

# GROWING UP WISCONSIN

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Remembrances from the  
American Midwest

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For my parents who struggled so that  
we could succeed.



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## PREFACE

This book is a memoir of my childhood growing up on a small farm in southwest Wisconsin after our family moved there from Chicago in the late 1950s. The story is told as a collection of memories of events that took place during the 1950s and 1960s when I was between eight and eighteen years old. It describes what it was like for us “city folk” to get a small farm up and running after it had been inactive for several years and how we had to adapt to the quaint ways of a traditional farming community with a Bohemian (Czech) overprint. The book recounts events that shaped me personally, but it also describes some of the customs and personalities in the area, which have largely been lost to time.

The idea for this book came about several years ago when I embarked upon a comprehensive genealogy of the Baker family, which like many American families, traces the migration of settlers from New England westward across the country in search of better opportunities and affordable land. My ancestors were adventurers and risk-takers who were not afraid to uproot in search of a better life. That led me to the belated realization that the same had happened in my immediate family when my father—middle-aged, in poor health, and with a wife and two small children to support—had moved

from the bustling life of Chicago to the simpler, though rustic life on a farm in Wisconsin.

Upon trying to describe our life to the younger generations in our family, I realized that they could not comprehend what I was talking about. The hardships we endured, the sense of adventure, the satisfaction of building something from nothing, the customs and cooperative spirit within the farming community, are all things that they could not imagine, let alone experience. This leads me to the reasons for writing the book. There are two: simply my desire to record some of the positive experiences that I had early in life; and to document a rural lifestyle that has all but disappeared today. The events described really happened—no names or places have been changed.

Fred G. Baker  
Golden, Colorado  
October 2013

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The Farmhouse

*The condition of the farmhouse and how  
it was not exactly what my mother had  
expected*

It was about an eight-hour drive to the farm from Chicago. We followed the I-90 tollway as far as Rockford, Illinois, but soon found ourselves on two-lane highways in Wisconsin where the traffic moved a bit more slowly. It was impossible to pass even the slowest cars while we pulled the overladen trailer. We turned west at Madison and continued onward until evening, stopping at a familiar motel in Spring Green, on the Wisconsin River. We had hoped to get farther but had made a late start from Chicago. In retrospect, I think Spring Green was as far as my Dad could manage in one go at that time. The combination of fatigue, overheated car, and children's racket was enough to drive him out of the car for a rest. Mom took us boys out for a walk along the mighty Wisconsin riverfront and treated us to a snack while Dad caught a catnap at the motel.

Our arrival at the farm on the next day was both anticlimactic and shocking at the same time. After the long trip with stops in Richland Center and Hub City for gas, lunch, supplies, and food, it was a relief to finally get to our destination. The realization that we had a lot of work to do before we could actually live in the old farmhouse was somewhat overwhelming and difficult for my Mom. Even her optimistic nature was taxed during the first few days at the farm.

The farm was settled by the George Norman family in 1856 just before the Civil War. The Normans had cleared the forest back over many years and three generations to yield much of what we saw before us. They built the house using mostly materials they had harvested from the land itself. The limestone used in the foundation and cellar walls was local rock seen in outcrops on the farm. A lime kiln built back in the valley had burned the limestone to produce lime for the mortar and plaster that were used in the house. The wooden beams and lath in the house were all made from lumber cut and milled on the farm. The main beams shaped by hand saw and broad axe were exposed in the basement ceiling. Wooden pegs were used to fasten the beams together at the joints. Those pegs and hand hewn beams can still be seen in the home today.

Our immediate challenge was to enter the house through the back door. A narrow, concrete walkway led to the screen door on the back porch. But a three-foot-long, cotton mouth, water moccasin snake lay bathing itself in the afternoon sun just in front of the back door. When we approached, it raised its viper's head, opened its mouth, and hissed at us. Dad had to stop us boys from getting any closer. He immediately recognized the telltale, diamond-shaped head as that of a poisonous reptile and had us retreat several feet while he went back to the car. He returned shortly with a 0.22 caliber rifle. Taking careful aim, he shot once then twice at our unwelcome guest, dispatching it cleanly. He then used a stick to move the lifeless form from the sidewalk. On further inspection of the doorway, he found a hole that led under the concrete slab of the porch to an obvious snake den. "Be careful here boys. There may be more snakes living inside. Always look before you open the door so you don't step on a snake by mistake. And step well clear of that hole!"

With the snake out of our way, Dad led us beyond the porch, through the back door of the house, and into the full-length kitchen beyond. To our horror, the wood floor of the kitchen was completely carpeted with dead insects, hornets, wasps, and flies. Apparently, Uncle Roy had come into the house three weeks earlier and sprayed DDT (a very effective insecticide) to kill

all the bugs that had moved into the house since it had been abandoned over the last few years. Literally thousands of insect pests had been exterminated, and we found them in every room.

