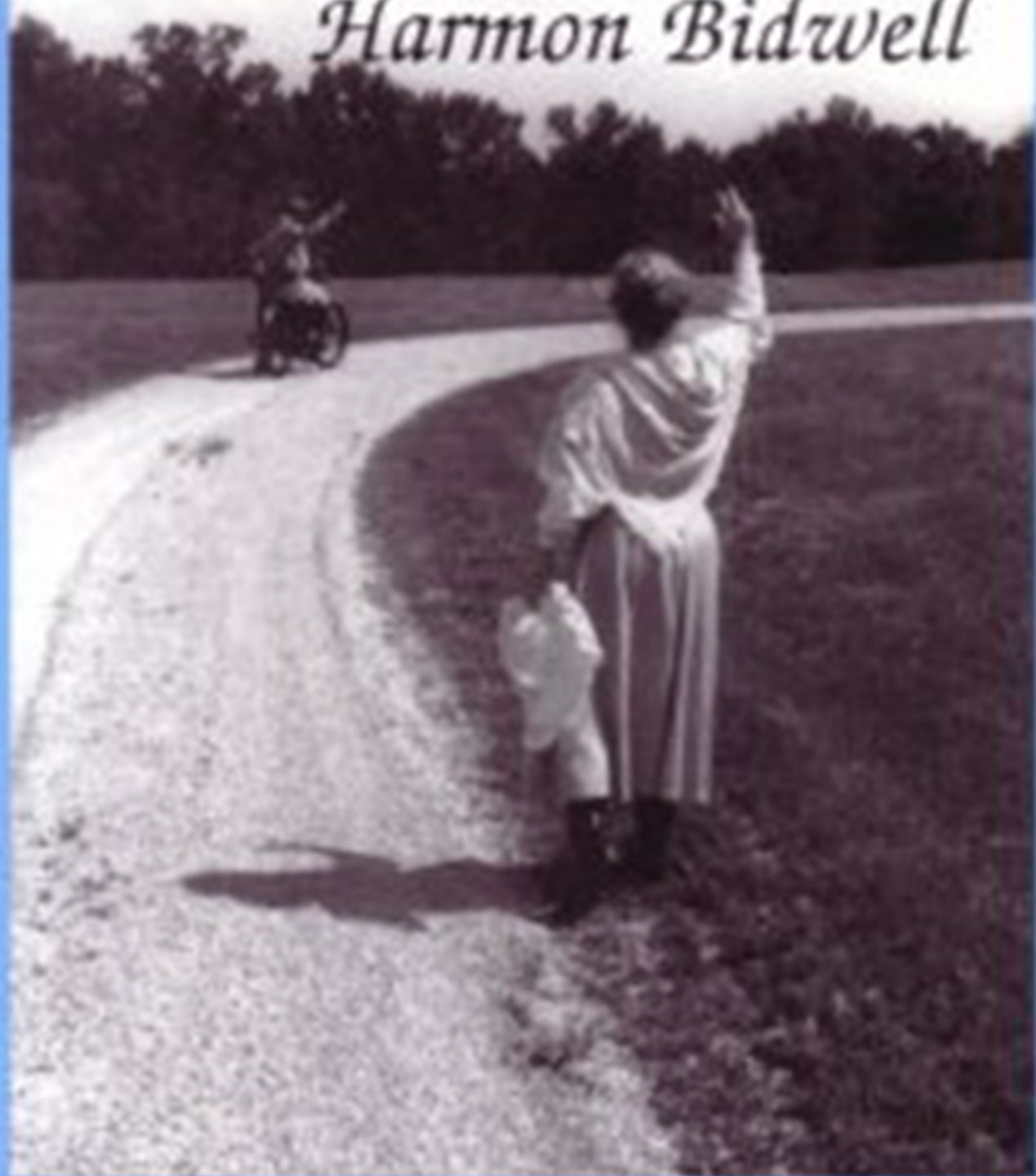


*The Travels of
Harmon Bidwell*



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Harmon Bidwell

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Preface

This is an example of “frontmatter”, which comes before the main text of the book.

Chapter 1

The Wind and the Water

July 17, 1916

Dear Aunt Victoria,

I hope this letter has found you in good health.

Although it has only been a week since I left Lanesville, I must say that I already miss you greatly! I have been staying with a wonderful elderly couple; Leeman and Elizabeth Gray, and I will tell you about them in further detail shortly. But first, there is much to say about what occurred just after I left you last Sunday afternoon.

As I traveled northeastly from home to reach the Dixie, Sir Davi was running exceedingly well and the speed meter showed that at times we were able to maintain a somewhat steady 45 miles to the hour. However, after four or five miles of riding on a nicely compacted roadway, the surface very quickly turned bad. I was near the Harrison and Floyd line, and it appeared as though the area had received even more water than we did from that thunderstorm we had a few days before I left. No repair crews had yet pushed the washed out gravel and dirt back into place, and this thoroughfare quickly became Sir Davi's and my first driving challenge.

Riding now on this much rougher road, I had to reduce my speed to around 20 miles to the hour, and at that rate, I could just barely outrun the fanatical dogs that seemed to make every effort to scare me from my wits by crouching low in ambush behind hedgerows or trees, and then wildly uncoiling at me at the last possible second as I unwaringly drove by.

Strangely enough though, they didn't appear to be attacking me, but rather the beasts seemed to want to take a bite out of my motorcycle! Indeed, one of the larger and stronger looking breeds (I think it was a bloodhound of some sort) got so close to my back end that I was certain his gnashing teeth would pierce the tire!

To anyone who may have seen me, I must have looked ridiculous bumping up and down on the seat as I tried dodging the deep ruts in the road— and at the same time keep up enough speed to stay ahead of the animal. It was frightening, but I was amazed that he was somehow able to keep his huge paws from stumbling him headlong into a hole as he galloped at top speed, all the while keeping his head up, and barking loud enough to vibrate the glass in my goggles.

At one point, I laughed out loudly when I glanced back to see that the mutt had actually run into the back tire and had a good sized burn of black rubber right between his eyes.

I could see that he didn't like being laughed at, or burnt on the forehead, and he mustered up a raging charge of speed that scared me into realizing that he was about to either bite my right leg, or jump into the side of me and knock me completely off .

Bad ruts or not, I had to gain speed quickly, so I gave Sir Davi full throttle and it was as though the motor had been taking a bit of a nap. The sudden flood of fuel not only awakened it, but choked it as well. . . and just when I feared it would completely die, it swallowed the gasoline all at once and the resulting blast of a backfire jolted me forward, zooming me in a flash back up to 45 miles to the hour.

After bouncing back and forth across several dips, and nearly losing control, I gripped the handles tightly and held on. The road began to smooth out, and as I was nearing a sharp curve, I felt I would be at a safe enough distance to look back for the last time.

The hound had stopped in the middle of the road in the very spot I had given Sir Davi the throttle.

I couldn't see the rubber tire mark on his forehead any longer, because now his entire face had been blackened by the explosion. He wasn't barking, and he didn't appear to be injured either. He just sat in the middle of the road staring

at me as I rounded the curve.

I've already decided upon a different route for my return trip.

Not long after my encounter with another man's best friend, I reached the Dixie Highway and turned onto it, heading northward. It was a very busy thoroughfare indeed, for I immediately passed several motorists driving southward on the other side of the road. I began counting them, and during one half-hour period, I saw as many as 25 autos! I even saw one other man on a motorcycle driving southward, and as we passed, we both waved as though we were long-lost brothers! It did indeed seem as though we had always known one another – or perhaps we had a common feel for the pleasures, as well as the possible hardships, of riding on open-air machines.

At any rate, as we slowly passed, I could see plainly that he was a good deal dirtier than I was, and parts of his engine were coated with fresh mud... not a good sign for the road ahead! I could also tell that his machine was quite a bit different from my own in design, and although his fuel tank was too mud-spattered to completely reveal its name, I saw its first letter was an "I" meaning it must have been an Indian.

(Dearest aunt, I am quite aware that you do not know much about these manly machines, so I will tell you that the "Indian" variety is one of the very best for traveling in all types of weather and road conditions.)

I would have liked stopping and talking with the rider for a while, but I was anxious to get as far on my first day of travel as I could, and still have enough daylight left to pitch grandfather's old tent on a good site. I was also in a hurry to find a gasoline station - not to buy fuel - but to get another road map! Yes, Aunt Victoria, I can hear you now! ... I know how I forget things... and you're right! When I left home, I managed to leave my road atlas right there on the kitchen table. Oh well, you also know that you always tell me "good comes from just about everything", so here's a thought... I'll try to remember to write down which towns I pass through, so you can use the map I left behind to follow me along the way.

