

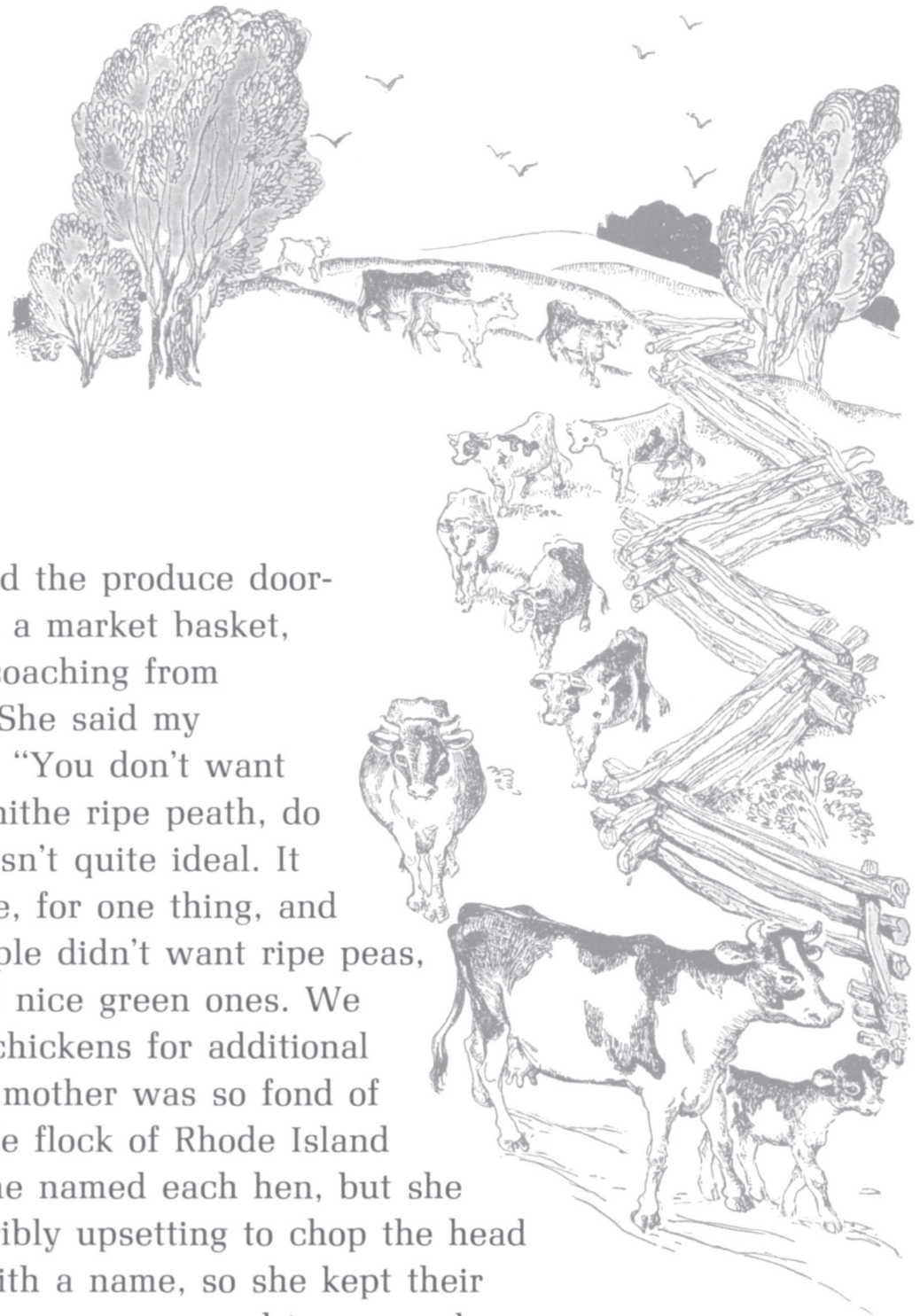
by **DOROTHY M. JOHNSON**

The little town of Whitefish, in northwestern Montana, was pretty rural when I was growing up.

The Methodist minister kept a cow for instance, in a shed behind the parsonage next to the church, and supplied milk to some of his neighbors as well as to his own household.