We explored the rest of the house carefully. A short hallway led to the living room and a small bedroom on the first floor. A steep staircase led to the upper floor, which contained a single large room. The upper walls of the upstairs room sloped downward along the sides, matching the pitch of the roof. There was a window at either end of the room, which served as the sole source of light. A covered, exterior staircase on the south side of the house close to the snake den led to the root cellar. Dad decided we would look in there later in case it was occupied.

The first order of business was to sweep up the insects in the house and shovel them into a medium-sized cardboard box for disposal. We filled the whole box with insect remains! Mom set to work mopping the kitchen floor so we could store things in there temporarily. Dad drove the car and trailer up the gravel track to the back porch door and we began to unload the trailer. Jacyn and I carried the smaller, lighter things and stacked them in the kitchen while Dad carried the heavier stuff. The load we had brought with us consisted of the starter items we needed for cleaning and repairing the house, our clothes, and a few pieces of furniture. When the



farmhouse was fixed up, we planned to have the rest of our furniture and household items shipped from Chicago.

I don't know how my parents did it all. We were like modern-day pioneers, settling in a remote land, left to our own resources. They started their lives over in a house that was old, rundown, and clearly too small for our family. There was no running water, no inside plumbing of any kind, and barely any electricity. At first, we had to hand-carry buckets of water into the house from a spring nearby. The toilet was a closet-sized outhouse located about a hundred feet from the house with just a hole in the ground, which had to be my Mom's worst nightmare. The yard was completely overgrown with tall grasses and weeds. Yet, somehow, my parents managed to overcome all obstacles and make a home for us all.

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## Chub Graves and the Turtle

### *How to catch snapping turtles and how not to handle them*

Wisconsin farmers were great practical jokers. One day Jacyn and I were helping Chub Graves look for lost sheep at his farm. We had been combing through the low area of his pasture along the banks of the Pine River which dissected his land, when suddenly, we ran across a big snapping turtle on the river bank and caught it by the tail. It weighted about eight pounds.

Now snapping turtles generally pull their heads into their shell for protection, but if you are not careful they will try to bite you. They have a mouth shaped like a bird's beak and a strong jaw that can hold onto you forever if it snaps closed. In fact, it is almost impossible to pry their jaw open once it is clamped down, so you have to be very careful to hold them upside down by the tail and away from your body. If someone is bitten, about all you can do is cut off the turtle's head and even then it may be an hour

before the jaw muscles relax and let go. So a bite is a serious thing.

Chub threw the turtle in the trunk of his car and said we should go into Hub City for lunch. We got in the car and he drove to the Swamp Inn on the south side of town. When we got there, he told us he would play a trick on the barman, Jim, who was a good friend. So he carefully reached for the turtle's mouth with a pair of steel pliers, and sure enough, the turtle bit right down on the part of the tool that was offered. Next he grabbed under the turtle's head with his thumb so it looked like the turtle had bitten his hand. Then he rushed into the tavern holding the turtle by one hand and shouting that it had him by the thumb. There were about a half-dozen people in the tavern at the time. Jim, the barman, saw the big snapper and sprang into action. He ran to the back room and came out with a huge meat cleaver, ready to chop off the turtle's head or Chub's hand if he missed. He was really excited and concerned. Just as he was ready to give it a whack, Chub let the turtle drop onto the top of the bar. Everyone was surprised, then quickly realized that Chub was putting Jim on. Everyone laughed except Jim. He was mad at first because he had really believed Chub, and then became embarrassed because he had made him look foolish. In a few minutes, he calmed down and began to laugh at the great practical joke too.

Chub eventually gave the turtle to Jim and we were all invited to come back that evening to eat turtle soup for dinner. It was sure good soup!

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## The Old Swimming Hole

### *Summer fun and the sad tale of building a submarine raft on the Pine River*

Like all boys our age, we loved to swim and play around water. In our neck of the woods, however, swimming options were limited. There was an outdoor swimming pool at Krouskop Park in Richland Center with a sandy bottom, which was filled with water from the Pine River nearby. But the water was brown and heavily used by kids from town, so despite all assurances of constant monitoring, we viewed the water quality as suspect. In our opinion, students at the nearby high school were not allowed to grow things from it for their Science Fair projects so as to avoid creating a public panic.

We had a better swimming option near our farm in the summer time. The Pine River ran about three-quarters of a mile down the old Norman Valley road from our house. The water was too shallow for swimming where the road crossed the river on a rickety steel bridge. Besides, the bridge abutments were heavily

infested with water moccasins and the snakes made for bad swimming companions. However, farther downstream, there was a place where the river flowed straight into a large sandstone bluff causing it to abruptly change course to the east, thereby creating a deep pool for swimming and adventure. The same Pine River supplied water to the pool in town, but being some fifteen miles upstream and closer to the river's source, the water was significantly cleaner. I still wouldn't call it pristine by any means—it was a deep amber color from passing through the wetlands nearby—but it seemed wonderful on a hot summer afternoon. And here there were no snake dens to be found.