Just before reaching Indianapolis, I pulled into a station called Gehrig's Garage, and I picked up a new road atlas from the rack. I turned Sir Davi off, and noticed on my watch that it was nearly five o'clock.

Remembering that you and I had waved good-bye to each other at one

o'clock, I was surprised to find that I had already traveled 140 miles from home! Considering the various road hazards, Sir Davi and I had been able to maintain a fairly high speed, and I hoped that we would be able to continue at that rate.

I sat on Sir Davi near one of the pumps, looking at the map, and although I didn't really need gasoline yet, a small voice hollered, "Fill it to the top, sir?"

I had the map opened up wide in front of my face like a newspaper, and as I slowly lowered it, the first things I saw were the letters "N" and "Y" on a ball cap. I brought the map completely down, and under the hat stood a youngster who looked to be around 12 years old. He was kind of a skinny kid, but I think his big brown eyes and even bigger grin made him look thinner than he really was. From his shirt pocket a small wooden ball dangled from a string, and I knew that down in the pocket hidden from sight, was the rest of the toy that I remembered so well as a child.

The boy flipped the ball into the pocket and asked me again... "Fill it to the top, sir?"

I looked around to see if there were any attendants, and I caught a glimpse of a man through the large front window of the building sitting by the cash register. He had a New York Giants cap on too, and he gave me a wave as to signal to me it was all right for the boy to help me with whatever I needed.

It looked like a family-run business, so I told him to go ahead, but to please be careful! I didn't want fuel sloshed all over the gas tank or on my knapsack either.

He was a nice kid, and he said he'd be extra careful, so I put my dusty goggles on the handlebar and walked into the building to buy a Coca-Cola and a Hershey's. When I returned, the boy had already checked Sir Davi's oil level, the air pressure in both tires, and was down on his knees busily cleaning the dried mud from each and every spoke on the front wheel.

I told him that I appreciated all of his effort, but that everything – including me - would be getting dirty again real soon. He looked up at me from under his ball cap and told me that he loved it whenever he got the chance to be up close to a motorcycle like mine.

Aunt, even though I'm now used to riding a motorcycle, and I sometimes don't think much about it, I knew exactly how he felt. I could tell it was the

same way I feel whenever I see an areoplane up close in a field, or flying overhead. . . there's just something special about it. I got on and kicked the starter lever. The engine came to life with the kind of roar that usually causes people who are standing close by to take one or two steps backward. Instead, the boy took a quick step closer and watched me twisting the throttle to warm Sir Davi up.

His father was now standing and watching through the big window and I pointed to the boy, and then pointed to the field of grass next to the station, making a large circling motion with my left hand.

Although the boy did not understand, his father did, and he nodded his approval to me. I shouted to the boy, "Get on!", and no sooner had I said it, I could feel his hands gripping my jacket on both sides, nearly pulling my feet from the ground!

I put on my goggles and was surprised at how clear everything looked through the now spotless glass.

The boy had cleaned the lenses as carefully as he had treated my motorcycle, and I took them off and gave them to him to wear. His father, still watching from behind the big window, laughed at the sight of his bug-eyed son as we pulled out of the station and rolled down a short hill to the grass.

Aunt Victoria, I don't know how many times we rode around that bumpy field, but I do know that I had as much fun as that boy did on his first motorcycle ride. It was a little after six on my watch when I took him back to the station, and Sir Davi was still running as he hopped off and gave me back my goggles. I waved to his father who was still inside and reached out to shake the boy's hand when he yelled, "Wait!" and ran into the building. He was only gone for a few seconds when he came dashing back out the doorway with what looked like a small piece of paper.

. . . It was a baseball card.

The engine was loud, and he shouted above it.

"It's Christy Mathewson, one of my favorites!" Before I could say anything, he stepped up and put the card in my jacket pocket. I buttoned the flap down over the pocket and yelled, "Thanks! – What's your name?"

He cupped his hands to the sides of his mouth and shouted. . . "It's Henry!"

I told him my name, and reached out sideways with my left hand. As we

shook hands I yelled that I'd liked to have a few of my own cards to give him in return. "I like Mathewson too", I hollered, . . . "but deep down, my Sox are Red!"

Still grasping my hand, Henry laughed and with his eyes wide shouted, "We'll see about that, come World Series time!"

We dropped hands and I patted my buttoned pocket to be assured

Henry's gift to me was safely tucked away. I placed Sir Davi's gear lever in position and with all of the voice Henry had left in him he shouted for me to "Watch out for the holes and the crazy drivers!" I twisted the throttle a few times and the engine roared, acting like it was ready once again for the open highway.

Henry took a short step backward and waved, and I accelerated out onto the main road. My time spent with the boy had put me in a ballpark mood, and over the next 20 miles I must have hummed "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" at least a hundred times.

It was by that time getting close to 6:30, and even though I had only just returned to the road, I was beginning to feel worn from a first day of riding.

Actually, I was as saddle-sore as a greenhorn on a cattle drive, and realized that if I didn't stop soon and rest, I'd probably not be able to sit on that seat again for days! Even so, I decided that I would ride for two more hours, and then stop no matter where I was. It was my hope that those two hours would be enough to get me past the monster I knew loomed just ahead of me. . . Indianapolis! And dearest aunt, what a monster it was!

It is truly impossible to believe that you and I have always lived just a half-day's journey from such a metropolis of mankind and metal.

If you will look at the map, you will notice that almost all of the big highways branch from the center of that city like arteries and veins do from a heart, and believe me, when you get close to the heart you can tell that every one of those arteries and veins are being pumped to full capacity.

I have never seen so many automobiles, big trucks, buses, taxis, roadwork vehicles, and yes, motorcycles, in my entire life! I used to think the best place to learn to drive a vehicle was in an open field where you wouldn't hit anything, or hurt anyone. Now I think the best place to learn is in the city!

Some people shout and cut wildly in front of you. Others are quiet, but

pounce upon their brakes at the last possible second before smashing into the rear of the next fellow. Still others go so slowly that you must swerve from one side of the road to the other with the agility of a bluegill to avoid them. All in all, it was the most eye-opening driving experience I have ever witnessed.

When I reached what I guessed to be about half-way through the town, traffic suddenly slowed, and then came to a complete stop. Keeping my feet on the pavement, I gave Sir Davi a small amount of gas and rolled out to the midway line to see if I could spot what the trouble ahead might be... and sure enough, about 100 feet ahead, somebody had locked bumpers with somebody else, and they'd both managed to twist themselves sideways – blocking both of the northbound lanes.

No-one appeared to be hurt, and a small group of men had already begun pushing the still stuck-together autos from the road while at least three more men jumped up and down between them trying to break the cars loose. It appeared as though one of them had a flattened tire, and pushing was slow.

There were plenty of men on the job, and I wouldn't have been of much added help, so I turned Sir Davi off, and sat back to wait it out with everybody else in the ever-lengthening line of traffic behind me.

Considering the way everyone had been driving just a few minutes earlier, I was at first rather impressed with the display of patience around me toward this unexpected inconvenience. However, at roughly the five minute mark of no forward progress, the faint sound of a single horn blast could be heard from somewhere far behind.

I don't know any Morse Code, but one beep must mean, "Everybody join in!" because before I knew what was happening, everyone, both in front, and for who-knows-how-far behind me were blowing their horns without a rest. It was so loud and so annoying, I truly felt sorry for the chaps who were helping at the scene of the accident.

Here they were, pushing and jumping for all they were worth, and for all I knew, their own wives were honking at them along with everybody else.

Throughout this ordeal, Sir Davi and I had been stopped next to a large advertisement board beside the road that may have at least partly explained the frenzied drivers that surrounded me on all sides.

On the board was an at least 20 foot high picture of a man dressed in rac-

ing gear, and beside him sat his faithful racing auto... a huge auto, painted in bright red with white stripes and the number "88" displayed boldly on the side of the motor cover. In the background, were the figures of some rather lovely ladies waving for the racer's attention, but his gaze was fixed to the lighted cigarette he was holding. The writing across the board's top said, "1916 Indianapolis Speedway Winner, Dorio Resta, smokes the Winner's Cigarette... Cavalier."

Seeing the smoke curling up and about the great racer's face brought to mind one of the few memories I have of my father when I was very young.

I could once again imagine him deeply sunken into the big cushions of his favorite chair after the strains of a tiring day - stocking feet propped up - the smoke rising and hanging overhead as he enjoyed an evening with The Indianapolis Star. Cavaliers were his favorites too!

Mother always hated the smell she claimed it left on his chair and everything else... including him, but I remember that he'd just laugh and say it did no more damage than her fried fish!

