

THE LOST CHILDREN

(A story told by Mary Messe Roth to her children many times during their growing-up years; Mary was born on November 11, 1859, and died on May 9, 1949 at the age of 88 years, 5 months, and 28 days. Her daughter, Catherine Roth, captured the story in print so that future generations may know about it. The illustrations are by Sharon Cruckson.)

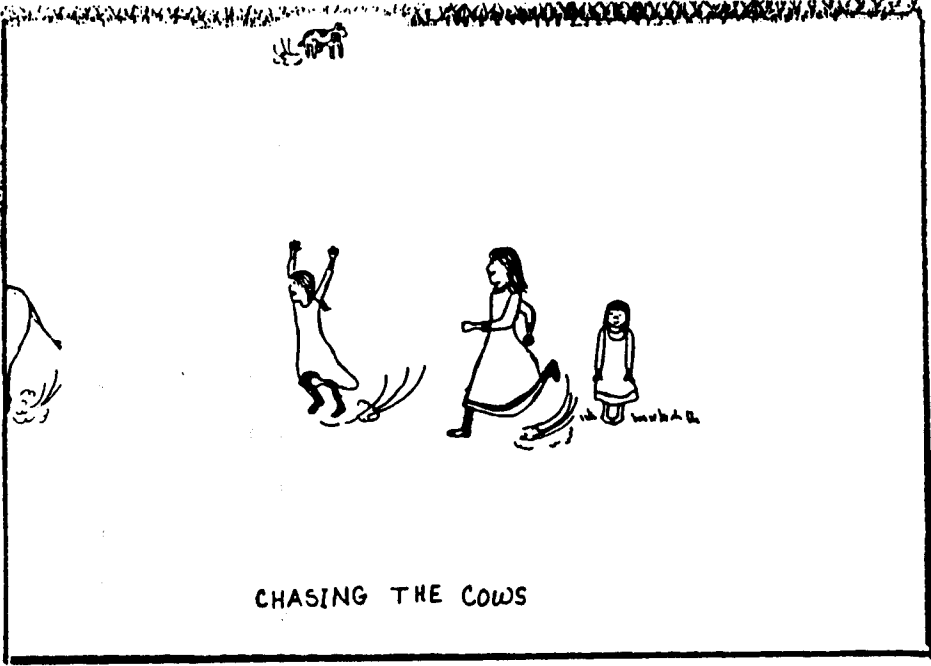
Little the boys and girls of today realize the hardships of pioneer days when this great State of Wisconsin was a vast wilderness with only here and there a small village, many of which have grown to be large cities. It is to give them a glimpse of those days that I am writing the following experience I had when only a child of six. My children and grandchildren always begged me to repeat the story of the "Lost Children" as they called it.

I lived with my father, brothers and sisters on a little farm in the midst of a dense virgin forest of northern Wisconsin where the wolf, lynx, wild cat, bear and deer roamed and other helped themselves to the farmer's cattle. My mother died on my fourth birthday which left the care of the home principally to my sister Ann who was then only eight years old. Our house was built of logs from trees cut, grooved and put together by my father (John Messe). The barns were also built of logs. The shingles for the roofs father made with the use of a draw-knife which is still in my possession. There were but two rooms on the first floor--a large kitchen which also served as a living room, and a bed room. The upper floor was used for sleeping quarters, and also had large built-in bins in which father stored flour and other supplies for the year's need. The furniture was very simple, also being father's work.

On a Sunday morning in the early part of November 1865, father went to the village of M _____, then consisting of a few scattered houses and a little frame church, to attend to some business, instructing my older brother Matt, then fifteen, to go and see about some oxen which he intended buying, and Peter, eight years old, to watch the cattle. Matt however took Peter with him, and left Ann to watch the cattle. This was not an easy matter, for one of the cows with long horns had acquired the art of derailing the fence and taking off for the woods with the rest of the cattle following. It was not long before Ann espied the cattle straggling into the forest through an opening made by this troublesome cow.

Leaving our little four-year old sister Catherine Messe in the house, Ann and I started in pursuit of the cattle; they soon outdistanced our short legs and before we realized it, we were lost in the forest wearing only calico dresses and without any wraps to protect us from the cold.

