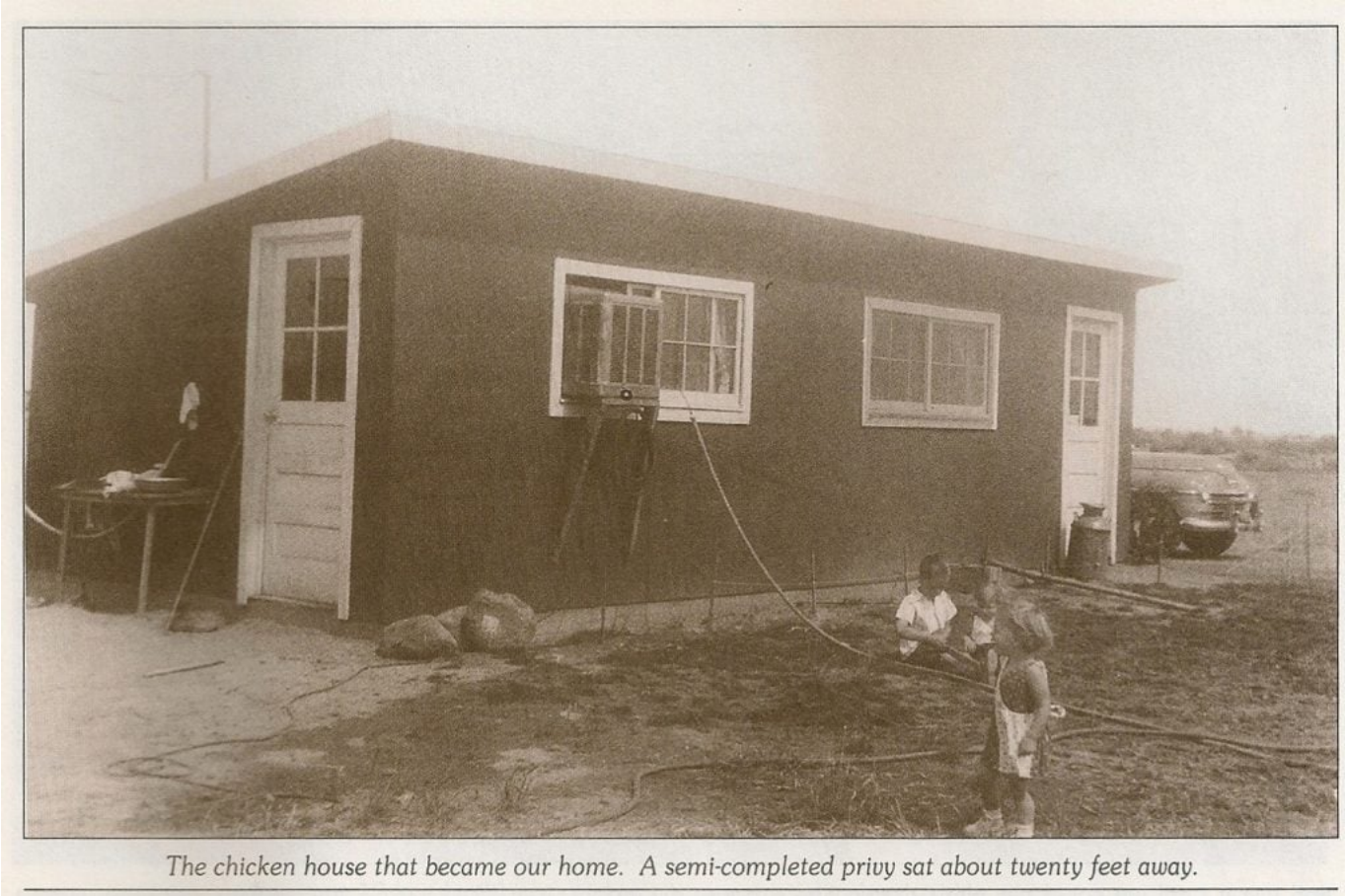
Where the Wind Blows Across Sage

By Carl Nelson

The farm we were homesteading in the Columbia Basin in the '50s was a designated 180 acre plat in square miles of desert sage brush and cheat grass. Irrigation had arrived, and farms were being carved out for homesteading (see homesteading qualifications: : https://carln.substack.com/p/my-first-complaint) and leveled for irrigating. Initially there was no road. You had to drive across a lot of countryside to locate the surveyor's stakes, I'd suppose, when my parents first visited the area and chose their plot. There was a gravel road to arrive on by the time I first saw our 'farm'.