I couldn't wait to be like him and smoke myself, and he had always said that when I graduated from high school and had a good-enough job to where I could afford it - I could do it. But when he and mother died, and you took me in, I can't say as if I ever even thought much about it. Besides, I wouldn't want to smell up your place! Now, though, that I'm outside most of the time, this trip could be as good a time as any for me to start, and that billboard of Doria Resta pretty well inspired me to think about picking up where father left off! Who knows? If a Cavalier can get me the kind of female attention it gets Resta, then I'll be a winner too!

Well anyway, soon enough those men had shoved the autos out of the way, and both lanes began slowly inching forward. Ironically, I noticed as I neared the men that they were all pulling cigarettes from a tin offered up by one of the group, and since I was passing by the wreck at less than a slow trot, the fellow giving them out hoisted the tin in my direction as an offer right then and there. The other men looked clean and upright enough, but this one seemed not to care how he looked or even give a thought to what anybody else thought about it either. His hair and face were in deep need of a good wash and his disarrayed clothing needed one too. He was certainly being friendly, and I appreciated his

offer, but when his grin displayed several badly decayed teeth I politely refused with a wave and drove on.

I didn't see what cheap brand he must have had, but I can tell you this: when I start smoking, Cavaliers will be the only one for me!

I was relieved to leave the city behind, but I soon missed its extra smooth driving pavement. No sooner had I traveled a quarter-mile beyond the city's limits, the road began to return to its usual unpredictable self. That means that I could sometimes ride for miles and hardly feel a bump, and just as I got used to it, the surface would completely change to a rutted, somewhat perilous condition. It is a situation that I am sure we motorcycle riders are much more aware of than the drivers of four-wheeled autos, but every now and then I will see one of them hit an unseen hole and two seat fulls of folks will bounce clear to the ceiling!

The men on the road-crews work hard though, and I'm sure it's a very hot job at times, trying to keep filling in the thousands of cracks and holes that the endless traffic continues to make.

The stop-and-go city driving had worn me to a frazzle and I was amazed to see the amount of time it had taken me to get from one side to the other... nearly an hour! I left Indianapolis on a road called the Range Line Highway, and I reassured myself that I would stop at 8:30 no matter where I was – and this I did.

When the time rolled around, I found myself about 5 miles south of Kokomo, and I pulled off into a small wooded area. I threw the switch allowing Sir Davi to come to a rest after a long day's work, and he thanked me with a short, somewhat quiet backfire.

I pulled my machine backwards onto its stand, and lifting my right leg up and over the fuel tank soon proved to be a ridiculously simple task that I simply felt ridiculous trying to accomplish.

... It was absolutely no use.

I'd been riding on that seat for so long in the same position that the muscles in the top parts of my legs had decided for themselves that they'd stay that way for a while. Aunt, I like to think of myself as the kind that really doesn't care what other people think about them, but I do hope no-one saw me wriggling from side to side, pushing myself backwards inch by inch until I could reach

behind me to untie my knapsack.

When I did, it fell to the ground with a thud, and I had only to let myself down as gently as I could onto the fender of the back tire. From there I tried to stand so I could shuffle backwards over the tail-light, but my thighs would not straighten up for more than a few inches before a tightening pain clamped me just above the knees making me yell in one of those half laughing, half crying screams of absurd agony.

The tail-light proved to be too high up off the fender, and all I was managing to do each time I tried to hop back over it was to bang into it and make it loose. What's more, the tightening in my thighs had gotten worse, and I now no longer had enough flex in them to even be able to scoot myself back up onto the seat.

I thought about it, and one good thing it seemed, at least, was that I was far enough off the road that no one could see me. But after more thinking about it, I didn't know if that was such a good thing or not.

Various ways of being found there dead came to mind, and I began listing them out loud to help me forget about my aching legs for a while.

Let's see...#1. My Flesh Could be Consumed by Insects. Not a pleasant thought, and I'd hate to leave an unsolved mystery for anyone who eventually passed by and spotted a pile bones behind a motorcycle. #2. Starvation. (Although anyone finding me would never guess that's how I died because of the several canned goods in my nearby knapsack.) #3. Death by Freezing. This one was pretty unlikely though, due to the fact that it was now July, and the first freeze probably wouldn't hit until at least late September, and that left plenty of time for one of the first two things to happen to me before then. #4. Old Age. Well, after saying "old age" outloud I all of a sudden got aggravated with the ridiculous mess, and decided right then to take a real deep breath and get myself off that fender anyway I could, pain or not.

I sucked in hard, strained up as high as I could on my left tip-toes, and flung myself to the right pushing as hard as I could on the fender with both hands. The result was a slamming onto the rock-hard ground with the right side of my shoulder and face, and to think back on it, I was lucky I didn't tip Sir Davi right over on top of me!

I was so tired from the whole day's ride and this latest ordeal that I fell asleep right there where I lay... but before I did, I made myself a promise that

I would never go through anything like this again, and I had already begun contriving a way to keep that promise.

I was later awakened by the nearby hooting of a Barred Owl, and I had already gotten up off of the dampened ground before realizing the muscles in my legs had relaxed and were back to near normal. They were certainly still terribly sore, but I could, at least, walk around well enough to get my knapsack and begin setting up grandfather's tent.

I had pulled Sir Davi off into an open spot among large maples and oaks that were shimmering with the illumination of a full moon, and with no clouds above, setting up the tent was as easy as if it were broad daylight. From my knapsack I pulled out the small pillow you made for me, and when I did, all of the oatmeal cookies you hid in it were flung in every direction!

I can't tell you how good those tasted. I hadn't stopped anywhere for supper and I suppose you meant for those 15 cookies to be snacks that would last for at least a couple of days— They didn't.

I'd finished the first two or three off before my head hit the pillow, and as I lay on my side gazing off into the trees for any animal I might see scampering about in the moonlight, I ate at least a half-dozen more!

I began to feel as though my eyes were getting tired because it suddenly seemed to be more difficult to focus on the forest around me that had only moments earlier been easy to see... but when I rolled over on my back and looked straight up, the reason for my ever-darkening surroundings stared silently back at me.

It was an eclipse of the moon!

I held one of your cookies at arm's length and covered the whole thing up, wondering how much of an eclipse it would be, and delighted in the fact that I was the only person in the world indulging in such a combination of rare treats... one made of shadow, and the other of sugar.

I don't know what time I fell asleep, but it must have been not long after finishing off your cookies. I watched the shadow cross to the halfway point on the moon, but don't remember anything beyond, and when I later awoke shivering in the early morning's dampness, I half awakened lugged myself around gathering sticks in the bright-again moonlight until I had enough for a fire. I felt revived as its flames rose and warmed me, but when I saw on my watch it

was nearly two in the morning, just knowing how late it was made me tired all over again and I crawled inside grandfather's tent.

As I lay there, I could see by the firelight's glow the "U.S." on the inside of the entrance flap, and it made me wonder how many sleepless nights grandfather and his friends had stayed within this same canvas cover while the not far away thunder of cannons filled the dark hours. As tired as I was, I couldn't seem to sleep, so I went back outside and sat thinking about it for awhile as the last embers of the fire dimmed.

I remember how extra good those cookies tasted as I watched the moon sinking beyond the trees... thank you again for packing them for me. It made me wonder what soldiers ever had that tasted good to them.

I tried, but it was difficult to imagine the sounds of battle — for the only break in the dark stillness was an occasional automobile passing by on the highway out beyond the trees. It was a warm night, so when I finally crawled back inside I left the flap open.

Lying there, I thought again about what men inside that tent had heard in the night, and I wondered what they thought about, or said to each other.

All that I heard was a slight rustling of branches in the breeze, and the occasional faint hooting of an owl from some far away corner of the forest. I drifted to sleep listening to its call, imagining it to be telling me that all was right with the world.

What seemed to be only moments later, the faint crowing of a distant rooster awakened me, and my eyes had trouble adjusting to the fact that he was an extra early riser. In the total darkness I struck a match to see on my watch that it was only 5:30... but I couldn't get back to sleep so I began feeling around for a few things to start packing up. Soon enough, the first rays of light filtered in to help, and before the sun was fully up I had the tent down and away and was ready to go... But — not before carrying out my new plan of survival on the manly art of maintaining motorcycle muscle tone!

There was simply no way I was going to land myself in the same cramped position I had the night before, and I had come up with what I was sure was the proper amount of physical activity to ward off any such reoccurrence.

Firstly, I worked up my shoulders and legs a bit with an old stand-by that you'll remember I wasn't too bad with in my younger days... The Jump

Rope. Of course, I brought no rope along, but no matter... I quickly found that fifty imaginary twirls and hops required roughly the same effort the real thing ever did.

