

Florrie

Though we lived in the city when I was a child, we spent frequent weekends and much of our summers where my mother grew up, the Langlade county farm of John and Florrie Follstad. It was tucked in the woods of north-eastern Wisconsin, a place that was then and is even now largely wilderness. Not long before it had been a harsh pioneer outpost where Victorian immigrants survived a grim test of mettle.

I was born four years after my sister Sue and one before my brother Jim. Sue still recalls me as an infant— so small and pale, the labored breath. She knew without being told her new brother might not survive. It took the ministrations of my mother, grandmother and sister together, plus many weeks at the farm that first year, to finally persuade me to live. By my first birthday I'd been there six times.

The journey is over 200 miles. It's a four-hour drive now, longer still in the early years when we arrived by train or poor roads, not to mention dreadful weather. Long enough to make the trip itself an adventure. We usually had to get an early start. Mother would warn us the night before, "We need to be there by breakfast. Getting you kids up at 3:30." With the awful snap of the light switch, searing brightness wrenched us from deep sleep. We stumbled like zombies through total darkness to the back seat of a running car.

Dad's parents were from the same part of the state, so he knew the road well. A few hours later, "Ready for some coffee?", and the car filled with its rich aroma from the thermos Dad took to work every day, poured carefully for him in its lid and Mom's in a paper cup. We heard the crinkle of waxed paper-wrapped sandwiches, smaller than usual since we were in transit. "Are you kids ready for half a sandwich yet?" Three dreamy kids squirming in the back seat slowly came to life as familiar farmlands shrouded in mist sped past in the breaking dawn.

After three hours the relentless patchwork of fields stitched with fences fell away. Forest, lakes and streams prevailed by the time we reached Langlade county, part of a high glacial plain. In places skeletal pines in boggy swamps stretched for miles.

Cool summers and brutal winters conspired with geography to make this place hard to civilize ever since it was first settled. In time, this created a cultural divide as well. To those from the southern part of the state "up

north" conjured a vision of desolation and poverty. It was a place to visit only in deer hunting season— as much for its taverns and brothels as its teeming game— or for two weeks in summer with the kids, if you had a cottage on a lake.

My first visit to the Follstad farm was in 1948. What my mother called "up home" was a subsistence farm with antique equipment dependent on hard manual labor. Her parents John and Florrie still relied on horses then to work the fields, and didn't get a tractor till 1950. Yet nearly all their children returned with their spouses to help. Of course they'd been raised that way, but the visits had their pleasures as well. They could fish, hunt, eat great food and enjoy each other's company at the farm's lovely home.

A rush of gravel thrown up by our car's tires marked the last mile of our journey. The row of elms came into view, then the house. Grandma Florrie may have been in the garden, or would come to the kitchen window but always from wherever she was came a high-pitched, owl-like "Hoooooooooh!"

She'd often be wearing an apron— not the silly frilly hostess half-aprons they embroidered for one another— but full pinafores with a high front, full back and deep pockets. Only twice in my life did I see her in trousers, or "dungarees," when we went berry-picking. Both times she apologized to the children about it.

Florrie Follstad wore print or plaid house dresses always, and hose, and black leather shoes with squat stacked heels of at least two inches whether she was washing, canning, killing chickens or dragging a sack of potatoes. (I can't vouch for the killing chickens, actually, she never allowed the children to see that.) Her day-to-day shoes were slit with x-shaped holes here and there for painful corns. The doctor in town had fiendishly attempted to burn them off with acid once. She never went back. (I found one of those shoes on the stone pile last summer, as if the torturous things refuse to die.)

Her magnificent snow-white hair was achieved without bluing and despite decades of home permanents— a source of well-deserved vanity and always a subject of comment. She had been a shy beauty in her youth and was still lovely as a grandmother. But she was most admired for the beauty of her home, the bounty of her table and the compass of her heart, all maintained despite dreadful odds.

Many of my 11 cousins were about my age, and we had close and sometimes volatile summer relationships. My cousin Jody was headstrong and high-spirited, the oldest in her family and equipped with a temper to match my own. As we grappled in blind fury, she once grabbed a favorite shirt I was wearing and the front went to shreds in her fist.

Surely the tatters were clear evidence of her brutality towards me.

"She ripped my shirt! Jody ripped my shirt!" I bellowed. In spite of the fact that it was, I knew, old and well-worn.

I didn't see Grandma Follstad again that day. When I went to dress for play the next morning, there on my bed was my shirt again, miraculously whole. Closer inspection revealed the finest cross-stitches I had ever seen, easing every shredded tatter into place. It was eloquent embroidery. I never fought there with Jody again.

