

## Chapter 3

DECATUR, ILLINOIS

1870

My parents finally settled in Decatur, Illinois. I was born there September 24, 1870. My father had what was then considered a good job in a furniture factory as a skilled cabinet maker. He also kept the machines in repair. He was paid \$3.50 per day! We owned our own little comfortable home and an eighty acre farm in the country.

When I was two years old my mother took me on a trip to see my grandmother in Missouri. I am sure I can remember nothing about the trip but I heard later so much about it that it seems very real to me.

My earliest recollections are of events when I was a little more than three years old. I can remember my mother, as a tall slender woman, then about thirty-six, as she wept on receiving news of the death of her mother.

I can remember having my picture taken with a new black velvet suit and of the photographer showing me the developed plate. I still have the one picture in a heavy oval walnut frame.

I also remember going with my mother to visit a woman who lived in a big house with spacious grounds. They had a brindled dog that had puppies. I went out in the yard to play and the dog seeing me swooped down upon me and bit me on the arm much to my terror.

We had a fat Indian pony which was driven to a light spring wagon. Once when coming back from a trip to our farm in the country when nearing home McGuffin became so anxious to arrive he spurted around the corner into our alley, I rolled out of the wagon and a wheel of the buggy ran over my thumb, bringing blood but no permanent damage.

When I was five years old our family, father, mother, my older brothers Harlow and Walter and I moved to our farm two and one-half miles in the country. My father said he did not wish to raise his boys subject to the temptations of the city. Decatur at that time perhaps had a population of 25,000 but is now probably as much as 100,000.

I think my father may have been one of the early inventors of breakfast food. As early as I can remember we had wheat cracked on a coffee mill which we ate for breakfast, and at times at other meals with cream and sugar. After we had the mill it was cracked on the corn burrs and my first years in college I have lived on it. If those are right who say that cereals should be eaten soon after they are ground then we were blessed with nourishing food.

My father and mother were members of the First Baptist Church of Decatur and we went to church and Sunday School every Sunday whether we lived in town or country. In the old church which had a high basement they opened a trap door for us to go down to the Primary Department where I can remember singing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so".

When I was not quite five they gave each of the children a certificate of membership in the Sunday School framed in a gold frame. When they called the name of the first pupil, he was absent.



then the superintendent called Frank J. White and I marched up proudly in my velvet suit and with my flaming red hair to receive it. May 2, 1875 the certificate which is before me says; though the frame has long ago disappeared.

The first pastor I can remember was Mr. Bonham who used to wear a shawl. He afterward became pastor of the First Church in Kansas City. At his death he left his property to Ottawa University.

I also remember Mr. Van Osdel preaching in the new church which later became the main Sunday School room of the church. He must have been the minister who used the following illustration of the hunter who came home from a day's hunting and dropping into a chair by the fireplace went to sleep, but as he did his foot struck the ~~logs~~ against the shovel; in his sleep he dreamed about the whole course of his life (as I am now doing) and when he awoke the shovel was still ringing.

When we moved to the country our lumber wagon as it was called got stuck in the sand of Sand Creek a quarter of a mile from our farm and my father unhitched the horses and getting them out on solid footing, pulled us out.

By this Sand Creek ford lived old Uncle Billy Devers and his wife, a simple old couple. In fact, so simple that when it was rumored some years later that they had never been married, they rushed to town, got a license and were married by a justice of the peace.

Our farm was a paradise for a boy. Between Sand creek and our house were huge oak trees with bluegrass beneath. On the far corner of the farm was Big creek, a small creek that cut a small corner off the farm and my father traded that small corner with a neighbor for a corner on our side of the creek. The corner we acquired had on it two large butternut trees, the only ones I ever saw. The tree belongs to the black walnut family but bears a very excellent elongated nut in which there is a kernel very much larger on one side. The squirrels always knew on which side their nut was buttered.

We used to play a game called hullgull with these kernels; holding our two fists clenched with a big butternut kernel in one fist. If the opponent guessed the right fist he got the nut.

A half mile from our house was the Sangamon river. In the summertime we boys used to start out, go to a pool in Sand creek, divest ourselves of pants and shirt, throw our chip hats on the sand and jump in, repeating the process in every good pool.

We didn't swim in the Sangamon unless our father was with us. But it was here that my father taught me to swim by dumping me in over my head. We made Indian huts of bark, fought with weed spears, tried to shoot birds with homemade bows of hickory and not too straight arrows, never inflicting any casualties on the birds.

Sometimes Walter and I went hunting with our older brother Harlow carrying the shotgun. My father taught us to be careful not to point a gun that was supposed not to be loaded at anyone. My mother said a gun was a dangerous thing even if it didn't have a lock, stock or barrel because a man once beat his wife to death with a ramrod.

