

# Autobiography of my Childhood

Matilda Siegmund Jones<sup>1</sup>

The first observation I can call to memory of that home-made table in the large dining-room of our farm home, was made from an old-fashioned high chair at Mother's left.

With my parents and myself were grouped around that table regularly, six strong and healthy boys and two girls. Back of the table was a long bench which seated three, four, or more. Whenever company came the regular occupants of the bench slid over nearer each other, chairs were hitched closer together and extra plates were laid. There always seemed plenty of food for "extras" though they arrived just at meal time, too late to get their "noses in the pot." There was no end to the number of peddlers, agents, hunters, homesteaders, prospectors, and guests who partook of our hospitality.

I do not recall that my eldest brother<sup>2</sup> had a customary place at the table for he was married before I was graduated from the high chair to a place on the bench at Mother's right, beside the coffee pot. The high chair was passed on to this brother's children<sup>3</sup> who were like a continuation of our own family for they were with us as much as they were in their own home.

A little sister of mine was drowned<sup>4</sup> when she was less than two years old, so that left a gap between the older group of five boys and two girls, and the three of us, two boys, two and four years my senior, who were by turns my playmates, workmates, schoolmates, enemies, and allies.

As I think of the old home I am ever reminded of that portion of Alice Cary's "An Order for a Picture"

These and the house where I was born,  
Low and little and black and old,  
With children, many as it can hold,  
All at the windows, open wide,-  
Heads and shoulders clear outside,  
And fair young faces all a-blush:  
Perhaps you may have seen, some day,  
Roses crowding the self-same way,  
Out of a wilding, wayside bush.

And here in this house I was born; on an 800 acre farm; of German immigrant parentage; the youngest of ten living children. What a heritage! And what an opportunity to become useful!

When I was eight years old I could milk a cow as well as an adult (though I sometime got an awful jolt<sup>5</sup>). Such vital daily chores as bring in the kindlings and night wood for the fireplace, and keeping the supply of stove-wood up to standard, feeding the chickens and closing their house at night was good discipline for me. The most valuable lesson in one's life is the necessity of having to do something to promote the welfare of the family.

I sometimes forgot to shut the henhouse before dark, so had to go out alone to do it because I was

responsible for that chore. I wasted no time but scooted for the shaft of light from the kitchen door. I always said "goodnight" to the chickens and they answered me in their sleepy way.

Though work was irksome, our play was delightful. I could do anything that my two brothers did and outran them in foot races. We had miniature farms with improvised tools and implements copied from everything used on Father's farm, from a shovel to a steam thrasher outfit. We stocked the farms with cattle and sheep made of pears with sticks stuck in for legs and horns, the stem serving for a tail. The pigs were fir cones; the fowls, blossoms of wild legumes; and once when Mother was away we plucked all the blossoms from the peas and beans for a new variety of chickens and were punished for it with a limber wild currant twig.

There were certain trees which we climbed each year. We always hunted birds' nests but never took the eggs. We knew by sight 28 varieties of birds and could identify the eggs of 12 varieties. We fed the young birds with berries. Often we "wormed" our way through the meadow, parting the grass with our hands to avoid crushing it. (Father would have been enraged had he discovered trails made by walking). In this way we located the wild strawberry beds and sometimes chanced upon a meadow lark's nest in a hollow left by a horse's hoof.

Anyone who hasn't lived in the country has missed a life of real joy. I have picked berries in an old straw hat; I know what a stone bruise on the heel feels like; I have blown a bellows in my brother's blacksmith shop; made willow whistles; ridden a horse facing its tail; played town ball<sup>6</sup> at a country school<sup>7</sup>; ridden a bull thought too vicious to run in the pasture; led a calf by ear and tail; made rail fences for the pigs; picked up spuds until my back wouldn't straighten up; chased squirrels and lizards running on a rail; used a scythe to mow the briars; churned mud "butter" in the edge of the creek with a "barefoot" dasher; made scarecrows; been stung by bees while wading barefoot through the clover; turned the grindstone for my dad when he bore down with all his strength; thrown green apples at a swinging hornet's nest; "transacted business" with yellow-jackets; used silks of corn for mustache and whiskers; plugged the citrons<sup>8</sup>; hollowed out the seed cucumbers for boats and manned them with a crew of pumpkin blossoms. My brothers tunneled the haymows along the beams; then we would form a "train" and chug through. Once we invited a neighbor boy to crawl through. He refused, so two of us held him at the mouth of the tunnel while the third one prodded him through with a pointed pole.

