

A SUMMER AT SILVER BAY

by

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It was not easy to leave home for an entire summer. For a boy of fifteen, whose roots had grown deep into the rich soil of the Mississippi delta, it looked like an eternity in a strange land. It was my first train trip alone, and it was exciting to be in the lower berth and see the small towns pass in the darkness. Now the train was slowing for Birmingham, and the orange glow of the Bessemer Steel industry was like a preview of inferno.

Five years before, I had been in New York with my mother and my sister, Louvica. I had been escorted then to see the sights by various members of the Parlin family, and had spent a month at Silver Bay. The thing I had noticed first about Silver Bay, and remembered first now, was the smell of the cedar shingles on the house and of birch logs in the fireplace. This memory was closely followed by a kaleidoscopic procession of special people from distant lands—China, Japan, England, Germany—especially of the British gentleman, Jock Fletcher, who was upset because Lydia, the German maid, had a picture of Hitler by her bed, and who got himself stranded in the canoe one windy day and had to be towed in. I remembered the incredible precision with which activities of all kinds were programmed; I remembered movies from all over the world taken by Cousin Charlie and Cousin Daisy; I remembered Cousin Grace playing the piano, and the musicals of Ruth and Howard.

I remembered the intense blue of the lake surrounded by forested mountain slopes plunging down to the clear, fresh water which changed with every mood of the weather; the guest cabin in the woods on the lake bank within earshot of the waves; the Regatta at the Association, the square dancing, the swimming and boating and fishing; the box of frogs which escaped in the house, terrifying Lydia; the bats in the attic and the riotous fun of swatting at them in the middle of the night with tennis racquets, boat paddles, brooms.

I remembered the boathouse where the lake came right inside with the beautiful mahogany motor launch, and the room upstairs where the

Chinese party was held and the guests all tried to eat with chopsticks and someone played music on the blade of a handsaw; the picnic at which we performed a play written by Cousin Charlie, in which I wore a cardboard thing which made me look like a battleship (I can't remember of which side—friend or foe) and we did something which I didn't understand, having to do with international negotiations. This was in 1940 when some people were still laughing about the threats of Germany and Japan. This rich profusion of memories of experiences and personalities played tag in my brain until the rhythm and rocking of the coach put me to sleep.

Grand Central Station was a gigantic grotto, like the Hall of the Mountain King. One could easily insert in it my entire home community of Carter—people, homes, cotton gins, barns and stores—with hardly a noticeable diminishing of available space. I was clad in new shoes, and a wool suit to protect me against the rigorous cold of the northern United States. It was June, and the temperature in New York that day was 98 degrees.

I had been told that someone would meet me at the "Station". Since our "Station" at home was about the size of a modest three-bedroom house, I had not anticipated the problem I was now confronted with. Just how in an underground labyrinth of such incredible size and complexity as I was in, did I go about finding someone whom I might or might not recognize, and who might or might not recognize me? Since I was immediately caught up in a river of humanity which surged through the winding tunnels, my mind was diverted to the problem of staying afloat and in the general vicinity of my luggage.

The torrent erupted into a still larger space and I and my bags were deposited like a small delta about thirty feet from the tunnel entrance. This space was even more unbelievable in size, and reverberated continuously with the din of bustling crowds and loud speakers blaring out unintelligible garbles. It seemed as though everyone in the city had chosen that day to be in that Station and late for his train. At least one of them had to be a member of the Parlin family.

Since all directions looked about the same, I started wandering in a very wide circle which I figured would put me on an equal footing with the traffic and perhaps afford a glimpse of whoever it was I was

supposed to glimpse. I had just about decided that the whole thing was a dream and that, like Alice, I had become very small and had tumbled by mistake into an ant nest, when the public address system boomed out something that sounded remarkably like my name. The fourth echo confirmed this fact, with the further statement that I was to report to the Information Desk in the Main Waiting Room. I looked towards the center of the room and sure enough, there it was.

