

Two Stories

by Warren Kliewer

GROWING MEMORIES

"You see that weed?" said Uncle Herman, pointing toward a tangle of vegetation.

He had taken me to an unweeded patch behind his farmhouse, which was located some five miles out of town. I wasn't sure which weed he was referring to, there were so many tangled clusters of plants in this weed enclave competing for my attention. So when I asked, "Which one?" he took me a couple of steps closer and pointed to a three- or four-foot plant with vivid green, mint-like leaves. "Oh, that one," I said with a knowing air. I was ten or twelve years old at the time, and evidently I had already learned how to respond ambiguously, leading people to believe I knew a great deal more than I ought to at my age.

"That's hemp," said Uncle Herman. "You leave it alone, you hear?" He seemed to believe I would know what to do with hemp, and he laughed as if he enjoyed snatching away the temptation he had just offered.

But the truth was that I had no idea why I was supposed to leave this particular weed alone. Later that afternoon, when I was sure no one was watching, I went out again, wandered away from the house in the opposite direction, gradually turned my steps northward and westward, and came back around through the trees to the back side of the weed patch. I studied the hemp plant. It had no spines. It didn't have three-leaf clusters like poison ivy. Why was it dangerous? I found no answer that day.

It must have been four years or so later when, thinking back to that afternoon, I finally figured out the meaning of the warning, and I was shocked. "Hemp was another name for marijuana, and Uncle Herman was raising it in his farmyard.

Why? I couldn't imagine him smoking a "reefer," as they were called in those days. He couldn't be expecting to raise one plant and make a profit. I was sure there were no other uses for marijuana. It didn't make sense. Uncle Herman was, after all, a capable farmer, a solid Mennonite, an affectionate father. But he was growing a mind-polluting weed in his back yard.

So I put my mind to it and worried over the question and finally figured it out. "It's because he's a Socialist! Or an Anarchist. One of those. And he married a woman who's not a Mennonite. That's why." Having thus disposed of the question with my adolescent angle on politics and human nature, I expected to spend no more time worrying about my favourite uncle's character flaws. In those days I was a reasonable child, good at giving other people excuses, and I wrote off Uncle Herman's growing dangerous weeds as just another of his perversities.

Perverse he certainly was. Everyone agreed on that. Whenever he'd walk into a roomful of people, the temperature rose. In those days it was customary on Sundays for people to drop in unannounced to visit relatives, and to get a Sunday dinner after church you'd have to give advance notice of a day or two. After dinner the women would drift off into the kitchen to do a little dishwashing and a lot of gossiping, and the men would find their way into the living room, where the conversations would start out in a lively enough fashion but would gradually soften into silence as the men one by one drifted off into a nap.

Now, that is no way to entertain a curious teenage boy, so I never looked forward to having relatives over for Sunday dinner—except when Uncle Herman was coming. I knew that I could count on his coming into the living room with a smile that said little but promised a lot, and even before sitting down he'd say something to get the pot stirred up like, "Did you hear Roosevelt's 'Fireside Chatter'? He's in collusion with the bankers, that's what." It was not possible for the other men in the living room to ignore that comment. Someone would rebut, and we'd be off and running. I rejoiced silently. No naps today!

I remember one Sunday when Uncle Herman's arguments had backed my increasingly irritated father into a corner. Things were getting ugly, and Uncle Herman whipped a newspaper out of his pocket and read quotations from one of the stories. It was a Socialist newspaper. In our living room! I was sitting a mere six feet away from a Socialist newspaper! Surely lightning was going to strike our house in the middle of the night.

But the sun rose the next morning and our house was still standing. And a few days later my mother whispered to me that she didn't really believe he believed all those things he said he believed. To this day I am not sure she was right. He might have been teasing. Or maybe he was propounding half-truths. Or was he really proposing an agenda for change? I do know that try as hard as he might, he never succeeded in getting anyone to change his vote, join the Socialist party, or even admit that Henry Ford was trying to take over the government. He himself never joined the Party and he drove a Ford car, so maybe my mother was right. And yet, we could not avoid feeling that he deeply and truly believed those

things he was saying at the moments he said them. And that would account for his great success in provoking the liveliest talk the four drab walls of our living room had ever heard.