Next, and without missing a beat, I broke into 20 side-straddle hops. These I dedicated to my old gym teacher, Mr. Elmers, whom I could easily imagine standing directly behind me yelling, "Is that the best you can do Bidwell?... Faster, man! ...Faster!!"

After those, I dropped down and duck waddled for at least 30 seconds.

I felt pretty silly doing it, but after feeling the full stretch it gave my upper legs, I know now I won't try any long drives without a good waddle. While still close to the ground, I fell forward and lit into as many

floor-dips as I could muster in about 15 seconds, and to finish things off, I sprang back to my feet to count out another 20 side-straddle hops.

The entire routine had taken less than five minutes, and I felt great!

The exercises had awakened and loosened me, and I made it a permanent plan to include my "Rider's Workout", as I called it, at least once every day of this trip. (Besides...it would make old Mr. Elmers happy to know I still jump whenever he yells!)

With the morning air crisp and the sun brightly shining, Sir Davi started as though the oil was still hot, and we were off. There was no-one else on the road at that hour and it was a beautiful cool morning to be riding in the open air. Considering the short amount of time I had actually slept, I felt rested and Sir Davi ran smoothly – seeming to be refreshed as well. We reached the city of Kokomo in what seemed like a matter of minutes, and at that time of the morning,

there was no city-like traffic to deal with at all. Driving from one end of the town was nothing like it had been in Indianapolis. (Of course, Kokomo isn't nearly the size of the capital city, but it made me understand that early morning riding would be the best thing to do if I was going to be traveling through other big cities in the future... and I figured I probably would be.)

Leaving Kokomo, I made my first stop at a roadside gasoline station that had a diner. I still had plenty of fuel, but the "Ham and Eggs Breakfast" sign was too inviting to pass it by. It wasn't as good as yours, but it certainly hit the spot that first morning!

After breakfast, I rode northward to Peru, and then turned eastward on Wabash Way. No sooner had I made the turn, I was astounded to see what I'm sure must have been a beaver swimming in a large pond off the right side of the road. He was moving away from me so I stopped Sir Davi as quickly as I could and jumped off to get a better look. I never quite made out any big flat tail, and he was facing the other way so I couldn't see any big teeth either, but it had to be a beaver! That makes the first sighting of an animal we don't have around home, so I'll keep track of any others I see on this trip and let you know about 'em.

The road on to Fort Wayne was a surprisingly smooth one. (Perhaps there's more money in the north for better roads.) At about 8 o'clock I drove through the small town of Roanoke and pulled over at a Barney Kroger's. The sun was already making it clear it was going to make it a hot one that day so I put my jacket in my knapsack and went in to buy a Coca-Cola and a Hershey's.

Aunt Victoria, walking through the front door of that store was like stepping back into time itself. When I worked as a stock-boy for Mr. Kroger in one of his Louisville stores, I never knew how much the same his other ones were too! What I mean is, of course I knew there was food in all of them... but there's more to it than that. The stock-boys working in this Krogers were setting up displays of canned goods, and fruits and vegetables exactly the same way I had been taught to do it back in Louisville. I know that sounds kind of common, but when I saw the same bright lighting overhead, the sparkling clean meat cases, and the big cracker barrels, it was all so familiar I felt like I was late for work!

I always wanted to meet the real Barney Kroger in person, but now I realized why I never did.

I figured he must keep himself terribly busy traveling all the time to each of his groceries to make sure his managers are keepin' up with what must be some pretty tough rules on how to do things right in the food business! He came into the Louisville Kroger's a couple of times, but both times I had an off-work day. A friend of mine who was working those days told me Mr. Kroger seemed a nice enough man, so I suppose he is. The butcher of this Kroger's was a nice fellow himself, and he didn't mind my questions about the traffic I might run into when I got closer to Fort Wayne. I said I wanted to get to The Lincoln Highway, and he told me that I was still about 15 miles away from the city, but

if I wanted an easy way to The Lincoln, I'd have to turn around and go back about a mile to get on an old road that wasn't used very much anymore except by the farmers and other residents who lived out that way.

As I listened to him, I tried to follow his directions with my map, but that was useless. None of the roads he mentioned were on it, so I wrote down everything he told me on some brown butcher paper that he gave me. By the time he was finished giving me directions like, "Turn right at the rusted tractor wheel," and "Go up the hill 'til you get to Johnson's collapsed hay barn", I had written a collection of instructions that looked like a blueprint for a three-ring circus.

I thanked him politely as I went out the door, thinking at the same time that I wasn't about to go back and get myself lost in the countryside when I could probably find a better way for myself—but when he came to the door pointing the direction he wanted me to go, and then calling out "You won't have any trouble," I didn't have the nerve to thank him again and then drive off in the opposite direction.

Sure enough, his directions led me down some old beaten back roads that only farmers on tractors still used, and I wondered if I'd ever get through, let alone find The Lincoln Highway. But while following the scrawled instructions, I did turn right at a rusted tractor wheel, and passed Johnson's old barn as well... collapsed right where it was supposed to be.

Finally, I topped a hill, and there on the other side was a sign that said, "New Haven - One Mile." When I reached the intersection of the tiny place, I pulled out the butcher paper map

I had written on it: "Turn right at New Haven. You are now on The Lincoln"... and it was true. I was, indeed, on The Lincoln Highway, and pulling out my road map, I could see that I had completely gone around the heavy traffic I would surely have run smack into at that time of the day in Fort Wayne.

I guess most people really will help you if you just give them a chance.

From there, it was only a short 15 minute ride before I crossed the state line into Ohio.

I remember it was around 9 at that time, and I pulled off the road to map out my next stop. I decided it would be Upper Sandusky, and it looked to be about 80 miles away.

By the time I reached it, I had rolled through Convoy, Van Wert and Delphos. I saw several turns I could have made along the way, but there weren't any other towns on The Lincoln after I passed through Delphos all the way to Upper Sandusky.

It was by now close to 11 o'clock and I was getting hungry again, so I found a grocery with a pump. I pulled Sir Davi up next to an old, dilapidated flatbed truck that had a large water tank strapped down to it, and a pump attendant told me he'd get to me as soon as he could. In the meantime I took my knapsack in with me to haul a few groceries, and while I stood waiting for the meat counter clerk to finish up a couple of dandy ham and cheeses for me, I overheard the cash clerk talking with a very tired and worried looking old man. The clerk was telling the old-timer that he was sorry, but he just couldn't do anything about it. The old man seemed desperate, and I moved a little closer to catch more of the details.

As it turned out, it was his old flatbed truck I had parked next to, and he was here to try to buy a load of water for him and his wife and all of their thirsty cows and sheep as well.

The clerk knew the old man by name (it was Leeman), and I could see that he wanted to help, but he told him, "until it rains, and rains good and long" he just couldn't risk selling anymore water from his store's underground cistern or he'd surely run out, too.

I didn't have any idea what I could do, but finally I said, "Can I help?" Neither of them knew me, of course, and they certainly didn't expect me to blurt out anything. When I did, they both stopped talking and turned to me silently as if I had no idea of what the dilemma was - and I guess I really didn't.

The problem was that for over a month, it hadn't rained a drop in this part of Ohio, and everyone was in serious trouble over it. . . especially the farmers.

They continued to stare at me, and I repeated my offer. "Can I help somehow?"

In spite of the drought, the old man's sense of humor hadn't completely dried up and he smiled and said, "If you've got a thousand gallons of water in that knapsack. . . I'll thank you kindly!"

I told him I was sorry, but I didn't.

A hopeful smile left his face as he silently left the clerk's side, and as he ambled past, his outstretched weathered hand came to a rest on my shoulder. He was tired, and with a weakened voice said, "That's alright, son. I appreciate the offer."

The sandwiches were ready, so I picked out a few other groceries along with some extra Hershey's and paid the clerk. While I was tying my knapsack back onto Sir Davi, the old man came outside to leave. We smiled to each other, but had no words. I wanted to say something, but could think of nothing that would make any kind of difference. He climbed into the truck, started the engine and pulled away... only to come to an abrupt stop a few feet past the pumps. Before I had time to even wonder what the problem was, he leaned out the window, looked back at me and shouted, "Do you know anything about windmills?"

I thought about his question. I knew the answer was "No," but I thought about it anyway. Finally I said... "A little bit."

It wasn't a lie. I knew what windmills looked like. I knew they had turning parts, and I knew they pumped water. That was a little bit.

He asked me that if I wasn't too busy, would I like to follow him down to his farm to take a look at old Maxwell. After he told me what his wife was cooking for supper, I knew I wasn't busy, so I followed him to a town called Marion, which was about 20 miles to the south on The Harrison Trail.

