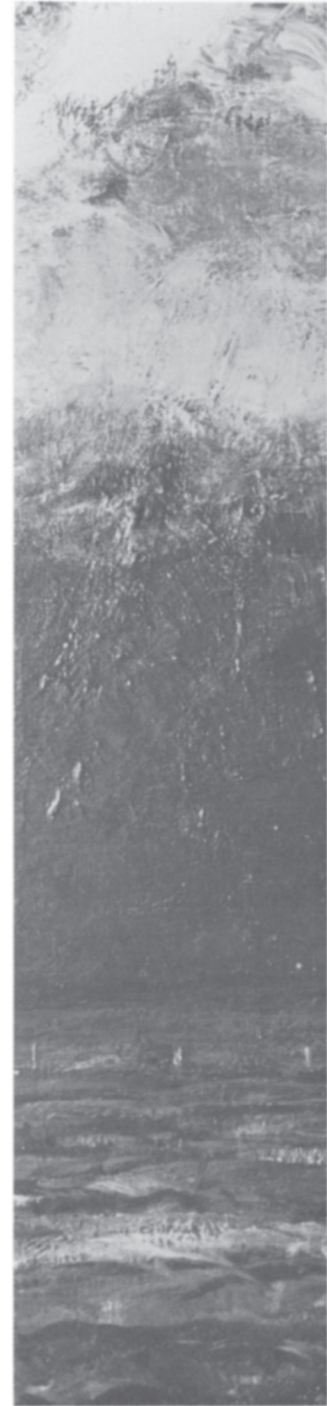


# **The Wind Symphony in**

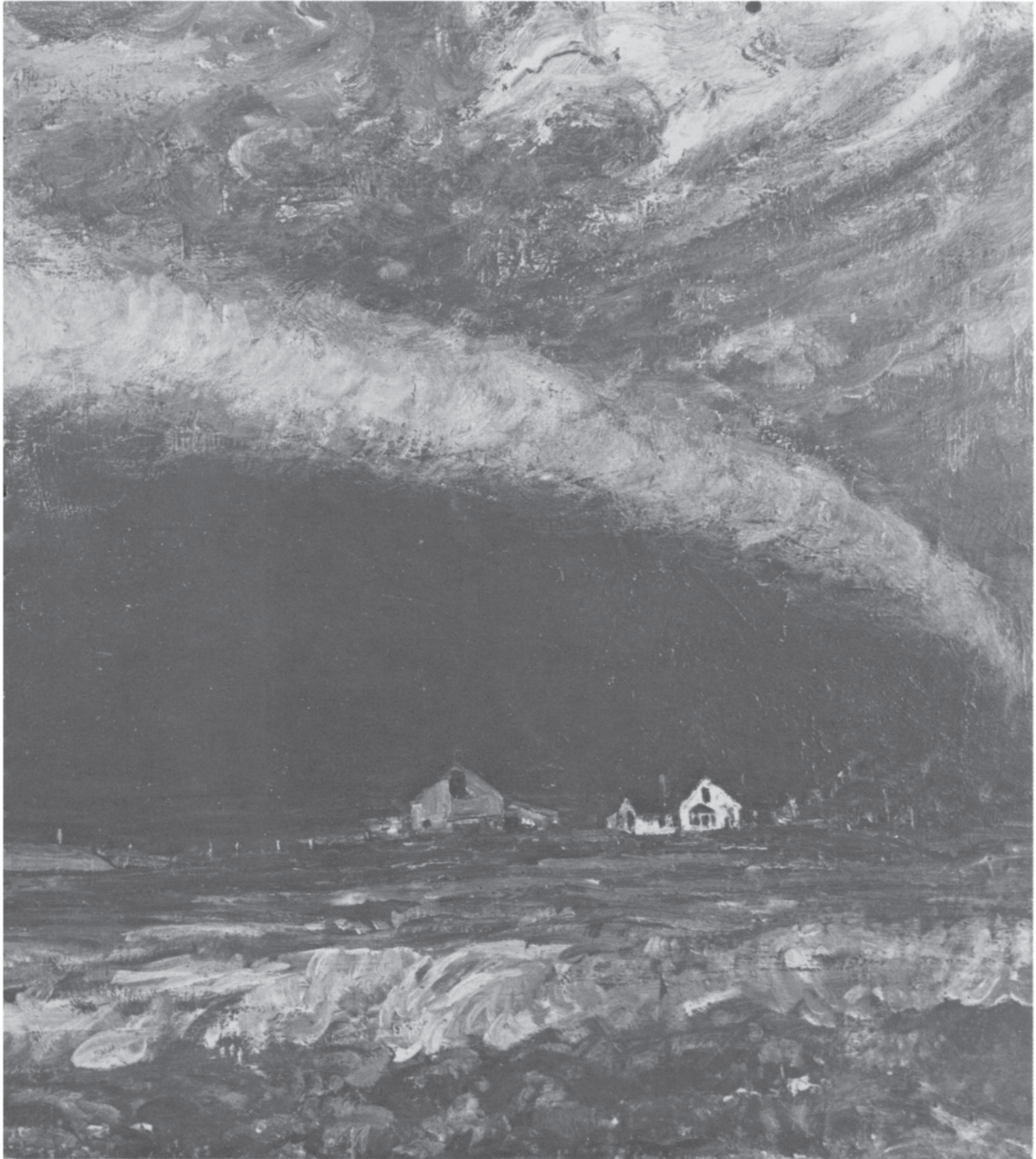
by MARY KNOBLE YOUNG

**It is a little more than a half century ago that my mother, Katie Baertsch McCabe Knoble, went through a winter experience in Northern Montana so lonely and haunting that she kept its details to herself until she told me about it in 1968 when she was near the end of her life. Even then, she half-expected me not to believe her, for one becomes practical and tough-minded after a long life. Anyone who has been caught in a prairie blizzard, though, and heard the moaning of the wind and lies down in the lassitude which can precede a lonely death can believe, especially if one has not been born to endure such things. And Mother was not. She had been a young widow in Madison, Wisconsin, when my father had married her and brought her out to Northern Montana in 1910. There had been some good years, but there had been some bad ones. Memories of a gentler way of life came vividly to mind when she was left alone with her children on our ranch near the Canadian border in the winter of 1921 . . .**

No artist has ever captured the scenes and faces of homesteading more graphically than did South Dakota's great Harvey Dunn. We use two to illuminate this haunting vignette, based on a Montana homestead experience. At right, Dunn's brush captured an approaching storm in *STORM FRONT*. We close the article with the bleak, wintry loneliness of *AFTER THE BLIZZARD*. Both reproductions are by courtesy of South Dakota State University, Brookings.



# **Floyd Knoble's Barn**





Casper Knoble and his son, Fred, posed beside their uniquely designed cross-country bicycle, in about 1896. Shortly after their trip to Montana and into Canada, father and son and others of the family homesteaded near the Sweet Grass Hills in Northern Montana.

**T**HE MONTANA ADVENTURE for my family started during the 1890's, when my grandfather, Casper Knoble, and his son, Fred, who was to become my father, explored the West on a two-seated bicycle. They had won many medals racing the bicycle, and had decided to leave their Wisconsin home and see the West, traveling on trails made by the wagon trains of other pioneers.

Their supplies were carried in large cases, built into the frame of their unusual bicycle. They slept on the ground, shot their own food, and cooked over an open campfire. When the tires wore out they bought heavy rope, which they wound around the wheels and fastened securely. It lasted much longer than the tires had.

