

THE GRANGE MEETING

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My mother had a cousin by the name of Hannah, who lived on the edge of New Philadelphia, Ohio. She and my mother were children on nearby farms in Tuscarawas County. My mother and family moved to Delaware, she went to Ohio Wesleyan, and entered the 20th century. Hannah and family moved to a different farm adjacent to New Philadelphia and never left the 19th century. She was a big boned woman, thoroughly good-hearted, and a little nutty. The nuttiness was a manifestation of a condition shared by two brothers, her father, and her mother. They all had latent syphilis introduced into the generations by Hannah's father's father. Where and how he contracted the disease, I don't know. The story was told me that he was a sea captain, which was supposed to explain the phenomenon. But there is no indication in any family record that the grandfather was anything but a 19th century Tuscarawas farmer. Hannah's younger brother's hands were curled shut into useless fists by syphilis. When the two families lived on adjacent farms, my mother's mother would never allow her daughters to stay overnight with the cousins. In 1929 or 30, Hannah's father got out of bed one night, telling his wife that he was going to the toilet. She knew that of course he was going to commit suicide. So, in the morning, she went out to the barn and cut him down. Before doing so, she slapped his face as hard as she could.

Hannah never married. For many years, she and a fellow named Charlie courted one another. They finally decided not to get married, so Charlie moved in with Hannah and her older brother, also unmarried. Hannah and Charlie carried on reduced farming on the several acres left of the New Philadelphia farm. Most of the land had been sold off for various municipal purposes. The New Philadelphia airport is located on some of that property. Charlie did the heavy work of digging and tilling. Hannah maintained a large vegetable garden, kept the house, and did the cooking. As the summer progressed, she canned jar after jar of vegetables. The jars went to basement shelves, where the jars from the year before and the year before that were pushed back to make room for the

newcomers. When the house was cleaned out after Hannah died, there were jars from 40 years before in the back rows.

I used to visit Hannah and Charlie for a few days every summer, starting shortly after the older brother died. I stayed in his room with no ill effects, so far as I know, except for a back pulled hither and yon by the lumpy, sagging mattress on the bed. I spent most of the visits driving Hannah around to see the old farms and graveyards of our ancestors and cousins. Nearly everybody Hannah knew was a “cousin”, second, third, second cousin third removed, related either by genes or remote marriages. I particularly remember the farm on Stillwater Creek where my mother was a child and the one-room log cabin where my grandmother and Hannah’s mother were born. It still stood intact along a country road on a weed covered corner of one of the old farms. The rest of this paper is a description of part of one visit to Hannah.

The Friday that I arrived in New Philadelphia turned out to be grange night. So I had to go off to the Grange meeting with Hannah and Charlie. First there was a potluck supper which confirmed a general opinion I had come to over several years, namely, that Ohio farmers of the 19th century could not cook. Hannah was a terrible cook; and the other contributors to the supper were no better. Hannah bought creamed peas, which, as she said, she had made somewhat thick. With a consistency like jello, they stood in a mound on the plate. The gooey sauce entirely hid the taste of the peas, which was probably quite good, since they had just been picked from Hannah’s garden. Another lady brought scalloped potatoes that were raw and floating in a kind of soup. The only meat dish consisted of a chicken which had died of old age, the corpse of which had successfully resisted the attempt to tenderize it through cooking. The meal was topped off by a cake bought at the local bakery, of the quality of cakes for sale in corner groceries in run-down areas of a city.

After supper, we all trooped upstairs for the meeting. “All” is used rather loosely. Besides myself, Hannah, and Charlie, there were 6 or 7 other women, two of whom were “juniors”, i.e. high school students, and one other man. He was the Worthy

Master of the Grange. The Worthy Master got out his Ritual Book and started reading. He was stopped by one of the ladies who pointed out that the Bible had not been opened yet. In fact, the Bible wasn't even on the table where it was supposed to be. Proceedings went into suspension while Hannah scurried around looking for the Bible. She was the Grange Steward. A quarter of an hour elapsed, and Hannah still could not find it. Finally, a lady sitting just behind the Bible table asked why the meeting didn't get started. The situation was explained to her, whereupon she pulled the missing book out of the table drawer where she had put it after the previous meeting.

