpa’s, our foot prints marked a dark eager running pattern all the way to the front porch where Father and Mother and Le Blanc and Julia stood watching us, waiting to exchange a last wave of hands. John and Henry raised their hands, but Mary holding my hand and carrying a basket could only smile and nod.

As we entered the forest I turned to wave again. Mother was still on the porch, alone.

Now we walked in single file. Henry, with his gun, in the lead, Mary next, myself at her heels, and John carrying the
canoe paddles, bringing up the rear. The road was narrowed by the great drifts of fallen leaves that bordered each side and filled the deep ruts where an overlay of thin needle ice broke in tinkling sound as we trudged along. This was all familiar road—we had walked it many times going to and from Grandpa’s.

Presently we came to the edge of the Brousseau clearing where we made a turn to follow the fence and were soon scrambling up the gravel bank to the road bed. In the still morning air we could hear Mr. Brousseau calling his pigs. We had come a mile of the way.

Stepping along was easier now. Mary took my hand—Mother’s parting injunction—and we walked side by side. Henry in front, John in the rear as before. The soft Chippewa tongue rippled at times, but mostly we went on, as Indians do, in silence. Once Henry halted us suddenly, to point at two deer as they crossed the track just ahead. We soon came up to their dainty hoof prints impressed in the soft wet earth of the road clearing. Loose gravel was still rolling down the bank where their leap had dislodged it. The deep forest beyond held the secret of their wild hideaway.

My newly soled sabots were doing comfortably well, for I was still trudging along at the Indian pace—a pace measured to tumpline burdens—when we came to the Big Swamp. There the railroad roadbed traversed, as a causeway, a wide stretch of muskeg country, a low flat treeless expanse of bog vegetation soaking in its watery bed like a sponge. It was impassable on foot, a man could so quickly sink to his armpits in it. Indeed our Grandpa had told of how one of the Merritt brothers—Cassius, the youngest, it was—nearly met a tragic death in a muskeg swamp south of the St. Louis River while on a searching-for-iron expedition. It was the Merritt brothers who discovered the great ore beds of the Mesabi region. Whether Big Swamp was larger than others in the vicinity I do not know, but the railroad men, in fact every one we knew, called it the Big Swamp. The Indians had always given it wide wind room, save in winter, when they sometimes hunted over its frozen snow-covered area on snow-shoes.

But on this morning—and memory still retains the beauty of it—the swamp was a carpet of copper golds and rusty reds, a blue haze trailing over it like chiffon ribbons. The roadbed of the railroad cut across the variegated colors straight as a surveyor’s line, the rails gleaming silver. Wide, canal-like ditches paralleled it on both sides, their dark swampy waters mirroring the brilliant orange sky of the late sunrise.

It was in these canals that the Indians used their canoes. Paddling across the swamp was quicker, rested our legs, and saved many a pair of moccasins, to say nothing of home-soled sabots. At the ends of the canals were the sturdy platforms built as parking places for the handcars used by the section crews. You may readily guess what handy places these platforms afforded for stepping into canoes, and for stepping out of them as well.

Mary and I waited while Henry and John put their canoe in the water. Henry had cached it at the edge of the swamp when he returned from the rice country. It was a small canoe, called a “one-Indian canoe” because one man could carry it. The birch-bark gave a creaky sound when Mary lifted me in—the kind of sound a branch makes, when you tear it from the tree. I sat in front of Mary in the bottom, both of us facing the bow. Between her spread knees on the heavy folds of her wool and deerskin skirts, I had a snug seat. Memory still sees our feet together—still contrasts two small heavy sabots with a pair of soft moccasins on which a rich design of purple silk with blue and white beads had been worked. I still can picture Mary Beargrease’s feet and mine resting on the bottom of the canoe with wispy oddments of wild rice and grass and feathers blowing around them.
“Bien sur, Madame; les Beargrease ees know the canoe to manage”; these were Le Blanc’s words to comfort Mother. If Mother could have seen us crossing the swamp, her fears would have been dispelled for all time. Those strong brown arms in swift concerted motion sending the canoe on like an arrow! In no time at all we were on the other side of the swamp, John and Henry hauling out the canoe to cache it in a nearby clump of sumacs, then together the four of us walking the ties again.

