

I do not remember a single story told by Pop about my great grandparents, about his mother, or about my aunts. He did tell me several times that he and his brothers and sisters liked most of all to hear my grandmother sing *Darling Nellie Gray*, and often asked her to do it. They also liked her song *Mama's Black Baby Boy*. She must have remembered this, for that song was one of three that she chose to sing in front of my tape recorder when she was more than eighty, the other two being very old songs of Centerville origin. Pop said in my presence several times that his own favorite song was *Spanish Cavalier*, and he used to sing that song in the cow barn. A long time ago that fact got into a verse of mine that tried to combine the sensations from an afternoon lying in the sun on the hill in the East Pasture with the times I used to sit in the dust at the end of the field watching tumblebugs and waiting for Pop to get to the end of the field so that I could give him some message from the house.

The East Pasture

The June sun warmed the rocks on the slope,
and a boy lay on his side and watched a pair of tumblebugs
rolling their hot, packed ball down the dusty cowpath.
How they scurried and scuttled,
and guided the dungball past the pebbles and clods.
He turned on his back and chewed a timothy stem,
and thought the white cloud above him was a wild, white stallion,
waiting for him to ride it.
He remembered his father singing, "Spanish Cavalier"
in the cow barn before the sun came up,
and his mother humming, "Raggle Taggle Gypsies,"
as she lifted the crisp, brown potato cakes from the skillet
and poured the hot, dark cocoa.
"Then fetch me down my milk-white steed,

and bring to me my pony, O!
that I may ride and seek my bride
who's gone with the Raggle Taggle Gypsies, O!"

The June sun was warm on the slope.
A striped gopher stood by his hole in the pasture grass,
straight and still, bright eyes blinking, and peeped querulously
at the boy sleeping on the hill in the warm June sun.

Pop as Sharecropper

Pop was a sharecropper all his life, farming the 151-acre farm of a high school classmate, Leslie Hammersmith. Leslie had inherited the farm from his father, and he showed little direct interest in its operation most of the time. Pop got the farm when he and Mom stopped teaching grade school. One or the other of them once said to me that he had stopped teaching to farm partly because he wanted to spend more time with his kids than a teacher could. His behavior all the time we were growing up would lend strong support to such an idea.

I had the impression that Pop and Mom used every cent and all the credit they could get to start farming, and that they did it with an absolute minimum of outside help. Most of their horse-farming equipment was almost worn out when they purchased it at farm sales. Because of Pop's various illnesses and his short life they never really emerged from their financial problems. All of Pop's farming equipment and salable possessions sold at auction for a few thousand dollars. Because of the long-term nature of his illnesses he also had little life insurance. Probably most of this is typical of sharecroppers in the days of horse-farming, even in the rich prairie country of Illinois.

Pop once said, in an interview printed in the *Prairie Farmer* (August 19, 1950), that one reason his farming operation had been successful, in terms of return on investment, was that he had the best landlord in Piatt County. Perhaps he said that because Leslie let him run the place more or less as he saw fit. Apparently that was to Leslie's benefit. While Leslie served in the Second World War he gave his power of attorney to Pop rather than to his wife, much to her irritation. I admit to some disillusionment,