

A Childhood in Rural Iowa
Recollections of Edna Bockwoldt Johnson
by
Joshua Eskin

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Living on a farm in Western Iowa in the early 1900's was very exciting for a little girl, but there was always work to be done. The day started off way before dawn when Edna Bockwoldt's father and the hired hands would come down for breakfast. When they were finished, Edna and her two sisters would eat and rush off to school. When she came home, Edna would go down to the well to pump water for dinner and washing, chop the kindling wood, and round up the chicken eggs. In the evening she would run to fetch the cows from the pasture.

At harvest time she would help with the picking. The pickers wore a "Husking Hook" on the palm of their hand to help pull the ears of corn off the plant. The ears were thrown against the "Bang Board" on the side of a wagon and hauled home. A good picker could harvest two wagonfuls a day.

Edna's father was a cattle trader who was always trying to please his three little girls. On weekends, when he was herding cattle, the girls' job was to run along in front of the herd and make sure that the animals didn't stray into other farmer's yards. On Sundays he would take the girls out in their Ford and hunt for cattle bargains. In trading, often items other than cattle would enter into the bargaining. This resulted in the acquisition of a number of strange possessions. There was a

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Peacock, a vain old bird, who would admire himself in the watering trough; and a circus pony who had grown too fat for the ring. One day Mr. Bockwoldt *came home* with a Billy Goat. The children had loads of fun having it pull them in a small wooden cart. Later came a Nanny Goat and then, kids. The kids loved to climb up the grain conveyor belt on the side of the barn, and bracing themselves, survey the farmyard for hours.

The animals were wonderful to play with, but Edna had other *pursutes*, too. In third grade she became very interested in writing. She did have an amusing misconception, though. She decided that if she wrote illegibly, her teacher wouldn't notice her bad punctuation. This practice soon stopped when the teacher required her to repeat those assignments.

Edna did have one real problem at school when she was learning to read. Coming from a poor family with little money to spend on children's books, she had no exposure to Mother Goose poems, which the children learned to read on at school. The other children already knew the rhymes by heart and when the teacher showed them a picture in the Mother Goose book they would recite the related poem immediately. Little Edna was at a loss to explain this as she had to decipher every word. It upset her very much that the other children were so much better than her and many days she came home to her mother with tears in her eyes. However, besides this misunder-

standing her school work went very well.

At school the children would participate in an activity called "practicing for Dog Days". Dog Days was the time, during Indian Summer when the dogs were supposed to go crazy. The children prepared themselves for this period by practicing jumping on to moving wagons should, perchance, a mad dog pursue them in the middle of the street. The children all took this seriously though it must have seemed strange to them that the dogs never did seem to go crazy.

On her tenth birthday, Edna recieved her first book, "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" and her first birthday party. Her mother had been making paper flowers for a wedding. When she had finished rolling the delicate tissue paper onto a hat pin, she would pin the finished product on to the curtains all about the house so as not to destroy their shape. The colorful display provided a festive atmosphere perfectly suited for the party.

Here is where I will leave Edna, enjoying her tenth birthday and anticipating even better things in the years to come.

I give my permission
for this material to be
written by Joshua Eskin.
I certify that all material
is true. Edna Bokwood John
(Mrs. Wendell)