CHAPTER VIII

DECENTRALIZATION

By 1880 John's four older sons were married and on their own. William and "big" John were on their own farms. Jule and Frank were "working on shares" the Childs and the Lake farms, respectively. These two farms adjoined for a quarter-mile, but their dwellings and sheds were nearly a mile apart. The Childs place had a lot of marsh and wooded hills but it also had some seventy acres of very good soil. The Lake place had about 115 acres of cultivable land, but very thin loan above gravel, was foul with weeds, its fertility practically exhausted. Frank took it probably for the separateness which it afforded. The fairly pretentious house on it may have influenced him somewhat but more likely he was challenged by the problem of rehabilitating the exhausted soil. It is a temptation to describe the methods by which he accomplished this result, but that would be a digression from the story of John Baker.

At this point misfortune struck. It was personified by Jenny Draper, granddaughter of the Francis Draper from whom was purchased the 206 acres. She was an orphan and lived with her uncle, Francis Draper, Jr. nicknamed "Colonel" by his father because of certain characteristics which reminded the senior of a bull in his herd. I do not remember ever seeing her, but she has been described as attractive. She gave birth to a son and she named Jim Baker as its father. Jim denied paternity. Perhaps he was correct, but he certainly played around with her at times, and if the play was restrained to the point that he asserted, he was about the only man in the neighborhood who did not have carnal knowledge of the lady – according to common report. His wife blamed "Colonel", but perhaps she was prejudiced they were separated some little time afterward. My mother averred that in boyhood the unfortunate boy looked like a hired man "Colonel" employed the summer before the child was born. Around the threshing machine, young men joked each other about fathering the brat and contriving to get it blamed on Jim Baker.

I never heard whether Jenny Draper ever demanded that Jin marry her. She might well have. He was the son of the richest farmer in the neighborhood. He was

personable. About five feet eleven inches tall, he was well-built, with regular features, a pink and white complexion, sharp gray eyes. He had a good tenor voice and had sung on the Milton Academy quartette. And he had the reputation of being the champion wrestler in that region. This reputation was rather undeserved, but there was no question about it, he was active, wiry and strong and did not shrink from an encounter if it was thrust upon hip. On one occasion he hit an adversary so hard that he fractured his own thumb but spread the opponent's nose so over his face, that it never got back into its proper shape.

How he obtained his reputation as a wrestler is typical of the times and possibly worth the digression. It was a cold day in late October. A threshing crew, on the Bigelow farm had come out after dinner and were standing around shivering from the wind -- and the effects on their skins of the digestive effort on their insides. To keep warm some began to pull and shove around the men next to them. A certain Dave Sofey, a local Brom Bones, an all-round athlete and known as a good-natured bully, chose Jim for his shov-ee. Then catching sight of a fairly fresh cow-tab on the ground nearby, he announced that he was going to print Jim Baker's picture in the cow-dung. Roused by this prospect, Jin used all his strength, craft and speed with the result that he put Sofey down and held him there. Some amazement was expressed by the bystanders to which Sofey replied "Yes, and he can put down any man around the machine." Thus a new champion was acclaimed.

Jim so stoutly denied his responsibility for the "brat" and Jennie Draper's reputation was such, that grandfather Baker stood by his son. The Drapers filed suit and won it. While the suit was on "Colonel" Draper lifted the child toward grandfather saying "See your old grand-dad." That so enraged the old man that he could only ejaculate a "Br-r--r-p". Whereupon, both "Colonel" and Jennie declared that he spit on her, and brought suit for that. Although they lost that suit, the sons came to the conclusion that so long as so much property was under one ownership, it would be a shining mark under frequent attack. So, the conclusion was reached that the farms must be divided among the ultimate heirs.

Meanwhile, the Bakers appealed Jim's case, giving bond for his appearance before the higher court. But the psychology of a bastardy case is that some man must be made responsible, so why not the man of most means? It was decided in

family counsel that the simplest way out was for Jim to "skip the country" and forfeit the bond. This he did, and although he came back to visit every few years, he did so by stealth and was careful not to remain long under the jurisdiction of Waukesha County. Nor did any of the Bakers ever admit to knowing where he lived. Actually, he was not far away; no further than central Illinois.

