

# LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

## Retreat to the Land

AN EXPERIENCE IN POVERTY

*By Charlie May Simon*

*Illustrations by Howard Simon*

A GROUP of us were having tea one Sunday afternoon at our studio in New York. As may be expected, we were discussing the depression. There were, besides Howard, who is an artist, and myself, a stock broker, a publisher, a writer, and a dancer. We did not know the first thing about economics, but we freely expressed our opinions and theories.

As I listened to them my thoughts turned to a cabin of our own in some wilderness, with a garden patch, a pig, a cow, and some chickens, and perhaps even a sheep and a loom, for we were in a receptive mood then. When I glanced at Howard I saw an expression in his face that reminded me of the time six years ago, in the Latin Quarter of Paris, when he asked me to marry him four days after we met. When our company had gone I was not surprised when he said to me, "Will you go?" and I answered, "Of course."

Howard counted up the month's bills. He found that we had exactly eight hundred and fifty-seven dollars and some cents after they were paid, including the return deposit of the electric company. We were young, we said, healthy and self-reliant. We were interested in the same things, and were not bored with each other. Of course our venture would succeed. We did not mind giving up luxuries, those toys of civilization that had been invented in the last generation or so. All we asked of life was a little food, shelter, clothes enough for warmth, and peace and leisure to do the things we wanted to do.

So one morning, a few weeks later, we got into our Ford roadster and started west. We settled in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, following the

footsteps of a long-ago ancestor. We were not long in filing a homestead claim on sixty acres of virgin pine forest, and started in on the job of wresting a living from the soil. Here we have been for over a year and a half.

We are thirty miles from the nearest railroad, telephone, or radio. A dirt road winds its way through our wilderness, but the creeks are unbridged and have to be forded when swollen by winter rains. Sometimes they are impassable, and our mail is held up when the mail carrier who brings it from the railroad to our little postoffice cannot cross on his mule. Rumors reach us by the grapevine system, and they are even more garbled than newspaper reports.

"They say Mr. Hoover's started a war on Chiny, or somewhere," we were told during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. And just before the election Uncle Bill Taylor said that Doctor Evans said that some one told him if the Republicans got in, every man, woman and child would receive a hundred dollars. But there was no talk of depression, and here, we decided, was the ideal place to build our home.

Our nearest neighbor for five miles on one side is old Uncle John, who lives alone with two half-starved hound dogs in a tumbledown shack. He cooks over the fireplace and sleeps on what appears to be a bundle of rags, though they were at one time patchwork quilts. He hid from us for several weeks, and we learned that it was because his trousers were too torn to be patched any more. But his modesty gradually left him, and he often comes to sit and chat, always saying as he leaves, as though he was just about to forget it, "By the way, kin I borry a little—?"

On the other side, our nearest neigh-

bor is six miles away, a tall and gawky young man, Oval, and his equally tall and gawky wife, Amerika. A short time after we arrived here, they came calling in a home-made vehicle with no two wheels alike, drawn by a pair of lean mules. Ameriky brought her two weeks' old baby.

"I jist been duncey to see yore place," she told me. "But the little one here war borned on the day youens come. Hits name's Jewel."

Oval, dressed in the conventional overalls and a little straw hat that covered less than half of his shocky blonde hair, had nothing to say at first. He sat smoking one cigarette after another, rolling them in strips of catalog paper with home-grown tobacco, and striking the matches on the bare soles of his feet. Finally he asked Howard to step outside.

"I jist wanted to say," he said, "that when I hearn youens war a livin' here, I lowed there war a goin' to be trouble. But I see youens know how to mind yore business, and I wan ter shake hands with you and say I'm yore friend." With that he reached back in his over-all pocket and drew out a quart fruit jar filled with white corn whiskey, and shoved it out toward Howard.

The log house, with its huge stone fireplaces, slowly grew to look like the drawings Howard had made in New York. It is just large enough to meet the needs of two people: a studio, a library, a kitchen, a bedroom and a wash-room, with plumbing, such as it is, by an expert moonshiner. The rooms are built around a stone-paved courtyard bordered with wild flowers transplanted from the woods. We had labor at fifty cents and a dollar a day, depending on the size of the family of the workers.

They taught us many things about making a house without the use of boughten things, how to rive shingles from a board tree, and how to make the large wooden hinges and latches for the doors. With Howard's help they made most of the furniture. Howard carved the oak doors with pictures of the wild animals about us and painted murals on the walls. I was kept busy making cushions and curtains of gingham and hooking rag rugs.

