



GROWING UP ON AN IOWA FARM

*Stories and remembrances from
childhood, 1914 to the 1930s*

By James Washington France

Above: Charles
Washington France
with his son, James.

At right: Mildred,
Mom, Keith, Dad,
Dick, me, Warren,
and Howard.



Dear family:

I was born March 27, 1914 on a farm in Mahaska County, Iowa. The farm was purchased in 1869 by my grandfather (George Washington France) who raised a family of five sons and two daughters. One of those sons died at an early age, another went into the lumber business, another became a farmer in Missouri, and the oldest later settled in southern California. The two sisters married nearby farmers. My father, Charles Washington France, stayed on the farm and married the daughter (Janette Smith) of a nearby farmer.

Our family consisted of five sons and two daughters, as did my grandfather's family. Howard was my older brother and Margaret was my older sister. The children younger than I were Mildred, Warren, Keith, and Dick. The family, besides having the same number of children as my grandfather's family, was in the same order of sons and daughters and with the same placement of the family member staying on the family farm.

Earliest memories

Some of my earliest recollections are of my Dad buying a 100 pound bag of sugar when sugar was scarce because of World War I, of us making a trip of nine miles to Oskaloosa in a bob sled, and of keeping the horses at a livery station while in Oskaloosa. I remember another trip to Osky in a buggy pulled by a horse that kept a watchful eye backwards in case my mother tried to hurry up our trip by reaching for the whip.

Other recollections are of putting stockings up at Christmas and asking my mother why she looked so much thinner after a birth when we were supposed to believe that a stork had brought the baby. It was probably hard to fool farm kids who saw cattle, sheep, hogs, and chickens giving birth. All of us kids except Keith were born on the farm. The folks used a doctor in Rose Hill for delivering the babies and treating most of our ailments. As I remember, his bill was usually \$3 and he sometimes had to be asked to send it.

In 1918, I remember watching from a second story window overlooking the street and town square as World War I troops — just returned from overseas — paraded down High Ave. in Osky.

School days

I remember walking to Allgood on my first day of school with my brother Howard and my sister Margaret. We walked through a pasture that made the walk shorter than the one-and-a-half mile road walk.

Some 20 to 30 students went to Allgood. School ran from 9:00 to 4:00 with fifteen-minute recesses in the morning and afternoon and an hour for lunch.

Each student had a desk and the students were called by grade to sit on a bench in front when the teacher reviewed their work. Coal was kept in a nearby shed and a stove in the rear of the one-room school building furnished heat. The outhouses for boys and girls were located on opposite corners of the one-acre school lot, and students went to a nearby farm to carry drinking water in a pail to the school. Games were played such as darebase, blackman, baseball, and, later on, we had an outdoor basketball court.

Generally, we had a new teacher every year teaching grades one through eight. (My father was a winter term teacher one year.) I remember one teacher had difficulty in maintaining order and this resulted in her dismissal in the middle of the school year. The replacement teacher placed a rubber hose length on her desk when she took over. She was able to keep better order, but the hose mysteriously disappeared shortly after its appearance. (The story I heard was that the hose was cut up one night after someone snuck in through the window — I didn't have anything to do with it.) One family with 10 children, mostly boys, probably presented Allgood teachers with the major problems. However, they did provide excitement for other students.

Besides the teaching duties, the teacher was responsible for the heat and cleanliness of the building. Parents were sometimes invited to attend evening programs and box suppers.

County examinations were held for the seventh and eighth grade students to determine if they should graduate from grade school. Our County Superintendent was a woman by the name of Kraut who, of course, was referred to as Mrs. Sauerkraut by the students.

Hunting for danger

The students eagerly anticipated the arrival of May when school was over for the summer. Some of the boys started going without shoes in April and we went swimming in nearby Middle Creek as early as possible. Parents were generally too busy to give much attention to their children's safety and expected them to develop a sense of what they could or could not do. The farm animals, tractors, machinery, cars, and mud roads all had to be handled with due care. Some of the more dangerous situations developed from Halloween pranks, the careless handling of firearms, using dynamite to catch fish, exploring nearby operating coal mines on Sundays, and celebrating July 4 (which one year involved burning a wooden fort built from scrap lumber to repel the attacking Indians).

Drivers' licenses were not required in the 1920s and my father would ask me at an early age to drive to Rose Hill to take a broken machinery part to a blacksmith for repair. He later had me, at about age 12, take hogs to an Oskaloosa hog buyer who would weigh them and give me a check which I deposited at the bank. I remember sometimes eating a noon meal costing 25 cents before returning

home.

My father was a generous and cheerful person but a quarter on Saturdays was it during grade school. I earned extra money in the summer by being the water boy for the threshers, selling honey from the beehives I cared for, and from setting up a trap line in the winter. One winter I remember catching four mink whose pelts brought about \$11 each.