I often went to town with my father to hold the horses while my father delivered butter which was one of the chief cash products of our farm. My mother did not use the dash churn but a barrel churn that turned over with a crank. Many times she won the prize for her butter at the county fair, bringing home the coveted blue ribbon.



They got thirty cents a pound from individual families when other farmers sold their butter to the grocery stores for from ten to twenty cents. I enjoyed going with my father except when he stopped too long to talk with some garrulous housewife.

But there was real work to do on the farm; carrying water to the field, piling sheaves and hoeing corn. My father grew his wheat and oats on the hillsides and harvested it with a cradle.

I well remember the centennial celebration July 4th, 1876 when it rained and no one went to town but Harlow on horseback. So I added to the downpour with my tears. This was the last year of President Grant's administration.

I learned to read simple children's books at home and started to school at the age of six and accomplished the feat of completing McGuffey's First Reader, the Second Reader and part way through the Third Reader in the five months of school we had that year.

The school was a quarter of a mile walk from home. The average attendance was ten and our teacher was a middle aged man.

A flourishing afternoon Sunday School was held in the schoolhouse. I was very proud of our singing ability as we usually took the prize in the annual Sunday School picnics.

There was an abundance of odd characters in our neighborhood, any one of which would figure well in a novel. One of these was a lay preacher who had a voice that could be heard for a half mile without troubling to go to church. Another character was old man Waits who had several sons and a large pack of hounds whose musical baying made the woods ring.

On our farm were two apple orchards; a new one near our house and an old one on the north side of the farm, near the butternut trees where a house had formerly stood. This old orchard was on a lovely grassy slope and had at least one early Maiden Blush apple tree that ripened very early in the summer. But we boys seldom got any to eat as my mother used the most of them just before they were ripe to make apple pies, and weren't the pies good!

Our father grew sorghum and made molasses for ourselves and our neighbors; usually a big barrel or two for home use.

Those four years spent on our farm (1875-79) were among my happiest childhood years. Almost our only playmates were Tom and Willis (Wis) Bankson, sons of a Cumberland Presbyterian minister who lived nearby, and Willie Steplen. The Steplens lived next door to us in Decatur and had moved to a nearby farm when we had moved.

My sister Florence was born the year that we left Illinois and was the joy of our family.

Fifty years after (1928) when on our last furlough from China in travelling by auto we visited the farm and camped in the school yard. The same building was still being used as a school. All the good bottom land of our farm was part of the new lake Decatur and one lone apple tree was left of the old apple orchard now on the shore of the lake.



## Chapter 4

MISSOURI HARRISONVILLE

1879

In the autumn of 1879 we moved to the West where my father and mother had lived before the Civil War. My father had traded our farm for 160 acres of raw land in Osage County, Kansas about 40 miles southwest of Topeka. The Steplens did likewise, and we all set out, the Steplens with one wagon and we with one wagon and a large spring wagon all of them covered and we also had tents for camping.

What fun it was for us boys as the horses walked at the rate of twenty miles a day and we could walk whenever we liked enjoying the varied country as we went along. We crossed the Mississippi river at St. Charles, on a bridge a little way northwest of St. Louis. At that time St. Charles was inhabited almost wholly by Germans and we had difficulty in finding storekeepers who could speak English. East central Missouri had a very large percentage of Germans. They had sent whole regiments into the Union Army during the war.

However it was only 90 miles southwest of St. Louis where U.S. Grant lived as a farmer when the war began. By the way, I was born in the second year of Grant's presidency.

We followed what is now number forty highway, then a rather rough road and unpaved except for a short stretch that was macadamized on which we had to pay toll. Between St. Charles and Boonville there were some very hilly places, one of which I remember we went down what seemed like stairs over ledges of rock.

We passed Columbia but I have no recollection of seeing the University. But in this region we saw old brick mansions with tall white columns that had been built before the war. Water was scarce and we had to tell people that we were going to Cass county, Missouri as many people looked askance at any covered wagons going to hated Kansas.

One man I remember had a sign at his well warning people to keep out, but his neighbor welcomed us, gave us water for our horses and as we camped beside the road brought us apples and apologized for his surly neighbor.

We crossed the Missouri river at Boonville on a little steam ferry. Forty years later in 1924 we crossed on the same ferry with our Dodge car. At Boonville we saw more colored people than we children had ever seen before and were much amused by seeing colored boys dancing in the street.