He wasn't actually vowed to poverty; it just happened to work out that way. Most of the settled people in town raised their own vegetables. A garden was, in fact, a symbol of stability. Boomers and drifters didn't stay long enough to raise one. We had a big garden, and at a tender

# WHEN THE PREACH



age I peddled the produce door-to-door from a market basket, after some coaching from my mother. She said my approach — “You don’t want to buy any nithe ripe peath, do you?” — wasn’t quite ideal. It was negative, for one thing, and anyway people didn’t want ripe peas, they wanted nice green ones. We also raised chickens for additional income. My mother was so fond of our first little flock of Rhode Island Reds that she named each hen, but she found it terribly upsetting to chop the head off a bird with a name, so she kept their descendants anonymous and impersonal.

**HER KEPT A COW**



**W**HILE VERY YOUNG, I learned to talk chicken language, and I can still do it, but I never know what I'm saying. I can keep a hen's interest for a couple of minutes (they have a very short attention span) by clucking and making soothing chicken noises while she stares at me with one eye. Then she utters a horrified squawk and runs off to tell the other girls about it. Either she can't stand my foreign accent or, in my ignorance, I have touched on some shocking subject that respectable hens simply do not discuss.

In looking after our flock, under the tutelage of my mother, I learned more about chickens than I ever wanted to know. They are suicidally inclined. We kept baby chicks with their mother hens in low pens covered with small-mesh wire so they couldn't get out and wandering cats couldn't get in, but the chicks *wanted* to be eaten.

Normally I like cats better than chickens, but family loyalty makes a difference. In cases of our chickens vs. someone else's cat, I defended the chickens. A smart cat will prowl along a pen, lashing its tail and stirring up a ruckus until the chicks in their hysteria force their way out of their safe refuge and right into kitty's jaws.

In the spring, I maintained a constant cat alert; my bedroom window looked down at the

chick pens. The yowls of the intruding cat and the shrieks of the hen would wake me. I'd grab my .22 calibre rifle and fire at the cat.

Once I hit one, but not fatally. Some little girls who lived a couple of blocks away told me with pride that they had found a poor hurt kitty in their shed, so they took care of it until it got well — to come back and eat more of our baby chicks.

There was always something to be done for those blasted fowls. In all seasons they had to be fed and watered. In winter, the bucket I lugged to the chicken house had warm water in it. On cold nights, I plodded through the snow to let down a burlap curtain across the front of the henhouse and hang up a lighted lantern; not that they wanted to read in bed, but that small heat kept their feet from freezing on the perches.

In summer they had to be let out for an occasional treat of foraging for green food and bugs and then herded back to their run. Did you ever try to herd a hen? She won't go your way even if it's the way she wanted to go in the first place.

In the spring I dealt with hysterical setting hens that were so devoted that they wouldn't leave their nests for a meal unless removed forcibly. Also I was midwife for some of the hatching chicks that were struggling to get out of their shells but couldn't quite make it alone. This is tricky business. You can't help them too much or too soon or they'll die on you.

I have one happy memory of our flock (besides eating them). That is the pleasure of watching a hen take a dust bath in the rhubarb patch. She shuffles her chest in the dry dust and works it into her feathers. She languidly stretches one leg and one wing, then the other leg and wing. She digs with her beak at her itchy places. She clucks her satisfaction. Then she shuffles some more. Finally she shakes herself all over — the equivalent of mopping off with a nice big turkish towel.

This performance combines, for the hen, two of humanity's pleasures that used to be rather rare: stretching out in a bathtub of good hot water and sitting on the front porch in the evening after the dishes were done and the bread set to rise and the wash put to soak.

The dust-bathing hen has no responsibilities. She has raised her brood of chicks and parted from them without sadness. She has scratched around industriously and filled up with food. Now she can attend to her itchy places, and there is all that lovely fine dust in the pleasant shade of the rhubarb leaves. So with a clear conscience she relaxes and looks after her personal comfort, and you can't help wishing you were a hen.

For the benefit of a generation that never sees chickens on the hoof, let me explain that they do not occur in nature on a plate, cooked, or all naked and white on a little paper tray covered with cellophane in a supermarket. In the adult stage they are covered with feathers, the color depending on the breed. To get a chicken to the consumer, somebody has to kill it, take the feathers off and remove the innards. All these steps are unpleasant. At our house, my mother performed the assassination and I did the rest and still had the best part of the job. She didn't *like* cutting a hen's head off with an axe, but she spoiled me.