When I was seven or eight, I caught civet cats, possum, skunk and muskrats, but no fox or coon. When trapping mink, I would set a line of traps primarily by drainage tile openings, slightly underwater and covered by grass. My claim to fame at Allgood was the one time I took a wild shot with a single shot rifle and brought down a duck flying high up in the sky. Some of the 10 Van Zee kids called me "dead shot" from then on.

Once, we dug a den of foxes out. We took the small cubs and put them in a silo on the farm. We kept them for a couple of weeks and they were constantly yipping. Then our hired man took them to Osky and kept them in his back yard until the game warden insisted that he let them go or turn them over to the State Game Association.

Many farmers had a dog or two. We acquired a large mixed breed, an almost black dog named Sport, in about 1924 that I took with me when I went hunting. Sport wasn't allowed in the house and would sleep in his doghouse or inside the porch in the winter. When we would cut the oats and wheat, he would leap among the grain still standing in an effort to locate rabbits as they were flushed from the field.

Entertainment

Ice cream socials were held at two nearby churches in the summer and both churches had Sunday morning services in the 1920s. The minister at one church was a neighbor farmer and a farmer's wife played the organ.

In about 1920, My father and I took a load of wheat to a flourmill located near Currier Hill on the South Skunk River. The flourmill was a building several stories high and apparently went out of business in the early 1920s. Mr. Currier, the owner of the mill, had a son named Walter, a World War I vet who was a mechanic. I enjoyed driving and I gladly made numerous trips to his shop nearby when Dad's cars developed mechanical problems. Dad was lucky to get 10,000 miles out of his cars during the 1920s due to the roads and other factors.

My folks subscribed to two daily papers in the 1920s and to the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Successful Farming*. I subscribed to *The American Boy*. Howard subscribed to *The Argosy* and he had these magazines stacked from the floor to the ceiling on two sides of his room.

Oskaloosa had a band concert on Saturday evening in the '20s and '30s and cars would line the four sides of the square. Nickel hamburgers could be

purchased at White Castle. Several drug stores had soda fountains with marble countertops plus counter stools. There were two Greek candy stores serving ice cream sodas and other treats and several pool halls with one serving wine for a time before it was legal to do so. The Oskaloosa Public Library was used as the place to meet when Dad was ready to make the trip back home.

During the 1920s, the France and Smith reunions were held in the summers at different homes or at the fairgrounds. Relatives would come some distance to attend and we had a chance to see cousins at least once a year. My mother had a brother from New York who would take pictures of our family on his trips back to Iowa.

The family would go to the State Fair in Des Moines and sleep overnight at the fairgrounds. Some of the more popular attractions were the roller coaster, the whip, and a boat ride through tunnels with various scenes at every bend of the tunnel. At one state fair, a collision of two locomotives was held which brought large crowds that day. During the 1920s, Des Moines also had an amusement park that we sometimes visited in the summer, as it had a faster roller coaster and a better funhouse than the State Fair.

One summer the family drove to Henry County in Illinois to see some of my mother's relatives. We stayed overnight at a Davenport hotel where we all enjoyed running water for our baths. I remember eating my first cream puff at the relatives' house and my Dad driving 30 miles an hour on a paved road in Illinois, which was a terrifying speed at the time.

Saturday night was the big night for farm boys and my quarter was usually spent going to a movie and perhaps for an ice cream sundae or a chocolate milkshake. Oskaloosa had three movie houses in the 1920s with the best movies usually starting on a Sunday, another movie about the middle of the week, and usually cowboy movies on Fridays and Saturdays. One movie house had vaudeville acts on some nights between the main feature movie and all had shorts and the news. Bank nights, where prizes and money were given away in a drawing, were popular for a while.

In about 1921, my Dad and I drove a wagon to What Cheer to pick up a Brunswick phonograph which would play the thick Edison records among others. Shortly after that a radio was purchased that was a source of wonder for awhile. Circuses would stop in Oskaloosa in the summer and we would get to see them unload from the railroad cars and sometimes we would go to the circus itself. Every year we went to the Southern Iowa Fair in Oskaloosa, which was generally held after the State Fair.

On the farm

Our first tractor was a Fordson we purchased in about 1925. On one occasion, I remember pulling a load of hay and an attached hay loader up a hill.

The front end of the tractor started to lift itself from the ground, but I managed to stop the tractor before it went over.

Horses were the most dependable source of power for the farm while I lived there. Up to nine draft horses such as Belgians and Persians were used to pull disks, plows, harrows, wagons and other farm implements. They were cared for by whoever used them.

A larger Case tractor was later purchased and the horses were gradually phased out in the 1930s. Oats and wheat were harvested by binders which would cut and tie the straw in bundles before being ejected. The bundles would be picked up and placed in shocks until they could be loaded up on hayracks. The load of bundles was taken to the threshing machine that separated the oats and wheat from the straw. Late in the 1930s, Dad purchased a combine that would cut and thresh the grain in one operation.

