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Country Neighbor

FREE!



December 2007



Good Night to Autumn...Hello to the Holidays...Welcome longer days in January!



Just outside my window on Fifth Street, Winter says hello to a stubborn green leaf with a white, Thanksgiving snow.

Voices from the Valley

Country Scenes	3
Merri's Diary	4
Joe & Marta's Christmas past	4 & 5
More Colorful Scenes	6 & 7
Hunting & Fishing	8
Poetry	9
"The Face of Drought"	10
Wood-choppin' Party	11

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Your

COUNTRY NEIGHBOR

Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Published by Stephen Hassler

Writers this month, Thank You!

Devon Adams
 Vicki Harger
 Merri Johnson
 Karen Ott
 Joe Smith
 Marta Smith
 Josh Whisler

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Your Country Neighbor

"Your Country Neighbor" is a publication that promotes the American value of "rural living" by presenting country and small town life in photos and essays from people who live here. Their columns include stories, poems, and an occasional editorial or news release.

A notable presence is the photography. Plus there is a Web site that shows off more photos, and contains archives of the recent two years of this publication. You can view it at:
www.yourcountryneighbor.com

Your Country Neighbor

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In Nebraska: Auburn, Avoca, Brownville, Cook, Falls City, Humboldt, Johnson, Nebraska City, Nemaha, Otoe, Pawnee City, Peru, Shubert, Stella, Syracuse, Table Rock, Tecumseh, Union, Verdon, Weeping Water.

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CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

Your Country Neighbor is developing a "Christmas Shopping" link on the home page of www.yourcountryneighbor.com web site. This link will take you to a list of stores that have special gift-giving ideas for your Holiday shopping.

Country

Scenes



The Harvest was Corn in October and Soybeans in November.



Interesting looking barn near Brownville.



I get black oil sunflower seeds from "Brownville Mills."
See Harold's ad at the top of the facing page.



Friends watching the world go by.



Red-winged Blackbirds seen migrating
along H-275 south of Hamburg.



This Autumn scene on a Rock Port bluff can be viewed in color
at: www.yourcountryneighbor.com

Just click on the Publications Picture, then the link next to Dec 2007.

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Diary of an Unemployed Housewife

Merri Johnson

It's another unseasonably warm and lovely November day, Veterans' Day as a matter of fact.

Our new next-door neighbor took advantage of the opportunity to go deer hunting this morning and is presently butchering a 3-point buck hanging from a convenient limb of a shade tree just a few feet from our back door. His fishing boat is tarped and parked in his back yard too, awaiting the warm days of spring to return to the river.

Obviously an avid outdoorsman, he seems like the kind of person who knows what he likes and goes after it. I respect that. And I expect he'd eat a whole lot better than we would if push came to shove and we had to revert to living off the land.

Not that my husband couldn't butcher a deer. He worked in a hog packing plant for several years back in the 70's, so he's had experience enough to be able to handle that aspect of securing your own food. It's the actual *shooting* of the deer that could be problematic. Deer tend to spook and run when they detect a predator. We'd more likely be eating a lot of rabbit stew. I have to say my husband isn't a bad shot with a blow gun. Rabbits – at least the cottontails that frequent our yard – just freeze and hope you won't see them.

I'm not at all opposed to hunting, and having lived a number of years on a livestock farm, I'm not too squeamish about the realities of butchering, either. But, I'm happy to leave that to the people who enjoy it.

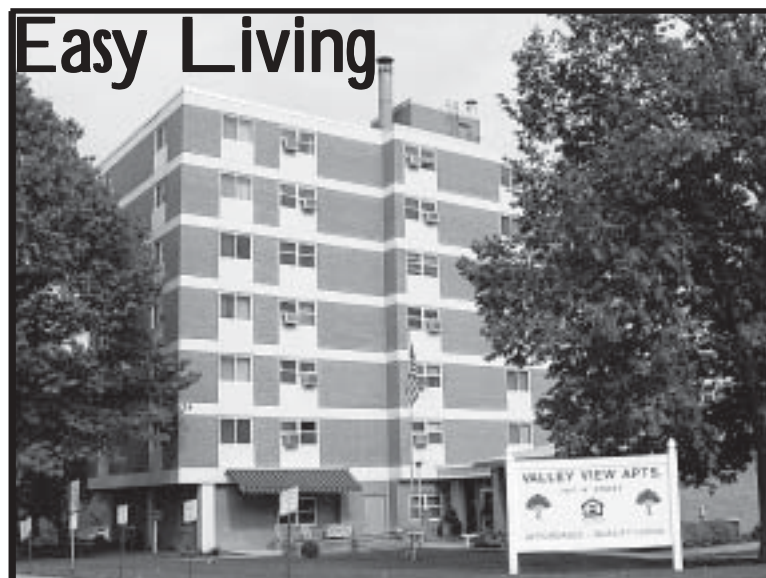
My involvement with wildlife takes the opposite tack: instead of eating the wildlife, I feed it. I love watching birds in my yard. Within a few days of moving into our rental house, I positioned two feeders and a bird bath where I could easily see them from the kitchen window. I knew it would take a little while for the birds to find the feeders, so I was patient. One week turned to two, and two weeks became three. Finally, in the fourth week a cardinal came to call. And this morning I was thrilled to see a junco, a goldfinch, several sparrows and a red-breasted nuthatch. I can't wait to put out even more feeders when we move into our new home, hopefully soon after New Year's.

