

Forging through the Drifts

By Al Cornell

Counting down the last few months to 100 years ago, Alvina was the sixth of 15 Luttig children to be born in the same house. For the past 72 years, she has lived west of Bloom City where she and Durward Merry settled a couple years after their marriage.

Growing up in that large family, four miles north of Boaz, instilled a work ethic that prevails to this day. There was not much time for play and no need for toys. She does remember bouncing down the stairs with her siblings on their bottoms and occasionally having a large box to play in. Of course, the constant interactions of that group of children would have created some fun times.

However, that work ethic and frugality are characteristics that were learned early and have continued to define Alvina for a century. One of her first comments to me was, "People don't save things like they used to." She said that as she showed me crafts that she made from used bottles, pine cones, and hickory nuts. She was seated in a chair with a thimble on one finger, and a needle and thread in the other hand, mending someone's jacket.

Alvina Merry's folks' fancy kerosene lantern was altered into the electric lamp that Alvina still uses beside her bed.



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From her earliest memories, she was part of a clan working together to sustain itself. In addition to daily chores, seasonal activities were vital to survival. The potato patch was a field. Hickory nuts and walnuts were gathered by the bucketful and picked out on winter nights.

Recently, upon receiving a gift of black walnut nutmeats from Alvina, her doctor asked, “How do you break

It was Alvia who crawled into the attic to run wires to the holes for one ceiling light in each room.

the nuts open?” Alvina replied, “With a hammer.” Then her doctor said, “Don’t you hit your fingers?” Her response: “No, I hit the nuts.” If practice improves precision, she should be good at hammering nuts.

In season, the children attacked cornfields with sharp hoes. When cutting weeds close to a hill of emerging corn, once in a while a mistake was made and the corn plants got severed. The innovative children quickly dug a hole and covered up the evidence. However,

Dad found the evidence at the missing hills and asked, “Who hoed off the corn plants and buried them?” He had to instill the need for careful hoeing as each potential ear of corn mattered.

In the summer, much time was spent cutting and stacking hay. Alvina became skilled in the art of making stacks that retained their shape and shed water.

She recalls five kids sleeping in a bed, seven loafs of bread baked every day—frequently two such batches on Saturday so the family could go to church on Sunday—and mixing pancake batter in a dishpan.

Ah, pancakes. Cane was raised, cut close to the ground, and hauled to Boaz for squeezing. They produced 30 to 40 gallons per year. Though milk was sold to the factory, each week the cream from one day’s milk was churned into butter. Apply those to the pancakes, add sausage and eggs, and you’ve got good eating.

In addition to chickens, hogs were frequently butchered. Some meat was canned in two-quart jars. Some fried sausage was covered with lard and stored in a crock in the basement. Raw salted meat was stored in wood stave vinegar barrels.

A large garden produced a variety of vegetables. Cabbage was turned into kraut and some beans were stored as Schnitzel beans. Bees were kept for honey. Apples, grapes, mulberries, gooseberries, and other fruit were raised.

Occasionally, oranges were purchased.

Not long after completing her eight grades of schooling, Alvina hired out to work for a neighbor. The hours were long and arduous, and she was paid \$2 per week.

On January 1, 1942, Alvina married Durward Merry. The new year arrived with a wintery blast that sculpted immense snowdrifts. It appeared that they couldn’t get to the farm where they intended to spend the night, but there was recourse. The Clydesdales could pull the manure spreader through the drifts. A bride in her wedding dress in a manure spreader—you won’t hear of that combination again. Alvina was accustomed to dealing with situations and making things happen, and so they made their destination.

So, almost as if she were forged by hammer and anvil, there arose a young woman with the resilience to face the challenges of life.

When they got electricity in their house in 1945, the electrician needed help, and it was Alvina who crawled into the attic to run wires to the holes for one ceiling light in each room. At first, those lights were turned on and off by screwing the bulb in and out. Several years later, they got an electric cook stove, a refrigerator, and electricity in outbuildings.

In July of 1946, their first child was born. Phyllis was a profound special-



Left: At 99 years old, Alvina was recognized as the parade marshal at the Viola Horse and Colt Show.



Right: She recalls hours of turning the butter churn.



Left: Alvina Merry looks up from mending someone's jacket. Right: She turns old jars into craft characters.

needs child whom Alvina cared for at home. When Alvina was 78, she was no longer able to lift her. Phyllis then lived in nursing-care facilities until her death at Pine Valley Health Care Center in March 2015.