The original farm was 427 acres. Dad bought the adjoining farm in about 1929, which added 80 acres. Corn picking was tedious work and not many could husk and unload into a crib more than 100 bushels of corn in a day. Spurs on corn-picker's gloves ripped the husks off quickly, which got easier after an early freeze. At the time, there was no elevator on the farm for elevating the corn up to the top of the corn pile. In the late 1930s, Dad purchased a corn picker and with larger tractors and better farming methods there was a considerable decrease in the need for farm labor.

There were some 17 or more farmers on our threshing run in the 1920s and early 1930s. Farmers would send a man with a wagon if needed for each one-half day of threshing. Dad always had a full day of threshing. The women would try to outdo each other preparing lunch for the threshing crews, although there were two homes we would try to avoid being at at mealtime. After the men had left in the evening, I would try to run the steam engine thresher or at least blow its whistle on the remaining steam. Silo feeding was usually a month later and involved about half the number of men as threshing.

I remember herding for seven miles 200 or so lamb to Rose Hill in the 1920s and shipping them to Chicago. Once we arrived in Rose Hill with the sheep we might have lunch at a nice boarding house, or, if it were too late for lunch, a candy bar would have to do. Later, Dad would ship lamb to Chicago by the Anderson truck lines and several times I made the overnight trip to Chicago in their trucks. We would arrive at the Chicago stockyards in the early morning and I would do some sightseeing in the Chicago loop before Mr. Anderson was ready to drive back in the afternoon.

Dad was a stockholder in an Oskaloosa bank, the Mahaska State Bank, which failed about 1932. He suffered a loss because of the double liability feature of the stock.

That wasn't the end of Dad's financial concerns. His shell corn sold for a low of 11 cents a bushel and in 1934 there were no crops due to a severe drought

and insects. There was another drought in 1936, but not quite as severe. I remember hauling water for the livestock from Oskaloosa to the farm in those years.

Fire destroyed the farmhouse in the spring of 1935. The fire started in an old oil stove on the porch. Mildred was staying by herself on a Saturday night when everyone else was out shopping in Osky. She was heating water on the stove, then left the stove and wasn't aware that excess oil had caught fire in a drip pan under the stove. She couldn't move the stove off the porch because it was too heavy for her. As the folks were returning home, they saw the glow in the sky from the blaze. They got to the house in time to save a few valuables. Mildred saved some family photos. Dad saved Mildred's purse knowing that she had just been paid for teaching. Another France family farmhouse had burned down in practically the same spot in about 1906.

High school and beyond

Since I had passed the seventh and eighth grade exams, I looked forward to my first day at Oskaloosa High. The school had an enrollment of nearly 700, with some students driving as far as 14 miles to school each day. I had a trip of nine miles and my sisters usually rode with me in the 1928 Chevrolet. The high school principal made the remark that the students driving some distance had a better attendance record than some living in town. Certain courses were generally required in the first two years and I especially enjoyed the math, chemistry, history, and physics courses. I did not like the manual training courses such as mechanical drawing and woodworking but they were required at that time.

I was interested in football and basketball, but generally couldn't stay for practice because my sisters rode home with me. I did work in some outside activities at high school. I got the job of running the movie projector for assemblies thanks to an uncle who taught physics at the school.

I stayed in town with my Aunt Mary for about two months in the winter of my freshman year, and for several weeks when my 1928 Chevrolet got frozen down in the mud on the way home.

My parents were having considerable financial problems when I graduated from high school in June of 1932. I wrote to several colleges for information but it appeared an impossibility to go to college in the fall of 1932. I decided to stay out a year and concentrate on attending college the next year.

Iowa became the logical choice for several reasons and I managed to obtain a summer job at the University Hospital. During most of my four years at Iowa I had a National Youth Administration job that paid cash; enough for my board plus some other expenses. I stayed at a frat house one year, at the Quad for one year and at a private home for two years. One year I worked for an assistant professor accumulating data for his thesis. I ran a calculator crunching numbers and graded papers. Tuition was \$18 a semester and rent was about \$70 a semester.

which was paid for by my parents. When I graduated from the University of Iowa, I was awarded a BS Degree in Commerce.

In the summer of 1935, when I returned from college in Iowa City, my brother Warren and I slept on cots in a new, unused chicken house that I had built. We had the dependable 1928 Chevrolet Coupe with us and the folks had the other car at another house a half mile away while a new house was being built near the chicken house. We had lots of fun that summer. We got our water from the well and used the corncrib for a bathroom.

Both Dick and Warren were banged up playing football for Oskaloosa High School. Dick had lingering back problems from playing center at the school. We also played football near home and sometimes some boys from town would come out to play with us. We would choose sides and Ed Smith would get mad if his team lost and he would want to fight. Somebody would paste him in the face and that would end that.

And these are my memories of growing up on an Iowa farm.