The swimming hole, which measured about twenty feet wide by forty feet long, lay on Chub Graves' property a few hundred yards from the northeast corner of our farm. We could walk there in about fifteen to twenty minutes by hiking up our east pasture to the ridge where Jacyn had leapt off the rock cliff. We could skirt over the top of the cliff and down the east side, or angle around the cliff onto the old Norman property and drop down into the next valley over. We would then have to cross the valley and another low ridge to get to the river. We usually hurried on the way to swim and lingered on our walk back so that we could also explore the woods. At the right time of year, we would find morel mushrooms at our favorite hunting

spots close to fallen elm trees. The morels were always welcome at home and Mom would cook them for dinner on the night we found them. Of course, we never told anyone where we found the mushrooms because everyone loved to eat morels and they might poach our treasure trove if they ever found out where to look.

We went swimming about once a week or so, but made special trips if we had guests at the farm. Visiting cousins would come with us for a swim every so often but they usually begged off when they saw the amber-colored water. Girls we knew would sunbathe on the sandbar nearby as Jacyn and I tried to demonstrate our daring-do in the water. We would jump in from the top of the rock bluff where the water was over six feet deep. We could wade across the river at several points and just reach the base of the cliff before the water closed in over our heads. We also did the “dead-man float,” where we would hold our breath and push off the bank to see how far we could drift before our lungs seemed about to burst. When I look back on those times, it is a wonder that neither of us drowned, since we did not really know how to swim.

One summer, when our friend Lanny Winter was staying with us for several weeks, we all came up with a plan to build a raft for use in the swimming hole. We collected yards of used binder twine to tie logs together and set off one day to cut down a poplar tree on the west side of

the “hole.” Using a full-size axe we felled a pretty good size tree that fell with a thunderous swoosh-thud away from the river. Then we set about taking turns cutting it up into logs about six feet long. We had just enough logs to line up to make a raft five feet wide. This was plenty big for our purpose. We had just finished cutting by the time we had to go home for dinner.

The next day, we came back, arranged the logs, and bound them together with what seemed like miles of twine. We checked our knots and used up all the twine in the process, thankful that we had saved some previously to make a heavy braided tow rope for use in pulling the raft into the water. That was when we realized that all three of us together could not budge the raft one inch due to its great weight. We sat and strategized for a while, considering a block and tackle. We would have to walk home to get it though, so we dropped that idea. We could also pull the raft with a horse, but there wasn't enough room for the horse to maneuver. Or, we could take the raft apart and move it closer to the bank and reassemble it there, but that was too much work. Finally, Jacyn and I remembered that the ancient Egyptians had used levers to move large blocks of stone into place when building the pyramids. This seemed like a brilliant idea, and we enthusiastically set about cutting one of the leftover poplar branches into a long pole that we could use as a lever. We



worked as hard as Egyptian slaves to move the raft, but we only succeeded when we all pushed together on the tail end. After about an hour it seemed, we had the raft teetering on the edge of the high, steep riverbank.

Until then, we had not really thought about how we were going to launch and man our water craft. At the last minute, we decided that one of us should jump on it, once it was in the water, to insure that it wouldn't drift away. Lanny volunteered for the role. We figured that he could jump on and ride the raft the last bit into the water, all the while holding onto the tow rope like a lanyard as the raft jetted away into the pool.

What happened next was totally unexpected. With one last surge of the pole, the raft rushed over the edge and was thrust down the bank in near free fall. The tow rope wound up under our feet and we all fell down on our butts. Meanwhile, the raft dropped into the amber water with high speed creating a huge splash and vortex. It went in end-first, churning the water, throwing up mud from the bottom, and creating a huge fountain of backsplash that both dazzled and excited us. What a dramatic launch! But where was the raft? It was gone!

We stared at the roiling, brown water in disbelief, astonished that two days of work and such a huge object could disappear like that. Shock and awe held us until, about thirty

seconds later, the outline of our raft appeared deep in the pool several feet from the bank. It looked like some ghostly submarine creature. At first we thought that the raft had sunk, but how could that be—wood floats, doesn't it? Then as we watched, a weak current took hold of it and begin to move it downstream. There was just enough buoyancy to hold the raft about two feet underwater. We immediately ran up the rock bluff and down the other side to intercept the raft before it could drift away from us. That turned out not to be a great risk, as it ran aground on the downstream side of our swimming hole while still submerged. We tried desperately to push it farther into the pool and even climbed on top of it, but if more than one of us got on, it just sank to the bottom again. With some annoyance, we managed to drag the raft out onto a gravel bar and tie it to a tree branch before calling it a day.

When we got home, my Dad, a veteran of many aquatic adventures on the Des Moines River in his youth, explained what had probably happened. We had cut down a green poplar tree that was full of water so it was about the same density as the river water. That was what had made the raft so heavy and at the same time just barely buoyant. He said that we should wait a week, let the raft dry out in the summer sun, and try again. Sure enough, when we went back for another try several days later, the raft was lighter

and floated. We had fun with it all summer after  
that.