The division of the Baker lands between nine heirs was not an entirely simple matter. It was complicated by the fact that the several sons had worked at home without wages for various periods. Some had stayed at home throughout the year; some had taught school during the winter. According to English custom, daughters did not inherit, but according to American ideas girls had the same rights as boys. "Big" John had been in possession of his farm for several years. Cash had been advanced to some at various periods and little record made. Some had sold horses or cattle which they had claimed as theirs and kept the money - or claimed the money as still due.

How these smaller issues were settled, I have never learned, except that Mary Jane should share. Then the several farms were appraised. With a little give and take the time for which each should claim wages was agreed. Then came the task of dividing up the land. First, the forty acres of the first farm on which the bouse and barn were located were reserved to the parents John and Grace Baker. No one wanted the Lake farm; it was no good. As he and my mother said "to keep peace in the family* Frank accepted the Lake farm, subject to certain cash payments which he had to make to Mary Jane to partly meet her share. Then Jule accepted the Childs farm, augmented by the small tract bought from Reeves, subject to a similar pledge to Mary Jane.

Richard was still at home and so it was logical that with Edward and Alf, he share in the contiguous area of nearly 500 acres composed of the first farm, the Underhill and the Bottrell places. But it was understood that he would have as his share the Underhill farm and a part of the Bottrell farm. He, Ed, and Alf had to pay to Jim the latter' a portion of the inheritance. Somehow in the figuring, it turned out that Willian was to pay some hundreds to John, John was to pay something to Jule, and Jule some hundreds to Mary Jane. Looking back, it would seem that some sort of a "clearing" arrangement would have permitted William to have paid Mary Jane

direct and the payments to John and Jule be reduced to minor amounts. This might have prevented much unpleasantness in later years but of course, this is the wisdom of hindsight. All were each pledged to pay to their parents an annuity of some forty or fifty dollars to provide for their needs.

Bat money was harder to come by during the '80's than it had been during the '60's and early '70's. And so, those who were not good managers got behind in their annuities and in their obligations to their co-heirs. These defaults resulted in the estrangements of certain brothers, but their father prevented the estrangements from coming out in the open in the form of law suits, by promising to make good the shortcomings when at his death, the reserved forty acres would be sold and the proceeds distributed. But in this both he and the intended beneficiaries ultimately were frustrated as will be explained later.

After the farms were divided among the sons, the old folks continued to live in their house on the reserved forty. Alfred, Edward and Richard continued to live with them, but Richard soon married and moved with his bride into the Underhill house. Edward and Alfred never married, whether because of a natural shyness toward women or a wariness because of "Jim's case", it would be difficult to say. Except for Mary Jane and Jim, all the Baker progeny lived on land that "Squire" Baker had owned. Even Mary Jane and family lived within two hour's drive by horse and buggy. But soon after Richard's marriage, John, the second son, sold his farm and moved to Eau Claire county in the northern part of the state. That was the last break in the clan ownership during the lifetime of the parents,

Although both parents grieved over "Jim's case" they more or less enjoyed the serenity of old age. John, Sr. pretty much kept to his easy chair close to the kitchen stove; he always was sensitive to cold. He managed to keep the woodbox replenished, lug the kitchen swill to the pigs, grub out a few weeds in the orchard and gather a basket of apples or pears in season. By this time he was stooped and leaned heavily on a cane whittled out of a broomstick. He read little and his spectacles were of such a vintage that he could recognize only large print. His thoughts were much of the past and every now and then he would break out into song, in a voice still clear and of good timbre.

Grace never took her ease. Mother of eight sons and one daughter, she had been helped in her housework only a short time after they moved into the new frame house in 1861. Mary Jane married only ten years after the youngest son, Alfred, was born. As a woman's workshop, the kitchen and pantry of the "country seat" was a woman-killer. She tried to train the younger boys to help her, but they were poor help. Boys wearing aprons have always squirmed under the jibes of their fellows. The result was that the house always looked littered and disorderly. Grace never dropped the habit of activity but I suspect, too, that she never acquired systematic habits, and I know that John, who in his clay-floored Pattacott had always thrown bones for the dog from the table to the floor, and spit on it if he were so moved, was of no help toward tidiness. Yet, it was always a treat to go to Grandma's. The mingled smells of snow apples and saffron bread which always permeated the kitchen were something to be remembered. There was always a slice of "curranty cake" or of bread and butter spread with sugar for a hungry child. Even when father drove into the yard home-bound from church, we must come in for a "cup o' tay", or if mother declined that, a cookie for the "childer". On no occasion did we children ever leave empty-handed.

