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THE FARMER'S ADVOCATE

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The Autobiography of a Country Spinster.

By Aunt Jane.

My little brown cottage stands on top of a hill that slopes downward pretty sharply for half a mile all the way to Lake Seneca, New York, so that I can look over the trees and see the lake in all its various moods—and that makes it sort of company.

Lots of people say that Seneca Lake is very good to look at. They say that the fish in it are sulky and won't bite. It's too cold for bathing, and yet it never freezes over—or so seldom that it might as well be never. It is so treacherous, too, with its sudden squalls, that folks are afraid to sail on it, and it's so deep that no one has ever been able to find bottom in the middle. And men drowned in it are never found. I have heard a doctor say that the cold springs in Seneca make it too chilly for bathing—but how could they hinder its freezing in the winter time?

Anyhow, even if Seneca has faults in other respects, it is beautiful to look at, and I don't believe that anywhere in all the world one could see better sunsets than I get sitting on my front stoop. Seneca is three miles broad opposite my house, so it spreads out right from my feet, and on a clear evening I can see far up and down the water and the rising shore on the other side, with the farms and their buildings, and the people going along the roads.

Even though I am seventy-six years of age, my eyes are pretty good yet, and I can tell what the farmers across the lake have planted and how the crops are getting along. That's now in the summer-time. In the winter, of course, the whole country is white, but that makes the houses across the lake stand out all the clearer, and the teams going along the roads are company then.

All seasons are good for me here, but I think I like the Indian summer best, though the haze prevents me from seeing so far. The Indian summer is soft and quiet and mild and friendly and still—as if the lake and the woods—everything—was just thinking—like me. I am in the Indian summer of my life, but I'm not like the trees, for they wear their brightest colors, while I wear gray and my hair has turned white.

My life now makes me think of an Indian summer sunset, it is so calm, and I suppose that, like a sunset, it will go out soon, but maybe not so very soon, because I come of people who lived to be old. One of my father's brothers was eighty-five when he died, and an aunt lived even longer. I am only seventy-six.

I do not do any work now. Not what we used to call work in my day. Of course, I keep my house, and if people can find any dust in any of the six rooms they must have sharper eyes than mine. I do my cooking, baking, ironing, washing, mending, dressmaking and gardening, and in the fall I put up preserves, but that is really only play. I have plenty of time to read and to sit out in front, gossiping with the neighbors and watching things go by.

If I was on a farm, all alone, I suppose I should be very lonely, though I was a farmer's daughter and brought up on a farm. But here I am on the main street, with the post office only a hundred yards away, and three stores near the post office, and a blacksmith shop down the cross street that leads to the lake, and the Methodist church fifty yards across the street from me.

So there are plenty of people coming and going, and when I sit out in front the neighbors stop and talk to me. Then there's only the garden between my house and my brother's, and he is very good. He is much younger than I, and married. There is a string stretching from house to house, and if anything happened to me when I was alone, I could pull that string and they would come to me.

I own my house and furniture, and have a little money laid by in the bank. People in the city might think it a small store, but it is enough, because I can live on so little. If I mentioned what it cost me a week for provisions, folks would laugh—girls nowadays think they must spend two or three dollars a week for board, and I have heard that in the city people who take boarders charge them as much as seven dollars a week. The garden helps wonderfully. I grow corn, potatoes, beets, onions, cabbages,

radishes, peas, beans, melons, pumpkins, cauliflowers, apples, pears and plums—and in the bargain I have a flock of chickens. Maybe I'll have bees next year.

My father's folk were from New Jersey and mother came from Dutchess County, and they moved to this part of the country when it was very new and when I was only six years of age. My father had gone on ahead to prepare a place for us—he had bought 160 acres of land in the woods—but he wasn't ready in time, and mother got impatient waiting at last, and said that she'd join him anyhow, no matter what.

So mother and I and my sister and grandmother and an old doctor who had joined the party, came along in a wagon that had no springs, and that bounced and jounced us for three days, till we were nearly dead. The roads were so rough. Sometimes there was a mile of corduroy, as it was called—just logs laid side by side stretching across a swamp—and that sort of a road will make any wagon bounce like all possessed.

At the end of a hot day we came upon father, and he was half dead, too—working away in the hole that he had made in the woods. He was black from the smoke of the smudge fires that he lit to burn the brush and drive the mosquitoes away.

Father had been working all alone in his clearing—except for a team of oxen—cutting down the trees and digging up the roots, burning the brush, plowing and planting. He had only about four acres cleared when we arrived, and they were not really cleared, either, as the big stumps were standing. But he had a crop planted—corn, potatoes, turnips and hay. Enough to support us and the oxen through the winter.

Father was living in a lean-to—just a high trestle with boards sloping down from it. And there was where mother and grandmother went to housekeeping. The doctor stayed with us and things were rough, but what we didn't have we could do without.

That first night, mother said, we were all so tired that we just ate some bread and had a drink of tea, and then all went to bed. I and my sister slept in the wagon.

Next day we went to work in the clearing—father, mother, the doctor and I. We hauled brush and the doctor tried to chop, but he was a bad hand at it. Grandmother kept house, and, as my sister was only three years old, she could not do anything.

Father set about making a root-house, in order to save our crop from frost. He dug into the side of a hill and lined the hole with logs, putting a strong door on it and covering the roof with two feet of earth. This took a week.

Next thing was a log stable for the oxen. We all helped at making that. Father was quite a carpenter, and he rigged up a machine for making the oxen hoist the logs into place. The doctor drove, the oxen hoisted, and father eased the logs down into position. But the stable was a small affair, with a very low roof—just a shed. Father lent the horses to our nearest neighbor, three miles away, and he had the use of them through the winter for their keep. The oxen were better for our rough work.

As soon as the stable was roofed father began to get the crop in, for it was September, and the corn and potatoes were ripe. We were hungry enough to eat raw turnips, and we did very well without milk or butter or meat.

We helped at getting the crop in, and as soon as that was done we began to build the log house. We knew that winter would begin early in November, and we would freeze to death if we had no shelter. All through October we worked away, and by the end of the month had the walls up ready for the raising.

So, then, we had a raising bee. There was a mill five miles from us, and father wrote an invitation to the people and posted it in the mill. The neighbors came from ten miles away on every side. We had as many as twenty men helping us.

A raising bee gets a new settler acquainted with everybody, and the people who give it make a sort of feast for the workers. Father traded some potatoes for cider and applejack, and such stuff. We never wanted those things for ourselves—I've always been teetotal—but father thought that it wouldn't do to go against the custom, seeing that we were strangers.



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