As I grew older, my observations about Uncle Herman led to nagging questions. I had a picture of the parts which didn't fit together. There were the political arguments. There was hemp growing in the farmyard. There was a marriage to a non-Mennonite woman, and nobody was talking about the circumstances of that wedding. My mother, who believed that young boys hope for consistency, would say, "Don't worry. He's always been like that," not realizing that being "like that" was just fine with me.

For Uncle Herman was my only grownup male relative who never in any way intimidated me. That's a neat trick. For a small child inevitably perceives adult men as too big and too loud. To a child's ears even an adult tenor can become a rumble. And yet I always saw my uncle more as a pal than an elder, and for me his loud arguments were more fun than fearful. I have begun to wonder whether he might not have consciously decided to become accessible.

Maybe so. That would take some work, I should think, some effort refining one's own soul. A Minnesota farmer, after all, lived within and at the mercy of a climate that could kill unpredictably with a blizzard, that could wipe out a year's labour and income with one overnight rainstorm, that could drag a person down in to despondency with its dark winters and humid Augusts. Every day a farmer had to deal with huge beasts, like a draft horse that can put his hoof down carelessly and crush your instep without even noticing or a bull that for three hundred sixty-four days will come humbly when you call and on the three hundred and sixty-fifth will put a horn through your belly. And a farmer had to deal with microscopic beasts and growths like mites and blight and dry rot and other life-sucking afflictions. Why should a farmer, from whom nature demanded stern survival tactics, take the time to cultivate concern for the feelings of a ten-year-old nephew, who didn't look like a match for the forces of nature?

But what if, I wondered, the answers are inside the house, not outdoors? The family was living in a plain, two-story, white frame house with only a bit of scroll-work decoration up at the two gables and a tacked-on front porch with a row of turned dowels below the lintel. But these decorative touches had been added later, I realized, and the building was probably old enough to have housed three generations of the family. How did it happen, I wondered, that Uncle Herman could cling so faithfully to the family farmstead and sit in the house where his father and grandfather had lived and dare to cook up those outrageous ideas which drove his relatives into conversational frenzies? Why had he brought to this house a Norwegian bride, and there was some kind of secret about that wedding, and why had my mother warned me never to ask questions about it?

Whenever I was in the house I was fascinated by what I saw and heard. There was a front room, which still held the solid furniture and stillness of a Victorian parlour. The stairways to the second-floor bedrooms squeaked and groaned, and

when I was ten years old it was easy to believe the stairs were telling secrets, and maybe someday I'd know enough to translate. There were objects on shelves and there were furniture pieces so old that they must have belonged to Uncle Herman's parents, or maybe even grandparents. I could touch dishes and pictures, I could sit on chairs that had been used by my ancestors. How could Uncle Herman sit on those chairs and drink out of those cups and think up ways to overthrow the government? The more I learned, the less I understood. Just a few feet behind the house full of ancestral treasures there grew a marijuana plant. How could such things have happened, I wondered when I was fourteen or so. How did Uncle Herman dare to marry someone from outside the community, who shared none of his Mennonite faith, knew not one word of his Low German language, and was likely to cook lutfisk?

Since no one would answer my questions, I resorted to speculating. It must have been a hard decision, I concluded. There must have been some day when he had to tell his parents he was going to marry someone named Myrtle Thompson. "What?" they must have said. "Who is she?!" Were there long, painful looks between his mother and father? Did everyone try to avoid looking at each other? Were there fights in the kitchen? Did his parents have long, whispered conversations in their bedroom long after they should have been asleep?

It took me years of growing up to earn the right to hear the story my aunt Myrtle had so doggedly concealed. My mother was the one who told me, and her manner made it clear that she would tell the story once, not explain it, and never discuss it again. Old Mr. Thompson, she said, had been on his deathbed when the young couple had fallen in love and decided to marry. One day he called his daughter Myrtle into his room and demanded that she swear a solemn oath "never to marry that Goddamn German." She swore. He died. She grieved. And then she married the despised German anyway.