We had very superior chickens, rose-comb Rhode Island Reds, so there was a fairly brisk market for setting eggs to be hatched and reared by other people's more plebeian hens. A setting of fifteen nice brown eggs sold for \$1.50, which was a substantial sum. I don't know where my mother learned all she knew about chickens, but she sorted setting eggs carefully; they had no ridges and were all perfectly shaped.

One frugal purchaser bought some of our ordinary, cheaper eating eggs, hatched them, and unwisely boasted about how cleverly she had fooled Mrs. Johnson. When she tried it the next year, not a single egg hatched, and she was pretty mad. Mrs. Johnson had divided the flock, and only the best hens were in with a rooster. Those whose eggs sold cheaper, for eating, were in the equivalent of a nunnery. Hens lay even if there's no rooster around, but their eggs are infertile. Dear me, I learned a lot of things that are of no value to me now — like algebra and the boundaries of nations that haven't existed since 1918.





**I**T WAS MY good fortune as a child to spend some happy times on the Millers' farm near Whitefish, the kind of farm that I think does not exist any more, at least not in the West. Changes in farming practices and sanitary laws have obliterated such small family farms. (Lots of sins are committed in the name of progress). What the Millers used to do, necessary in their time, is now illegal. They kept a herd of Holstein cows, cooled and bottled the milk in a shining-clean room off the kitchen, and delivered it in town from door to door every morning in time for breakfast. Nowadays the deck is stacked in favor of corporations with names like Dairiland or Medosweet. Such spelling is supposed to make the product taste better.

The Millers came from the Midwest — Minnesota, I think — and my folks, who came from Iowa, made their acquaintance at church. Their farm supported from five to seven adult human beings, four or five horses, the herd of Holsteins, a flock of busy chickens, several hives of bees, and a few pigs. The people, the animals and the land all contributed to the support of one another. That farm was a living entity, working and productive.

Mable Engelter, whose name was Motichka when she and I were younger, guided me to the old Miller place in the summer of 1974. I couldn't have found it, because the road has been moved. The farm used to be a mile and a half from town, a far piece on foot, not so far in a buggy behind a sorrel horse named Major, and no distance at all now by car if you can find it. Mable could.

This is what it used to be like. Out front was a big hay or grain field, where men and horses labored and sweated in the summer sun. There was a two-story white house, an unpainted horse barn with hay in the loft, a big new cowbarn painted red, a tall silo, a bunkhouse, and various sheds. Back of all that were more fields, and then the woods began, swampy woods drained by ditches and harboring some dangers that were not imaginary. They were called sink holes.

But before we get to the woods, let's pause in the farmyard, where there was always something going on — seldom dramatic, just interesting. Maybe one of the men harnessing a team of horses, or some cute black and white calves to pet in the corral, or a cat going about

its lawful business, which was catching mice in the barns, or a hen emerging from a doorway with triumphant cackles because she had just laid an egg, or the cows plodding out to pasture. Or maybe someone coming out to scatter grain for the chickens, and the rooster, discovering it, taking all the credit and yelling to his harem, "Come on, girls, see what I've got for you! You can always depend on wonderful me!"

Once there was a colt named Dolly. Yes, yes, technically she was a filly, but everyone called her a colt, and Dolly didn't care. She started out as a beautiful brown but turned gray while still a little girl.

Dolly scared me into shrieks once. Normally she wasn't very friendly. One day when I wandered out eating bread-and-butter-and-sugar she fought me for it, and she was bigger than I was. She backed me into a corner, grabbed my snack and chewed a button off my sweater while getting the sugar that had spilled. I hadn't had enough experience with horses to understand that they're mad about sugar. The reason I shrieked was that I thought Dolly was going to eat me.

**T**HE FARMYARD WAS a fine place where something was always happening. Beyond the back hayfield was the forest, where dreadful things *could* happen because of the swamp. I remember only one that actually did, and that probably wasn't back of the Miller place, but it was somewhere in those dark woods. A small boy wandered off and, in spite of massive searches by many volunteers, no sign of him was ever found.

Probably he fell into a sinkhole. These were of various sizes, some only a few feet across, filled with standing water, and not easy to see. Somebody went to the trouble of marking one of them by putting a tall, dead lodgepole pine down into it. The top few feet of the lodgepole stuck up above the surface of the water, so sinkholes were not, as local legend said, bottomless, but they were near enough to it to be fatal. It wasn't wise to go plunging around in those wet woods in any hurry. One walked with care.