Soon we were in what was known as the Big Cut, where high banks cradled the track for about an eighth of a mile. Dry grasses and dusty stalks of thistle and goldenrod lay scattered in the trough between the banks and track where a section crew had lately mowed this wild growth down. We startled a covey of grouse taking a dust bath there. Whoosh! their sudden flight raised the seed fluff of thistle and goldenrod to fill the air like snow. “The grouse have lost their feathers,” I said to Mary. She picked some of the down from her shawl, shaking her head, perhaps to tell me it wasn’t feathers, so I picked some from my sleeves and put the fuzz in my pocket. I missed Aunt Minnie in that moment.

At the end of the Big Cut was a small clearing. The debris of a dismantled construction camp stood about, most of it hidden by the tall saplings and shrubs that had grown through the weathered tent floors and frames. Several long stacks of ties stood near the track over which a number of squirrels were flicking their harvesting energies. Just then we heard what our ears had been straining for—the long warning whistle of a locomotive. Mary whisked me off the track in the same second. And next I knew, I was leaning against the ties with breathless might, watching the thundering train roll by, the great wheels of the engine and smaller wide-flanged ones of the ore cars meeting the shining rails in ponderous rhythm, to shake the very earth beneath us. Bits of ore tumbled from the ochre and vermilion loads so that it looked as if a shower of bright dust was sprinkling the road banks as the cars rolled along.

We scrambled to the track again as soon as the caboose had whizzed by, to face in that moment the violent onrush of gusty air, strong enough to dash heavy gravel at our feet, while the rattle of rolling gear went clicking on behind us. It was a highly exciting diversion for me, but I was to enjoy
it alone. The Indians walked on as calmly as if they were on a rice expedition—and as silently.

A short distance farther on we spied the black smoke plume of a switching engine up at Columbia Junction, shunting empty gravel cars onto the siding. Just before we reached the Junction, we crossed over to the right of the track to follow a well-trod forest path—one the reservation Indians used as a short cut to the schoolhouse.

There was a pleasant freedom in walking over a woody trail again. No need now to be watchful of approaching trains, or to guard the measure of our steps—now long, now short—to meet railroad ties spaced thus willy nilly. Then, too, for the first time since crossing the swamp, Mary felt she could release my hand—a happy release and one that immediately renewed our foot energies. We were almost running now, spurred on by the sight of other children ahead, and the realization, more likely, that we were almost there. And then, quite suddenly, we emerged onto a clearing, and there in the center of it was our schoolhouse. I longed to run to it, but something of the quiet sober dignity of my Indian companions held me to their side. We entered the little log building together, John and Henry, Mary and I.

MANY OF THE SIGNIFICANT occasions of my childhood remain as pictures, full scenes the eye captured and retained and now may vividly recall. That first morning at the Indian school remains thus etched for me, its smallest detail clear and tenderly heart-warming. Moreover, a fragrance hovers over it—the pungent odor of soft wood smoke.

Miss Grettum was tugging at a window, trying to lower the upper sash. The morning sun lighted her face and her gold brown hair and the terra-cotta dress she was wearing with a warm autumn radiance. She had
built a fire in the small potbellied stove which centered the room, and an unruly lot of smoke was pouring from every seam and pipe joint, rising in spurts and wreathing to the ceiling; indeed from ceiling down the room was half filled with the thick smudge. I recall that I was standing near the door, hesitating to enter, when Miss Grettum came up to ask if I had found it a long way to come to school.

Presently the smoke was rolling out of the windows and she was saying, "You may sit here for today," here being a double seat and desk, the second one in a row of eight. Helene and Corinne Columbe were already fidgeting in the first one. Across the room was a similar row of desks, now almost hidden, so crowded were they with Indian children, three and more in a seat. John and Henry and some other big boys stood along the wall, their heads and shoulders like bronze busts against the windows. Standing there so quiet and grave, their arms folded across their chests, they did not look like the Indians I had come to know.

To my small mind, Indians were hunters and canoe builders and spearers of fish, and my small heart went out to John and Henry in a strange welling of sympathy, sensing how alien to them must be these blackboard and desk surroundings. I wanted to put my arms around Mary, who sat on the floor beside several of the older Indian girls, her shawl clutched about her shoulders looking utterly lonely and forlorn. I longed to sit beside her, for young as I was I had sensed—and this is the clearest part of my memory of that long ago morning—that school was a bewildering halt to Mary's way of life—that she herself, in that moment, could only wish to be home with her mother and older sisters, sitting in front of their teepee busy with the parching of rice or sewing of deerskins.