My father told me that the Sweet Grass Hills, where the Knobles finally settled, could be seen as they bicycled across the prairie, at first as small purple and blue hills in the distance. After several days of travel, which brought them much closer, the hills began to loom out of the prairie to such heights that they could almost be called mountains. But they were actually three buttes standing alone on the plains.

After bicycling into Canada as far as Edmonton, Alberta, father and son returned to the Sweet Grass Hills and homesteaded on the south slope of West Butte. They were joined by the rest of the family in 1898. My grandmother, Mary Knoble, whose name I received, was the first postmistress of the West Butte postoffice, established in 1901. She also ran a country store there until 1915 and intermittently thereafter until her death in 1922.

Fred Knoble returned to Wisconsin in 1901 to attend the University of Wisconsin, from which he graduated in 1904. At Madison, his roommate gave him a diary, in which he recorded some of his activities during 1901. He wrote of returning early in June to his father's ranch in Montana and going to visit his own homestead which joined the ranch. There he found that the buildings had all blown down — the roof of his house was found upside down in a nearby coulee. He decided to buy the Isaak Evans ranch, located around the west side of the butte about seven miles from his father's ranch, with the Canadian border forming its northern edge.

Fred also told in his diary of going to Omaha, Nebraska to buy young Herefords to stock his new ranch, and of the herd of fine horses he gradually acquired. The stock grew fat on the rich Montana grass and each fall Fred accompanied a trainload of beef to the Chicago market.

**W**HEN HE RETURNED FROM one of these trips East in 1910, Fred brought home his new wife, Katie Baertsch McCabe, whom he had met while he was at school in Madison. Katie had married Jim McCabe, a Great Northern brakeman, in 1901, and had been left a widow only eighteen months later. McCabe had slipped on some ice and hit his head on the edge of an iron train step, dying instantly. The young widow was enrolled in a business college when she met Fred Knoble.

