

## **Story for All Ages (Sharon)**

This morning's story for all ages is from the children's book "Farmer Boy", written by Laura Ingalls Wilder in 1933. It is the story of Almanzo, a boy growing up on his family's farm in New York State in 1866 or thereabouts.

I'll share an excerpt from a chapter in the book entitled "Late Harvest". As you'll see, it will transport us back to a time long ago when, for homesteading families, autumn was all about bringing in the harvest and getting ready for the cold winter to come.

### **Late Harvest**

Now the harvest moon shone round and yellow over the fields at night, and there was a frosty chill in the air. All the corn was cut and stood in tall shocks. The moon cast their black shadows on the ground where the pumpkins lay naked above their withered leaves.

Almanzo's milk-fed pumpkin was enormous. He cut it carefully from the vine, but he could not lift it; he could not even roll it over. Father lifted it into the wagon and carefully hauled it to the barn and laid it on some hay to wait till County Fair time.

All the other pumpkins Almanzo rolled into piles, and Father hauled them to the barn. The best ones were put in the cellar to make pumpkin pies, and the rest were piled on the South-Barn Floor. Every night Almanzo cut up some of them with a hatchet, and fed them to the cows and calves and oxen.

The apples were ripe. Almanzo and Royal and Father set ladders against the trees, and climbed into the leafy tops. They picked every perfect apple carefully, and laid it in a basket. Father drove the wagonful of baskets slowly to the house, and Almanzo helped carry the baskets down cellar and lay the apples carefully in the apple-bins. They didn't bruise one apple, for a bruised apple will rot, and one rotten apple will spoil a whole bin.

The cellar began to have its winter smell of apples and preserves. Mother's milk-pans had been moved upstairs to the pantry, till spring came again.

After the perfect apples had all been picked, Almanzo and Royal could shake the

trees. That was fun. They shook the trees with all their might, and the apples came rattling down like hail. They picked them up and threw them into the wagon; they were only cider-apples. Almanzo took a bite out of one whenever he wanted to.

Now it was time to gather the garden-stuff. Father hauled the apples away to the cider-mill, but Almanzo had to stay at home, pulling beets and turnips and parsnips and carrying them down cellar. He pulled the onions and Alice braided their dry tops in long braids. The round onions hung thick on both sides of the braids, and Mother hung them in the attic. Almanzo pulled the pepper-plants, while Alice threaded her darning-needle and strung red peppers like beads on a string. They were hung up beside the onions.

Father came back that night with two big hogsheads of cider. He rolled them down cellar. There was plenty of cider to last till next apple-harvest.

Next morning a cold wind was blowing, and storm clouds were rolling up against a gray sky. Father looked worried. The carrots and potatoes must be dug, quickly.

Almanzo put on his socks and moccasins, his cap and coat and mittens, and Alice put on her hood and shawl. She was going to help.

Father hitched Bess and Beauty to the plow, and turned a furrow away from each side of the long rows of carrots. That left the carrots standing in a thin ridge of earth, so they were easy to pull. Almanzo and Alice pulled them as fast as they could, and Royal cut off the feathery tops and threw the carrots in the wagon. Father hauled them to the house and shoveled them down a chute into the carrot-bins in the cellar.

The little red seeds that Almanzo and Alice planted had grown into two hundred bushels of carrots. Mother could cook all she wanted, and the horses and cows could eat raw carrots all winter.

Lazy John came to help with the potato-digging. Father and John dug the potatoes with hoes, while Alice and Almanzo picked them up, and put them in baskets, and emptied the baskets into a wagon. Royal left an empty wagon in the field while he hauled the full one to the house and shoveled the potatoes through the cellar window into the potato bins. Almanzo and Alice hurried to fill the empty wagon

while he was gone.

They hardly stopped at noon to eat. They worked at night until it was too dark to see. If they didn't get the potatoes into the cellar before the ground froze, all the year's work in the potato-field would be lost. Father would have to buy potatoes.

"I never saw such weather for the time of year," Father said.

Early in the morning, before the sun rose, they were hard at work again. The sun did not rise at all. Thick gray clouds hung low overhead. The ground was cold and the potatoes were cold, and a sharp, cold wind blew gritty dust into Almanzo's eyes. He and Alice were sleepy. They tried to hurry, but their fingers were so cold that they fumbled and dropped potatoes.

Alice said: "My nose is so cold. We have ear-muffs. Why can't we have nose-muffs?"

Almanzo told Father that they were cold, and Father told him: "Get a hustle on, son. Exercise'll keep you warm."

They tried, but they were too cold to hustle very fast. The next time Father came digging near them, he said:

"Make a bonfire of the dry potato-tops, Almanzo. That will warm you."

So Alice and Almanzo gathered an enormous pile of potato-tops. Father gave Almanzo a match, and he lighted the bonfire. The little flame grabbed a dry leaf, then it ran eagerly up a stem, and it crackled and spread and rushed roaring into the air. It seemed to make the whole field warmer.

...

Just after dark on the third day, he and Alice followed the last load of potatoes to the house.

The weather was growing colder every minute. Father shoveled the potatoes into the cellar by lantern-light, while Royal and Almanzo did all the chores.

They had barely saved the potatoes. That very night the ground froze.

“A miss is as good as a mile,” Mother said, but Father shook his head.

“Too close to suit me,” he said. “Next thing will be snow. We’ll have to hustle to get the beans and corn under cover.”

He put the hay-rack on the wagon, and Royal and Almanzo helped him haul the beans. They pulled up the bean-stakes and laid them in the wagon, beans and all. They worked carefully, for a jar would shake the beans out of the dry pods and waste them.

When they had piled all the beans on the South-Barn Floor, they hauled in the shocks of corn. The crops had been so good that even Father’s great barn-roofs would not shelter all the harvest. Several loads of corn-shocks had to be put in the barnyard, and Father made a fence around them to keep them safe from the young cattle.

All the harvest was in, now. Cellar and attic and the barns were stuffed to bursting. Plenty of food, and plenty of feed for all the stock, was stored away for the winter.

Everyone could stop working for a while, and have a good time at the County Fair.