But the memorable occasions were on Christmas Eve. For several years, come Christmas Eve, father would do the chores a bit early, and after supper hitch a team to the bob-sleigh or the wagon, depending on whether there was snow or not. We were generally the first to arrive. A few cows would be turned out of the stable to make room for our horses where they would keep warm. By the time we "men" got into the house, the baby would be unwrapped and laid on Grandma's bed to sleep and we'd begin to look over the field and up the hill for the lantern which Dick's or Will's folks would be carrying. Only Will's children were large enough to be of interest to me, but there were three of them at that time. After a while Jule and his family would arrive.

It would not be long before someone would suggest that Grandfather play something on his violin. This always brought out the protest that his fingers were too stiff; and the rejoinder that if he'd warm them over the stove they would limber up. Eventually Grandma would go into the parlor and return with the violin – a beautiful instrument of red cherry with tiger stripes. Grumbling still, Grandfather

would plink and plunk the strings, murmuring that it was out of tune; would turn a squeaking peg to tighten a string; turn another and another. It would not be long before he would draw his bow with a bold stroke across the strings, producing a pleasing chord, and then look about him.

"What shall it be?" he would ask; "Joy to the World?" and without waiting for the answer which was always ready he would begin to assign parts; the air to Will and Dick, tenor to Frank, base to Alf and Ed, alto to Jule. He never presumed to tell the women what parts they should sing, but they always joined in, which soprano and which alto I do not remember except that once when Mary Jane was there she and my mother sang soprano. As a matter of fact, I doubt very much whether Jule, Alf and Ed strictly sang the parts assigned to them. But all had an ear for harmony, their voices blended well and to my music-starved ears it was harmony such as I have rarely heard since. Only such oratories as the Messiah have ever moved me as those old Christmas carols and other old English songs did in Grandmother's kitchen as led by Grandfather with his voice and violin.

But "time marches on" and all too soon, one blustery day in late March 1891 Uncle Alf called to tell us that Grandmother had failed to get up that morning, had a fever and a sore throat. Father and mother looked at each other. Apparently, to them this was not unexpected. They knew how the buxom woman that had been Grace Baker had shriveled and weakened, the countless little short steps she had taken from stove to sink from sink to pantry, from pantry to table, over and over; how she never went to bed to get over a cough or cold; it could not go on forever. So, mother immediately put on a shawl and a pair of overshoes and accompanied Uncle Alf home. She stayed all day and when she returned, she would only shake her head. A few mornings later Uncle Alf called again but only to say that "It's all over".

As stated in the beginning, Grandfather went to live with Frank. The money which he paid for his board and lodging would have been a help to Jule, who was badly in debt and sinking deeper. But for some reason he refused to go to Jule, and expressed a strong wish to go to Frank; for one reason, I believe, that he admired Frank's wife as a good manager and business woman, I heard him say more than once that "With Lyd for a wife any of his boys would have made money." But in

time "Lyd" became nervous and irritable, the doctor said she was threatened with stomach ulcer. Anyhow, a change was necessary, and so grandfather was persuaded at length to go to Jule's for a while.

Some months later, when we stopped by Jule's on our way home from church, we found grandfather out by the gate. The first thing he said to father was "you able-bodied boys must see to it that I do not come to want. Jule's liable to fool it all away." And then it came out that after long persuasion, to get some peace, he had consented to give Jule a power-of-attorney which would enable him to sell the reserved forty and use the proceeds as he might see fit. That brought about such a quarrel between Jule and his brothers that it became very disagreeable to call on their father. Sorrowing in his loneliness and perhaps feeling that at last he had exhibited an unworthy weakness, he lived scarcely a year longer. He died June 18, 1895, having passed his eighty- sixth year by fourteen days. He was laid to rest beside Grace in the Little Prairie Cemetery. The grave is in the southeast corner, which because of the number of Baker graves, might appropriately be referred to as the Baker Corner.