Floyd Knoble and Lee Baertsch posed with a bumper crop of produce in about 1912. The Canadian line was only a half mile away from this barn, built on Fred Knoble's ranch and still standing today. Floyd, who built another barn which sheltered his sister-in-law during her winter adventure in 1921, died only five years after this picture was taken.

Fall was a bad time to start life in Montana, with a long winter just beginning. The buttes loomed high above the house to the east, but the view to the west was of white snow on the unending plains. On a clear winter day, one could see a hundred miles of nothing but snow.

Spring came as a sudden and beautiful relief, but even as the wind blew through the new leaves of the diamond-willow tree in the corner of the garden, Katie felt homesick for the larger oak trees of Wisconsin. But she was kept too busy for much looking back, for she and Fred were building a new frame addition to their home — four large rooms with a high roof and room for storage. The cement basement had a large concrete water cistern to catch rainwater from the wide roof, and a hand pump to bring it to the kitchen for washing and cleaning. Drinking water was hauled from a nearby spring.

In late summer, 1911, Katie prepared for the 150-mile trip, partly by buggy and partly by train, to the Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls where, in early September, her first daughter was born. She was named after the Biblical Ruth who had said, "Whither thou goest, I will go." Mother's life in Montana so far had been both interesting and terrifying.

The ranch was prospering, when, less than two years later, I made my appearance, two weeks early. Mother was planning to start for Great Falls the next morning but I arrived unexpectedly during the night, delivered by my father in the log bedroom. This happened in the middle of May when Montana was beautiful with blue sky and white fluffy clouds and fleecy white lambs playing on the green alfalfa fields. I felt at home in the world immediately and I think I helped Mother feel more at home in Montana. After that, two more daughters and a son were born in the big ranch bedroom.

As prosperity continued, Father started wheat farming and acres of sod were plowed under. The first years were unusually wet, the wheat flourishing in the rich soil. In 1916 a bumper crop was harvested and everyone seemed to be getting rich. Katie took us children to Wisconsin to visit her mother, our Grandma Baertsch.

While we were in the East, Father and his younger brother, Floyd, built a barn on the homestead that Floyd had claimed adjoining our ranch. We returned to find them working with the new lumber and bright red paint for the exterior. They were making Floyd's barn extra sturdy, the roof and rafters wind-proofed by adding heavy wire cables.



**F**LOYD WAS PROUD of his new barn, but it was the last good thing that happened to our family for a long time. The winter of 1917 was the first of seven hard winters, followed by seven dry summers. Cattle died and crops failed.

Early in 1917, Floyd fell suddenly ill and shortly after being taken over frozen roads to Sweetgrass, Montana, died of a ruptured appendix. His gravestone can still be seen in the Sweetgrass cemetery. Engraved on it are the date, January, 1917, and the words, "Gone but not Forgotten."

Uncle Floyd did not live to use his barn and during the next five years it stood empty. Prairie grass still grew on its dirt floor and the interior still smelled of new pine wood. It seemed to mark time while the happenings of the world marched on.

A few months after Floyd's death, the United States entered World War I, and other young Americans of his age were sent to Europe. Germany fell under the Kaiser's gluttonous designs, and the Communist Revolution overthrew the Russian Czars in 1917.

As I grew up through those years, I remember the grownups talking in the lamplight around the kitchen table after the supper dishes were done. They spoke about all these events, referring often to the daily newspaper, a precious item in our house. The world was in a wave of post-war depression, the ripples of which were keenly felt, even on a ranch in far-off Montana.

To me this was all frightening, although vague and far away, but there were terrifying happenings that were nearer and could be seen as well as heard and understood by a child. The farmers continually expected a better crop next year but always complained at harvest time that they hadn't even gotten their seed back. During the bad winters, animals died, their bodies piling up to form huge, grisly mounds in the spring thaw. There was no government help then, so people borrowed to the hilt from mortgage companies.

By the summer of 1921, the drouth was so bad that even the prairie grass refused to grow. The only feed to stack for winter was dried Russian thistles. This was when my father and another man from the ranch were forced to take the surviving animals to other pastures. This must not have been easy, for I remember they were gone longer than expected, and there was much worrying around the kitchen table.

**M**OTHER WAS LEFT ALONE except for us children and one old, lame cowhand named Parks. She was used to going without supplies for weeks at a time, but with no radio or telephone, the newspaper was her only connection with the rest of the world. Since no one had gone after the mail, she decided to make the trip herself. Parks was unable to travel so far, but he helped her catch the horses and agreed to stay with us.

They caught a team that had been running with the range horses across the unfenced homestead. Mother managed the skittish horses well enough, arriving in town to buy supplies. She put the two-week accumulation of mail into an oiled silk bag, and then added to her load a 100-pound sack of bran shorts for the chickens, hoping to make the hens lay better.