His farm was beyond the town another mile or so, and we were still a good quarter of a mile from it when I got my first glimpse of Maxwell. I had guessed back at the store that he had named his windmill Maxwell for some good reason, but I didn't think too hard about why until the thing caught my eye. From the high hilltop it was standing on, everybody in the whole county could probably read the gigantic "Maxwell House Coffee" advertisement painted on the tail vane, and the blades were a sight as well. As best I could tell, they were painted yellow and brown alternately, but over the years the colors had almost completely faded away.

As I followed the truck onto the curving road that led up to the house, I saw the names "Leeman and Elizabeth Gray" on the rusted mailbox. You could tell that this was once a beautiful place with its small but graceful house - complete with high gables and a curving front porch - but the years had worn it down

in the same way they had weathered old Mr. Gray. Still, the huge maples in the yard and the rolling surrounding hills made it a lovely spot for a home, and it was being kept up as best two old people could manage. As we came to a stop at the house, I could see that behind it there was a big barn and an equally large grain silo heavy with long vines of ivy. Beyond the silo there were fields of corn and another type of low growing crop that I really didn't recognize. Neither looked very healthy, and two nearby ponds were completely dried up.

As tall as the barn and silo were, the reason for my invitation to the Gray's farm made them look pitifully small. The old windmill stood directly between them, and towered above the two by at least another 15 feet. It was completely

lifeless, and its motionless tail vane cast a wide shadow over the rounded face of the silo.

I got off Sir Davi and met Mr. Gray as he was walking back from the truck. We hadn't really even taken the time to introduce ourselves back at the store, so we sat under the old maples on a bench he had made and talked a bit.

The conversation quickly got around to the windmill, and we walked over to it to get a closer look.

Standing directly underneath the structure and straining to look straight up at it made it sound like an outright lie to hear Mr. Gray say it was only 55 feet to the top, because from where I was, it looked to be at least three times that! The windmills I'd seen before always made a pleasant kind of whirring sound that was like the comforting whisper of a low crackling fireplace, or a small creek waterfall, but this piece of corroded machinery was a stark giant that made no sound, and looked even older than Mr. Gray himself.

I remember being amazed that on such a hot day, this frightfully tall piece of iron could appear to be so solidly frozen. Mr. Gray took a few steps back, and, with both hands shielding the sun from his eyes, took a long straight upward look at the structure. "Yep, I can't wait to see my old favorite color spinnin' up there again."

"Which one?", I asked as I leaned back and looked up beside him. "Brown or yellow?" The strange look he gave me told me that I had done it again, Aunt Victoria. You'd think I'd learn to just keep talk about colors out of my vocabulary, but I guess that's kind of hard to do.

Before the doctor tested my eyes and discovered I was colorblind way back in the first grade, I thought my life was over. Especially when Mrs. Thomas held up my best drawing and asked the whole class, “Now, class - what color is the sky?”

I knew it was supposed to be blue just like everybody else, I just couldn't tell blue from purple, and my best drawing wound up in the trash with a stern look from Mrs. Thomas – and orders to “Start over, Mr. Bidwell!”

The puzzled look I was now getting from Mr. Gray about his “yellow and brown” windmill blades had reminded me of that whole horrible day in school, and I immediately understood that my choice of colors was a bit off.

“Are you colorblind or something?!” he asked, looking at my eyes like he might be able to tell they were somehow different.

“Yes, I am”, I said with just a wisp of frustration. “So what color are they, anyway?”

“You got the yellow part right”, he said. “But every other one is red... not brown!”

He laughed, slapped me lightly on the back, and we turned and walked to the bench. On the way over, I remembered he had said something about wanting to see his favorite color spinning up there again. “What is your favorite color”, I asked.

He glanced at me like it was a silly question and said, “Orange!”

I had no idea what he was talking about, and had no plans to mention it again!

Back on the bench, we talked a good deal more.

I told him a little about me, and he used up the rest of the afternoon talking about how the farm had always been in the Gray family... about how he met Elizabeth... about the old war... and about the new one.

When he got back to talking about the farm, he said loud and clear that, “No drought was gonna' take it away now!”

His words were strong, but it was easy to see the doubt in his wrinkled, sunburned face.

Soon enough, Mrs. Gray called him to supper and she was surely surprised to see him drag me in along with him! She gave Mr. Gray one of those “I'll get you later for this!” looks, but he just laughed it off and said “Didn't I tell you

the windmill repairman was coming for dinner tonight?” Mrs. Gray filled me a plate and was just as friendly as I somehow knew she would be. Her smile and caring eyes reminded me of you the moment I first saw her, and I’d have to say that her apple pie is a very close 2nd place finisher to yours, too!

Well, all throughout supper, Mr. Gray told me about the workings of a farm windmill.

I’m sure he was wise to the fact that I knew nothing about them from the very beginning... he just needed someone younger there on his farm who would listen to his instructions on how to fix it, and then go do it for him.

Mrs. Gray had left the table to begin washing the dishes in the kitchen, but every now and then she would come back into the dining room for some reason or another. More than once I saw her shake her head as she caught bits and pieces of Mr. Gray’s ideas about getting old Maxwell working and I could see that she thought it would never draw water from the earth again. After all, Mr. Gray had tried for years to make it work, but now he was simply too old to climb the tower and try anymore.

He explained that the windmill had two problems. One was the terribly long and wet winter that blew in seven years ago. Maxwell went far too long without a change of oil, and the entire mill head had rusted solid before he could get any of his neighbors to climb up and lubricate it.

To explain the second problem, Mr. Gray put on a little demonstration. He went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water and three drinking straws. He pulled out his pocket knife, cut one of them in half, and gave me one of the short pieces. Then he said, “Now try and draw water up that straw into your mouth.”

It was easy.

I just put the straw in the water, and sucked it up like a cola.

Then he put the two long pieces together, one inside the other, and made one extra long straw.

He handed it to me and said, “

Now, do the same thing with this.”

I put the long straw into the glass and tried to draw the water out through it. It would rise a ways, but then I would have to take a quick extra breath to get it to come all the way up the straw and into my mouth... and each time I did,

there was a hissing sound coming from where the straws were stuck together. . . like air was leaking out or something.

When I pointed out that air was leaking out of the straw, he said, “Air’s not leakin’ out son, it’s leakin’ in! – and that’s Maxwell’s other problem. Nobody will believe me, but I know what’s wrong. They all think the water down below has been all used up, but they’re crazy!!

There’s plenty of water down there. It’s just that the well pipe has somehow gotten a crack in it somewhere, and it makes old Maxwell hiss and cough just like that straw did. Thing of it is, I’m the only one that ever heard it hissin’ like a cat because it only started doing it just before the bad winter showed up. Then the gear work all rusted up, and there you have it.”

I told him that I didn’t think it would be too much trouble for me to climb up and loosen the rusty gears with some oil and elbow grease, but when I asked him about what we could do to fix the cracked well pipe that was underground, he said, “Nothing. . . there’s just nothing we can do about it.” But then he added, “What we can do though, is give those blades an extra breath.”

He could see I wasn’t getting the idea, so he spelled it out for me.

“Just like you took extra-quick breaths to get that water to come up the straw, we’ve got to get those blades turning extra-quick to draw the underground water right past that crack down there! . . . And once we get it going, I won’t let it rest until it’s filled up at least one of my ponds!”

Well, Aunt Victoria, old Mr. Gray’s enthusiasm and raw faith in his idea was so real I had to stay and help. It’s been almost a week since I met him at the store in Upper Sandusky, and tomorrow I’m leaving.

I started this letter after getting home from church with the Grays this morning, and they’ve left me alone throughout the afternoon and evening hours to write. (I’ve paused only once to again enjoy one of Mrs.

Gray’s wonderful suppers, and tonight’s chicken was topped off with fresh strawberry pie. I just thought you’d like to know she’s fed me well!)

Looking out of my second floor window, I can see the sun is about to set. . . and down below I can hear Mr. Gray telling the whole story again to yet another bewildered friend of his as he lets them fill up their water tanks.

. . . Oh, and just now I heard him pointing out the several families of mal-

lards that wasted no time taking up residency this afternoon as soon as the big pond began to fill and show the slightest signs of muck.

I suppose you may want to know how we did it, so I'll tell you in a quick manner before I go downstairs to say goodnight to the Gray's for the last time.

Thinking it over now,

I believe the hardest part was overcoming my fear of the great height of the tower. Before we could even begin to hope to pump water, we had to free the blades from their rusted state and that took many hours of pushing and pulling and pushing and more pulling while I knelt on a tiny half-rotted platform 55 feet off the ground. For the first whole day of work, that was all that I did, and at one point I blessed you for the lovely scarf you knitted for me.