The Millers had a cabin out there, occasionally inhabited by a solitary woodcutter who

was paid by the cord for the firewood he cut and stacked. A corduroy road led to the cabin. Corduroy roads were a frontier invention that could be built through swampy forest with the materials that grew there — trees — plus an axe and a lot of muscle and some big nails if available. Such a road is built by laying small logs close together across wooden stringers. It moves up and down in the muck under the gingerly placed hooves of horses, and a person walking gets his feet wet, but at least the walker doesn't sink up to his knees and a wagon can make progress without getting totally bogged down.

The woods were fascinating. Skunk cabbage grew there, with great gaudy yellow flowers, and pale blue clematis almost the color of air, and pink lady slippers and mint. Sometimes ghostly white Indian pipes heaved up right through dry spots in the road. Often you could hear grouse drumming, sounding like someone trying to start a small gasoline engine.

The Millers' cows were milked twice a day — by hand. When I visited the farm I never got up early enough to supervise the morning milking and was not awfully welcome at the barn in the evening, either. The reason given was that I might get in the men's way. Mostly, I think, it was because I shouldn't hear the language they sometimes used to the cows. Some cows like to switch a tail in the milker's face; some try hard to put a foot in the bucket or, better yet, kick it over when it's three-quarters full. So a milker has a right, even a duty, to reprove them without being hampered by the presence of a shockable little girl.

Once I wanted to learn to milk. The lesson lasted about three minutes. The teacher announced, "Your hands are too small and at the rate you're going you'll dry up the cow." Later my mother remarked, "The smartest thing a woman can do is *not* learn to milk. If you can, you'll have to." She had carefully never learned. As it happened, there were no cows in my future.



IN THE FALL of 1918 came the great epidemic of Spanish influenza. Sick people took care of sicker people. Many of them died. Public gatherings were forbidden. The three doctors never got any sleep. When school closed for an indefinite time, my mother sent me out to stay with the Millers and went on working, as everyone did who still could. So I was there on the day when the great news came: The war is over! Mother heard it in town and telephoned it to the farm.

Grandma Miller stopped dead in her tracks: now her youngest son wouldn't have to go. He was in a student training group at the University. She pulled herself together and smiled at me and said, "You can tell the bees."

I was puzzled. "What should I tell them?" I often talked to horses and chickens and calves, but bees never seemed very friendly. Besides, they were all put to bed for the winter in their hives out by the garden.

"Just tell them the war is over," she said. So I put on my sweater and went outside to the row of beehives. This custom I had never heard of before and have seldom heard of since. It is very old; there is an obligation to tell the bees about important events. Otherwise they won't thrive.

I was then, and still am, timid about undertaking for the first time something I don't know how to do. What was the right way to tell the bees? There was no way to find out, so I simply did it, hoping there was no wrong way. The silent hives were bundled up for winter. I walked along the row of them and spoke politely to each hive, repeating, "The war is over," having to take it for granted that some of them were listening. "The war is over," I told them all. Then I went back into the warm farmhouse, my peculiar duty done.

That night or the next one there was a big celebration in town, and everybody went who wasn't sick in bed with the flu. But more vividly than the glee of the celebration and the music of the Whitefish Boys Band I remember those quiet few minutes when I walked along by the silent hives on the 11th day of November, 1918, telling the bees. It was a strange and memorable privilege. And it was the only time in my life that I ever spoke gently to bees. My normal reaction when I see one coming is to shriek and run for cover.

IN THIS AGE of specialization, lots of ranch kids don't know any more about milk than city kids do, because Daddy raises grain or sheep or hay or beef cattle. Milk comes in waxed cartons at a supermarket, as skim milk, low fat, homogenized, half-and-half, heavy cream, buttermilk and chocolate flavor. For these kids I must explain that it doesn't come that way naturally. It comes in cows. At least cow's milk does. (Once in Greece a man I was interviewing kindly gave me a glass of warm sheep's milk. I got it down, and even thanked him, but I'll never become addicted to it.)

A cow has four spigots, but just plain whole milk comes from all of them. Her calf can't have a treat of a strawberry malt, no matter how much he whines and teases. If you leave this plain milk alone in a pan, nice yellow cream will rise to the top. Ladle it off, let it sour, churn it, and you get butter. What's left is buttermilk. Or you can put the fresh whole milk through a machine called a separator; cream comes out a little pipe and skim milk comes out a bigger one.