Mother, starved for conversation, stayed in town longer than she should have, considering the time of year. There were no radios or weather reports to

tell her of the snow and high wind that would soon overtake her.

The drifts grew deeper and deeper, and by the time she was within three miles of the ranch, going past the nailed-shut homestead shack and Floyd's deserted new barn, it was dark and stormy. Urging the horses homeward through the drifts, Katie suddenly felt the wind change. It was full in her face when she realized that the horses were turning, rather than the wind changing. One of them whinnied into the darkness and she knew that they were trying to join the range herd. They were going back in the direction of Uncle Floyd's barn and soon came to a stop in its shelter.

When Katie tried to move them forward, they refused to take a step, so she unhooked the tugs and tied the team to the buggy wheel.

When Mother entered the barn, she felt an overwhelming relief in the shelter against the storm. She returned to the buggy and brought in the sack of chicken feed to use as a comfortable seat, feeling the warmth of the feed store that was still held in the ground grain.

She sat listening to the howling blizzard, the wind roaring in the rafters and against the re-enforcing cables. In the frigid cold, it became a deep humming sound, as though a huge orchestra was playing. Katie began to feel comfortable and sleepy.

Reminding herself that people feel drowsy when they are beginning to freeze to death, Mother began to think of her whole life and told herself that this is what happens when people are about to die. But she continued to sit and think of many things, of her first husband, Jim McCabe, who had died so young nearly twenty years before. Now, amid the hum and howl of the storm, she thought she was hearing his voice. She knew that talking with the dead is considered odd and irreverent, if not completely insane.



Jim McCabe and his bride, Katie Baertsch, pictured in Superior, Wisconsin, in 1901, shortly after their marriage.

**M**OTHER KEPT THE SOUND of Jim McCabe's voice a secret for over 45 years, until she faced death once more. I was the person she told, a short time before her death in Spokane, Washington in 1968. I told her then that if there had been a spirit in the barn, it would have been that of Uncle Floyd, who had built the barn, and who had died when he had so wanted to live. But she insisted that the voice she heard had been Jim McCabe's.

Whatever the cause of the sound in the cold, new barn, it had saved Mother's life, for it startled her awake. She kept hearing the voice: "Go home, Go home." She looked around, she told me, but could see nothing. She thought, "By morning it will be thirty below in the barn. They will find me here frozen stiff." The voice repeated: "Go home." It was then that she realized the wind had stopped. She went to the buggy, but the horses had broken away and were long gone. She decided to walk home, remembering to take her precious sack of mail.

After struggling through the snow, Mother began thinking of her past life again. Her cousin, Elsa Baertsch, had told her that in North Dakota her mother used to put a light out for the men on dark nights and fasten a sheet on the house behind it so the light re-

flected further across the prairie. As she thought of this, Katie saw the first beams of the light at her own gate which Parks had put up to help her find the way.

Later, while we children busted ourselves with candy and the funnies, Mother warmed herself by the stove, drank coffee and read the 1921 newspaper. A few days later, Father and the other men returned home and went to retrieve the buggy. They found that the horses had returned to the barn and torn open the sack of ground grain. They had eaten it all. Later an old gray buggy horse named Steamboat was found in bloated death near the barn.

After Mother's wierd winter experience, the ranch was our home for only two more years. The mortgage holders foreclosed on us and then leased the place to Clarence Youngman. It was later sold to Mr. and Mrs. Otto Kiehlbauch, who have lived there now for nearly fifty years. They have made many improvements in the house and surrounding buildings, but Father's barn looks exactly like it did six decades ago. But not so Floyd's red barn, which had sheltered Mother and had echoed with the wind symphony and the voice of her first bridegroom. It has been moved away, and instead of humming through the rafters, the wind now waves a field of wheat.



Mary Knoble Young, who lives in Oilmont, a small community near Shelby in Northern Montana, has written a series of reminiscent pieces for the *Shelby Promoter*, which were shared with us some time ago by Editor Jack Gilluly. The piece published here, especially appropriate for a winter issue, was prepared for magazine use from one of her columns. After leaving the ranch, Mrs. Young tells us that the Knoble family moved to Kalispell, where all the children graduated from Flathead County High School. She and her sisters took home economics classes from their Mother's cousin, Elsa Baertsch, who figures in this story. Elsa, who married P. N. Bernard in 1927, still lives in Kalispell and is now 85 years old. Mary attended the University of Montana for two years, then took teachers training at Billings and taught her first country school in Western Montana's Lake County in 1933. She received her B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1940 and returned to Montana to work in the Kalispell schools. There followed three years of teaching English and art at Oilmont High School before her marriage to Irvin Young whom she had known since childhood.