If this was, in her father's eyes, a misalliance, she still bore three children and created an unusually warm and affectionate family. But she obeyed a fragment of her oath as devoutly as Uncle Herman clung to his family inheritance of a one-hundred-sixty-acre farm and an old house with gingerbread at the gables and a Victorian parlour. Throughout her life she remained a Lutheran. Surrounded by Mennonites, who surely must have made broad hints from time to time, she had kind words for everyone except the word "yes"—until at the age of fifty-eight she finally succumbed and joined the Mennonite Church. No one knows what went through her mind at that moment of rebaptism. She certainly had honoured her father's demand faithfully in her fashion.

Recovering the vanishing past is an act which requires imagination as much as research, and sometimes even more. And it certainly requires time, for the brain needs to be aged just like cheese or wine. When I first began to puzzle about my complicated Uncle Herman, I wondered why a man so dedicated to carrying on inherited traditions should take such delight in stirring up people's feelings with his political debates. That's the kind of question a very young person has to ask but cannot answer. But time brings up new ways to rephrase old

questions. After a few decades of retracing Uncle Herman's process of growing older, I too stopped looking for consistency. It is possible, Uncle Herman had taught me, to be reverent about the past and playful about the future. It is possible to be loud and gentle at the same time.

There is a gigantic cottonwood tree about sixty or seventy feet high in the front yard of the farmhouse Uncle Herman lived in. No sensible landscaper would ever allow a cottonwood tree, that strews mounds of its fluff every spring, to grow that close to a house. But Uncle Herman did, for that tree had been planted by his father, and that was reason enough to let it live out its life. And my discovering a bit of historical trivia explained the marijuana. During World War I the U.S. government encouraged farmers to grow Indian hemp, *Cannabis sativa*, because the war made it impossible to import the usual sources of fibre. Hemp makes good rope. There are, I discovered, two more uses for marijuana. Rope and memories. That weed was another detail in Uncle Herman's collection from the past. He had been letting that lonely little hemp plant hang around because its ancestors too had once lived in this place.

THE ART OF GRAFTING

I lived on a farm for three days—or to be precise, two-and-a-half days and two nights. But my parents grew up on farms. So did their parents. So did, I'm sure, all our ancestors way back to the time when the revolutionary invention of agriculture worked its way across northern Europe. And yet, it would be going too far to say my generation broke the bond with the land. The village where I grew up, and where indeed there were people who spent their whole adult lives working indoors, was so small (one mile square) that no matter where you stood, you were a half-mile or less from open country. No matter where you stood there was a cow within walking distance. So maybe the ancestral bond was not entirely severed. Agriculture still shaped our sensibility.

We all learned early, for example, that nature makes all the important decisions. No matter what the clock or the calendar tell you, the weather decides when you have a day off. The farm animals decide when the mealtimes are. The growing cycles of the weeds decide whether you'll walk erect or stooped over with a cramp in your back and a hoe in your hand. This latter was, in fact, the reason why I lived for two-and-a-half days and two nights on a farm. My Uncle Henry's strawberry beds were being overrun by weeds.

So he stopped in at our house and asked if I'd like to come out and work. I suppose he could have telephoned, but in those days farmers who did have phones rarely used them except to call a doctor, and people who gossiped by

phone were thought guilty of telephone abuse. And hiring an untried nephew to weed strawberries was too delicate a negotiation to conduct with technology. You need to see the people's faces. Besides, if you telephone, you won't be invited to stay for mid-afternoon lunch, which Uncle Henry liked to be able to count on. So we talked about this and that and the other, and finally got around to the strawberries and the weeds and an offer of a dollar a day plus room and board for the three days, and I probably nodded, and Uncle Henry abruptly stood up.

My mother looked puzzled. "Can't you stay for coffee" she blurted out.

"No, no, no, no," Uncle Henry said adamantly.

"Oh, my," my mother said, looking hurt and disappointed. He softened. She insisted it would take less than five minutes. He relented, knowing it would take at least a half-hour. She made fresh coffee and laid out a big spread of summer sausage and cheese and homemade bread and homemade jam, knowing that he didn't care at all about schedules and never had. The five-minute coffee break took at least an hour. Brothers and sisters in those days knew each other well.

On Monday morning I saddled my little Palomino mare and rode the seven or eight miles northeast to their farm, arriving about nine or nine-thirty. This was a sign of my urban degeneracy, I suppose; for farmers the working day began at sunrise. But in my view my timing was perfect. For I'd hardly had time to unsaddle the mare before my Aunt Kate called us for the mid-morning coffee break. At the age of thirteen I measured time as the distance between two meals.