No cream rises on the milk I buy, because it's homogenized — forcibly stirred up. And it never sours; it just spoils. This is progress, I suppose. If the Millers had homogenized their milk, they would have lost all their customers, because people used that risen cream in coffee. The milk was delivered in shining clean glass bottles every single morning. Mine comes in disposable cartons on Monday and Thursday, except when Monday falls on a holiday. I've never laid eyes on the man who leaves it in a box on the front steps.

The Millers' milk was delivered by a quick-moving young cousin of Grandma Miller, Ruth Day. Everybody in town knew and admired her. No blizzard stopped her. She rode in an open buggy pulled by a sorrel horse named Major, with the milk bottles in the back of the rig. The lithe way she leaped out, grabbed the right number of bottles, ran up to the right houses with them, picked up the empty bottles, and leaped back into the buggy was a sight to behold — preferably from inside a nice warm house. Sometimes I spent a week end at the farm and rode back home with her on Monday morning, so I know how bleak and dark and bitter cold those winter mornings were, how deep the snow could be before the city's horse-



drawn snowplow came through, and how slippery was the ice on the buggy step.

One summer when I was about halfway through college, my mother spent a week of vacation at the Millers' cabin in the woods. By that time they had sold out to Joe Moneghan, who had a milk route in town. I worked at her office that week — she was cashier at the Mountain States Power Company — and commuted from the cabin. This involved getting up at 5 A.M. for a quick breakfast, which she cooked on an old wood stove. For me there was a long hike through the woods on the corduroy road to the farm, a ride into town on the milk wagon, a change from hiking clothes to a dress at home, and another walk to the office. Returning to the cabin after work (after changing clothes again) there was no ride even part of the way. We ate supper by kerosene lamp-light and then went to bed. There was nothing else to do and no time to do it anyway.

My mother had a fine time with the creatures of the wild in the daytime. She scared the wits out of a porcupine, who stayed under the porch floor most of the time while she poked rags down to catch his quills. She completely upset the life style of a buck deer that was accustomed to drinking from a pool near the cabin. The pool bred mosquitoes, so she put some kerosene on it. When the buck innocently dipped his thirsty muzzle through that film of kerosene, he just about had a fit. She was still laughing when I got there hours later. The resident wild life was mightily relieved when we moved back to town.

**T**HE MILLERS' two-story white house was the heart of the entity that was the farm. Downstairs there were four rooms — the kitchen, the dairy room (sacred to milk and the cream separator and a big ice box and used for nothing else), the dining room (which became the living room when the supper dishes were cleared away, because there was a fancy big lamp that hissed and gave good light for reading), and a small sitting room with a slippery sofa and an upright piano. The Millers' youngest son, Lyle, played the piano very well. Upstairs were two dormitory-type bedrooms.

Ah, the kitchen! There was a big wood-burning range from whence came marvelous food (Grandma Miller was a fabulous cook) and even the convenience of a small hand pump at one end of the sink so nobody had to carry in water. Somebody did, however, have to carry out the swill pail quite often. That little pump was a fine thing to have, but you had to be careful never to leave the handle up or it would lose its ability to bring up water. Then one of the men would have to prime it, with suitable grumbling, because the men had better things to do.

When Mable took me out to see the old Miller place, decades later, it was a farm no more, but just a place to live in the country. The fields where men and horses had toiled under the summer sun to raise hay and grain produced a mammoth crop of useless golden dandelions, like other places nearby that had once been farms. The fields were too small to work with modern machinery, and who remembers how to harness or drive a team? The buildings are gone as if they had never been, even the tall silo and the big red cowbarn. The white house is gone, replaced by a low modern one where two small children were playing in the yard.

The pleasant young woman we talked to there had never heard of the Millers or the Moneghans, who bought the farm from them. She named half a dozen people who had owned it in recent years; I had never heard of any of them. She and her husband, a doctor in town, and their two little boys were renters.

The menacing black forest at the back was a frail green; it has been cleared off and thin new growth has replaced it. I didn't have the heart to ask whether the sinkholes are still there. It's better to remember the dark mys-



teries of that swamp as they used to be. The living farm was long dead and long forgotten.

Those utterly useless fields of dandelions were like a knife in my heart. Ghosts of sweating men and horses and the crops they raised were there; that was no place for the brown earth to be idle and grown to weeds.

A year later I went back and found a change and felt a whole lot better. Roy Duff owns the old place now. Roy is a busy man, a take-charge man; he operates the town's taxi service and a bunch of buses, is part owner of a thriving new-car agency, served as Mayor several terms, used to manage the local baseball team, puts on an annual reunion of his World War II National Guard regiment that is nationally famous. Just catching him took half the afternoon. He drove me out to the farm.

