

AUTUMN RETROSPECT

By Alice Baker

These halcyon days of autumn touch the recall center of childhood. Memories flood back with poignant intensity.

"Could I get some help from you women folks with the husking? There'll be a snowstorm much before we want it one of these days." The plea was from my father who was always loath to have his "women-folks" do any menial farm labor.

Mother, with shrewd psychology, aided and abetted Father with, "It'll be fun in the cornfield these nice fall days."

Six o'clock breakfast over that dull overcast morning, we began to dress for husking. Mitts were useful for many farm jobs: picking black berries, pulling weeds and husking corn. To make these ugly, but helpful mitts, we cut off the worn out foot of the stocking, cut a hole near the top for the thumb, and another for the little finger. We pulled this long black tube up over our wrists, and above our elbows. They not only kept us warm, but kept us from being cut by the sharp blades of the corn leaves.

Our husking pins were made of a piece of hickory wood, rounded off, pointed at the end with two parallel grooves made to hold two edges of a finger length thong of leather.

Armed with the husking pin and dressed for our job, we climbed into the lumber wagon and rode to the cornfield.

Father pulled over the first shock, loosened the marsh hay band, and laid the stalks flat for us to husk. When the shock went over, field mice scampered in panic in every direction. My youngest sister would shriek with fear, hop on both feet and run away until the poor frightened mice had found cover and were out of sight.

When we were sure the mice had disappeared, we set to work. We each grabbed an ear, pierced the black silked end, pulled down the husks in the left hand and with the right hand, snapped off the ear from its place of attachment, then threw it into the basket.

Father emptied the baskets into the wagon. A full basket gave incentive to our work and made husking an interesting job instead of a monotonous drudgery.

As the morning drew on, the murky cloud covering lifted and finally the sun shone in a clear blue sky. The poet's "bright blue weather" arrived at its usual hour. As the morning sped along and the sun rose higher in the sky, Mother called out to Father: "Eleven o'clock?"

Father had had ample practice in telling time by the sun. His affirmative reply was the signal for Mother to start home to prepare dinner. We youngsters worked on with father for the remaining hour. Filling the baskets kept us from feeling our growing hunger.

Twelve o'clock was the golden hour! How delicious the dinner smelled as we came into the fragrant kitchen. It was a feast of baked potatoes, mutton, brown gravy, baked apples, and johnny cake with sorghum molasses.

Porphyro's feast for Madeline in Keats' poem "St. Agnes' Eve" paled in comparison. Hunger had made it a great feast and work had made relaxation a sensuous pleasure.