Phyllis, along with siblings Ruby and Richard, grew up accustomed to sharing her home with baby animals and other critters that needed special attention. Calves, lambs, piglets, and chickens often resided next to the wood stove. Most fared well under Alvina's watchful care.

Once, when the children were little, someone needed to go to Richland Center for shopping. Whoever stayed home had to build pig troughs and sheep gates. Alvina chose trough and gate building over shopping. On another occasion, she made a trough with 12 nipples for piglets whose mother had died giving birth.

A shocking accident claimed the life of Durward in a 1983 woods mishap. Richard, along with his son Josh, maintains the farm and the herd of Hereford cattle. Alvina has snacks ready for anyone who stops by and has something ready for Richard's supper when he comes for evening chores.

Each year, she enters about 40 canning and bake goods exhibits in the Viola Horse and Colt Show. Ruby says, "She mends for all of us." She continues to do crafts that at one time included fancy gifts like a manure fork fixed up to look like a farm boy and given to Richard.

Yet, of course, as she counts down to

her 100th birthday, even Alvina has had to slow down a bit. Four or five years ago she quit butchering chickens, and her outdoor activities are limited by the inevitable arthritis. The entire family takes turns caring for the chickens and performing other tasks as needed. Great granddaughter Aubrey loves to gather the eggs.

When I walked into the house, I was presented with a plate that held several each of five or six varieties of cookies. As Ruby handed me a cup of tea, she remarked, "Mom makes cookies by the bucketful." I now regret that, with great restraint, I limited myself to only two blue ribbon cookies. ☺

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FARMERS' ALMANAC

Not too many years ago rural folks relied on the Farmers' Almanac.

It gave them an idea of what kind of weather to expect during the coming year, it offered suggestions on how to solve various kinds of animal (and human) illnesses, and besides it included a joke or two to make a long winter a little shorter.

The Farmers' Almanac is still published. The 2016 edition that I am thumbing through says it's "For farmers and City Folk." I suspect some savvy marketing person caught on that only about 2 percent of the population in this country is actively farming so they'd best think more broadly.

What can we learn from this 2016 edition? Calendar dates: Easter is March 27, The Fourth of July is, well, on the 4th of July, Labor Day is September 5, and Thanksgiving is November 24. Then there are the dates for what they call "Minor Holidays and Occasions:" Daylight Saving begins March 13, Mother's Day is May 8 and Father's Day, June 19. Oh, Daylight Saving ends November 6.

A page is devoted to "Hints for Your Health."

- Regular consumption of nuts, peanuts included, helps to extend your life.
- Drinking coffee (good news for my Norwegian relatives and friends) helps promote longer life.
- "Eggs, the Perfect Brain food." Eggs contain vitamin B12, among other nutritional goodies. B12 is supposed to keep your brain cells working well. Not to worry too much about cholesterol. Minimal effect on blood cholesterol, researchers say.

For the gardeners out there, the Almanac has an article on companion planting, meaning some vegetables get along better with each other than others. Some examples:

- Beans get along well with broccoli, carrots, corn, cucumbers, peas, and potatoes. They don't like onions.
- Carrots like beans, lettuce, onions, peas, radishes and

tomatoes. They don't like dill and parsley.

- Spinach gets along with all vegetables, especially members of the cabbage family.
- Tomatoes like everything except corn, dill, kohlrabi and potatoes.

For those who like old fashioned, and sometimes really dumb, riddles, here are a few: (See answers at the end.)

1. No sooner spoken than broken. What is it?
2. Which word in the dictionary is spelled incorrectly?
3. What is yours, but others use it more than you do?
4. What two things can you never eat for breakfast?
5. What can travel around the world while staying in a corner?

What is the origin of these words that I sometimes hear?

"Long in the Tooth," to describe an older person, usually a man. It comes from buying horses and checking their teeth to determine their age.

"Bite the Bullet," meaning to endure something unpleasant. Before much was known about pain management, a person undergoing some painful physical procedure was asked to bite down a bullet to distract their pain.

"Saved by the bell." When someone died, or at least was thought dead and placed in a casket, a piece of string was tied to the dead person's wrist, and threaded above ground to a little bell. A relative might sit all night waiting to hear the bell ring.

(Answers: 1=silence, 2=incorrectly, 3=your name, 4=lunch and dinner, 5=a stamp)

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