

Country Playground

Imagination and simple pleasures made for barnyard adventure.

By Darlene Morberg Greendahl, Erskine, Minnesota

Coming in from a cool morning, I would be welcomed by our barn with the sweet aroma of hay, straw and animals and the scent of fresh manure.

The cows would turn to see who was coming, and there was usually a greeting from the one horse on our northern Minnesota farm of the early to mid-1950s.

And, of course, there were the cats. When the “Ma Cat” appeared, all skinny and meowing as though she had something to tell, the search was on! Where were the new kittens? As soon as they were found, they were moved to another secret place. Sometimes Ma Cat fooled us and put them in the hay upstairs.

On a special shelf against the far corner wall were clothespins, twine, a radio, many things with unknown uses and something very special—a tin of carbolic salve. I can’t ever remember going to the barn without opening the tin for a sniff of that heavenly aroma.

Sometimes, I’d get to feed a calf from a special pail with a nipple at the bottom. The little ones, with their innocent faces and trusting eyes, were pretty strong and would bunt the pail, and I’d have a hard time hanging on. I can still feel the pressure from letting one of the calves suck on my fingertips—it felt as though the blood was going to come right out of the ends.

Another specialty was the salt block. Never mind that the cows had been licking on it, too; you just had to look for a dry spot. You followed up with an ice-cold, salty drink from the flowing well—

always had to have just one more sip.

Being careful for splinters, I'd climb the stairway of rough-cut lumber, always looking inside the wooden nail keg at the top, even though it never changed.

In the wide expanse of the loft, I'd watch dust particles float in sunbeams peeking through the high, rounded ceiling. I remember that "good" itchy feeling after rolling in the hay and the hard climb to the top of the bales—you could almost touch Heaven from way up there.

Sliding on the loft floor, slippery with hay, was another delight. And there was the rope on the pulley. You could be Tarzan for a while.

Looking out the hayloft door offered the best time to yell or yodel. I'd listen for my echo resounding across the yard and on to the town of Oslo, 9 miles to the south of us.

When the cows were out to pasture, Western sagas were played out with my cousin and best friend, Margie—she was Roy Rogers and I was Gene Autry. The dividers between the stalls made perfect horses for riding off on adventures.

Then came the stanchions. You could slip your head in and out, since each was much smaller than a cow's. But it was more fun to think you were a cow that was locked in, chewing on hay for a while.

Behind the barn was the pasture, where we played horse and galloped to our hearts' content through the Wild West. Margie was "Trigger," and I was "Champion." Two finer horses you would never find.

One of my favorite things was stepping into a fresh cow pie and feeling it squish up between my toes, giving them a wiggle to get the full effect and then rinsing off in the flowing well water.

Farther out in the pasture were the plum trees. You could eat to your heart's delight—and sometimes your stomach's demise.

Beyond that treat was the junk pile, which held treasures that could take up the better part of an afternoon. It even had a special horse. Its head was missing but made for some great rides. I was told it was once used to repair harnesses. I couldn't understand why it had been tossed aside, as it had so much use left in it.

Then it was off to the river, where we'd sneak in for a swim in just our underwear so Ma wouldn't know (not thinking the dingy, gray color it had become would be noticed).

Whenever I thought I was lost, I'd look for the barn, which was like a beacon for me until we left the farm, in 1957.

I see the barn today, and it seems so sad, being the only building remaining. Although it was left behind, it has not been forgotten, its treasured memories living within me.