Animals, Wild and Tame

Domesticated animals were vital to our way of life. Each animal served its purpose, from the food we ate and the milk we drank to the soap we washed with and our delightfully warm featherbeds, filled with feathers from our own ducks and geese.

We always had two milk cows, and I learned to milk them before my fingers were even strong enough to squeeze out all the milk. Cows kick sometimes – hard – and we were lucky to have metal braces that fit over the cows' hind legs to prevent this. We would also feed the cows while we milked them, to distract them.

The new milk was strained and then divided. Half was for drinking, and it was put into a clean jar and stored in cold water. The other half was set in a warm place for a day or so, until it clabbered, and that milk was churned to make our butter. A half-hour's effort with our molded clay butter churn produced both butter and buttermilk, both of which were used regularly in mountain cooking.

When the weather was bad, our cows stayed in the barn and we brought them their feed. Most of the year, though, they grazed outside for their food. As young as age six, it was my task to find them every afternoon and bring them home. The cows might range a mile away or more; luckily for me, they wore cowbells on leather straps or ropes around their necks, so that even when I couldn't see them I could listen for them. I was also lucky that our dog at that time, Rover, would go along with me to find the cows. I was always barefoot in good weather and there was a constant danger of stepping on a snake, but Rover had a good eye for snakes and I knew he would keep me safe.

Our cows were milk cows and our chickens were mainly kept for their eggs, so most of our meat supply came from our hogs. Hogs couldn't roam as cows did; we kept them in a small pen. Although they required a lot of attention, thanks to them we never wasted leftover food. We never had many leftovers – my frugal parents subscribed to the old rule, "Take what you want and eat what you get" – but such scraps as we had mostly went to the hogs, with a little left over for the dog. This fattened the hogs up nicely, and we butchered one around November and the other around February. While I worked at many jobs around the house and farm, I was never asked to help with the butchering, and I was grateful for that; I'm sure I would have done it, but I think I would not have liked it. Still, I remember being fascinated as I watched my father and Grandpa Messer butcher hogs.

Sometimes they shot the animal in the head, and other times they killed it with a blow to the head from the flat side of a hatchet blade. Either way, death was always immediate. The hog fell to the ground and one of the men immediately slashed its

throat deeply with a long knife. Cutting both jugular veins allowed all the blood to run out of the hog rapidly.
Once the hog was drained of blood, it was laid on wooden slats where boiling water, heated in a kettle over a nearby fire, was poured over sections of its body to loosen the bristles. Section by section, the bristles were steamed loose and the men scraped the hog's skin hard with large butcher knives until it was smooth. When all the bristles were off, a stout stick was tied to the hog's hind feet and used to hang its body upside-down from a low tree limb.

Next the hog's head was removed, its belly slashed from tail to neck, and the internal organs taken out. Some organs, such as the liver, brains, and kidneys, were saved to be fried and eaten. Scraps from the head would become headcheese. Fat was rendered into lard or grease for cooking. Even the intestines were used, not for food but to make lye soap. The rest of the hog's body was sectioned and carefully salted on every inch of every surface, then preserved in the smokehouse. Eventually that meat would hang in the smokehouse and be unhooked as we needed it. We salt-cured almost all the meat, and so butchering just two hogs a year provided our family with pork all year round. Only the most tender, boneless loin meat was eaten right away, for supper, each butchering day – a delicacy to look forward to, fresh from Mom's frying pan, after the hard day's work.

While I never had to do the butchering, I did do a great deal of hunting, as did all of the boys and men I grew up with. Dad invited me hunting with him for the first time when I was five. There was a very large mulberry tree in a quiet hollow about a mile from our house, and since it was early June, he figured squirrels would be going after those ripening mulberries. Sure enough, when we got about a hundred feet from the tree we could see several squirrels there. Dad asked me to sit down and wait for him, and I watched as he moved slowly and quietly toward the tree. When he was in range, he raised his twelve-gauge shotgun and fired.