Meanwhile, my husband will spend the winter practicing his golf swing in his "driving cage" facilitated by the nine-foot basement ceiling, and counting the days until golf season returns.

We all have our own way of enjoying the outdoors. Some of us get excited bird-watching from our patios and kitchen windows; for others, nothing compares with a day in the fresh air pursuing that little white ball up and down a tree-lined, well-tended expanse of grass; and still others seek a more visceral connection to nature, staking out their personal space in the food chain.

Isn't it grand that our communities and countryside are peaceful and intact, instead of erupting regularly with the sound of automatic weapons and pock-marked by explosions? The crack of a deer hunter's rifle is the closest we come here in our little corner of Nebraska to the sound of war. We have God, and our veterans and their families to thank for that. I hope that in your own way, you all paused on Veterans' Day to be grateful and mindful of the blessings of a country at peace, and of what it takes to preserve them.

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Christmases of the Past

by Joe Smith

Back in the 1940's, my father had a business called the Smith Motor Company, in Roswell, New Mexico. He and my mother worked long hours to get the business going. My dad was a Desoto and Plymouth car dealer, and during the war there were very few cars that got sent out, but Dad had a good repair shop that kept things moving and bringing in some much needed cash. Mother kept the books and knew just where the money had to go when there was some to spend, and there wasn't much.

Christmas came around one year and my mother, bless her heart, ordered all our presents from the Wards and Sears catalogs. Mail was not the best in those days either. Needless to say, a week before Christmas no presents had arrived for me or my brother. Dad found a couple of used bikes and cleaned them up and painted them with new paint, stripes, and replaced parts where they were needed. Then he found an old wagon and rebuilt it for me as I was the younger of the two boys. It was just about the time the war was over and stuff was not in the stores as yet or mother didn't have time to shop. I'm not sure which, maybe a little of both. That Christmas was just as good as any I can remember.

Now we jump ahead some years and what happened at Christmas time. We lived just 11 miles from Mexico near Columbus, New Mexico. My wife and I had three children, and we were not plush with money either. I found three used bicycles in town at the bike shop. I took them home and out to the shop and rebuilt them with new paint and all, just like my dad did for me. It was hard to keep the kids from seeing me work on them. I think they smelled a rat. The kids were 8, 6, and 4. Lisa was the youngest of the three. When the kids went to bed Christmas Eve I brought the bikes in and set them up in the living room by the tree. About 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning we heard them in the living room peeking at the bikes. Then they went back to bed. We heard Kelly tell the other two to act surprised in the morning when we called them in to see what Santa had left. They really hammed it up when we did call them in to see what they got. Just overdid it a little. It is funny how history repeats itself.

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Christmas Memories

by Marta Smith

When I was ten and my brother was seven we moved from Nebraska to Colorado Springs, Colorado. Not long after our move my little brother came down with rheumatic fever and was bedridden for a year. That Christmas my mother decided to make a pair of Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls for me and to have Lanny sew on the buttons, etc, just to keep him occupied. One day I came home from school and opened the trunk for a needle and thread so I could sew on a button I had lost. Of course I saw the dolls, and Lanny was heart broken. So besides those two, they made me a huge cloth baby doll, the size of a three year old. Her name was Pinky, I kept her until I went to college and my mother gave her to her sister Maxine, who ran a daycare. So Pinky got a lot of loving over the years.

"My Life & Times as Harve Bodine"

by Joe Smith

If you like the stories I write, you would love this story. Harve Bodine was in the Confederate Army, riding for the Quantrell Raiders. He didn't like anything that guy was doing so he and another fellow left before the end of the war and went out West. It seems he turned lawman.



The story has a lot of human feeling in it, honest emotions, true love (sorry, no hot sex scenes). The story takes place in an area I am somewhat familiar with. Other parts came from Harve himself. I had no idea where it was going. I just wrote it down like Harve told me to. Whether it actually happened or not is for you to decide. Joe Smith.

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By November 1st, nearly all the corn had been harvested. They are finishing up in this field.



Nishnabotna River from the H-275 overpass on the south side of Hamburg.



Lots of Autumn colors in Brownville this Fall. This is a scene from the 'connector trail' that goes through town.



Bobcat spectators had a good season in the PSC Oakbowl.



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This Blue Jay visited my bird feeder in early November; some of the trees still had green leaves.