Grandma Florrie was an early riser. All us grandchildren were city sluggards compared to her. "Best part of the day, between 6 and 9 AM in the garden," she'd say. Garden here meant the vegetable garden, of course. If Florrie meant flower garden she would say so. Though cleaning and laundry were approached with a grudging vengeance, she truly loved to cook, so tending the garden was the toll for that pleasure. But after that garden work was done, she'd picked and prepped food for dinner and put the roast in the oven, Florrie would turn to her other great love— her flowers.

A cutting garden stood between the vegetables and the road. Since she divided her dahlias every year but couldn't throw a bulb away Grandma planted vast numbers of them— one late diary entry counts 53 holes— small purple ones, or shaggy pinks and yellows the size of dinner plates. There were also gladiolas. Florrie's bouquets of three-foot stalks were spectacular.

The first seed she planted every year grew into sweet peas for cutting. Their unique scent is still a favorite of mine, and still reminds me most of her. The dining room table was never without a big bouquet all summer, nor the high deep mantle above the fireplace. Sometimes if the petunias needed pinching, little glass bowls of them would appear too, finished with a wisp of asparagus fern she grew indoors for just that purpose.

Flowers were everywhere on the four-acre grounds. There were mock orange, honeysuckle, lilacs, of course, and iris beds under the elms along the drive. She banked other gardens with annuals like asters, zinnia, petunia and sweet William, and the perennials she loved: painted daisies, Oriental

poppies, phlox, and banks of old tiger lilies. She was partial to deep purple and sky-blue delphiniums. My favorites were the peonies— huge pink flowers with ivory centers, giant white blossoms stained with streaks of blood red, or deep rose globes with gold-braid stamens tucked among their taffeta ruffles.

In a special garden she made a show of delicate specimens astonishing to find this far north. Huge crimson and white begonias, jewel-tone coleus, double or colored-leafed geraniums she'd swapped cuttings with friends to start. It was bordered by her prettiest field stones, white crystalline and pink granite. There were even fuschia and an orange tree she took in every winter. On the road out front, passersby would simply stop to look at the yard for a while before driving on— Mom said it had been like that since she was a child.

By the time she was a grandmother at 50, osteoporosis had given Florrie a prominent hunchback. She knew this only as retribution for the moral failing of slouching as a child. Sciatic rheumatism crippled her left leg ever since a bad fall in the hay mow when she was 60. Despite handfuls of aspirin, she never lived a day without pain. Yet she continued to expand vast flower beds on every side of the house till she was well into her seventies, under the pretext of "evening them out." This despite the cruel climate of Langlade county, not to mention her infirmities.

She had learned hard work and determination at the side of her immigrant pioneer parents. But her goal was inspired, I have come to understand, by the gardens she left behind in the English villages of her youth. A pale-yellow old rose Florrie always grew came with her family from the Cotswolds. This is one of the loveliest districts of England, birthplace of the Victorian cottage garden.

Florrie shared few memories of her homeland, and then only when curious grandchildren would plead. Their old stone row house had windows bricked over because of a king who once taxed sunlight. She went to call for her best friend on the way to school one morning, only to find the girl had died of diphtheria in the night. They were required to wear black sashes to class the day of Queen Victoria's funeral in 1901, her last mild English January.

She said little else about the life they left behind, and never spoke of the voyage she took with her family to come to America at 10. Still, Florrie cherished the tattered black-bordered memorial card "In Loving Memory of

Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria" that she had gotten from her mother Mary when she died.

Though I was only five when Great-grandmother Mary died I can still recall her long dark dress, the antique cameo at her throat. Her white hair was caught in a loose bun at her neck, and wire spectacles conferred ancient wisdom. The old woman's face was worn by bitter disappointment and constant toil, resignation, and a luminous frailty. Still a Victorian lady, she hid her rough hands in the pocket of her apron when visitors came to call.

Great Grandmother Mary's farm kitchen took up half the house. There was a sofa at one end, a big table and Hoosier at the other. At the center she reigned from an awesome apple-green and white wood-stove with scrolly chrome fittings. A red-lipped white enamel kettle provided boiling water for tea at a moment's notice.

Mary was sick at heart. She regretted they had left England for Wisconsin every day till she died at 87 in 1953, old enough to be the only great-grandparent I ever knew. Testament to that, a prized pale-pink china tea cup perched on a little shelf, "A Gift From the Crystal Palace, London" scripted in gold on its side.

Florrie's mother Mary had gone to London at 15 to work as a servant in a great house, but took to neither the bread and water diet nor the garret room in which she was to live. She left as soon as she could for the Cotswold village of Ascot-under-Wychwood.

There she met and eventually married Florrie's father Caleb Moss in 1888. He was from a family of wood cutters, but with the elm forests gone—the "wychwood" part of the name—there was no work. What the newlyweds wanted was their own land for a farm.

Caleb's grandparents had been gleaners—allowed to cull the grain left after the lords had harvested. They had led a local land reform revolt in the 1840s. A memorial in the village square still commends their valor. The simple justice of the right to own land, and thereby control one's own destiny, had always fired his imagination.