“No, this desk didn’t call for you. That was from the Main Waiting Room, which is that way.”

Thunderstruck that there could be a waiting room more “Main” than this one, I followed directions and eventually found Grace Parlin, who informed me that instead of an arrival this was only a pause. I was rushed to meet Aunt Miriam and Blackie at Penn Station, and we caught the train to Ticonderoga.

I must confess that I had held visions of a pretty soft summer, since on my previous visit, as a guest, I had not been aware that much work was done by anyone. These visions faded rapidly as I was introduced to the responsibilities of my office. Briefly, they included the daily feeding, watering, and droppings-collection for about two thousand “eating chickens” (numbers may be grossly distorted due to time lapse and point of view); daily feeding, watering, droppings-collection, and egg gathering for about forty laying hens; tender loving care for 25 baby turkeys, a two-acre lawn, and a garden; two freezersful of ice cream each Sunday morning and other miscellaneous duties ranging from the building of fires on cool mornings to helping to fill the silo. But the pièce de resistance was the daily watering and feeding of 40 White Hampshire hogs.

These hogs were kept, I was told, in a large pen just up the hill from the main house. Wheat shorts were kept in the garage, (apparently for the convenience of the chipmunks) and carried up the hill in ten gallon loads. When Henry, the farm caretaker, first introduced me to the herd and was in the act of showing me where to administer the nutrients, etc. we had been surprised by about forty pounds of shote hurtling over the wall of the pen and landing partly on me and partly on Henry. We were struggling to get it back on its own side when here came another. I knew then and there that the situation was laden with

grave possibilities, especially for one whose thumb was not whatever the proper color is for successful hog-raising.

But, full of hope and determination, I prepared their breakfast the following morning and started up the steep slope with some 80 pounds of wheat shorts. As I hove into view a great squealing and commotion arose in the pen, and through my perspiration I perceived a quartet of healthy, hungry hogs thundering down upon me. Four skillfully executed body blocks sent me and the shorts in a great avalanche down the hill. Thus the problem of administering nutrients was complicated by circumstances that my fourteen years of age never succeeded in altering. I first tried the sneaky approach—coming by another route. But don't ever think a hog can't hear. Their radar picked me up as soon as I left the garage. Then I tried the obedience training method, consisting of a stick to discourage the over-eager. I stored the weapon at a point just below the impact area so as to be armed and ready for the attack when it came. Since, however, hogs are practically impervious to blows, and one has to deliver a really terrific blow even to get their attention, I found this method as inadequate as the first one. It sometimes took three trips to get the necessary food in the trough.

The fence-jumping became worse and though I became rather skillful at getting them back over, it was a no-win war. Posses went regularly into surrounding areas to bring back fugitives, who merely waited until the next day to escape again. Just why none of us thought to add another two feet to the pen fence I'll never know. However, even this would not have prevented the mass exodus which occurred one hot July afternoon when the 750 lb. stud boar decided to crash through the 2" x 10" plank fence and along with the entire herd disappear into the mountains. The largest of all posses was formed in pursuit and the mountains rang with an incredible cacaphony produced by hog-callers of every race, color and creed. Hog-calling in one's native tongue is often a highly personalized and always a bizarre sound; but to hear it in Chinese, Japanese, British and German, intermingled with contributions from New Jersey, New York and Mississippi, is an experience which defies verbal description.

Most of the hogs were eventually rounded up. (But there are tales told today by campers and hunters, of huge, white, rhinoceros-like

animals that can jump like deer and consume an entire tent in the twinkling of an eye. Indeed the Adirondack rhino has become more dreaded than the grizzly, and is particularly dangerous in winter when it cannot be seen at all in the snow.)