Many years later a friend told me about coming to a ferry near Boonville where there were only row boats. Several negroes sitting there made no move to man a boat so he said can't any of you men row? There was no response. Then he said can't any of you push a boat? Then one of them jumped up and exclaimed, "Oh, I thought you meant ro(ar) like a lion!"

After more than a month of travel we reached my mother's old home where my Uncle Jessee Saunders now lived with his wife Aunt Fanny and their five boys and two girls. They gave us a warm welcome especially around the big fireplace. Three of the boys are still living, Adrian and Walter I saw in 1946 at Downs, Kansas. Maud the



younger daughter Mrs. Simmons also lives there and the youngest son lives near Yamhill, Oregon and the other daughter Mrs. Eva Frush lives at 2494 50th Ave. N., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Before we started on the trip my father had bought a new set of harness for one of the teams. But three days before we started the new harness was stolen from the barn. Beside the Steplens two other families were to meet us in Springfield for the trip. They started before us but we saw nothing of them in Springfield.

There was still living near Harrisonville an old lady, Mrs. Barmer, who thought she could tell fortunes. So just for a lark my father and mother visited her and she told my father's fortune saying, "Your new harness was taken by a man who has a team of dun horses". One of the men who failed to meet us had a dun horse. Probably my father had suspected this man as the culprit, and may have mentioned it to our relatives.

During the war when the Union cavalry was stationed at Harrisonville some of the soldiers visited Mrs. Barmer to have their fortunes told. Before they arrived at her home in the country, one of them said, "I'll test the old lady." So he took off his saddle and hid it in a fence corner. When his time came to have his fortune told she looked into the coffee cup and said, "So you thought you would fool the old woman. You hid your saddle in a fence corner and you'd better get back there for the hogs are tearing it up." Either some of his comrades had given him away or she noticed when he came that he was riding bareback, for she was no fool. The Baptist church of which she was a member finally erased her name for their roll when she refused to stop fortune telling. She was a pleasant old lady and probably got a lot of pleasure out of her practice of Clairvoyance. She and my mother were good friends.

After a visit with my mother's people we all travelled on the remaining eighty miles to our land in Kansas. It was now nearing November and it was a bleak prospect on the bare brown prairie. There was a small, square one-room sod shack on my father's land. But the lonesomeness of this uninviting place seemed to make the prospect all the more forbidding, my mother shedding tears.

So after a day and a night the two families decided to go back to Missouri for the winter. So back we went. On arrival my father found that the mill on Grand river was for sale. So he traded the Kansas land for the mill and we settled down in the house nearby which he had built about twenty years before. Mr. Steplen traded his Kansas land for a farm very near our mill.

Our one story house although covered on the outside walls with walnut siding which my father had sawed in the sawmill, was too small, containing only two large rooms and the floor being too near the ground, was infested with rats. So my father proceeded to build a new story and a half house. We boys thought what a lark we would have when we tore down the old house. But when the old house was demolished and the floor taken up not a rat could be found. They had all moved with us into the attic of the new house! My Uncle Jessee had a whole family of black and tan terriers that were famous rat catchers. One of these was turned loose in the attic and soon cleaned out the rats.

What a paradise this place was for we boys; right on the river bank with Uncle Jessee's woods across the river.

It was not long until my father built us a fine boat and painting it blue, we named it the Blue Goose. There was a ford in the river a



short way below the mill for more than a half a mile was a fine sheet of water that give us a splendid place for boating and fishing. Although I was only nine years old I was permitted to take my tiny sister in the boat. One time we three boys were having a race with ourselves! I sitting in the bow paddling and Walter and Harlow sitting beside each other rowing as hard as they could row. Harlow being so much bigger rowed too hard and the boat turned over and we rolled out into the deep water. We promptly swam to shore and then my big brothers swam back, bailed out the water, took me on and we continued merrily on our journey.

Near the rapids a man in Harrisonville had built a large ice house and we boys went up in our boat once a week in the summer to rake over the sawdust and fill up the holes at the sides of the ice to keep it from melting. Walter was paid a small amount for this service and we were allowed all the ice we wished to use. Each time we rolled a huge cake of ice down the bank and sometimes it slipped into the river and it was quite a task for us to pull it out of the water.

In the winter we pulled the boat out of the river onto the snow and it would become frozen into the snow. One night in the late winter there was a sudden thaw that was accompanied by rain and in the morning the river was in flood, the ice was gone and our precious Blue Goose was nowhere to be seen. In a few days word came that a man ten miles down the river had rescued it. So we went down with a wagon and hauled it back. It had a big crack in one side. But with tar and tow and a strip of canvas and a new coat of blue paint our beloved boat was as good as new.