If we were uncomfortable while this was going on, we did not know it. It was not until the house was finished and screened that we thought of the flies swarming through the unchinked walls, and the yellowjackets that drove us away from the table whenever we had wild honey for breakfast, the nightly delousing of chiggers and ticks that crawled onto us from the bushes, and the noises of the screech owls, foxes, wildcats, wolves, and even one night the unearthly scream of a panther.



*A homestead claim on sixty acres of virgin pine*

We planted our garden without knowing it first had to be fertilized, and nothing came up. So we brought sacks of fertilizer from the cow lot of an abandoned homestead, and spread it over the garden, and planted again. Every morning as soon as we got out of bed, we went out into our garden and watched it grow, from the baby seedlings on, counting each new leaf that formed. We hoed out every little weed that stuck up its head, and when

the sun beat down too hot and strong, we drew bucket after bucket of water and carried it to the garden. It grew, a little puny, perhaps, for it was on new ground, but it pleased us. And then came a herd of wild cattle and ate every thing down in one night. We ran out in our night clothes and beat on a tin dish pan to frighten them, but as soon as we went into the house again, they came back, and we had to go to sleep to the sound of the crunching of our corn and beans. With the help of a young mountain boy we made a fence of palings, and planted again, with no thought of heroism, but with the determination that our venture should not fail.

"Yotens hadn't ort to plant yore beans on flower-pot day," said the boy, "caze they'll all turn to blossom and won't make beans."

So because he seemed to know, and because he had a successful garden, we waited until twin days to plant the beans and peas, and the corn was planted in the dark of the moon and the potatoes were planted in the light of the moon, and the watermelons at midnight on the first of the month. Whether it was the fence or the fertilizer or the phase of the moon, our garden grew, and supplies us with food.

We bought a cow and her calf and some chickens. The cow is allowed to roam the mountains and feed herself on mountain grass, coming back each night and morning to be milked. The chickens feed themselves on grass and grasshoppers and what cornbread and buttermilk we have left. Inefficient perhaps, but we have enough milk and eggs for our needs. We trade for what food we do not grow. The mountain people are fond of trading, as money is scarce here. A shirt of Howard's brought a bushel of black-eyed peas, and a dress of mine brought two gallons of sorghum molasses and a peck of corn meal. The woods are full of wild berries and grapes, and if we cared for hunting and fishing, there are all around us deer, wild turkey, quail, rabbits and squirrels, and the creeks are full of bass and trout.

Savannah, a husky mountain girl of fourteen, came to us one morning and asked if she might work for us in exchange for her clothes and an education.

"Pappy caint buy me shoes to wear to school," she said, "and I want to larn books."

The soles of her shoes were tied on with strings, and her dress of many patches was of a nondescript color. This was all she had, and it was worn out in the fields to pick cotton, at night to sleep in, and on Saturdays she washed it and wore it on Sundays when her beau came a talking.

I realized how little one can learn in a two-months-a-year backwoods country school when during her geography lesson I once asked her if she knew what shape the earth was.

"I don't know," she replied, "I've hearn some say hits round and some says hits squar."

And when I gave her the fairy tales to read that I thought every child was familiar with, she could not understand them because she had no idea what a king or queen or a fairy was. She is a bright child and eager to learn. It was not long before she had quit sassering her coffee and knifing her peas. Giving up her snuff was the hardest thing for her to do, for she loved to sit at one end of the room and spit between her teeth into the fireplace on the other end, and she was proud of her accuracy.

Every morning she washes, irons, or scrubs, and draws the water and keeps the fires going, and every afternoon she bathes and changes her clothes and I hear her lessons. I traded an etching to a New York friend for two pairs of shoes and some dresses, and a friend from Chicago sent her some sweaters and handkerchiefs and underwear in exchange for a wood engraving. Now Savannah is well clothed, and she knows that the earth is round and that Columbus discovered America, and she has a faint idea that a king is a boss of a whole lot of people and land.

After the house was finished and the garden growing, and Savannah was well established in the household, we had about two hundred and fifty dollars of the money we brought with us. By this time we had given away, traded or worn out nearly all of our clothes, and we decided to buy substantial woolen and khaki clothes that would last a long time. Too, we had more leisure and we could subscribe to some magazines and books by the month. We sent off checks for the magazines and books, and we went in to Little Rock for one more fling, a movie, dinner at a hotel, and shopping. A few days after, we re-

ceived word that the bank had failed before the checks could be turned in. One of the magazines continued to send us the year's subscription, and some one on the staff of the Literary Guild bought an etching and that paid for the books we had received. The rest were stopped. The stores were not so kind. There were threats to sue, but the justice of the peace, who is also the general store keeper, the game warden and the postmaster, was sympathetic, having lost a few dollars himself in the bank. Later the bank paid a small dividend, and the stores were satisfied.

