

## Drawn from "A Sum of Remembrance"

by R. R. Spear. 1985.

After the death of my Grandma Rockenbach, Grandpa continued to live on the farm in Crystal Lake. I think in the mid 1950's, Aunt Ruth and Uncle Phil took over the farm, although there wasn't any farming going on by Grandpa, it was a lot to keep up. I would spend parts of each summer up there through grade school. Aunt Ruth had a rug loom in the cellar. What a contraption, with shuttles and wire racks for the threads, but she could make that thing sing, or clatter, and turn a pile of old rags into a beautiful rug, I would help her by sorting the rags and cutting them into strips, then loading the shuttles, while she ran the hand and foot powered loom.

Grandpa kept a vegetable garden and chickens. I would have to collect the eggs in the morning and I never seemed to get away without being pecked or chased by the hens. Grandpa would say, "No, no boy, your doin' it all wrong. Ya gotta sneak up on 'em." I would go into the coup with him and he'd press the hay down, put his hand under the hen and retrieve an egg and the chicken would never even wake up. I did a little better at it after that. Previous to that, I thought you were just supposed to tip the chicken over, grab an egg, then run for cover, wait awhile for things to settle down, then go in for another egg. No wonder it took me an hour to gather seven eggs.

Grandpa would always keep his eye out for any hen that wasn't laying. Now, if I was a chicken and knew what was in store for me, I'd be stealing eggs from the hen next to me. He'd say, "C'mon boy, we're gonna have us a chicken dinner." He'd go into the coup, grab the non-producing offender by the neck and take it into the shed behind the barn with me trailing behind. He'd close the door, grab an axe and in one swing, off the hen's head would fly. I asked him why he didn't do this outside, where it wouldn't be such a mess to clean up. He replied, "Boy, I'm too old ta be chasin' this bird halfway 'cross Crystal Lake, he won't go far in 'ere." Sure enough, this hen was racing around inside the shed. After the chicken dropped, he'd pick it up and say, "Fetch the head boy an' follow me ta the garden." I guess city folks would hang the chicken by its feet from a clothesline and wait. Not Grandpa, he'd stand out in the garden and swing the hen round and round, saying, "Step back boy, I don't wanna get any blood on ya." "What do I do with the head, Grandpa?" "Throw it o'er there boy, the rats 'ul take care 'a it." Somehow, I lost my taste for chicken for a while.

I can't ever remember my Grandfather calling me by name, but then, he did have somewhere about forty five grandchildren. He would just say, "Oh yah, yer Shirley's boy, ain't ya?"

My place to sleep at night was in the attic, two stories above the main floor of the house. There was a winding staircase and a long section of attic that could only be illuminated from the first floor. Although, there was a small reading lamp next to my bed and three windows at the peaks of the attic, they shed no light down the longest section. On either side of the long section of attic, were the accumulations of thirty years and fourteen children, so you had to walk carefully even with light.

Aunt Ruth would send me up to bed at night, with a hug, saying, "Yell down when you have your light on up there." It's going to take more than a hug to save me from this night. I would wait the longest time before finally saying, "Ok", and relinquishing my only way back to civilization. Once you're up there, you're up there and there ain't nobody that's going to hear you. "Good night, Roy." "Good night, Aunt Ruth." The hall light is turned off and the door is closed at the bottom. Now what? I'm not tired. There's a small book' case next to the bed. I'm ten, I can read. What do we have here? College English, no. A couple of novels, naw, big words and too long. Biology, yuk! (Remembering the fate of the chicken). Short Stories by Edgar Allen Poe, never heard of him. Ghost Stories by Alfred Hitchcock, ya. I've seen his show on television. This book looks like a good one and I've always been partial to spooky tales. The first story leaves me with a tingling spine. Well, there's no way that I can sleep now, might as well read another. That did it! Enough for tonight, got to get some sleep. Light off. The farm house sits just back from U.S. 14 and the lights from passing autos, throw shadows through bare windows, right onto the wall in front of me. Light on. Maybe a little more reading. I'll try the other book of short stories by Poe. This man is mad! He's trying to scare me to death. Ok, I'll leave the light on and try to sleep. I keep opening my eyes to see if anything has moved. No, everything is where it should be. Wait a minute, those were just stories, pretending stories, they didn't happen. I grabbed the Hitchcock book and thumbed through the front. Here it is. Here's the word, fiction, it didn't happen. Good, good, now the Poe book. Where is the word? It doesn't say fiction. Did these stories really happen? Wait, he died in the 1800's. So it happened a long time ago. Maybe it won't happen again. Can't chance it. Got to sleep with the lights on and I'll pull the covers over my head. No good, it won't work, I only lasted five seconds with my head covered that time. I can't stay up here. I've got to make my way back down stairs. Getting out of bed, I walked to the opening of the long section of attic. Strange shapes, did something move? Back onto the bed I jumped. Five minutes. Have to try again. If I run fast, I might make it, but what if I trip and should fall? To horrid a thought. I walked as far as I dared into the darkness and softly cried and called for help, not daring to disturb whatever might be lurking behind the boxes, but no one answered or came. I spent the remainder of the night walking, patrolling the lighted portion of the attic. Even at daybreak, there was not enough light, that I could allow myself to go back down the stairs. Finally, Aunt Ruth, thinking me to be a sleepy head, turned on the lights and called for me to get up, for we had things to do. I came down, but did not impart to her my fears. After chores, I napped in the shade on the side of the barn. The fear of the attic became less and less, along with a change of reading material.

In later years, I learned not to fear the dark but only my imagination and on occasion, I still pull the blankets 'round my ears, lest they be gnawed off in the night. I can't say I've missed that attic one bit.

The barn, like the attic, was a storehouse of forgotten things. In the loft, which was completely floored over and had a staircase, there was a basketball hoop. You could sense the excitement of a long past game between the members of the family. But, the clutter of items now

closed off most of the open floor. An old baby carriage, picture frames, clothes, books and a hall tree. I often wonder who became heir to it all.

On the east side of the loft, was a door that could be opened, offering a view of the field from high up. Opening the door and brightening the loft, I would daydream. Alone up there, it seemed sad to me, that life had passed from this place. Once noisy, busy, productive, it now serves no other purpose, than to collect one's discarded forgotten things and cast a shadow on the field. Imagined voices are only stirring pigeons in the rafters and mice that scurry back into hiding.

In 1957, Grandpa's health began failing and like his farm, that had once seen life, his shadow fades. He passed away on January 9th, 1958.

The barn was destroyed by fire in late 1972, and the farm house is now remodeled beyond recognition of its former quaintness, but I wonder what's in the attic?