

Down on the Family Farm: A Personal Remembrance

*It all comes back so clear today!
Though I am as bald as you are gray-
Out by the barn-lot, and down the lane,
We patter along in the dust again,
As light as the tips of the drops of the rain,
Out to Old Aunt Mary's!*

-James Whitcomb Riley



John Schmidt

What a rich farm heritage we have in America! A heritage that is kept alive not only in memory, but by the present living out of our lives, embracing values

that have sustained this country in times of peace and peril. Those who prepare the soil and plant the crops that feed the nation have an intimacy with God that graces their lives in a special way. The work of planting seeds and harvesting their bounty is symbolic of God's purpose for mankind.

Whenever I think of agriculture and farming, I think of my own family, especially my mother and her great grandparents, John and Mary Schmidt, who started the family farm. I grew up in the suburbs of northern Virginia, carved out of the great woods of *The Old Dominion State*. But the images that filled the bedtime stories in the home I was raised in were all about life on a small farm in Burr Oak and Fawn River Townships, in a place called Michigan.

When neighbor kids would try to *one up me* in the rough and tumble of neighborhood play, telling me that their dad was better than mine, or that they had this or that advantage, I had a secure place I could retreat to in the quiet of my youth. I'd go home at night after a tough day at the playground, and I'd say to myself, "so what, they've got nothin' on me, 'cuz my mom grew up on a farm!" and it seemed to me at that moment of satisfaction, all was well with the world and the advantage was supremely mine. You see, farm life had an enchantment for me that came alive in my mother's childhood remembrances of life on the farm.

Today, as I look back, I can picture my brother and me playing around the stone foundation of the old barn during our summer vacations. By then, the farm no longer included the company of barnyard animals and the chores of daily farming, but the remnants of that special life were to be found all around us. In the field east of where the barn once stood and alongside the adjoining pond, large stones were piled in deposits that for sheer size could have



Mary Schmidt

only been placed by some pre-historic glacial drift. I was to learn that these stone piles were created not by the caprice of mother nature, but by the determined backbone of my great, great grandfather, John Schmidt, with the help of his horse and something called a stoneboat. This was a new word in my lexicon of country life. I knew what a steamboat was, because I read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and I had envisioned myself floating down the Mississippi on more than one fanciful adventure, but a stoneboat, that was a boat of a different stripe. The piles of stone still remain today where

they were placed a century ago, and the image of my great, great grandfather with horse and stoneboat in tow is firmly fixed in my imagination. To me, the word stoneboat symbolizes the American ethic of hard work and perseverance. It has become a favorite symbol of mine for overcoming obstacles and for getting a tough job done.

Behind the farmhouse stood the outhouse. From those who knew, we learned about the utility of Sears catalogs, and about unappreciatively cold winter nights. We heard stories about cutting large ice blocks on Plum Lake and after they were packed, how amaz-

ingly long they would last into the warm weather months without refrigeration. The point I failed to grasp was that these stored ice blocks were themselves the source for the household refrigeration. We heard about the late-summer harvest and that special moment when the unmistakable sound of the threshing machine could be heard coming down the dusty road with men dangling from the sides, along for the ride to the new job site. We heard about the cooking that would last all day in order to feed the hired hands of the harvest. There were stories told about raising mint, and growing gherkins for Heinz. And then we listened quietly to the telling of sad times when the family parlor was used as a funeral room to display the deceased, and friends and neighbors would come to the house to pay their respects.

While my mother would tell us that life on the farm had everything to do with hard work, she shared so many wonderful stories about how rich her childhood was down on the family farm. She talked about her collie Shep, about her favorite sheep and goats, the mile-long walk to the one-room Plum School, and the wonderful Christmas dinners at the farmhouse of her Great Grandmother Mary Schmidt, a stone's throw across the street. My mother called her Ma, but she was known by most as Aunt Mary. They are all gone now, all but a few; the barn is a memory, the windmill too. But strangely, it all comes back in that wonderful and fitting verse by James Whitcomb Riley, *Out to Old Aunt Mary's*...

Out to Old Aunt Mary's Wasn't it pleasant, O brother mine,

*Wasn't it pleasant, O brother mine,
In those old days of the lost sunshine
Of youth- when the Saturday's chores were through,
And the "Sunday's wood" in the kitchen, too
And we went visiting, "me and you,"
Out to Old Aunt Mary's?*

*It all comes back so clear today!
Though I am as bald as you are gray-
Out by the barn-lot, and down the lane,
We patter along in the dust again,
As light as the tips of the drops of the rain,
Out to Old Aunt Mary's!*

*We cross the pasture, and through the wood
Where the old gray snag of the poplar stood,
Where the hammering red-heads hopped awry,
And the buzzard "raised" in the clearing sky,
And lolled and circled, as we went by,
Out to Old Aunt Mary's.*

*And then in the dust of the road again;
And the teams we met, and the countrymen;
And the long highway, with sunshine spread
As thick as butter on country bread,
Our cares behind, and our hearts ahead
Out to Old Aunt Mary's.*

*Why, I see her now in the open door,
Where the little gourds grew up the sides, and o'er
The clapboard roof!- And her face- ah, me!
Wasn't it good for a boy to see-
And wasn't it good for a boy to be
Out to Old Aunt Mary's?*

*The jelly- the jam and the marmalade,
And the cherry and quince "preserves" she made!
And the sweet-sour pickles of peach and pear,
With cinnamon in 'em, and all things rare!-
And the more we ate was the more to spare,
Out to Old Aunt Mary's!*

*And as many a time have you and I-
Barefoot boys in the days gone by-
Knelt, and in tremulous ecstasies
Dipped our lips into sweets like these-
Memory now is on her knees
Out to Old Aunt Mary's!*

*And O, my brother, so far away,
This is to tell you she waits today
To welcome us- Aunt Mary fell
Asleep this morning, whispering, "Tell
The boys to come!" And all is well
Out to Old Aunt Mary's!*

-James Whitcomb Riley



Sen. Cameron S. Brown (R) Fawn River Township, is the Assistant Majority Floor Leader in the Michigan Senate. He chairs the Senate

Agriculture Subcommittee and the Homeland Security and Emerging Technologies Committee and is the Vice-Chair of the Campaign and Election Oversight Committee. He earned a Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University, and has a BA in History from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. Sen. Brown and his wife Helen live in the farmhouse built by his great, great grandparents John and Mary Schmidt in St. Joseph County.

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