One day Savannah and I spent the day with old Granny Blair, who taught us to spin thread from cotton and wool, and weave it into cloth, and her husband promised to make me a loom just like hers. But the work was long and tedious, taking days to make a little cotton cloth that could be bought for five cents a yard. I often say that I will some day get to it, but I know that I never will, as long as the clothes we have last, and we can continue trading etchings for shoes.

Once a week we walk the twenty miles to and from the post office for our mail. We are still tenderfoot enough to feel the effect of it, for the road is steep and rough. But the thought of the lounging pajamas and slippers that Savannah will have out for us and the warm milk and buttered scones with blackberry jam she will have ready make the climb worth while.

Though we do our own baking and cheesemaking, and plowing and hoeing the garden, we have never before had so much leisure. We have also found time to enter into the life of the settlement. Howard has been called upon to act as lawyer and doctor. Old man Leach had fought in the Civil War, but his widow forgot which side he was on. He would not take a pension during his lifetime. "Not as long as I got two good hands and two laigs will I take nary penny from nobody," he said. But Mrs. Leach did not share his scruples.

"Mr. Howard," she said, "you been around a whole lot and know a lot of people. Can you tell Mr. Hoover to git me that there widow's pension Uncle Mike said I orter be a gittin'?"

Doctor Evans is our only doctor within a radius of thirty miles, and that means mule miles instead of automo-

bile miles. He is an old man, past eighty, and he has had no more than two years' schooling in his life. He obtained his license when the State was young and not so strict, and because we are a poor settlement, and can pay for our health only with calves and pigs and chickens, the town doctors have allowed

gums with its brains, a remedy every mountain mother uses. Then the child had summer complaint, or diarrhea, and was given laudanum, paregoric, whisky, castor oil, black draught, and then more medicine. Everything was given that Ameriky could think of and everything that her neighbors told her about.



*The log house is just large enough to meet the needs of two people*

him to go on practising. His sole knowledge of medicine is contained in the directions on the patent medicines he has bought, and his sixty years of experience. He is a conscientious old man though. He has no home, living with whichever patient needs him most, often sleeping on a pallet on the kitchen floor. His speciality is gunshot and knife wounds, for he has had much practice in that in our moonshining community. He is never called in on an obstetric case, for that is left to the women folks.

One day last winter, word reached us that little Jewel was sick, and would we go for the doctor. We found him at the Blair place, where old Mrs. Blair was ailing. It was after dark when we reached the sick baby, for we had to go around thirty-five miles by automobile to reach a place six miles from us.

By questioning Ameriky, we learned that the baby's illness had started with a cold, and she was teething at the same time.

"I give her some pole cat grease fer her cold, and she perked right up," Ameriky said. And Oval had gone out into the woods and killed a rabbit so that Ameriky could rub the baby's

When the old doctor brought out his ever-present dose of strychnine, and began tearing strips of Sears Roebuck catalog paper to portion out doses from his collection of medicines, Howard grabbed his hat and whispered to me that he was going for the county nurse. It was a long rough ride to the county seat and our tires were worn, but I bade him Godspeed.

We had stood silently by and watched Mrs. Thompson bathe her child sick with the chicken pox, in the blood of a freshly killed chicken. And we had seen a young man die of a burst appendix because his wife said she was afeared of hospitals when we offered to take him to one. But our little homestead baby was too close to us to allow to die without trying to save her.

For the first time, I felt our helplessness in the wilderness and understood the natives' need for a religion of faith. When I made my way through the crowd of men, women and children who had come to set up, I saw little Jewel, lying white and thin on her straw bed, with an old quilt used for a sheet. I quietly reached down and killed a bed bug that was crawling on her arm.



"I jist caint git shet of them thangs," Ameriky told me. "The bats brang them here. They lay the eggs in the walls."

Soon after the dose of strychnine, Jewel began to rally.

"She's a gittin' better. I know she's a goin' to git well," Oval said. "I been a prayin'."

About that time a whippoorwill was heard near the window. This means to the mountain people a message of death, and I shuddered.