There were seven<sup>9</sup> from our family who attended the county school the first year I went. The teacher "boarded round" but spent most of the time at our house because it was nearest the school. I think he liked the lively bunch there, too. I did not like him for he held me on his lap (I was six years old and too dignified to sit on a man's lap for I was going to school), wound my pigtails around my neck and played hopscotch on the buttons of my dress with the tips of his fingers.

My father made willow baskets. I helped gather and carry home the withes for them and learned to weave the baskets. I enjoyed helping Mother dip candles, make huge kettles of soap outdoors, piece patchwork quilts, and prepare fruit for drying. A wooden, slatted frame hung above the fireplace in the living room and this was kept full of sliced apples for drying in the winter.

From the whole fleece, Mother spun yarn on a foot-powered spinning wheel, skeined, washed and dyed it and knit stockings for all of us until I was twelve and too long-legged to be clothed by hand craft. When Mother skeined the yarn, I held the huge spools for her on a knitting needle. I learned to knit but did no great amount of it until during the World War<sup>10</sup>. At fourteen I made my own clothes. Mother was my teacher.

There were fire-places in many of the homes. Around these our social groups had taffy pulls, corn poppings and dancing parties. On our neighborhood picnics we played group games and did folkdances. The school was the social center. There we had spelling bees and a literary club. Father, who had learned to play the violin in Germany, taught my youngest brother<sup>11</sup> to play when he was sixteen. Either my sister or I played his accompaniment on the little chapel organ. Two other brothers played the guitar and cello. A few years later we, with six neighbor boys, organized an orchestra. We practiced in the school house or went the rounds in the homes where the young people of the neighborhood congregated each time and danced. How keenly we enjoyed this wholesome sport.

Every Sunday during the spring we went to the woods to hunt wild flowers. We knew the common name of thirty varieties and the botanical names of a few. Some years later a Sunday school was organized in the school house. On Sunday evenings, all the year, our family grouped 'round the organ and sang sacred songs.

When I finished the grammar school, I took a teachers' examination just to see what it was like. To my surprise I passed with a high grade, but I was too young to teach. That summer I was eighteen, so the following winter I rode horseback four miles every day, put my pony in a farmer's barn, walked the last half mile and carried a pail of water as there was no well at the school (and isn't yet), and taught a small county school for six months.

Terms were short and wages low. I helped with the work on the farm each summer. Despite the small salary, I managed to save enough to pay for an academic course (which included Normal training) and two years in college.

I chose Willamette University because it was convenient to reach Salem and my people could help grub-stake me which cut down my expenses.

So, after teaching various rural schools for six winters, I entered the University at the age of twenty-four, to get my first taste of higher education under the softening influence of a school fostered by a religious organization.

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1. The full heading reads as follows:

Matilda S. Jones  
c/o Coos River School  
[crossed out]  
Marshfield, Oregon  
[crossed out]  
Box 155 Bonanza, Oregon  
[cursive]

Received Sep 27 1926  
Extensions Division  
[stamped]

Advanced Writing

Part II.

Lesson XVI.

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2. Edward George, born 1860. He would have been 23 at the time.
3. The high chair is emphasized more in an [early draft](#). It describes briefly how the family came to Oregon. Matilda's brother's children were Charles, Nairn, Merta, and Laurence.
4. Eliza; she drowned in a watering trough in 1876, 4 years before Matilda was born.
5. Jolt; i.e., kicked by the cow.
6. Town ball; a 19th century form of baseball.
7. Alder Creek School, located on Alder Creek west of Stout Mountain.
8. Citrons; another manuscript contains the phrase "plugged the citrons and watermelons to see if they were ripe". From this context, it is clear that this is *Citrullus vulgaris*, not *Citrus medica*. The former is a Eurasian relative of the orange. The latter is a fruit similar to a watermelon that grows on a vine. It is not eaten raw but is preserved or candied.
9. Julia, 17; Caroline, 15; Henry, 10; Frank, 8; and Matilda, 6. The others were the oldest children of Matilda's brother Edward; Charles, Nairn, and Merta.
10. World War I.
11. Frank, in 1894.