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Ira And The Buck: A Minnesota Woods Story **by C.J. McFee**

That morning Ira got up very early to hunt a deer. Melissa and Joey stayed in their beds. Upstairs, Joey snuggled under his blankets in the chilly attic room, pressed in the swamp grass mattress, the sturdy tick smooth to the touch, the slight coarseness worn. When the mattress got too flat and Joey's bones hit the board bottom of his bed, they just stuffed some fresh hay in and fluffed it up again. His bed was contained in a box of rough boards, they worn smooth too, smooth enough so no tiny splinters would needle his skin. Joey liked the walls to his bed; it was his place, his own little room, a safe and secure dinghy in the sea of his life. And the winds blew, through the popple shingles and rough sawn rafters it seeped in. The light too, through little holes and cracks, spreading out, dust specks swirling and sparkling in currents of air.

Downstairs, Melissa awoke. She lay awhile, her head cradled in a feather pillow, allowing herself time to become familiar with the day. It was early. Ira was not beside her, gone to get a deer. She savored her life, pleased with the progress they had made. Their own homestead! 160 acres! The first frame house in that part of the county. Sure, it had been a lot of work, but Ira had been right, it was worth it. And now it was November, and coming on their first Christmas in their own new home.

Early in the spring they had come up from southern Minnesota. Ira had already been in these parts, working on the railroad, driving spikes on the east-west line through Wadena. Around Wadena the soil was sandy, good lumberyard ground that drained fast -- but watch out if it didn't rain for while! The crops burned fast. It turned into desert in times of prolonged drought, and the pines into ready torches, brittle dry and full of pitch. When he heard the area north of Wadena was open to homesteaders, he made a trip on the trails up north. He knew that in this region were areas of clay and good black dirt that held the rain.

Ira went a day's walk north, fording the Leaf River. The trail, rust-colored with fallen pine needles, traversed a steady but not straight passage through the forest. Ira treaded in the shadows of the tall white pines, so still at the base of their black, fissured trunks, some spongy with moss, some green only in the fissures, some orange, fiery orange with a strange moss or fungus. Above, far overhead, the thick trunks swayed slowly, back and forth, the fronds of soft green needles bouncing in slow motion. The trail led out of the pines and through the hills. Looking south, he saw the skyline broken from time to time with a craggy white pine, standing head and shoulders above the darker green spruce near the river.

He picked out a trail heading east, crossing a swamp on a beaver dam big enough to bear an ox and cart. The flora changed. He traveled over a big hill, the forest now oak and hardwood, the signal of good soil. From thunderous, creviced trunks, strong and sinuous branches snaked out for yards, hung with leaves as big as his hat. Down to a creek he came, a little waterway still flowing with fresh water even in August. Along the creek at this spot was a large meadow, canary grass, tall and lush, rippling in the wind. Numbers of cumulus clouds, white and grey, billows and wisps, proceeded across the blue afternoon sky. There was a good ford here, solid bottomed, and to the south the land rose steadily, out of the reach of spring's high waters. Ira knew that this was where he wanted to be. No sandy pine ground for him! Leave it to the wolves. What with Wadena now served by the railroad, it was a good market town, two days away by ox cart, one down and one back, and one day by horse.

So they came up, and buttons, it was nice that her two brothers came and helped the first two months! They got the garden ground cleared, and built this fine house. They didn't have a cow yet, but they would next spring. They would buy one with the money they made from the railroad ties, good white oak ones that Ira cut and hewed and hauled to Wadena. They got cash for those ties and with the money left over from buying the few things they couldn't grow or pick themselves, they were going to buy a cow.

Meliss remembered the trip up, the ox cart's slow passage along the

gentle trails. All they brought was tools, and bedding, and some kitchen goods, and this iron bed she was lying in now. She had told Ira that if there was one piece of furniture she wanted to have that was not homemade it was an iron bed, with the head and feet cast with impressions of grapes and leaves, and with the iron rods bowed and shaped in a loose filigree. "My, that looks elegant!" she always thought, and imagined herself a queen. Yes, Ira had thought it was rather extravagant, hauling a hundred-pound cast iron bed out into the middle of the woods, but they had compromised, and got a fairly lightweight one, tied it on the oxcart, and that was that.