Mrs. Gray saw what I was doing up there, and she shouted at me, insisting that I tie myself to the tower's top with something. I had been on the tower for most of the day trying to free the big blades, coming down only for more oil, a quick sandwich and drink, or a short run behind the barn when necessary.

I made a bet with the sun that I would see those blades turn before it went down, and I was getting aggravated and extra determined because it was evident by the cool shadows of evening that the sun was winning. It had become so cool, in fact, that on one of my trips down for oil, I took my jacket and scarf back up with me, and now my scarf was the only convenient thing I had up there to tie myself to something to make Mrs. Gray happy.

I wrapped it around my waist and tied it to one of the several iron supports that were nearby, but it was really a nuisance and kept me from being able to twist my body and put as much force into my pulls on the blades as I had been... so I thought that as soon as Mrs. Gray went back inside to work on supper, I'd untie the thing and get back to work myself.

As I continued to oil and pull on the blades, I began to believe it was a useless task. My hands were scraped and bleeding from a few different places and the blades were as stuck and still as ever. I had had it, and was ready to quit and climb down. It was at that point I remember glancing down to see Mr. Gray looking straight up at me with the same hopeful look he'd been wearing all day long, and I paused for a moment to really take a good long look at the desert-dry fields surrounding him below. The grimness of the scene all at once frustrated and angered me, and in one, last minute, Give-It-Everything-I-Had-

Determination, I pulled harder on one blade than I had all day long. The effort broke loose the rusted mechanism all at once, and I was thrown backwards and off-balance toward open space and a 55 foot drop when your scarf tightened, causing me to fall to my knees on the platform.

Did I thank you for that scarf? . . .

Thank you.

I turned to look straight down over the edge of the platform, and I could see the top of Mr. Gray's head far below. He was looking to the kitchen yelling, "Elizabeth, come out here!"

I called down to him that I was alright, and she didn't need to come outside, but when I saw her face and his together looking up, they weren't focused on me at all! I turned back around, and there before me was what we had all longed to see. . . the huge metal fan was turning. Ever so slowly, and in a somewhat jerking manner, but still turning all the same. Even high atop the tower I could feel only the slightest wind, but the designer had angled the blades to react to nature's whispers and Maxwell was talking back again for the first time in years.

I climbed to the ground and we all stood there watching it as the sun went down behind the barn. Even after it was dark and Mrs. Gray had gone inside to finish supper, Mr. Gray and I sat under the maple and listened to it. I had used at least a gallon of oil that day trying to loosen the thing, and all of that slickness kept the mill's gears quiet for a time. But soon it wore off and the rusted gears strained and squeaked when even the slightest breeze brushed upon the blades.

We had been silent for what seemed like hours when Mr. Gray leaned forward, cocked his head a bit, and spoke in a half-whisper, "You hear it?"

I didn't think he was talking about the squeaking gears, so I listened closely. I heard it.

It was a hissing sound that we both knew was coming up from the underground pipe. Mrs. Gray called us in for a late supper, and as we walked to the house, Mr. Gray put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Today was the easy part. . . tomorrow we get down to business!"

To tell you the truth. . . his "tomorrow" kinda scared me.

The next day was Tuesday, and it was really surprising how fast the whole idea came up.

I took Mr. Gray for a short ride on Sir Davi around the farm and before we even got back to the barn he was yelling, Thats it! That's it! I've got it! I have got it !!"

I glanced back at him while we were still riding and he was looking down at the back tire and still shouting about it. I stopped by the windmill and he jumped off, staring straight up at it, and then back at the tire, then back up at the blades, then back at the tire, over and over again.

"Look at that, will you? I tell you, son, that's it!"

I hadn't really understood how Sir Davi's back tire was going to be the miracle cure Maxwell needed, until I realized Mr. Gray wasn't looking at the tire at all.

It was the gear.

Now that I at least knew what he was thinking, I had no idea how to make it work. He didn't waste any time telling me his thoughts, but ran straight to the barn and came back dragging an old chain.

It was roughly the same length as the one on Sir Davi, which meant it was about a hundred feet too short for what we needed. I asked him where we could find more, and he said, "I don't know... but we'll find it... we have to."

A small water truck pulled up and the driver said that this would be the last load he could bring. Mr. Gray had found out about a man who lived several counties to the south where the drought hadn't hit quite as bad. But now even folks down there were running short of water and, although the man was nice about it, he said he simply couldn't sell any more of his supply right now.

The water was dumped in a trough for the cattle that had come up over the hillside at the first sound of the truck pulling in, and as Mr. Gray watched them push at each other to gulp down what little amount they each would get, he looked beyond them at his withered corn. Without rain soon, the crop would be a total loss, but now he didn't care about that. Like all of the other farmers in the area, he was down to trying to save his animals, and he talked to them as they continued to shove for a space to drink - telling them that he had found the answer- and they'd all be cooling themselves in the pond in 24 hours. His soothing voice brought their heads up from the trough and they stared at him momentarily with gentle eyes as though they understood, and were relieved to hear what he said.

I hoped he was right.

All the rest of that day we searched for every unused chain anybody might have lying around. At an auto junkyard, we found five different pieces that had been used on chain-driven trucks. Each length was about twelve and a half feet and when we returned to the farm we took out the master links and made one huge piece from them.

Tuesday was a day of nearly fruitless effort as we were only able to come up with another few feet of chain from two old bicycles that Mr. Gray remembered were up in the hayloft. Late in the day, I climbed to the top of the tower holding on to the hook-end of a fishing line so we could measure how much we still had to have.

Mr. Gray was far below, holding on to the pole end, and I wondered what kind of photograph it would make to see the old angler hauling in a 55 foot windmill... with a good sized man clinging to it to boot!

As it turned out, we figured the whole chain would need to be at least 150 feet long, and that meant we still had a lot of pieces left to find.

The daylight went quickly and we ended that day sitting under the maple planning to get up extra early the next morning and make Wednesday our “day of the hunt”.

The next day we were up well before sunrise and Mr. Gray and I tiptoed around the house, trying to get ready without waking up his wife. We packed some sandwiches and apples, and Mr. Gray found a few colas in the icebox, so we took those too. It was a warm morning and still pitch black when Mr. Gray climbed into the cab.

My job was to push the old truck down the drive a ways before he would start it because of a hole that was in the muffler, and neither one of us wanted Mrs. Gray thinking the Wright Brothers were landing in the back yard.

I started pushing, and it was so dark Mr. Gray turned on the headlights to keep from rolling off the curving drive and hitting the split-rail fence that lined the edge of the rock. The sudden blinding beams not only lit up the fence, but shot beyond it like a searchlight landing on the open door of the hen house. The resulting rush of chickens that flung themselves through the door out into the false daylight cackled and ran off into the darkness like they'd seen a six-foot fox!

Mr. Gray had his left arm out the window, rapidly waving forward for me to push harder and get us around the corner before the headlights chanced upon what we both knew was still out there somewhere. . .

But it was too late, for there, all alone in the open hen house door stood a rooster, and he had taken center-stage in the spotlight for this morning's performance.

Mr. Gray's now wildly flailing arm called for all the speed I had, and as the loose gravel spun out from under my boots in all directions, I hoped the bird's brain was at least big enough to tell the difference between a truck's headlights and the rising sun of dawn.

As we rounded the curve and the drive went into a downhill slope, I hopped into the back and, catching my breath, laid backward to see the stars were out and beautiful. We quietly coasted to the bottom of the hill, and the farm instantly returned to darkness.

The rooster didn't care though, and he let out a couple of walloping cock-a-doodle-doo's that I'm sure cracked more than a few eggs in the hen house. His high-pitched crowing pierced the predawn silence like a canon shot, and was topped only by the blasting voice of Mr. Gray himself as he hollered back a surprising choice of words that I would not have thought were a part of the general American farming family's vocabulary.

The old man fired up the engine, and off we went. I rode in the back, and among the other usual truckbed junk crowding me was the fishing pole we had used to measure how much chain we still needed. It made me laugh. The whole idea of leaving out this early in the morning reminded me of a fishing trip. . . and now we were off, hoping to catch a whole stringer full of Great Northern Link.

Well. . . we weren't disappointed! By 4 o'clock that afternoon we had returned with a large catch indeed. We had not only found more old truck chain, but had also gotten chains from an old sawmill, a burned-up fire engine, an elevator, several rusted tractors, and a few extra pieces from some of Mr. Gray's old friends. (They didn't believe what he wanted them for, but Mr. Gray assured them that they would be glad they had helped him out.)