He gets some good out of it. His son lives in the cozy new house. By the road Roy has put up four big quonsets to house his nineteen buses, including seven school buses. Quonsets aren't awfully pretty, but they beat dandelions. They're good for something. And the small fields are big fields now, planted to grain; he leased that land to a California outfit that owns 780 acres west of his that used to be small and useless fields. The fences are down, big machines do the work, and the earth produces again.

**F**ARTHER AWAY from town, some farms still thrive, but they're bigger than the old Miller place. Joe Voermans had one of the biggest dairy farms around — he milked about thirty-eight cows, more than the Millers did. Times changed, and legal requirements for dairies became too strict for private milk routes to be economically practical. When he had a good offer for his place, he sold out. A dairy now has to have a pasteurizer — expensive — and a rule requiring a 500-gallon stainless steel tank — also expensive — was a blow to small operators.

Voerman's brother-in-law, Tony Braig, farms on a beautiful place several miles from town, with spreading fields and islands of woodland, backdropped by the Mission Range of the Rockies. Tony came from Stuttgart, Germany, as a young fellow and worked for several years in the Van Aken Gardens. About 1938 he went into farming of a specialized kind — raising turkeys. There is a job with complications, but he and his wife, Mary, stayed with it for sixteen years. They bought ready-hatched poults and averaged 1,200 to 1,300 birds at a time; once they had 2,300.

Turkeys have an even stronger death wish than chickens; they get hysterical about small matters, and they're cannibals when they get the chance. Tony had to guard his flock vigorously against coyotes — not that the coyotes got many turkeys, but their presence scared the birds into a shrieking frenzy and some of them inevitably got smothered in the rush. Once he lost forty-six birds in thirty minutes because they got cold and snuggled up in a corner.

Mrs. Braig did all the killing during peak seasons. "You just stick a turkey in the brain," she said, "and it goes limp, feathers and all, so you can simply rub the feathers off."

The Braigs have two sons, Robert and Jacob, who became, respectively, a stockbroker and an airline pilot — about as far from raising turkeys as they could get. The whole family got so sick of turkeys that for their own holiday dinners they ate ham.

About 1955 Tony got out of turkeys and into the Grade A dairy business. A big bulk truck picked up the milk right at his gate. Then he changed with the times. Now he raises handsome beef cattle — Black Angus and Herefords — plus hay and grain. He sells some of the grain. This operation he can run with no

hired help except high school boys to “buck bales” during haymaking.

One big farm, the Van Aken Gardens, hasn't changed very much. This one, started in 1914, raised vegetables to sell wholesale to stores and door-to-door to retail customers. Now Van Aken's sells only wholesale. For years beyond counting, this farm was famous for its French endive. Almost nobody else in the United States raised it, and Van Aken's best customer was the flossy Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. In 1925 Herman Van Aken wrote a book about French endive that sold all over the United States. It had no competition. It was for years the *only* book about French endive. Van Aken's stopped raising this delicacy only a couple of years ago.

In Whitefish now, people still have vegetable gardens, but not so big as ours was. Fresh produce is shipped in from California; it didn't used to be. After digging potatoes out of muddy clay in too many late autumns, I swore I'd never plant another seed, but now, in Missoula, I do raise a few vegetables in what started out as a flower bed. They taste better than supermarket stuff.

Where our big garden was in Whitefish, and the chicken house and all that, there's a new house inhabited by people I don't know. The Methodist preacher doesn't keep a cow. You can't hear a rooster herald the dawn anywhere in town. Such rusticity is probably forbidden by city ordinance, along with outdoor privies. Change isn't *all* bad.



We are bound to regret when it is no longer possible in this place, at the end of a Dorothy Johnson reminiscent article, to tantalize ourselves and our readers about what is coming next. But we have at least one more to herald: Scheduled for the Summer issue, 1976, it is titled, quite simply, *THE FOREIGNERS*, and it is, quite simply, about foreign-born people Miss Johnson, her parents and friends, encountered in Great Falls and Whitefish when she was a child. As with all segments in the Johnson series, it is humorous, nostalgic and full of meaning. And while it may be the last of the reminiscent series, *THE FOREIGNERS* will not be the last of Johnson articles on other subjects and other times which we hope to publish in these columns.