Caleb became a blacksmith, but it was a struggle supporting his and Mary's growing family. Mary's brother—always called simply "Uncle"—had long been begging them to join him in America. In time, the tales of nearly-free land in an agricultural Eden rekindled dreams of years, even generations

before. After fifteen years of marriage and three children, the Moss family finally made the trip to America in 1902.

Caleb and Mary pooled resources with Uncle and bought 80 acres of cut-over timber land near the hamlet of Kempster, Wisconsin. They set out to build a dairy farm. At a time when life expectancy was under 60 the three adults were all middle-aged at over 35. Grandmother Florrie and her sister Mary could help with some work at 12 and 14, but there was a baby brother too, and another yet to come. Caleb kept a journal from the time they left England, expecting a grand adventure. It became instead a saga of deprivation and hardship.

Florrie learned first-hand what backbreaking, heartbreaking toil it took to turn logged timberland into farmland. The Mosses arrived in Langlade County in a raw mid-March in 1903. First they threw together a cabin of scrap log they foraged, then built a small barn— more comfortable than where they lived, Grandma Florrie said. They had to clear enough land by the end of May to yield food for some livestock and themselves in the coming winter. Giant stumps from trees hundreds of years old had to be pulled up by ox teams and burned.

Next came the hell called "picking stones." Ten thousand years ago retreating glaciers littered the area with millions of granite field stones. To till this soil the Mosses had to pick up the rocks and haul them away. Stones too large for oxen to haul they split up with dynamite, then carted away along with the others to some low, marshy place. Stone piles grew as large as an acre, and became a farm's private dump. Every winter's freeze heaved up more rocks. Caleb and Uncle cursed them as their most successful crop.

In addition to all these chores, Caleb took a night-watchman job at a sawmill to make it till harvest. He worked from 6 PM to 7 AM, farmed mornings till noon, and slept from 1 PM to 5 PM— four hours a day. They barely survived.

Despite their regrets, the Mosses expected at least to be judged as Americans— on their accomplishments and not their lineage. Yet they quickly learned the price of acceptance. To blunt open ridicule and harassment, the Mosses shed their British accents as quickly as possible.

Neither did they admit to drinking tea. Though they referred to their afternoon caffeine and pastry break with the American word "lunch," it wasn't lunch at all. On their own land and in the sanctity of their own home,

they kept high tea and were English again, every day at four o'clock.

Grandmother Florrie helped establish her family's rudimentary farm those first years and attended Kempster's one-room school. When it came time for high school, the only one in the county was in Antigo, some 15 miles away. She went there alone at 13 to live in a boarding house and attend classes. But she had to work so hard in exchange for her room that she had neither strength nor time to study. After two years she didn't return.

By this time the Mosses were settled enough that Caleb was able to quit his night-watchman job. They had cleared enough land to support a dozen head of cattle, set stone and hewed beams for a fine barn from trees on their own land. Though the vagaries of weather or the market for their product would never free them from worry, the family had held its own against the odds. They built a classic T-shaped Victorian farmhouse, and Florrie returned to the Kempster homestead.

Like many of their neighbors, Caleb and Uncle had started their own logging operation during the winter months when they weren't tilling their fields, to make extra money to buy land to add to their holdings. Rather than continue her formal education, Florrie decided to work as a cook for her father's logging crew. She had already helped at home, and was keen to learn more. She reasoned folks will always need to eat— and she liked it.

Food in a logging camp was serious business. In a time before any kind of power tool, these lumberjacks were little more than human chain saws. They lived in rough, temporary quarters in bleak winter isolation. The five meals a day they ate were as much entertainment as fuel, and it was no secret that the best crews followed the best cooks.

For Florrie the work was mainly drudgery at first. She advanced rapidly in skill and responsibility over the next several seasons, however. By 1911, when the posh new Muskie Inn opened in the nearby village of Elcho, she was a seasoned veteran of 20 who decided she was ready to work in a more refined kitchen.

The Muskie Inn was a gabled, half-timbered Norse fantasy of pine forest frescoes, moose heads and antler chandeliers. One of the Follstads of Elcho ran it, and there was one in the kitchen named Mattie. She was a formidable Scandinavian ice queen, and tyrant of the first order if the bread was too dark or the silver smudged. Here, Florrie learned of salads in molds

and suckling pig, crab Louis and the high art of Scandinavian baking– the sand bakkels and berliner kranze she would make the rest of her life.

In time there was another reason to enjoy working at the Inn– seeing the youngest bachelor Follstad brother who would often come in to dine. Although he was nearly 15 years her senior, Florrie couldn't imagine he had ever been more handsome. John had an honest smile, he liked her cooking and he was starting to notice her, flirt, you might say, in that joking way of his. When they married in 1917, she was 26, he was 40.