The chicken house that became our home. A semi-completed privy sat about twenty feet away.

The area was flat sagebrush as far as the eye could see until

it climbed the Horse Heaven Hills, directly to the south, or the blue mountains far away to the west. Later, at night, standing on the back door stoop I could hear a chorus of coyotes howling, under a lot of stars. There were a lot of coyotes back then and a lot of jack rabbits. Pheasants proliferated, too. You generally only needed to watch for snakes when you walked off into virgin terrain or near rock piles. Feral neighbor cats would happen past. One was making a caterwaul on our rooftop one night so bad that dad got out of bed, in a fit of pique, and shot it. A week or so later a neighbor asked if we had happened to see their tabby. Mum played dumb.

I left out the tumbleweeds which grew big, with the diameter of small children. When the wind blew they would snap loose from the soil and go bouncing, tumbling, and flying; dozens of them coming at you like defensive football players at the kick-off. They would dance for miles and pile up against fences and trees.

Way out there staring across flat miles of sage land about the only things to make fun with were the ground and the wind. So we made a flour paste with which to glue pages of the local newspaper. Then we took strips of wood left from dad’s table saw and made a kite with baling twine and old rags for a tail. Why make a small kite when you can make a big one? The kite was much larger than myself and we took it out one day when the wind kicked up. Unfortunately it had kicked up a little too much. It was about to lift me off the ground when it got away and cart wheeled splattering into pieces.

Another thing we did was to make forts. Who knows why we built forts? There was nobody nearby within a half mile. But I suppose we enjoyed the idea of a hideout. Now creating hideout in a flat landscape is a bit of a challenge, which we solved by digging a hole, rather grave size, which we camouflaged with a lattice of soil and brush, from which we could come and go, unseen. Since there was no one there who especially wanted

to find us, the charm of sitting in a hole soon wore off. And in short time, spiders, snakes and other critters moved in. Finally, dad drove his tractor into it. No more holes!

After the farm became more developed there were more things to do. The next fort we made was of baled hay. We fashioned a hollow from the interior of a baled haystack. For our entrance we disguised a wooden flat with straw and baling twine to resemble one end of a hay bale. We thought ourselves very clever and would steal watermelons, sometimes a cooling pie, to sit inside and devour while chattering.

For fun I would pretend I was an alligator and hunt my territory from one boarded irrigation ditch spillway to the next. All of the irrigation water was collected in a run-off pond before flowing into the wastewater canal at the lower end of the farm. Most of the irrigated farms had one. These served as our swimming holes. The water could get six to eight feet deep. That seemed very deep to me at the time. We lashed fence posts together to make rafts from which we mounted wars. My older brothers needed five posts whereas I only needed three or four, which gave me an added mobility.

The children worked hard, but they played hard, too. Wooden rubber-band gun fights were a favorite.

My dad was a Kansas farm boy who worked his way through college to become a civil engineer. But he'd wanted a farm himself. Mom loved a challenge and had a penchant for hard work, so when the chance came to own a chunk of the newly opened Columbia Basin Reclamation Project, they grabbed it. Running a farm is a lot of hard work. Creating one is even more so. I remember the giant yellow Ukes, like great diesel carpenter's planes with huge rubber tires traversing back and forth across the sage land, scraping here and depositing there in order to "level" the land for irrigation. And I remember all the dirt and clouds of soil as the wind blew. The intent was to grade it just a bit off-level, so that the gradient from irrigation ditch to run-off ditch were just enough of a drop to make the row water trickle past at the proper speed for maximum absorption. Dad did survey work on the side, so he had his farm staked precisely. I remember riding on the cultivator, the fertilizer and seed hopper as we prepared the fields for our first crops. My crop was cantaloupe. I planted them in the triangle plot of ground where the tractor path bifurcated as it t-boned another. I remember harvesting the

one which survived as being just larger than a softball. I also had a pig I liked to watch.