So we tried again. First came the Bible opening ceremony. The two juniors picked up staffs that looked like bishop's crooks and marched to the Bible table. There one slowly opened the Bible, and they marched back. That important event was followed by a prayer from the Chaplain, then a hymn and the Star Spangled Banner. The singing was accompanied on a piano which had not been tuned since the Grange was founded in 1876.

Since I was present, they had to skip most of the ritual, which was secret. Instead, they went straight to the business of the evening. The first item came from the Home Economics Chairman. She announced that she had decorated a pillow case with a handkerchief for the summer contest, and why hadn't anyone else done so. That produced a discussion of nearly an hour on how to decorate pillow cases with handkerchiefs. The Home Economics Chairman stated that the directions were explicitly set forth in the contest booklet. Nobody could remember having read the booklet, so they wanted the procedure explained in detail. It seemed that you cut the handkerchief into two triangles. You sewed one triangle on the front of the pillow case. Then you cut the other triangle into a long strip, which you sewed as a border on the back of the pillow case. All of that proved to be too much for the ladies to grasp mentally. One by one, they asked how to cut the handkerchief. No one listened to an explanation given to someone else, so the answer had to be gone through for each lady in turn. Finally, when I thought that the problem had been settled, a lady at the back said that she thought there

was some sort of summer contest going on involving decorating a pillow case with a handkerchief; and did the Home Economics Chairman know anything about it.

The next item of business was a report from the Junior Chairman. What it came down to was that the state office wanted a contribution of \$10 from each grange to support junior activities; and that the local juniors wanted a contribution of \$5 each toward their summer camp fees. Somebody asked how many juniors were going to camp. The Junior Chairman thought that there might be three. That caused another great confusion. How could $3 \times \$5$ equal \$10? It took another half hour before most of the members became aware that two different requests were at issue. Finally a motion was passed supporting the \$5 per junior for camp and denying the \$10 to the state. Everybody voted for it except the Treasurer, who said that she was becoming alarmed at money always going out and none coming in. In reply, one of the ladies who had voted for the motion stated that the \$10 they had just voted to send to the state to support their own members' camp fees was not excessive.

Next came a letter from the state grange's Legislative Representative (i.e. lobbyist). He wrote with some urgency that a bill was about to pass that would allow hard liquor to be sold on the State Fair Grounds—not, to be sure, during the State Fair, but at other times. A great to-do ensued as the ladies discussed ways of dealing with the crisis. They finally decided to follow the Legislative Representative's suggestion of writing letters to a certain State Senator whose committee was then considering the bill. The lady reading the letter gave the full name—first, middle initial, and last—of the Senator in question at least 10 times, once for every person present. Then somebody asked what the Senator's first name was. The reader replied that the letter did not say. Since nobody took down any of the name and address information during any of the repetitions, it didn't matter.

Finally, the last item of business was the annual chicken barbecue. The Worthy Master appointed the Home Economics Chairman as head of the Barbecue Committee. The Home Economics Chairman declared that she would certainly not take on that job.

One by one, everyone else stated that he or she would not do it either. Since they couldn't get a chairman, they turned to the question of how many chickens to buy. That proved to be a more tractable issue, and a number was soon agreed to. The Worthy Master then asked who would sell tickets. Again, one by one, everyone refused. They completed the planning by choosing a date for the barbecue.

The important matters having been disposed of, the Penny March began. The two juniors took up their staffs, paraded to the Bible table, and ceremoniously closed the book. Instead of returning to their places, they made an arch with their staffs. Everybody, except me, walked under the arch in some order of precedence, and tossed coins into a bowl. The girls then paraded back to their chairs; and the formal meeting came to an end.

The Worthy Master called for the entertainment. Everyone waited. Eventually, it turned out that nobody could remember who was supposed to have organized the entertainment. Fortunately, the Worthy Master just happened to have in his hand a poem which he wanted to read, which he did. A lady produced a newspaper article on long hair, which she read. Another lady asked me to tell them a little bit about my home grange, which I didn't.

Since nothing else seemed about to happen, the Worthy Master asked the Chaplain to give the thought for the day. The Chaplain said that somebody should have told her that she was supposed to have a thought for the day.

So the meeting came to a close. I was exhausted. Hannah suggested that I come for a two-week visit the next year, instead of just three days. There were so many other interesting things we could do together.