"Somebody kill that dratted bird," a woman screamed. "You William, chunk a rock up thar and kill that bird." But William did not succeed, and the bird went on with its innocent call all during the night.

And when a screech owl called out in the darkness, an old man quickly turned his overall pocket inside out and wrung it, thus wringing the neck of the owl. The call grew fainter and fainter, finally dying away.

Would Howard never come, I thought. Hours must have gone by. The children were sleeping on pallets around the floor. I was sitting with the grown-ups around the fire, scarcely listening to the tales of death and haints that are always told when people come to set up with the sick. At last I heard two cars in the distance come bumping along the rocky road. I knew Howard had brought the county nurse.

When there is a doctor in attendance, the county nurse is not allowed to express an opinion about a case, but she saw that the child needed immediate attention. We pleaded an hour or so with the doctor and the parents to send the child to a hospital where she would be given every chance to get well. At last they agreed, but it was with reluctance that Oval and Ameriky with the baby in her arms were bundled in the nurse's car at dawn and began their long drive to Little Rock.

But they were too late. It was over a week after little Jewel had been buried and her little grave had been duly decorated with broken bits of colored pottery, that we learned of it.

"You orter seen that place," Ameriky told me two months later when her second baby was born, and she could bring herself to talk about Jewel. "She war in a room with lots of other little

children, and they wuz so clean. She had two white sheets put on fresh ever day, and if they even spilt a little water on the bed, they went and changed again. I'm glad we went. She couldn't have got well nohow, but I'm glad she had such a nice place to die in."



We've spent many pleasant afternoons this summer on some neighbor's porch, with our bare feet resting on the cool floor, discussing the latest gossip, who has been cut or shot in a brawl, or how Miss Marthy's baby was brought into the world by Grandpap Tillar, because we women folks could not reach her in time, and how Miss Marthy will never get over the embarrassment of having a man attend her. And we would hear again of how Dick Bly got on a drunk that lasted a week, and held a revival over at Wild Cat Ridge, and saved five souls. He came to as he walked out into the water to baptize them, and walked away saying, "Hell, I ain't fitten fer this job."

We have so adjusted ourselves to the life of the mountains that we have no actual need for money. The battery of our automobile has long since died, and the tires are worn out by the rocks on the road, so no money need be spent for gasoline. Once a week the peddler comes from the city and trades flour and sugar and salt for chickens, eggs and butter. Savannah has had twenty-five cents in her purse since we gave it to her two months ago, and Howard has been carrying a half dollar around in his pocket so long it is getting rusty.

All along our letters have been full of enthusiasm. We have written glowingly of our freedom from financial worries and our leisure to do whatever we wanted to do. To those friends who bathe in lavender bath tubs with sweet smelling salts, we wrote of bathing in Cove Creek amongst the water-lilies screened by willows, and taking our shower at a tiny waterfall.

Now that the house is completed, the rose garden growing, and the pumpkins, sweet potatoes, peas and corn harvested, we can sit back and say that it has been successful, this experiment of sustaining life on the soil.

But it has really proven nothing except that, whatever the cause of this

world economic disturbance, the remedy is not back to the soil, to the simple life of our forefathers, in spite of what the theorists sitting on easy chairs in warm houses may say. We have enjoyed creating Possum Trot, even the hard work, the hunger and the poverty, for that was part of our scheme. But we have learned to our astonishment, that it was the creating we enjoyed. We are still not satisfied. There is a restlessness within us that we cannot defeat, that is as old as mankind. We want more than a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs. Luxuries are as necessary as bread to those of us who have known them. When every drop of water you use is drawn from a seventy-foot well, and every bit of food you eat must be forced from a rocky soil with a hand hoe, you don't feel that machines are your enemies. We want light again by pressing a button, and water, hot or cold, by the turn of a tap, and steam heat and iced lemonade. We are already pricing water systems and electric systems in the mail-order catalogs, and I have been looking longingly at the pictures of kerosene refrigerators and washing-machines.

We know that when the depression is over, and people start going around once more with confident faces, buying paintings, etchings and illustrated books, and money comes to us once more, we will not spend it wisely as we once had planned. We will not add to the potato house or build the guest cottage. We'll go back to the city, and once more Howard will wander through the art galleries, or mingle again with friends in his profession. And I can think of nothing I would like more to do than to hand one of those little green papers I have not seen in so long, to a salesgirl, and be given a neatly tied parcel, containing anything, I don't care what, and hear again the clinking of silver change going from her hand to mine, and into my purse. I'd get once more into silk stockings and a chiffon dress and Howard would take his tuxedo from out of the moth ball box, and we'd go to a symphony concert, or we'd hear Fritz Kreisler play his violin. And as on that day when we filed our homestead claim and started cutting down trees for our home, we'd say, "After all, this is really living."