Pigs are interesting creatures. They are built low to the soil and have seemingly made their peace with it, being quite happy to slop about in mud and snort through goo. I like their bristly pink skin, their round noses and especially their grunts and snorts. I've always enjoyed grunting and snorting myself so perhaps I felt an immediate connection. Also they got big and fat. I liked things which grew big and fat. And they bore the cutest little piglets. How they could wander in and out the seemingly oblivious sow's legs without being stepped upon or crushed was a continual amazement to me, a watchable moment. "Slopping" the pigs was big excitement as they all came running, jamming their heads in to the feed trough, grunting , nosing, and slurping. Squeals of indignation, and snorts of dominance made the common conversation.

I slopped the troughs. Then stepped back a bit from the fence and the stampeding herd of pigs. They hit the troughs like three or four splitting wedges all trying to jam themselves into the same crack. Whee! Their dinner didn't look that great to me, but they loved it. The nearest thing I've seen to come near it were the Black Friday sales following Thanksgiving at WalMart.

I didn't attend kindergarten, so mom saw to that education. And while I was busy with my assigned work she would type a daily letter to her father on an old Royal upright. Ratta tat tat… the keys hammered at ninety words per minute. She fired off the details of the day, her concerns, farm incidents and bits about dad and the kids. And not much about me, really, because I mostly just sat and watched her, plus my baby sister, Blythe, who was my charge. One week she had to wait until the end of the week when she'd have the money to buy a stamp. Now and then we'd churn ice cream or I'd help to make butter by shaking cream – for a seemingly endless time – in a

Kerr jar. It made me tired.

Even our 12-foot by 28-foot chicken house managed to host visiting relatives, such as my sister-in-law and her young daughter (left). Note the cardboard boxes stapled to the walls for insulation.

I rode the yellow school bus for about an hour each day, in and out from town. They would make the pick up about halfway between our house and the next, so each morning I'd walk about an eighth of a mile. We'd play marbles in the dirt while we waited. Agates were the most sought after captures.

My mother didn't mess around. As she was doing the dishes in the kitchen sink one morning she looked out to see the geese chasing my little sister across the yard, trying to bite and hissing. She walked right out, got the axe, and chopped off all of their heads. No more geese.

One late afternoon one of our cattle got out of the fenced area and into our field of alfalfa. Green alfalfa will cause cows to bloat. It must be a terrible death as they swell up and lie there in the alfalfa like balloons from which the four legs protrude like sticks. Mom and my brothers went out to

herd the cow back in. She got it just to the opening, but it wouldn't step inside. Wouldn't budge. Finally, completely exasperated, mom took up a fence post she'd found nearby, swung it hard as she could and broke it across the cow's rear. The cow bellowed and jumped forward. Situation resolved.

Farmers can't afford to mess around. Everything that happens comes down to whether you eat or not. We had a dog named Pepsi. When he was about one, a dog from the nearby farm dropped past and showed him how to kill chickens. Dad had to shoot him. "Once they start killing chickens, they won't stop," he said. Death and birth are much closer to a farm kid's life than they are to someone in the city. You are closer to the food you eat. You might have just gathered, plucked or picked it.. Death was just another happening. Death wasn't immense to me at that time, and never considered. It was just something which happened to the food we ate. But this gives it more prominence than the thought had. For example, when the chickens got their heads chopped off, I can't say I felt that much for the chickens – but the fact that they would keep running around while without heads was fascinating. What did this mean? The questions on the farm were far more numerous and much more interesting than the answers. City life and school would eventually give me answers, but the questions were never as vast.

I liked riding on the cultivator and sitting on the seed hopper while dad drove the tractor. There's all sorts of things you learn how to do while living on a farm like setting a siphon, milking a cow, plucking a chicken, snapping beans, making butter and ice cream, feeding animals, and enjoying the presence of rabbits, coyotes and pheasants, and collecting rocks from the fields. (Where did they all come from each year?) House cats grew pretty tough out there. I saw one trudging across the road in the car's headlights one night with one half a jack rabbit held in its mouth.

The great spaces could make a person feel very small and very

important at the same time. The wind blowing across the sage spoke to your soul, while the far off blue mountains were my stand in for God.