This was no ordinary farm. In their youth Uncle Henry and his slim young bride had embarked on the conventional diversified farming: oats and corn and barley and wheat and cows and horses and pigs and chickens. But what he really enjoyed was his ambitious fruit and vegetable garden. He discovered that whatever he touched would not only grow but thrive. He'd transplant a spindly cherry tree some neighbour had given up on, and it would shoot up and blossom and bear a heavy burden of dark red fruit.

So he followed his muse, as it were; he stopped farming and turned the acreage into a nursery. Evidently this created some consternation among the relatives, and I have a dim, old memory of my father's face pinching up with apprehension as he muttered, "He'll go broke, he'll go broke." That was neither the first nor the last time my father regarded someone else's muse as a wayward, wanton seductress. But Uncle Henry certainly confounded the skeptics. Under his hand things grew and couldn't stop growing. His quarter-section burgeoned. He started with conventional items but soon went on to introduce new varieties of ornamental tress: blue spruce, red-leaf maples, Lake City elms. Row after row of dozens of varieties of apple trees, cherry trees, mulberry trees, firs, pines, arbor vitae, oaks, chestnuts, walnuts, vegetables known and unknown, cabbages, lettuce, cucumbers, pumpkins, new varieties of potatoes and common and exotic melons covered the gentle rolling black soil which my father and others had predicted would become a desert. Aunt Kate grew along with the farm—sideways, that is, not vertically—and could no longer stoop, which is why they needed my help.

"You see those weeds?" Uncle Henry said in his deep, hoarse voice as we walked into the two-acre rectangular plot of row after ragged row of six-inch plants. "By the time you go, they've all got to be gone."

My thirteen-year-old eyes saw the rows going on and on, over the edge of the horizon, on to infinity. Suddenly my dollar-a-day salary lost its glamour. I began to think about ways to cut short my visit. Maybe someone could get sick and I'd have to rush home. Maybe I could have a serious accident? Or sunstroke? Or at least a bee sting? But for the moment I had no choice. I stooped over and began hoeing. Stooping, I discovered is what makes such a large field bearable. As soon as I bent over and focused my attention on this weed and that weed and the next one, I forgot how long the rows were.

And of course Uncle Henry was right there in the next row, talking ceaselessly. That may be why he hired me—because I was a good listener. If so, he got his three dollars' worth and more. I was able to give him a new pair of ears, and he gave me his constant study—the lives of plants. As we weeded, he identified each of these noxious intruders into his well-ordered strawberry field. He knew their several common names, and in some cases their scientific names as well, though he knew no Latin *per se*. But he also knew them from the inside out. He showed me their root systems, their leaf structures, their self-protective devices such as spines or mild poisons. As the strawberry field turned into a gigantic classroom, my tutor exercised his subject matter, which for him was also business, passion, vocation and hobby. We became so absorbed not in killing weeds but understanding them that I forgot to think about time. When aunt Kate called us for dinner, it seemed an interruption—as indeed it was, for we had made it all the way to the end of the field and only halfway back.

On farms in those days "dinner" came at twelve noon. For a farm worker it was not, as it often is for city office workers, an evening's entertainment, but an act of mercy, a way of rebuilding one's body which the morning's labour had all but depleted. So farmers' dinners had to be big. But Aunt Kate's were excessive. She always cooked enough for a half-dozen extra people, and since I was a ravenous thirteen-year-old, I'm sure I sat in for two of the six. And I'm sure that Uncle Henry said then, as had often said before, "You've got a hungry tapeworm, kid." But he smiled, for in those days, that time when farms were run by families rather than corporate agribusinesses, when a farm might not show a profit but always had a surplus, farmers gave food away. Cheerfully or grudgingly, depending on the farmer's personality, they fed whoever was there at the right time: relatives and neighbours, of course, but as well the hobo down on his luck, the Watkins Products peddler on his bi-monthly rounds, a neighbour's dog out exploring beyond its territory, a crow with a broken wing. To get a meal, all you had to do was show up.