Well, I had stayed where he told me but he hadn't told me to be quiet, and as soon as he fired that first shot I was so excited I jumped up and yelled, "Dad! I saw the squirrel fall!" Those few squirrels who weren't scared off by the shotgun blast ran away when they heard me holler out. So we went home with only one squirrel instead of the usual two or three.

The general rule in that mountain community was that boys could hunt on their own when they turned twelve. Until then, there were other ways we could help bring meat home. For instance, Dad's little brother Nasby would often go groundhog hunting with me when we were only seven or eight.

Groundhogs burrow deep into the earth. We would take our dogs out with us, and the dogs would get a groundhog's scent and find its burrow or sometimes even find the groundhog itself and chase it back to its burrow or up a tree. If the groundhog went to earth, we had to dig to get it out. Sometimes it took an hour or more to dig deep enough. Once the groundhog was exposed, it would always attack our dogs; if there was more than one groundhog in the burrow, one would stay and attack while the others ran. While a groundhog is a sizable animal – ten or twelve pounds – and a good fighter, in the contest between our two dogs and the one groundhog, the dogs always won and the groundhog was killed in short order. We would carry the groundhogs home, our fathers would clean and wash them and our mothers would fry them up. They tasted like fried chicken.

I also started to trap rabbits on my own after my Grandpa Messer had built a rabbit box for me. The rabbit box was a wooden structure about two feet long. One end was covered in strips of thin metal with slits between them, and the other end was left open. Inside the box was a little wooden door which could be propped up. Rabbit hunting started off the same as groundhog hunting, with my dog finding a rabbit hole. But instead of digging, I would place the open end of that rabbit box against the hole and then cover the sides of the box and the area around the hole tightly with rocks and dirt so that the only way out was into the box. When the rabbit got to the box, I'm sure he hesitated, but the spaces between the metal slats at the far end were designed to let in sunlight and make him think he could push right through. As soon as he tried, the inside door would swing shut behind him. Then all I had to do was carry him home right in the box. I brought home at least one rabbit a month for a year or more, until the novelty wore off. Because rabbit was not a favorite meat for my family, I don't think anyone much minded when I gave up rabbit hunting.

I finally turned twelve in 1947, and I thoroughly enjoyed being able to borrow Dad's shotgun and bring some squirrel meat home for my family. I remember one early hunting trip very well. I shot at a number of squirrels, but my aim wasn't yet very good and I kept missing them. Shotguns kick hard when the trigger is pulled, and I went home that day with a very sore right shoulder and no squirrels to show for it. I was so embarrassed at how many shots I had taken in vain that I hid the soreness from my mom and dad. A few days later, though, I heard Mom complaining to Dad about how many shotgun shells I was using – they were store-bought, of course, and our money was limited – and Dad told her that my shooting so many times was the price to be paid for me to learn to shoot well. After that I felt better about my learning curve, and my aim quickly improved.

Gifts from the Earth

I enjoyed the grown-up feeling of hunting and trapping, and I was proud to help put meat on the family table. But of course there was much more food to be had from the Earth there in the mountains, and I helped with that harvest in many ways, too. Like all the families we knew, we had a garden, and I was expected to do my share of planting, weeding and all the rest.

There were apple trees, planted by my parents and other relatives, and we collected a bounty of berries that grew wild in the woods, blackberries and blueberries in particular. I picked berries from the time I was old enough to carry a small bucket. Because berries grow best in weedy, grassy areas, it took a long time to find as many as we needed, and there was always a danger of stepping on a rattler or a copperhead. No matter how careful we were, we pricked our fingers and caught our clothes on thorns. By the time we got home, we were sore, tired and itchy. But every year Mom was able to can about a dozen jars of blueberries and 20 or 30 jars of blackberries, and the delicious blackberry dumplings and pies we later enjoyed, their jeweled colors bright on our wintertime supper table, were an ample reward for our hard work.