Miss Grettum's desk faced the room, the blackboard lining the full width of the wall behind it. Between the blackboard and the first window on the right where I sat (there were three windows on each side) was the map roll, and underneath it were a few shelves for books and school materials. I recall what pleasure I knew in a box of colored chalk kept on the top shelf. On the opposite side of the room was a large primary chart, and oh! how clearly I can recall the illustrations of its first page! There was a big red apple topped with vivid green leaves. Below it an oversized bumblebee hovered over a very pink wild rose. Here was a pictured alphabet in color to delight the heart of any child.

Under the windows, and near enough to be reached from the desks, was the long trough that held our slates. They made quite a clatter whenever they were taken from the trough or replaced, and I recall the practice drills Miss Grettum put us through to bring about a more quiet schoolroom. On winter mornings I would find a patch of frost on the wall back of my slate, white and glistening, the slate itself cold as ice. On such mornings we were allowed to warm our hands at the stove. The Columbe girls gave much exercise to this privilege—indeed, they were constantly flouncing in and out of their seats. But Miss Grettum was an observant person, and restless children were often summoned to her desk so she could judge for herself whether little hands were too cold to hold a book or a pencil.

There was another diversion for us, too, in the buckets of drinking water at the rear of the room. Two buckets, brimming fresh and cool from the school well, were brought in each morning and noon by one of the Indian boys and set on a bench near the door. A china cup and a tin dipper hung on the wall above them. We were soon taught to take our drinks at recess. As I think back on these off-the-curriculum diversions, I do not see the Indian children taking part in them. Well I know, they never stood at the stove, and as for the drinking water, they usually had theirs at the well, passing a tin can around, the older girls dipping out water for the small children. The Indian side of the room was al-
ways quiet; indeed, on days when Helene
and Corinne spent half their time braiding
and unbraiding each other's hair, tying and
untying ribbon bows, I wished I could sit
with Mary, where all was quiet and serene.

For the first few months of that school
year of 1894-95 there were only three white
children attending school, the Columbe girls
and myself. Later, the son and daughter of
a Danish family attended, but it was only
for a short time. These children had far to
go, much of the way over forest trail—a
dark and hazardous trip for youngsters in
winter. On several occasions their father
came with them. I recall how attentively he
sat in the rear seat of our row, his hat and
Mackinaw coat over his knees, listening to
the lessons or examining our reading books
and spellers. Miss Grettum was most kind
to him, pointing out in the books our les­
sions when in recital. Adult education had
not come into vogue in that day, yet I dare
to say that no teacher engaged in this task
today could do more than did Miss Grettum
for this poor Danish immigrant in that long
ago wilderness school. This enterprising
pioneer was not often at our home—he
came only for his mail and that about every
three months. But I remember once when,
in fair English, he talked with Father about
the early planting season and the best
varieties of turnip and other seeds.

MISS GRETTEUT promoted her pupils as
they merited advancement. For the Indians
she held to the prescribed program of ele-
mental work. For those of us who had no
need to struggle with a new language, she
granted unlimited opportunities—that is,
we were not confined to a rigid following
of certain grade studies. My adeptness with
the multiplication tables set me well up to
fourth and fifth grade work—then the
highest in this school—so that for arith­
metric I recited alone. There was more
pleasure in the reading lessons which were
shared with the Columbe girls, the three of
us standing before Miss Grettum’s desk
together. It was a proud moment for me when
I was able to read to my mother anything
she wished from the books at home.

Miss Grettum lived with the Columbe's,
but did not go there during the noon hour.
She ate her lunch with her children, Indians
and the rest together, indoors or out, as
the season permitted. On stormy days she
would read or tell us stories, or lead us in
the blackboard chalk games she always
made so interesting. On pleasant days, there
were walks in the near-by forest, where we
gathered wild flowers or seed pods. More
often we played games in which the Indians
joined with happy abandon. Sometimes we
would all sit down on the edge of the bank
near the railroad tracks to watch an engine
as it shunted flatcars onto a siding. The
flatcars were numbered—the figures large
and plain from where we sat—so that Miss
Grettem used them for number drills which
often enough proved quite exciting.