The largest piece we were able to latch on to was only about a half mile away from here, at a junkyard back up in the hills. The old fellow who lives

there reminded me a lot of Lee Willard back home... except that the piles of junk this man had made Lee Willard's place look like a one family rummage sale. I can't even begin to describe the mountainous masses of ill-fated metal that ranged from countless tons of common auto wreckage, to an unusual collection of broken-down amusement park rides... and it was from that collection of stuff that Mr. Gray and I found our biggest catch of the day.

Beneath the splintered floorboards of a badly rotted carousel, I spotted a long section of chain still attached to the drive motor, and the junk man said we could have it for nothing if he received one small favor in return.

All I had to do was carry "a few" buckets of old oil to the other side of the junkyard. It all sounded quick and simple enough, so I agreed. It turned out though, that this fellow's idea of "a few" was 28, and they were the tallest, fullest, and heaviest buckets of anything I have ever lugged anywhere.

The only way I could possibly carry one, was to carry two at a time to balance myself out as I struggled to keep from tripping over stray junk while at the same time trying to keep from sloshing the black sludge all over me.

Mr. Gray offered to help, but I insisted that he didn't. I knew his back wasn't up to it, so after he argued with me about it for a bit, he settled himself on the bent bumper of a Ford alongside the junk man, and they talked while I shuffled back and forth in front of them, carrying the buckets to the spot about 50 yards away where the junk dealer had asked me to dump them out. The spot was an old abandoned well that he said had completely dried up, and according to him, it made a great place to get rid of all of the old oil that was forever leaking from the cracked oil cases of the hundreds of wrecked automobiles on his property.

All I know is, I was mighty glad to see that stinking oil go each time I tipped one of those buckets and poured it in. From the faint sound of it splashing into the darkness below, I figured; the well to be at least a hundred feet deep, meaning that old fellow sure enough had himself a good place to dump worthless oil for at least a lifetime.

When I'd started, I felt plenty strong enough to finish the job fast – but after the third or fourth trip, my forearms began to ache so I sat down on the engine out of something and took a short breather. It was there that I saw on the ground the small rocks that I sent back to you in this letter. I'm not sure what kind they

are, but as you can see, they're not like the ones we've found around the farm at home. This trip will be a good chance to add to our windowsill collection, so I'll keep my eyes open!

When at last I had hauled and dumped the 27th and 28th buckets, the two old men were sitting waiting with the chain from the carousel in hand. They had freed it from the carousel motor while I'd worked, and Mr. Gray and I returned to the farm with what we felt would surely be enough chain for the job ahead.

We wasted no time getting started, and after three or four hours of hammering the sections together, we finally had one huge piece of chain that appeared to be long enough.

Mr. Gray had stayed up late the night before and found at least five different gears that we could choose from to attach to the front of Maxwell's blades. He handed them to me in a box and the first three I pulled out looked to be about the same size as the one on Sir Davi's back wheel. The next one was much smaller, and the last one was easily twice as big around as Sir Davi's. I picked out the one that I thought would get the job done without straining my motorcycle and headed for the top with a couple of wrenches, some wire, and a few odd-sized nuts and bolts. Mr. Gray manned his usual post at the base of the tower and, by the time I had the gear in place and had climbed back down, it was almost dark. Mrs. Gray had given up hours earlier on getting us to come inside to eat, and she brought out a picnic-type supper of fried chicken that we took an occasional bite of while we hurried to get Sir Davi ready.

Working in the light of two lanterns, we first had to build a large crate from all kinds of spare lumber Mr. Gray had lying around the place. None of it matched in age, color, or kind of tree that it had come from, and we looked like Neanderthal carpenters hammering it together in the dim, flickering light. Mr. Gray hammered his thumb at least twice, and although I couldn't make out exactly what he said each time he hit it, it was fairly similar to whatever he had said to the rooster.

By midnight we were finished, and we stepped back to gaze upon our creation. After agreeing that , "Surely it would look better in the daylight," we carried it over to the side of the barn across the driveway from the windmill. We eyeballed it to be roughly in line with the gear high atop the mill, and then

we nailed the whole thing to the barn wall.

It only took a few minutes to get Sir Davi's chain off the back wheel, and then we rolled him into the end of the crate that we had left unboarded.

Aunt Victoria, I'm sure that if that motorcycle could talk, right then would have been as good a time as any to ask us what in the world we thought we were doing.

We put a stack of extra boards under the back wheel, and that jacked the tail-end up to an almost straight up in the air angle, which made the handlebars and headlight face almost straight down into the dust. We went to the front and got down on our knees to look up through the handlebars, across the seat, and clear up into outer space.

It was a black, moonless night and even though the stars were doing their best, there still wasn't enough light to see Maxwell's blades.

It didn't really look like we had everything aimed quite right, so while I pulled and finagled with Sir Davi in the crate, Mr. Gray shuffled around on his knees looking up through the handlebars trying to spot the top of the tower.

He was squinting with one eye closed, and he reminded me of a picture of Galileo I once saw in an encyclopedia, although I'm certain Galileo was doing something a bit more important than trying to find an old windmill standing 50 feet in front of him.

Even though we were desperate to see it all work, Mr. Gray and I finally realized it was just too late and too dark to go any further, so we stopped for the night.

Thursday morning, I'm sure I would have slept until at least 8 or 9 o'clock, but Mrs. Gray shouted through the door at 6 a.m. asking me if I was up yet. Her loud voice startled me and I jumped out of bed. She said that Leeman was outside trying to climb the windmill and it frightened her. — I didn't tell her, but she had good reason to be frightened!

I looked out of my upstairs window, and sure enough, there he was, already up to the third step and still going. He had tied one end of the giant chain to a rope, and the rope was tied around his waist. Even at a distance, I could see that he was straining greatly to pull the heavy load up with him.

I wanted to yell at him to stop, but I didn't want to make him lose his concentration. Those rusted steps are too small and too far apart for anyone, let

alone an 80 year-old man!

I ran from the room in untied shoes and still unbuttoned shirt and rushed down the stairs, passing Mrs. Gray along the way.

As I burst out the kitchen door, Mr. Gray was just dropping himself down onto the bench under the old maple, both hands rubbing his knees.

Relieved to see him back on the ground, I trotted over and stood in front of him. All I could think of to say was, "It's kind'a high, isn't it?"

Looking down at his shaking knees as if he was talking to them he said, "Today we made it to the third step... tomorrow, maybe the fourth step... and the day after that..."

I interrupted him. "You have to promise me you'll never try to climb Maxwell again."

"Yes, he does!" shouted Mrs. Gray in a loving but stern voice from the kitchen door.

He looked over his shoulder to her and shouted, "The only thing I'll promise you, Elizabeth, is that if this gull-dern blue sky ever turns gray again and decides to rain on this farm... my promise is to sit in it... right here on this bench... in my skivvies, mind you—until the last drop falls!!!

That was something I would surely like to have seen, but I think he made a safe promise. None of the farmers around here see any break in this bone-dry weather, and the ones who do think it may rain soon are only expecting the kind of sticky afternoon cloudbursts that last for a few minutes at best. By the time old Mr. Gray got stripped down to his skivvies for one of those, it would all be over before a single drop worked its way through the leaves on the big maple tree down to him on the bench below.

Mrs. Gray called out that she was getting breakfast started, and Mr. Gray and I got started too.

I finished getting my clothes on, and walked over and picked up the end of the long chain where Mr. Gray had dropped it from his waist at the bottom of the tower.

He had already pulled the long brake handle that led to the top of the mill, and looking straight up, I could see that the old brake was still able to do its job. Even with a fairly strong gust of wind now and then, the big blades were locked up tight.

I tied the chain on with the rope just as he had done, and climbed to the top without stopping. When I was once again standing on the tower's platform, I loosened the chain from the rope and started to haul it upward. Mr. Gray kept it from tangling up on the ground and was shouting instructions up to me to either, "Slow down!" or –"Go on with it!"

I think he enjoyed the part of the foreman on the job; and I liked the part of the laborer as well. When it looked like I had reached about the halfway point on the chain, I pulled up a few more feet, and then hooked it over the gear.

When I was up there before, I hadn't noticed a small bird's nest that was neatly wedged in a knothole in one of the almost rotted through floorboards; and I didn't see it this time either until I had stepped on the end of the board.

The resulting shaking of the old wood caused the nest to suddenly fall through the hole, and I felt a sinking in my chest as I caught a dashing glimpse of a single light blue egg caught in the twines of the nest as it plummeted toward certain destruction.