When I was a child, we also did not have running water in any of our homes, and sometimes we had to put a lot of effort into getting it. When we lived on Jeffs Creek, during the dry weather of autumn the little clear spring behind our house went dry, and it was often my job to fetch water from the nearest well, a half-mile round trip. That may seem like a small task, but water is heavy, and carrying even a small bucketful can be painful as the wire bucket handle presses into the palms. That was one of the most unpleasant chores I had to do.

We grew a lot of corn in those days, to feed both ourselves and our animals, and extended families always helped each other with hoeing and harvesting. When we lived near Dad's family, his brothers and sisters and their father, my Grandpa Messer, all came to help. The corn was usually planted by mid-April, and the next month it would need hoeing to destroy the weeds that might otherwise choke it out. We used a mule to pull our bull-tongue plow between the rows to loosen the dirt and pull up some of the weeds, and then we walked behind it with hoes to work between the plants.

This was hard work, but we found ways to make it fun. For instance, Dad and his younger sister Esseline competed to see who could hoe a faster row. And sometimes if Dad found a small ground snake he threw it at Esseline's feet. Everyone working there got a little laugh at that, including, after a few minutes, Esseline herself.

After a second hoeing in late summer, the corn was left alone in the field until autumn. By then it was very dry. When each grain on the cob was hardened, the corn was ready for harvest. Usually a pair of mules pulled a sled through the cornfield as the corn was pulled off the stalks and thrown onto it. (Later we harvested the corn stalks to feed our mules and cows over the winter, so that nothing was wasted.) When a sled was laden, Dad drove the mules back to the house, pulling the load behind them. This was a tricky job, because all that corn was heavy and the hills were steep. I remember vividly a day when the sled's braking chain snapped and Dad, the mules and the sled all careened down the hill with Dad yelling, "Look out! I've lost control!" Just before they all would have collided with my Uncle Lloyd's sled, Dad's mules must have realized what was going on and both of them fell to their knees, stopping the sled. We were lucky neither Dad, nor Lloyd, nor either of the mules were hurt.

Back at home, we shelled the corn, removing kernels from the cob. That was tedious, but it had to be done before we could have our corn ground into the cornmeal Mom cooked with so often. Once we had two or three gallons of corn kernels, we would take them to our neighbor Roy Grubb, who had a grinder. He would grind that whole large bag and only take a pint of the corn as his price.

The Grubbs were our relatives – Ellen Grubb, the matriarch of the family, was my great-aunt – and they were good neighbors. To go along with the cornmeal for our cornbread baking, we would often get a jar of honey from Otto Grubb, the only beekeeper in the area. We would go and watch him collect the honey; smiling, he called it "robbing the bees." He never charged us for the honey or for any of the skilled blacksmith work his dad, Reuben, did. They were just good, neighborly people, and we did for them whenever we were able as well.

One other thing our family derived from the land there in the mountains was fuel for our stoves, to cook our food and warm our homes. Until I was about thirteen, we used wood as our fuel, and I helped to gather and chop our wood supply. However, in about 1948, when my parents moved to Jeffs Creek, that house had a coal-burning stove.

At first, Dad purchased the coal we needed and had it hauled in, but soon we began digging our own coal. I remember helping dig three coal mines with Dad, Lloyd, and Grandpa Messer: one behind the Jeffs Creek house, one up on the mountain across the creek, and one near my grandparents' home on Mill Creek. Apparently the coal there was not of the quality or thickness to attract commercial coal mining companies, so it was there for the taking.

I don't know how those coal seams were found; I don't believe you could see evidence at ground level. But once a site was chosen, we would make a tunnel ten or twelve feet

wide into the mountain's side. We used shovels to dig out the top layer of dirt. When we got down to the slate, we used dynamite to blast in further. Coal is part of a mountain's structure and is not easily removed, but Dad had worked in the mines and knew how to do that safely. Throughout the process we used a giant shovel, strapped to our mule, to haul away dirt and rock. The process of starting a mine took at least a week with all of us working together, and then we could tunnel deeper as needed. The thickness of the coal in those mines probably ranged from two to three feet, enough to power our stove year-round once we'd loaded it onto a sled and hauled it home.

