

#### IV COMMUNITY LIFE . . .



Some events of importance in my development took place right in our home or front yard. On Sunday afternoons father's cronies would come to talk and debate. It seemed almost a ritual to this group. In winter they would gather in our living room.

One person was Louis Norem, owner of what we termed *our* store for we did most of our trading there. He was my god-father. Anders Hendrickson, owner of the largest farm near Rushford, was almost always present. Others were John Green, Frank Smith, Jon Johnson, Ludvig Tagland and G. G. Grossfield. The latter two crossed the Atlantic with my parents on the ill-fated "Undine", in 1871.

There was interesting talk. One main feature was father's insistence on always standing up for America, as United States was called. He was an ardent patriot. "There is no land in the world that offers people the opportunity for a good life as does America", he often said. This sank deep into my consciousness. This was the land of opportunity, even for the poor.

#### 2.

Discussions were held about city affairs. For years there had been talk of providing Rushford with safe water supply and fire protection. One group favored building a huge tank on the bluff-side on Magellsen's Hill. This provoked discussion. It seemed endless but the project was finally voted and built.

Chinch bugs was a topic for years. They laid waste grain fields and were particularly destructive against wheat. Anders Hendrickson one Sunday said, "I am through with wheat. I shall raise stock". Soon he built the biggest barn in this part of Fillmore County. It still stands.

Patriotism reached unwonted heights on Fourth of July. There were big celebrations every year. The G. A. R. led the parade. It was impressive to a youngster. How proud we were of the soldiers in blue! How we looked up to them, the preservers of our Union! Circus Days were a delight and joy. Like all the rest of Young America I toiled for hours at heavy tasks necessary to earn a ticket. No sleep the night before, or very little, because we had to see the cars unloaded. We just had to watch the elephants push the wagons into place. What a world of wonder and glory!

#### 3.

There were parties, programs, lyceum attractions and occasional plays presented in Rushford Opera House. This was located on the second floor of a store building. Later roller-skating became the vogue and the rink, as it was called, was built. My parents had been brought up to distrust the theatre as being a part of the devil's own program. We, children, studied plays in school. We even participated in juvenile performances. So when Joseph Jefferson, himself, was billed to play "The Old Homestead", my younger brother and I decided to attend.

This decision encountered difficulties at the start. Permission was not granted. There was a lamentable lack of silver, also, that made the prospects dim. These obstacles faded away when we left home unobserved and, next, entered the Opera House via a second story window conveniently located near an outside "fire-escape" stairway.

We were there. We sat enthralled during the performance. It opened a new world to us. Jefferson at the close appeared, talked and, in closing, gave his famous toast: "Here's to your health, to your family's good health, and may you all live long and prosper."

It was an unforgettable occasion, not marred at its close when we quietly entered our second-floor bedroom, through its window, undiscovered, without awakening anyone.

Boys' clubs are to be found in many cities now. Back in the late 80's and early 90's they were uncommon. Mrs. George G. Stevens organized a club which met in her home. Her husband was the president of the local bank. She was a gracious woman, a leader in Rushford's social life. The home was Rushford's finest. My younger brother and I were invited.

Mrs. Stevens met each boy at the door and pinned a card bearing his name on his lapel. The evening was spent playing parlor games, singing and other entertainment. She found time to talk to each one. This club exerted a marked influence upon me. It led me to favor extension of services for the underprivileged which is what she most desired.

#### 4.

Church was important in our home. We regularly attended services following father in a row to his accustomed place on the church's right side. Mother and the girls sat with the women on the other side. As we grew older this custom was changed.

Vacation school was taught by the pastor. I learned to read and write Norwegian which was of great use to me later when at the University of Minnesota, where I enrolled in Prof. Carlson's classes in Norwegian Grammar, Literature and one course in Old Norse. It was in this course that I read some of the old sagas in the original. Jake Preus, later governor of Minnesota, was a classmate in the Literature and Old Norse courses.

Christmas was a marked holiday at our home in Rushford. It took some time before I could solve Santa Claus' unerring exactitude in discerning my inmost desires. I wanted a pair of boots edged in front with a copper strip. Lo, and on Christmas morning Santa had brought them to me! This was beyond my comprehension. I fled to mother and covered my head in her lap, tears of joy running over.

Christmas eve at the church was filled with a supreme gladness that could not be expressed in words. The beautiful music, the songs in which we all joined, the tree, the gifts, the pastor's brief talk. What could be more beautiful and wonderful? There was a present for each member of the Sunday School. "Do not open the packages now," the pastor said. "Do that at home. God bless you all. May you all have a Happy and a Blessed Christmas!"