At that point Uncle Charles, Aunt Miriam and Charlie (who I understand, was the original owner of the hogs) held what must have been a difficult summit conference, in which the choices must have been as follows: (1) repair and increase the height of the pen walls; (2) sell the hogs; (3) ship the swineherd back to Mississippi. Luckily for me, and the hogs, the second choice was agreed upon. A seasoned platoon of gladiators armed with pitchforks was dispatched to the arena and a large truck was backed up to the loading chute. With much shouting and prodding the herd was moved into the truck. That is, all except No. 1 rhino, who defied all efforts with 750 pounds of snorts and grunts which made our pitchforks look more like pickle forks. A separate crate was made for him from heavy timbers, into which he was finally prodded. Our shouts of victory had hardly reached Pudding Island when we beheld our captive erupting out the top of his crate in a shower of splintering timbers. No. 1 Rhino was finally carted away in a larger crate, thus ending the Swine Saga of Pudding Island Farm.

The chickens had been comparatively easily managed all summer, perhaps because they knew that every Friday was Guillotine Day, when from twenty to forty of their number were removed from circulation to grace the Sunday dinner tables of local families. However, problems arose in late summer when the chickens were moved out onto their "range", north of the main house. Several wire cages were placed near the center of a large pasture. During the day the chickens frolicked about happily catching grasshoppers. At night, chickens normally seek an elevated, darker place for roosting. However the wire pens were neither elevated nor darker than the surrounding pasture. This was further complicated by the fact that the reluctant chickens caught colds if they ran around in the grass after sundown and got dew on their feet. The problem could be stated thus: Chase two thousand swift-footed French chickens from a two-acre pasture through a one-foot-square opening into what the chickens considered unsuitable roosting cages, an hour before the normal roosting time. Now anyone who has ever tried to chase a chicken through any kind of opening knows that a

chicken has an uncanny capacity for psyching out the intent of the chaser and gleefully thwarting it.

My first attempts lasted well into the night and degenerated into what must have looked like a one-man soccer game in which arms, legs, hands, feet and head were used against tremendous odds. Fearing for the lives of the chickens, Aunt Miriam and Blackie joined me and the roosting was accomplished in time, even with the added handicap rule of no place-kicking.

Blackie was assigned to work full time with me at this point, and thus began a very pleasant association in which we enjoyed fishing, swimming, capturing chipmunks and red squirrels, and getting the chores done after a fashion. A favorite pastime was strolling through Arcady Resort, pretending to be looking for Star, the Labrador retriever, who was safely shut up at home. The lake, of course, was where we spent most of our time, swimming in the cold water until our fingernails were blue. Blackie did not care much for fishing, but I conned him into rowing me around the lake a lot, and one afternoon we came in with a five-pound small-mouth bass. We explored the islands for buried treasure and collected interesting rocks.

I occasionally saw Edward Parlin that summer. He came by several times to get vegetables from the garden for his long camping trips. I admired his woodsmanship tremendously and was deeply saddened that that summer of 1945 was his last.

I remember how we all looked forward to the weekend visits of Uncle Charles, who gave us all a lift with good news from the city, entertaining stories and fresh ideas for exciting activities.

I remember Aunt Miriam's patience with my shortcomings and her innumerable kindnesses, ranging from enrolling me in the Arts and Crafts program at the Association, to having my watch repaired every couple of weeks. I remember her telling me about the Hiroshima bombing while I was building a fire in the fireplace. Then the following Sunday we all went to Chapel and heard a beautiful Japanese soprano sing the Lord's Prayer.

I remember how autumn came in late August and the surge of homesickness I felt when I saw ducks migrating southward over the lake.

Looking back, I can see that my summer at Pudding Island Farm was the one in which I made my biggest step out of adolescence. I grew a phenomenal three inches, my voice changed, and I learned to accept responsibility—a little. I would be utterly dishonest if I said this growth was painless, either to me or to my immediate superior, Aunt Miriam. Experiences by their very nature have to be partly painful in order to be either real or worthwhile. The Silver Bay experience was both.