# STRAWS IN THE WIND

*Significant notes in world affairs today*

## THE CHILDREN'S HOUR OF CRIME

*By Arthur Mann*

THE average medical authority will agree that it is not healthy for a growing child to sleep with its head under the bed covering or pillow. As part of my duty to society and the domestic scheme of which I am a portion, I have tried for many years to mould the minds of my children along the most constructive lines within my mental grasp. I have endeavored more or less conscientiously to teach them the futility of banalities, conniving, revenge motives, etc.

Suddenly it seemed as though these several years of purposeful effort in this direction had gone to waste. Out of a clear sky my six-year-old son commanded me to "Stick 'em up!" He confessed that he did not know what it meant, and that he had heard it on a certain radio program.

My daughter, who is eight years old and a normally healthy girl of average intelligence, began sleeping with her head under the bed covering. Investigation disclosed that she was trying to escape imaginary foes who were appearing nocturnally in the darkened corners of her chamber. She had evolved a system of arranging the several doors of our apartment in a manner that puzzled me completely. For instance, if her chamber door was closed, all other doors, with the exception of my bedroom door, had to be closed. There are other subtle variations too complicated to understand, or even remember.

I felt that defeat had crowned my efforts to rear a child without fear of anything on earth, including myself, darkness, thunder, lightning or sundry agencies which often instil fear. She had developed a mild degree of sleeplessness, which I was certain would manifest itself to the detriment of her excellent health sooner or later.

But I have been encouraged greatly of late by a corrective measure of sur-

prising simplicity. All will soon be as before. My corrective step consists of removing the power tube of our radio set from 4 P.M. each afternoon until the children retire at 8 P.M. By so doing I have eliminated four hours of lessons on the art of crime and higher skulduggery which pour from the radio stations each afternoon, almost without interruption, from Monday to Friday.

I have listened carefully, and I can say without fear of contradiction that every form of crime known to man is either committed or suggested in the majority of juvenile programs on the radio today. There are exceptions, of course. There are a few broadcasting people who are trying to give constructive entertainment for children in exchange for the purchase of their commodity. But they shall have to be denied my daughter's audience until the others come to earth.

I have before me a chart of twenty-five juvenile radio programs on the three major stations or networks in the East. Not more than three or four of this number are free from crime and planned felony, either by subtle suggestion or actual commission. I contend that this is sufficient to make a huer and crier out of anybody, especially a father whose daughter cannot go to sleep on schedule.

Manufacturers of foods, especially cereals, have discovered that it is easier to sell by appealing to children than to trust the whims of adult listeners. Little Johnny or Mary will plead and plague for a new form of medicated sawdust until their despairing mother puts it on her shopping list. Sponsors even go so far as to intimidate child listeners to the extent of hinting that they have no right to tune in on a program unless they purchase the product of the sponsor.

It was this suggestion that sent my

son from the loud speaker one afternoon suffering from pangs of conscience. He gathered that it was dishonest to listen to "Little Orphan Annie" because my wife had refused to purchase Ovaltine which the program advertises.

Sponsors of most programs employ two tricks, one to hold the young listeners and the other to sell the product. They first inject intrigue and suspense into the story by placing the leading character constantly in danger after establishing sympathy. Then at the finish of each day's script they offer some cheap gift in exchange for concrete evidence that the product has been purchased. In this way they keep a consistent check on the results of their promotion.

Recently I turned on the radio to listen to the program "Skippy," a continuity based on Percy Crosby's cartoon strip. The program is sponsored by the Washburn-Crosby Company for the purpose of selling Wheaties, a dry cereal said to be of pressed whole wheat.

Tuning in, I find Skippy and his father captives in a truck and being taken to a hideaway. They have been kidnapped to prevent their testifying against "The Brain," a super-criminal. Some time ago "The Brain" was at the head of a counterfeit ring, which Skippy broke up.

At the time I tuned in the super-criminal is suspected of pyromania, for several buildings in the town have been burned. These episodes have been going on for months. The announcer assures each anxious juvenile listener that, while he or she may be gasping with suspense and at the point of swooning, there should be no deep concern over the ultimate preservation of Skippy's life. He will come out unscathed.

Another very popular crime program is "Little Orphan Annie," sponsored,