Meliss got up, stirred the coals and threw in three more sticks of wood. It wasn't really cold yet, but they sure could feel it coming. She couldn't believe that it got to be sixty below zero, as people said! Here it was November and it hadn't even snowed yet. Meliss simmered some cracked oats for her and Joey's breakfast. Soon he got up and they ate them, with a dab of sugar they had got in Wadena, and they finished their breakfast with a cup of the wild tea that the lady on the homestead halfway to Wadena had shown Melissa how to pick. At the table they opened one of the only books in their possession, and began to read. "He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works."

Ira crept out of bed. He held a splinter of fresh pine close to the coals and blew. It ignited, and he used it to light the lamp. He laced his tall dark moccasins over wool socks, and buttoned on his worn wool coat. Cap on, shells in his pocket, he stepped out the door, a lump of bread in his hand. He had a spot all picked out on the edge of a clearing on the river. Through this clearing, delta-shaped, passed a game trail which led to a well-used watering hole.

The brisk air woke him up quickly as he hiked. He paused, cracked his single shot rifle and looked through the barrel to the sky. "Can't see much anyway." With a mutter he slipped a shell in the chamber and shut the gun with a click. It felt easy in his broad hands, the skin thick and channeled, the deep cracks as dark as the harness brown

gunstock, the islands not much lighter, stained with his labors, ax work and hoe work, scythe work and saw work. The skin of his face had lightened a little since summer, when the sun had tanned it reddish brown like cut red oak, except up on his forehead where he was shaded by his hat brim.

Ira's jacket and pants, coarse and soiled, didn't make a sound when he knelt in the bushes. "The deer should be down for a drink," he thought. "They know the river's freezing over."

He didn't wait long. He watched, motionless and thrilled, as a buck and a doe paced into the clearing and stopped. Alert, young and strong, they peered around, their black noses pressed into the breeze, it ruffling their rich brown and white fur. The buck was especially muscular, its shoulders and buttocks rounded with meat. "What a nice rack!" The deer clattered, hooves on rocks, down to the water. Ira pressed the butt of his rifle into his shoulder, drew a deep breath, squinted and fired. The doe started in terror, and, almost comically, danced a circle in the clearing, a confused round, before prancing out of it.

The buck, surprised at the great pain in his chest, staggered, then turned to the bank and heaved to the rocks and sand. It lay twitching, its head lashing and straining in agony, tongue lolling and eyes rolling, striving for a sight of its adversary.

Ira rose up in a half crouch, broke the gun and slapped in a new cartridge. The buck exhaled forcefully, then its head slumped to the sand as Ira strode into the clearing.

Mitchell Smith, trapper, jiggled his enamel cup, suspending the last grounds of coffee and grains of sugar in the dregs. He tossed it off, chewing the grounds. Henry Morgan, his partner, leaned forward. "Well, tonight after we run our lines, we'll go out to Fuller's and pick up some fresh baking."

"Sounds alright!" replied Mitchell, and the two got up to their day's work. Their camp was west of Fuller's place, on the main trail out of Wadena.

Melissa didn't think much of it when Ira didn't come home to dinner. He had been out before from before sunup until after sundown. She and Joey had a sandwich, cheese and mustard on thick slices of bread, almost stale, their last loaf.

"Next year we'll grow our own wheat," Melissa mused, "and have it ground for flour."

The house was very warm because she was baking today. The trappers in the neighborhood came to buy fresh bread at Fuller's. She saved those cents for their infrequent journeys to Wadena. With people so few and far between, they kept tabs on each other. If Ira went to town, he checked the mail for Henry Morgan and Mitchell Smith, and the few other folks in their neighborhood, and so did those neighbors in return.

Joey split some kindling that afternoon and filled up the woodbox. He tended the chickens and took care of his few other chores. He thought he had heard shots in the morning. He walked to the meadow and peered out across. The sky was overcast and the air chilled. The tall grass, brittle dry and tan, whispered in the breeze. "Chepishsh, wishsh." Some small birds flew, or were blown, across the sky. A few congregated in the brush, peeping. They sounded especially faraway. The clouds, black, grey and white, boiled slowly. Joey turned with a shiver and trudged home.

Late in the afternoon, Melissa pulled the fresh loaves from the oven. She wished Ira would come home. Fresh bread! He could hunt tomorrow, couldn't he? Didn't they have a whole smoked pork hanging in the shed?