But on this first day she wrote our names
on the blackboard and showed us how she
intended to mark our attendance for the
week. She drew five chalk strokes, each to
make part of a teepee, so that at the end of
the week, providing we had been present
every day, we should each have a teepee
of our own. This is the way she drew them:

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MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY
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You may be sure I set about to copy all
this, for I could hardly wait to go home to
show it to Father and Mother.

The afternoon session—a very short one
due to the long distances most of us had to
walk—was devoted to writing and draw­
ing. The Spencerian method of penmanship
was taught. We practiced first on our slates,
then on lined foolscap, taking specimen let­
ters or words from our copybooks in which
we later penned our perfected work. For
me the drawing period was the high point
of the day. This subject was the open ses­
amo to another world—the beauteous
world of line and form, shadow and light
and color that was ever to hold a thousand wonders of delight. The drawing periods were the happiest of the school day and for me were all too short. I found a way to lengthen them, however, by practicing at home, and many were the pieces of wrapping paper I covered, not to mention the margins of Father’s newspapers, learning how to draw and to write. Father was an excellent penman and I learned much about how to form capitals and join the letters of words from watching him and studying his handwriting.

Of the return home that first day, I recall that when John and Henry slid the canoe into the swamp waterway, a surprising cloud of small yellow butterflies flew out of it. The reflection of their bright flutterings in the dark water has remained one of the most vivid memory pictures of my Minnesota years. When we reached the Brousseau place, Aunt Minnie was there to meet me. She had been skirting the forest along the right of way gathering fresh pine needles for Grandma’s pillows, and seeing us up the track, she waited, so she said. But I cherish a fonder conviction that Aunt Minnie intended to be the first to hear of my day’s adventures. She was not disappointed. I let loose of them to her heart’s deep content until we reached our parting fork in the road, where she turned off to Grandpa’s cabin and I to go on with John and Henry over the forest road, the same that had been so frosty that morning.

We found Mother waiting for us at the edge of our clearing. The long day of anxiety was over, and thanks to le Bon Dieu, her child had come to no harm. Soon I was eating cornbread and milk, talking fast between each mouthful, with Father and Mother and Le Blanc asking of this and that. And Julia, shyly leaning against the kitchen door, heard of how good and kind her sister and brothers had been to me all that eventful day.

Other school days followed just as eventful, perhaps more so, as when several ore trains, one after the other, confined us in places where we could not safely walk on beside the track. Despite the lost time, I do not recall that we were ever late for school. When real winter set in, we missed the pleasant water interludes the canoe afforded. The track, kept free of snow, made for comfort and freedom in walking, but of course, we had to forego the short cuts of our familiar forest paths.

One winter day stands out as most exciting. A dark and thick snowstorm threatened, and Miss Grettum dismissed us shortly after noon. We had just slid down the bank at the Junction when the conductor of an ore train waiting there for orders hailed us. “You youngsters live down at Burnett, don’t you?” “Oh yes,” I quickly replied, “My father is postmaster there.” “I see. Well you can’t walk home in this blizzard — get in the caboose,” and he lifted me up while Mary and John and Henry climbed in after. The caboose was as thick with tobacco smoke as the air outside was with snow, but it was warm, and the men were friendly. Presently there was a wave of lanterns and the train began to move.

Needless to say, I did much of the talking. I even went so far as to ask what kind of ore were they carrying. That was the day I learned what hematite is—the high grade iron ore mined in Minnesota. One does not learn everything in schoolrooms. Mother had begun a prayerful vigil at the windows, her heart in the storm, when we jumped off the caboose and floundered through the high drifts up to the porch. John and Henry slept in our barn that night and Mary on the floor of our kitchen. The blizzard lasted the traditional three days.

Not long after that, Father arranged with the railway officials for my daily transportation to and from school, but he was wise enough to limit the rides to stormy days only. It was a deal more fun walking and canoeing the happy three miles.

THE PORTRAIT of a North Shore Chippewa girl on page 108 is reproduced by courtesy of the St. Louis County Historical Society, Duluth.