To Make a Snapshot

Make them interesting—your pictures should tell a story at a glance.

—Instruction manual: Picture Taking with the Brownie Hawkeye Camera

1

True North

Ours was a 160-acre Iowa Century Farm, in our family over 150 years, born in 1831, when George Moore arrived in Cedar County from England and bought the land. Known as Rose Hill Farm, it sat on the hill of that name, the highest point in the surrounding area. The farmers living nearby built the one-room Rose Hill School across the road. My mother and dad began farming in 1945, and we four kids came along.

The thirty-six-by-sixty-foot hip-style barn, not the saltbox farmhouse, was the focal point from which we navigated. From the haymow windows, my brothers, Kenny and John Edward, my sister, Sharon, and I viewed the panorama of our universe: the Walls' barn to the north, Christensens' to the west, Bricks' to the south, and Zousels' to the east. We surveyed the corn, oats, and hayfields, the bluegrass pastures and cattle, and the south, north, and east timbers of oak and hickory trees. The metal weather vanes mounted on either end of the barn's roof—one

a trotting horse and one a dairy cow—swiveled, announcing the storms from the northwest. Dramas played out in the barn where life began and sometimes ended during spring lambing.

The barn's native oak rafters and haymow, filled with hundreds of bales, surrounded us with quiet, muffling the sound of the Massey-Harris tractor outside. Rusty the hound used his nose to lift his custom-made trap door and enter his winter palace, a house of straw bales we positioned with loose straw in the center. There he curled up and made a nest. Like a down quilt, the barn enveloped the animals and us in warmth.

Our Christmas party in the barn included the horses, Shorty and Joker, rewarded with apples after tolerating construction paper hats with cutouts for their ears. One day, after chores were done, we built a fort in the plum grove. Night fell, so we explorers followed the North Star home, even though we could see the barn's cupolas in the moonlight.

Every night after doing chores, we looked up at the North Star when we walked from the barn to the house. As the seasons changed, life itself changed.

Dad started farming in the 1930s with Kate and Fan, his matched bay horses, and he often said he was grateful for the new Massey-Harris tractor after the war. By the time I left for college, Dad no longer heated the house with a woodburning furnace, a welcome change to propane gas.

Even more dramatic, in less than a generation after I was born, life shifted from one farmer owning a tractor to work 160 acres to operators owning equipment to custom farm thousands. Several families no longer lived on a section of land where they knew and helped one another.

What would my future be? That of my family? As adults, would we sell or keep the farm?

Yet, I felt reassured—the barn stood with the North Star perfectly poised above it, my compass in times of doubt, crisis, or crossroads as a child and as an adult.

The day began and ended in the barn. "Make sure you water the hogs and hay the cattle. Last one done—shut out the lights."

2

Story Keeper

When I was eight, my Christmas present was a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye box camera. The instructions said, "You'll love to see photos of your family." We used up the flashbulbs in one day, so I grabbed the camera for outdoor shots. Sunday night TV ads advised me to "Look for the Kodak moments."

Yet, a Kodak moment was just that—a single shot that did not capture the whole story behind the scene. The photo of John at the top of the snowy pasture hill represented a whole sledding afternoon, not just a moment. I caught him poised as he yelled a "Whoop!" and belly flopped. The snow sprayed from the runners in crystal clouds illuminated by the sunlight at my back, just before he became a blur in the square viewfinder.

Photogenic in black and white, Shorty, a bay, and Joker, a buckskin, stood still with heads down nibbling grass. Not seen in the snapshot was how they earned their hay: tracking

rustlers in the south pasture with the Triple R Ranch cowboys, Sharon and Kenny.

I looked through the black leather photo album from my childhood growing up on the farm. Every photo spoke to me of the story behind the snapshot.



Sharon, Martha, and Kenny on the first day of school

The picture recorded my half smile and red-plaid shirtwaist on the first day of third grade at West Branch, Iowa's Herbert Hoover School, but neither the 10:30 smell of cinnamon rolls baked by Faye the lunch lady nor the soothing sight of the cafeteria's dark-green-and-white, mottled linoleum. Years later, a photo framed the high school marching band boarding the Greyhound bus for Oregon, but not the sound of the ukuleles and the folk music "If I Had a Hammer" harmonies we sang across America.

I knew what a Kodak moment was—until I took photos. A photograph was partial, not enough. More than an album of pictures, I collected a book of stories to fill the gap left by the photographs. More than photographer, I became storyteller, a story keeper.

Midnight Mass-sleep-deprived, yet with infinite energy, we glided past the multiflora rose hedge windbreak alongside us, spotted the rabbits' warm dugouts, their snow caves.

Those were the gifts of 1961.

One Christmas Eve

On a spring afternoon, Dad brought home a baby raccoon from a felled tree on a neighbor's farm. The mother and all but one of the babies had run away. We named her Lucy.

Dad said, "You can raise her but let her learn to live in the wild."

John and I fed her milk from an eye dropper and kept her in the large cage our cousin Maria used for her white mice project.

Dad warned us, "You can hold Lucy and cuddle her, but don't let her near your face. She might startle and bite you. She wouldn't mean to, but she's wild. Love her—but don't get too close."

We took her to Herbert Hoover Park to the family reunion where she was the family member most photographed by



Martha, pet raccoon Lucy, cousins Roxie and Dee

my cousin Dee's dad and reunion photographer, Harrison Fairall Moore.

Every day, we let Lucy out to play, and she and our hound Rex wrestled in the grass. We dressed Lucy in a doll's cape for our summer circus. We took her to the shallow end of the pond where she found snails. She washed them with her hands, scooped them into her mouth, and crunched them with her needle teeth.

We let her out to roam at night, and she came back every morning for food. We started school, the weather turned, and then we didn't see Lucy at all.

On Christmas Eve, when John and I threw down hay from the hayloft for the horses, we heard chattering. Out from the stacks of bales trotted Lucy. Her winter coat made her look twice as big as she really was. She scampered down the ladder and followed us to the house.

In the mudroom, we fed her syrupy canned peaches—her favorite—in her bowl. She finished, chattered, and went to the door. We let her out and watched her gallop across the yard and over the fence to the dark of the north timber.

Dad said, "Well, kids, Lucy is on her own now—wild."

Mom ladled oyster stew into bowls, and we sat down to supper. Later, John and I curled up under quilts beside the Christmas tree and rested until it was time to go to St. Bridget's Midnight Mass.

Making Christmas

I might have played Barbies more, except that I rode my horse on deer trails in the south timber, trained my 4-H calf to lead, and built forts in the hay loft with John. In December, we perused Western Horseman's catalog for cowboy hats rather than Monkey Ward's for toys.