They ate their supper after dark. The lantern light was yellow and

warm and the wood stove radiated warmth, right through to the bone heat, but even so, in the darkness of early evening, the cold seeped in. "Is winter here now?" thought Melissa. Their home seemed small and fragile, a candle in a huge oppressive blackness, a slight flower in a dark mammoth forest. "Ira?"

After dinner the two trappers hiked the trail to Fuller's. It wasn't far and they knew the way well. It was not so fun tonight, though, in the blackness of the night, all light from moon or stars extinguished in the clouds. When they got to Fuller's and stepped inside, the warmth of the wood burner brightened their cheeks and brows.

"Where's Ira?" they inquired, looking around. Melissa told them they he had left before daylight to hunt a deer, the concern in her voice evnident, high pitched and sharp.

Henry Morgan and Mitchell Smith avoided Melissa's eyes, but studied her throat, or the tabletop, as she spoke. Henry glanced to the floor, then over toward Joey. Mitchell kept his eyes fixed on the tabletop when she stopped speaking. Then they looked at each other. "Well, we better go take a look," Henry spoke.

"Yes," Mitchell replied. "He's probably dragging one in that's twice a big as he is!" and Henry gave a laugh.

"He'd be going down by the river, I suppose?" Henry conjectured.

Joey piped up, "Dad told me he found a drinking place where he could bag a buck a day!"

"And where might that be? I'd like to try it!" replied Mitchell.

"He said it was on the other side," remembered Joey, "on the other side of the meadow."

Mitchell Smith and Henry Morgan traveled the path where they

thought Ira had gone. The railroad lantern they carried barely penetrated the darkness of the night. They could not find him.

The next morning, as soon as daylight, the men searched again. They found a path along the river; following it they came to a clearing. There, two bodies were sprawled on the pebbles and sand. Ira Fuller, bent knees, keeled over on his head and shoulder, in a manner of contorted prayer, elbow drawn into ribs, hands frozen, half opened before him. A few feet away, a fine buck, one of the nicest the men had ever seen.

"Better not move him." Henry broke the silence. "Better get the coroner and do things legal."

A dread was in the men's hearts, but not a surprise. They knew the beauty of the woods; they also knew the harshness.

It took all day to get to Verndale. The coroner couldn't come that night. Henry Morgan stayed with the body to see that it wasn't disturbed. Late in the day the silence of the forest and meadow changed. Snow started falling. The flakes nipped Morgan's face with chills, the air filled with new whispers, the snow brushing branches and needles, accumulating in the tall grass along the creek. Henry climbed in a tall spruce and cut some branches, which fell on the larger branches underneath. He sat in this shelter and watched, watched all night, watched the snow and the shadows. He had erected a little enclosure over the body. It became blanketed with fresh snow.

Ira knelt a few feet from the fallen deer, right knee down, gun barrel grasped in his left hand, the stock resting against the outside of his left knee. The buck's fur on its head and neck, thick for winter, was wet with sweat, grains of sand stuck in it. Ira had paused to partake of the moment. He dropped his left knee to reach for the knife in his pocket.

Suddenly, the buck lurched to its hooves and charged, head down! Ira glimpsed its red eyes. He was unprepared. He brought the gun up as a club, grabbing the barrel. He whipped the butt up from his left and struck the buck soundly under the chin.

"Oh, God!" Ira, unable to move, lived only minutes. "Oh God... care for my Melissa and Joey!"

The gun had discharged, lead burning into the left side of Ira's chest. The buck staggered and collapsed, dead.

The coroner arrived in the morning. They found powder burns on the breast of Ira's coat. They examined the wound, and conjectured what had happened. Ira was buried, and Melissa and Joey spent the remaining winter in their home. Come spring, they left, going south to live with relatives. Melissa Fuller sold their homestead rights in 1885.

A true story, as told by Ed Miller, Sebeka, Minnesota. Ed's family purchased the Fuller homestead.

Written in July, 1980, by CJ McFee. Editorial assistance: Mrs McFee.

Author's note: I interviewed Ed Miller as a part of an Anthropology Methods class at the University of North Dakota. Ed was an old man in the small town of Sebeka, Minnesota. After graduating from UND I was unemployed for a while, and used the time to write this story. All rights reserved. CJM.

About The Author

C.J. McFee is an aging writer who wishes he were living in the North Woods rather than in the Concrete Jungle.

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