There were no large fish in our small river but plenty of little flat sunfish and small catfish. Once I remember I pulled out one of the latter but it dropped off my hook onto the sloping bank. Flopping its way down this bank I tried to stop it with my bare feet but it finally succeeded in rolling into the river and I had my bloody feet from its sharp spines for my pains.

Once we went with the men seining the river at night. A big fire was built and since I was too small to wade in the river I was left to keep the fire burning and much to my alarm a hoot owl came and sat high up in a tree nearby and suddenly he seemed to say "Who, who are you? Who, who are you?"

We went to school about a mile from home. In the winter the snow sometimes drifted until the road between the fences was completely filled. Melting a little on top in the sunshine and freezing at night, the banks of snow would bear our weight as we went to school in the morning but in the afternoon as we came from school there was danger of breaking through and that was still more fun.

Of course we made snow forts and fought snowball battles. One morning our side found that many of our partisans had deserted to the enemy. But we repaired our political fences and suffered little harm in the end.

Our first teacher was a man who had been a member of the lower house of the state legislature. He gave nearly all of his time to a few older pupils neglecting us younger ones so that we didn't receive much guidance and only those of us who were industrious made much progress.

The next year we had for our teacher an old man with a gray beard, Mr. Withers by name. He was one of the best teachers I ever had in country school and we all made splendid progress. After the holidays he failed to return for a week and when he came it was with a very red face. We learned later from our parents that the reason why such a good teacher was teaching in such a small school was because drink was his besetting sin.



Our constant playmates were Adrian (Ady) and Walter, Uncle Jessee's boys. We were very fond of Uncle John, My mother's youngest brother, and his wife Aunt Annie. Having no children at that time they were very good to us. Uncle John had the finest, most friendly voice with a genial crackle in it that we all loved. Strange to say he was an expert in sounding the good old "rebel yell", so well remembered by Union soldiers in the Civil War. Whenever we were in the woods with him we always teased him to yell and he would make the woods ring. He told us that he had belonged to a "Chivaree" band and had a horn but the others took it away from him since he could make so much more noise yelling.

I knew many soldiers who had been in either the Northern or Southern armies and one of them told us how in his first battle, the battle of Gettysburg, when the Confederate troops charged sounding the terrifying yell his hair probably stood on end with fright and only shame prevented his running away.



## Chapter 5

ROSIER DREXEL

1881

Though I probably needed punishing my father never actually severely punished me. But one day I narrowly escaped. My brother Walter and I were working together and I as often was rather lazy and Walter said he would take punishing into his own hands. I picked up a piece of wood and said, "If you come near me I will hit you." On he came and down came the stick on his head. My father saw what happened and was very angry and said, "I will attend to you."

Just then a delegation of men came in sight to see my father about a very important affair. Twenty miles southwest in the corner of Bates county and four miles from the Kansas line the people were fifteen or more miles from a railroad town. So some of the leaders in the community had gotten together and decided that they should establish a town of their own and they had sent this delegation to propose that my father move his mill to the beginning of the town.

After investigation my father decided to do so. We dismantled the mill, the farmers came with many wagons and the mill was moved and rebuilt. The owners of a store at Freeman fifteen miles north established a general store, still another store was built, a doctor came and built a drug store, a Swiss blacksmith came and opened a shop and soon the town was able to furnish everything needed by the flourishing farming community and the town was named Rosier for the wealthiest man in that region, though it was located on the farm of a man named Joel White.

Mr. Rosier must have been a descendant of Ferdinand Rozier the business partner of John J. Audubon, the naturalist, for Rozier is described as "dark, slender, cautious with a narrow frugal face and had shown sound sense about money", a perfect description of old Ace Rosier as he was known. Perhaps I should put in here since Audubon came into contact with Daniel Boone several times in Kentucky, that while we lived in Rosier two grandsons of Boone once stayed overnight with us, tall, slim, fine looking farmers from near Kansas City.

Mr. Joel White deeded two and one-half acres of land to my father and water rights to the finest spring for many miles around. My father named his mill "The Crystal Springs Mill."

It was a beautiful rolling prairie country, sloping gradually to more broken partially wooded country toward the east.

Just to the north of Rosier was an open prairie of about a square mile slightly broken by the small stream from our spring and other little rivulets and in some of the depressions were small clumps of trees and shrubbery; some of them containing wild plum trees bearing several different natural varieties of plums.

We turned our cows loose in this open pasture of blue stem prairie grass that had clumps of goldenrod and Indian paintbrush scattered over it. My brother Harlow who now worked in the doctor's drugstore had a team of bay horses and the mare was a lovely riding horse. I used to ride her to bring home the cows, always bareback Indian fashion. I enjoyed everything; the plums, the flowers, the riding.