The deepest I ever saw any of those homemade coal mines go was maybe 200 feet. We did not have the tools or equipment to go deeper. It is an unsettling feeling – at least it was to me – to walk under a mountain in a tunnel you have helped create, even if the tunnel doesn't go very far. It gave me a taste of what coal miners must feel when they go half a mile or more into a mountain.

Fun and Games

Growing up in the mountains then, we children had no television or telephone, no sports leagues or camps. But we had plenty of free time, especially before we were old enough to do many chores, and we could explore and do many things on our own. The only modern entertainment we had didn't arrive until I was about six: a radio, battery-powered because we did not have electricity. The radio was in a cabinet about 30 inches tall. It was placed next to a window because the battery, about the size of a car battery today, had a wire which had to be run outside through the window. That wire was attached to a small round metal pipe driven into the ground. I don't know why, but I remember Dad always had to keep the pipe filled with water.

Dad liked to listen to the Gabriel Heatter news program, which was on every evening around 6:00. That was an important connection to the world outside those isolated mountains. At first I thought of the radio as Dad's radio, but after a time I found there were programs I could enjoy as well. Most often I listened to "The Lone Ranger" and "Roy Rogers." I had never been out West, of course, nor seen a photograph or movie of it, but I enjoyed picturing the stories in my mind as best I could.

As much as I enjoyed my radio programs, whenever possible I preferred to be outside playing. I had a number of cousins and neighbors about my age to play with, but the one I spent the most time with was Dad's baby brother Nasby. We were always good friends – and stayed so into adulthood, I'm glad to say – but like most boys, we competed with each other a lot. I only remember one serious conflict with Nasby, though.

One day when I was about six, my sister Thena, then three, Nasby, and I were at my grandparents' house playing with June bugs. That was something we children often did in spring and summer. After we had caught one, we would tie a piece of thread around one of its legs, hold on to the other end of the thread, and toss the June bug up into the air over our heads. As the June bug tried to fly away, it would circle our heads on the thread, its wings making a pleasant buzzing sound.

Suddenly, Thena started crying and demanding Nasby give her back her June bug. He refused. I asked him, and he still said no. Playing the big brother, I tried to wrestle the bug out of Nasby's hands. In the tussle, by accident I struck his nose with my elbow hard enough to bring blood.

Nasby threw down the June bug and ran into the house crying for his mother. In no time Grandma Messer was hustling out of the house toward me with a switch in her hand. I might have taken the whipping without a fuss, but Nasby's bloody nose had

been an accident, and I didn't think I should get a whipping for an accident. If anything, I felt the whole affair was Nasby's fault for not giving Thena her bug back. Grandma Messer didn't seem to be in any mood to discuss the matter. I started to back away across the garden.

"Flem!" called my grandmother. "Stand still or come here so I can whip you for hurting Nasby!"

I turned and ran, climbing the fence as fast as I could to get out of her reach. Running up the side of the mountain by the Hubbard Cemetery, looking for a place to hide, I spied a small bush with a lot of low, leafy branches, and I crawled right in. My hiding place was maybe 1,000 feet from the Messer home. I listened and watched to see if she would pursue me, but she did not.

I stayed there two or three hours, not knowing what to do, until my father came to collect Thena and me. When I heard Dad calling, I hurried to him, thinking I could explain the whole thing and he would protect me. To my surprise and disappointment, however, I saw he had the switch in his hand, and he used it to give me the only whipping I remember ever receiving from him. He must not have switched me very hard, because I don't remember it hurting me physically. I did cry, though, from frustration, and loudly protested throughout that I did not deserve a whipping.

For some reason, after that incident, I was not angry with Dad or Nasby, but I was very resentful toward my grandmother. For a long time I refused to call her "Grandma," because I felt she hadn't treated me as a grandmother should treat her grandson. A few weeks after the whipping, Grandma sent Nasby and me to my great-aunt Ellen's house to borrow some lard. Nasby was a shy boy, so whenever we were together I did the talking, but I did not want to mention my grandmother's name because I was so angry. When Ellen opened the door, I held Grandma's glass jar out to her and said, "*She* wants to borrow some lard."