When father returned from the village, he found the baby Catherine lying on a bed where she had cried herself to sleep. He learned from her what had happened, and he at once notified the few scattered neighbors who sent out the alarm and formed searching parties, and scoured the surrounding forests. One of the men had a horn made



of a cow's horn, which was always used to call men and especially in case someone was lost. We wandered frightened through the woods, occasionally hearing the horn and the calls of the men, and we attempted to reach them; however, we must have followed an echo, and thus plodded farther and farther away, until darkness fell and our tired feet would not carry us any farther. All night we sat up between two logs with our arms about each other, fearing the dark and the wild animals, and whispering a prayer; occasionally we fell asleep, only to be awakened by some squirrel or chipmunk running across our legs. Thus the first night passed.

The next day we renewed our wanderings with hunger and thirst gnawing our stomachs, as we had had nothing to eat or drink since our breakfast the morning before. That day we found a few wintergreen berries which we ate. We could no longer hear the searchers, and night fell a second time; we again rested against a fallen tree, and waited for daylight.

The third day's wanderings brought us to a small hay marsh. The farmers only came to these small clearings to cut and stack the hay, and then they had to wait until winter set in and the ground was frozen hard before they could haul it away. I could go no farther, so we spent the third night lying on a

small haystack which seemed like a soft bed.

The next day my sister Ann could see a larger clearing, and hope of finding a farmhouse rose within us; it gave us strength to go on, but we soon found it to be only a larger hay marsh. There was a creek that ran along the marsh, and my sister crawled to it and brought me some water in one of my shoes, which I had been carrying with me--I was just putting on my shoes when we started running after the cows and I had never stopped to put the second shoe on. The hay stacks in the larger marsh had holes in the bottom of the stack, so we crawled into one that night and this helped to protect us from the cold, especially since there was not much more than rags left of our scant clothing.



After the fifth morning, we were too weak to go any farther; my sister just managed to crawl to the creek to bring me some water. (I still remember the taste of that water from my shoe.) In this way, the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth day passed, bringing little change except that we were growing weaker from the lack of food. Little did we dream that our father had passed through this marsh on Sunday (the eighth day), and walked only a quarter of a mile from us as we lay there too weak to move.

Meanwhile, father, who had not gone to bed since we were lost, and aided by the kind hearted people living near us, had continued searching frantically. The days passed with no sign of us, but still they continued combing the forest. On Monday (the ninth day), the men were on the verge of abandoning the search, but

Puddy Lemmer, then a young man, asked them to go once more in hope of at least recovering our bodies. Accordingly, the men started out again. Toward evening they came to a marsh, and there they separated, one-half going along one end, and the other half crossing to the other end of the marsh. We were about to go to sleep when the sound of a horn broke upon our ears. Ann whispered, "That is Heil's horn", and summoning all her strength, she dragged herself around the hay stack just as they had passed by, and hearing something rustling in the dry grass, they turned around and saw the object of their search. They immediately signaled the other searchers with whom father was searching, and as soon as father was within hearing distance he asked if we were alive, for he had not only feared that we had died of hunger and exposure, but that we might have been devoured by some of the wild animals in the forest.

Because father was worn out by the days and nights of searching, the men wanted to carry us, but I clung to my father. Not thinking, a big hearted man offered me a large piece of rye bread, which I took eagerly; however, Robert Shilling, who had fought in the civil war, realized our condition and quickly took it away, saying that he had seen many a man survive the pangs of hunger only to die from taking heavy foods into their weakened stomachs. I was too young to understand and would not let him carry me. After a while, I asked father if I could have a dill pickle when we got home.

We were taken to the home of John Bloom, where we were gradually nursed back to health by his kind hearted wife. When first we were able to get up, we had to experience learning how to walk again. After a few weeks, father took us home bedded in the box of a sleigh drawn by oxen. The cattle had come home, and father had disposed of the cow with the long horns that had been the cause of our being lost.

The End

Note: Mary Messe Roth's story is set in Marathon County, Wisconsin. [Richard Grassy III, 23JUN2005]

- Notes:
1. Mary Messe was the daughter of John Messe (a Frenchman) and Mary Fisher Messe (of German origin).
 2. Mary Messe married Stephen Roth; they had six children--Mary Roth, Catherine Roth, Louise Roth, Frank Roth, Ray Roth, and Martha Roth.
 3. Mary Messe had two brothers (Matthew and Peter) and three sisters (Susan, Ann, and Catherine).
 4. Mary Messe is the author of this story.