I watched as it spiraled through the center of Max's iron girders and was amazed at the luck of it not hitting any of them on its way to the bottom. It was a long, agonizing trip, but when it did finally meet the earth, I waited for Mr. Gray to shout up the bad news. He had watched it too, and we had both fallen silent from our work at the onset of this unfortunate event.

The nest landed on the concrete base of the well's pump —making me expect the worst — so you can imagine my complete surprise when Mr. Gray took a step toward it, leaned over to inspect the damage, and then nearly fell over backwards as he looked straight up to me and hollered, "Didn't even scratch it!"

Some things are surely wonders of nature... and others are complete luck... and on that day, I think I'd witnessed both at the same time. Mr. Gray shouted that we'd put it back later, and he carefully gathered the nest in both hands and carried it over to a shady spot by the barn. As I climbed back down, Mr. Gray was already back to the task at hand by busily hammering the two long ends of the chain together with a master link. While he did that, I walked over by the barn to see what else could be done to get Sir Davi ready.

There by the wall sat the nest, and I took a moment to kneel down and again marvel at what had happened. Shadows of the giant windmill were cast

in dark long “x”s across the barn, and looking back and up at the tremendously high platform, I figured that egg must have fallen a distance at least a thousand times its own height. The nest had surely helped, but it was a mere straggling of loosely bound dried grass and twigs, that probably weighed less than the egg itself.

I pulled a few nearby weeds and lightly covered it, thinking I could take it back to the top later, but for now – back to work.

In the darkness of the night before, what we had done to my motorcycle looked a little strange. Now, in broad daylight, the whole idea looked downright embarrassing. I don’t mind telling you that I promised Sir Davi out loud that I would get him out of this one as soon as I could.

I finished boarding up the back of the crate, and I made sure the tank had plenty of fuel. Mr. Gray was finished making the chain into a gigantic loop, so he dragged it over and we hung it on the large gear of the back wheel. Now — the circle was complete.

If nothing else from that point on had worked, at least we had set a world record for lashing a 150 foot chain around two immensely separated gears.

We seemed to be close to reaching our goal, but the chain had so much draping slack in it that we had to shove the heavy crate alongside the barn inch by inch until it tightened up... and when the chain seemed to have just the right amount of tension, we quickly grabbed our hammers and nailed the crate to the wall. At last... we were finished.

I’ll never forget stepping back from the whole scene and taking a good long look at it. There it was. A giant windmill with an even more gigantic chain looped 55 feet off the ground to its fan blades on one end, with the middle swooping down in a monstrous arc and winding up on the back-end of a Harley Davidson motorcycle boxed up in a crate nailed to the side of a cattle barn.

We looked at each other ... and knew it was time.

I climbed up and over the boards to get in next to Sir Davi, and I could just squeeze my leg in close enough to get my foot on the starter lever. At the last moment I wondered if the engine would have any chance at all of starting while leaning at such a steep angle, but it didn’t matter now.

Mr. Gray positioned himself under the tower and moved the long wooden lever that reached to the very top of the mill to release the fan brake.

I pulled in the clutch and put the shift lever in position for the lowest gear. Amazingly, with a single quick kick, the engine roared, and with a glance back to Mr. Gray, I cautiously began releasing the clutch lever. The wood surrounding Sir Davi creaked and rattled, and one board even fell off, but looking down, I could see the back wheel — ever-so-slowly — beginning to turn . . . and turning with it — was the huge chain.

An immediate squeaking of metal caused me to look upwards to the blades, and they too, were coming to life.

The chain was turning the gear, and the long pumping rod attached to the old pump at the base of the tower was moving up and down, just like the wind had made it do for so many years. The bright sun flickering through the fan as it whirled made the barn and silo look a moving picture show, and although I couldn't hear Mr. Gray over Sir Davi's motor, I could see that he was calling for Mrs. Gray to come out.

I had some bailing twine ready just in case it all really worked, so when it looked like everything was going well, I tied the throttle in place so the engine would continue to get fuel, and climbed out of the crate.

Mrs. Gray had come outside, and I met both of them at the base of the tower. Mr. Gray was leaning down close to the spigot of the churning pump, listening for even the slightest gurgle of water rising from the earth. We all listened, and stared at the spigot, but all that came out was hissing, dry air.

Mr. Gray shouted above the loud screeching of gears and old chain, "We've got to turn it faster! That's a big straw down there, with a bad crack. . . we've got to make those blades breathe quicker!"

The spinning blades were already causing the old tower to shake, but he was right. Water would never surface the way things were going.

I went back to Sir Davi and loosened the twine.

The engine got louder as I gave the handgrip another half-turn. The back wheel turned faster —and so did the blades — but still no water came from the spigot on the pump.

It was too much of a strain on Sir Davi to stay in the lowest gear, so I climbed back into the crate and shifted to second. Standing in the tight space between the boards and the motorcycle, I twisted the throttle another half-turn and the back wheel responded by spinning the chain even faster. A great

amount of heat was coming off Sir Davi's engine and I was beginning to fear I would damage it beyond repair. I hated to disappoint Mr. Gray, but I had to stop the engine—and stop it now!

I turned to shout to Mr. Gray that I was going to shut it down, but I was startled to see him standing right there next to the crate!

He wore a grin from ear to ear, and - he was soaking wet.

Water dripped off the ends of his stringy thin hair down through the wrinkles and bristles of his unshaven face. His shirt and overalls were drenched and stuck to his skin from his shoulders to his sloshing shoes and he was shouting, "Man overboard! I'm drowning! Throw me a line!"

Aunt Victoria, I would have loved to have seen the water come gushing out of that pipe with him standing there with his ear to it, but I missed it.

What I didn't miss, though, was seeing the old man during one of the happiest moments of his life. From the way he looked, he must have laid right down and rolled in it, and I could see that, as Mrs. Gray slipped back into the house, he had managed to soak her good too!

We gave Sir Davi a rest, and then fired him back up that afternoon long enough to fill three tanks of water. . . enough to last the livestock for a couple of days. The water that flowed from the spigot tasted a bit strange, but Mr. Gray said it was probably from a little rust still in the pipe. Anyway, the cows loved it, and that was all that mattered now!

While Sir Davi worked, I took the bird nest back to the platform and carefully snugged it into a smaller knothole close to the one it had fallen through.

Maxwell's gears strained and squeaked at a high pitch, but even so, I could still hear the shrill chirps of a bird nearby.

I looked in all directions, until finally, squinting through the swiftly turning blades I saw a robin perched on the wavering tailvane. I'll never know if her cries were of warning or thanks, but replacing the nest and hoping she would return to it was all that could now be done.

My hopes were soon realized, because I had no more than returned to the ladder when she flew in a large arc around the danger of the blades and swiftly came to a soft landing on top of the nest.

Taking a moment to watch her preen her feathers and stitch fragments of the nest back together with her beak, two things came to mind. One, I was

evidently forgiven. And two, this was obviously one very lucky egg!

Throughout Friday, we searched for a replacement for Sir Davi, and we finally found one late in the day and brought it back to the farm. All it needed was a large gear added to it like the one on the back wheel, so we bought one in town and put it on late that night. By noon on Saturday

owe had freed Sir Davi from its wooden prison and had the original chain back in place on the wheel. And... standing in his place... was the new power source for Maxwell. It worked fine from the very start, and as I write to you I can hear it running outside below my window as Mr. Gray fills up another of his many neighbors' water tanks.

Its motor isn't as loud as Sir Davi's, but it still seems to have plenty of power to turn the blades fast enough anytime Mr. Gray needs it.

Well, as I said earlier, I'm leaving in the morning, but I'll take with me the memory of two wonderful and generous people. I'll be careful, and I'll continue to write you a letter of some length each month I am away. That

should allow plenty of time for me to experience something of interest to share with you! Take good care of yourself.

Your Loving Nephew,

Harmon

P.S. I just heard another of Mr. Gray's friends laughing outside again. It's almost as though no-one had ever seen a washing machine help a windmill pump water before! The whole thing sort of inspired me to write a poem and I hope you like it... but as for my artwork, well... I never could draw as good as you, but I still couldn't resist trying to put down on paper what I imagined old Mr. Gray looked like two seconds after Maxwell came to life!

To A Long Life Two very different types of people live throughout this land. There's those who say, "It can't be done" and those who know it can. There is no doubt that Mr. Gray is of the latter breed. He doesn't kindly take to those who say he won't succeed. 80 years have whittled short the strength within his stride. But muscle is a small thing when one will not be denied. And so, though I've no notion where I next shall rest my head. I'll take with me the thought of something Mr. Gray once said: "When you believe that your idea has finally reached its limit. Look harder – and you'll be surprised – at what still lies within it."