This was especially true at Uncle Henry's nursery, since his business, after all, was selling plants and seeds, not produce. He was constantly experimenting with variant strains of plants, testing them for productivity and against the soil conditions and the raw Minnesota climate. If he tried out a new strain of cherries

or apples or mulberries, and it then matured and bore a lavish crop of better fruit, the harvest he was nurturing was not cherries but a store of twigs for grafting onto lower quality roots. And the twigs from a dozen high-yield trees, properly grafted would produce a small forest of super-trees. The fruit was the by-product, exploding in such huge amounts that it would have been impossible for Aunt Kate to can and freeze and dry a tenth of the crop, and even that would have been much more than they could eat. Apples would fall and cover the earth with brown rotten carcasses. Overripe mulberries fell and covered the earth with their black filth. And so, Uncle Henry sometimes invited people to come pick their own apples at twenty-five cents a bushel and shake down their own mulberries and cherries at a nickel a four-quart basket. But paying customers complicated his bookkeeping and broke his branches, so he gave away as much as he could. A person receiving a gift becomes a friend; you can give guided tours of the nursery and spend the whole time talking. And Uncle Henry enjoyed conversation more than money.

To my surprise, we finished weeding the strawberries before the end of my life on the farm (that is, my three days, my fifty-six hours), and so I had time to explore the mainly unused barn, the creek, the far pasture on the other side of the road, connected to the barnyard by a narrow path under a tiny bridge. And of course I had my eye on the two horses. All horses were destined, I believed, to be ridden by me, even these two old draft drudges which Uncle Henry kept on the farm for sentimental reasons, I suppose, but partly to lug a walking plow through the garden two or three days a year. The rest of the year the horses, in their role as well-fed reminders of the past, ate and slept and had drifted into that shrugging-off sensibility of senior citizens who have moved to Florida. It was my saddle that tipped them off. Senior citizens, whether human or equine, can always tell when someone wants to put them to work. In a fraction of a second these two huge, clumsy senior draft horses whirled around, driven by a sudden urge also to explore the far pasture beyond the bridge and were not seen again until evening feeding time.

And we had time for me to learn the art of grafting. By that time I had absorbed the fact that grafting improves a tree and thus by-passes many generations of evolution or selective breeding. So when he asked if I knew how to make a graft, I said, "Sure," as thirteen-year-olds are wont to do. And of course I didn't. He glanced at me, perhaps a little longer than necessary, and into his skeptical half-smile I read a comment: "You're full of it, kid." So he carefully selected two twigs of different sizes and textures, with his razor-sharp knife sliced off the ends in matching forty-five degree angles, gave each twig a deep lengthwise cut, and slowly worked the twigs into each other. "There," he said in his deep, hoarse, raspy voice. "Bind it up and you've got a graft." Then he picked out two more twigs and had me make a graft myself, so that I'd really know how in my fingers.

My life took me far away from farms and retired horses and giving food to strangers, and so I never had a reason to practice grafting again until some forty-

three years later. I was directing an actor in a one-man show about Thomas Jefferson—an actor, by the way, who is tall and rangy like Uncle Henry and who also has a deep, hoarse, raspy voice. We were working on a beautifully developed simile in Jefferson's comments on the effects of education:

As well might it be urged that the wild and uncultivated tree, hitherto yielding sour and bitter fruit only, can never be made to yield better; yet we know that the grafting art implants a new tree on the savage stock, producing what is most estimable both in kind and degree. Education, in like manner, engrafts a new man on the savage stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth.

The actor's line reading was vague. I could hear it wasn't grounded in anything. So I asked him, "Do you know what grafting is?" "Of course I do," he said, as actors are wont to do. And of course he didn't. So I passed on my bit of agricultural lore.

While doing the artistic homework for that Jefferson re-enactment, we discovered that the actor is a descendant of "Light Horse Harry" Lee, one of General Washington's officers, and therefore is related to Thomas Jefferson's maternal ancestors. For a moment, then, as I demonstrated and the actor learned the art of grafting, we were both re-enacting our forebears, Uncle Henry the nurseryman and Great-Great-Great-Great-Uncle Thomas the gardener. The moment of connecting with the past vanished quickly, as images and ghosts are wont to do. But for a while I believed I could smell fertile soil somewhere in that stuffy, indoor rehearsal room, though I'm not sure whether I was smelling Monticello or Minnesota.