"Flem, do you mean your grandma?" Ellen asked.

"Yes," I grumbled resentfully.

Luckily for me, although my grandmother was strong-willed and not always easy to get along with, deep down I knew she loved me and I enjoyed being with her. Eventually we mended that rift between us, and I spent a lot of time at her home through the years and ate many meals at her supper table.

Whippings weren't the only danger from our play back then. On our own as often as we were, away from parents' eyes, we had a lot of injuries and close calls. I remember stepping on a nail in our barn and being so sore that I had to crawl around the house and barn, instead of walking, for three weeks. Since none of us got inoculations in those days, I was lucky I didn't get tetanus.

Snakes were always a danger, too, especially since we lived so far from medical care or any kind of snakebite medicine. On one of our groundhog-hunting trips, Nasby and I ran into a thick rattlesnake, with its characteristic broad triangular head and jointed tail, curled up in the middle of our path. We had always been told that when a snake is curled up, it is in position to strike anyone who disturbs it. Of course we had also been told to leave snakes alone, but like all young boys we thought we knew how to handle ourselves, and we decided we would kill that snake. We searched in the nearby woods until we each found a stick about five feet long. Then we took positions on either side of the snake.

Nasby whacked the rattlesnake with his stick. It struck out at him but fell short. Then I whacked it with my stick, and it leaped back toward me. Fortunately it couldn't quite reach either of us, and after we alternated hitting it for ten or fifteen minutes, it stopped jumping. We then crushed its head with a rock and pulled the rattlers off its tail. We knew each ring represented a year in the life of a rattlesnake, and that snake had at least five rings. We proudly took the rings home and told our playmates about our adventure.

We were lucky that day, but later came a day when we weren't so lucky. One of my favorite playthings was a sled that Grandpa Messer made for me. Sledding was a popular pastime – Nasby and other friends and cousins also had sleds. One day Nasby and I were repairing our sleds in the yard next to my house. We didn't use new nails on our sleds because nails cost money; instead, we straightened used nails by laying them on the back of an axe blade embedded securely in a log and then hitting them with a hammer. On that day, my baby brother Otto, then three years old, came out of the house to watch us. He was wearing a pair of my hand-me-down boots, which were much too big for his feet, and he stumbled as he made his way through the snow.

As Otto approached us, he slipped and grabbed the log to stop his fall. At that moment Nasby was swinging the axe down toward the log, and it was too late to stop his swing. Otto's left forefinger was cut clean off.

My parents heard our screams and rushed outside. Dad scooped Otto up and hurried into the house with him, where he and Mom wrapped the injured hand tightly in a rag to stop the bleeding. Then Dad carried Otto to the home of our good friend and neighbor Otto Grubb, for whom he had been named. Otto was the only person in the

area at that time who owned an automobile. He immediately agreed to make the long drive, fifteen miles over mountain roads in the deep snow, to get Otto to the doctor in Manchester.

After they had gone, my mother asked me to go and find Otto's finger and bring it to her. I hunted sadly through the snow until I found it. She wrapped the finger in a scrap of cloth and put it into a matchbox, then gave it to me and instructed me to bury it somewhere. I hiked a little way and buried that little box under a flat rock on the mountain. But when Dad and Otto came home from the doctor late that night and they discussed it, they remembered the old superstition that a limb or digit which is cut off must be buried perfectly straightened out to prevent its owner from having lifelong pain where that part should have been. Like many mountain people, they took some of these old wives' tales very seriously. So the next morning, I was sent to dig up the finger and bring it home, where Mom and Dad could make sure it was straight. Then I reburied it in the same spot.

That was such a sad and frightful day for all of us that I have never forgotten the details. Fortunately, Otto made a full recovery. Since he was right-handed, the loss of his left forefinger never seemed to affect him much, and he never mentioned it as an adult. And although I don't expect the straightening of his finger had anything to do with it, I do have to admit that after the stump was healed he never did have any phantom pain where that finger used to be, as some people apparently do.