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Whisler's Hunting

& Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photo provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River is very low now, ending the barge traffic season. The water is clear and smooth and running around 45 degrees. The cold weather has held out for the most part which is allowing plenty of fishing opportunities. You can really see the deeper holes with the lower water level. These conditions really give you a feel for the lay of the river's bottom. It's a long drop to the water's edge in places and you can see lots of rip-rap rock formations this time of year. The river dike piling towers well above the water's present level giving you an understanding of the hazards that lay under the water's surface when boating at normal Spring and Summer river levels. The fishing action is mostly channel cats on dough baits with a fair amount of luck with night crawlers. I'm not saying that the live baits won't catch fish but there isn't much action on them right now. Even with the dough baits it's not a real strong hit but rather a playful tug as they mouth the bait. The bottom line is that they are not as aggressive in the cooler water as they were just a month ago.

Hunting:

2007 Fall Turkey Season is open and permits can still be bought now. All permits are available online at www.outdoornebraska.org or by mail through the Lincoln office or over the counter at any Commission Permitting office.

Remaining 2007 Fall Turkey Season Dates are:

Shotgun: Nov. 20 - Dec. 31.

Archery: Nov. 20 - Dec. 31.

The 2007 Fall Deer Firearm Season was warm but didn't seem to bother the hunters or the deer. You did need to get your harvested deer to a butcher ASAP due to the 70 degree weather on the opening weekend of season. It was a little different deer hunting in a short sleeved shirt. But the bucks were in rut and really didn't mind anything but the does. Big mistake on their part – several nice bucks were harvested locally and a fair amount of special antlerless permits seemed to be filled also.

There's a lot of hunting opportunities out there this time of year. With all the seasons in full swing you can almost pick your sport right now. So get out and get yourself some – you won't be sorry you did. Remember, I'm not an expert but I have my share of luck. I wonder if the experts are having any luck today? So until next time "Happy Hunting and Fishing."




Jason Debur & Brain McConnaughey from Auburn showing a pair of Blue Cats taken near Peru this fall.




14-year-old Trent Mertes shown with his first deer – a 10-point buck taken opening day. Sure is a big bodied deer - Congratulations Trent!

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SHOOTING AT THE STARS

by Devon Adams

I thought I saw
a bullet speeding
through the sky, but
all the stars were still.
It was a night for meteors
and I was waiting
in the dark behind the moon,
hoping for the special
rock that's big enough
to sizzle as it burns
it's way to earth.
But the falling stars
all fell behind my back
as I was looking
somewhere else.

PLAN AHEAD

by Devon Adams

I know that
there are planners,
who mark dates
on calendars
and never fail
to be on time.
They're the ones
who tap their fingers,
waiting for me,
to be there
on time.

WHISPERS

by Devon Adams

There are echoes of the people
who camped and hunted here
beside the wild old river.
They walked these hills in moccasins
that made no sounds,
and they left bits and pieces
of their lives hidden in the soil.
Someday your precious possessions
will be buried under years
of layered dirt and sand,
and your life will be frozen
in forgotten faded photographs.
Our footprints are insubstantial,
leaving less than memories,
like the wind that whispers.

*Editor's note: You can read previous poems by
Devon Adams online in*

*Your Country Neighbor archives; just click on
"publications" at:*

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TURN THE DIAL

by Devon Adams

The sundial turns to autumn
with its early dusk, and the river fog
that sits under the sunrise,
making clouds on the ground.
Deer are restless, as their coats
change from summer tan to winter gray.
They fly across fences, waving
white flags to mark their trail.
Leaves are shaking in their shriveled coats,
telling stories with dry humor,
looking for the courage to die
in the lonesome snow.
The air is full of harvest dust,
choking roads and throats, and
running rivers through our eyes and noses.
Hulking monsters stalk across the fields
and lumber slowly on the highway,
daring cars to squeeze past
their vicious tines and spikes.
On a clear blue afternoon,
tiny flags of cirrus clouds etch an arch
across the western sky that portends
cold rain and falling temperatures
that will strip the last leaves
and drown them in the mud.
We need to store the best past days
in our memories, like squirrels storing nuts,
because the winter knives will slice
deeply into comfort and complacency,
and cause us to doubt our emergence
from struggles in the cold.



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The Face of Drought

A Farm Report from Western Nebraska

by Karen Ott

Forty years ago, while Esther cooked and cleaned and picked the last tomatoes and blackberries from her Indian-summer garden, Fred brought in the harvest, hauling the picked corn from his fields to a back-yard crib built of red lath and heavy twisted wire. Fred didn't know a single farmer who combined their corn -- it just wasn't done, and he was no exception.

The first few times he drove the corn wagon through the yard, the resident flock of domestic geese nosily retreated under the trees, beating their wings in disgust at the tractor's intrusion. But once they realized they were out-matched they angrily waddled off towards the creek a few hundred yards away, where they spent the afternoon swimming off their frustrations.

Fred wasn't surprised. He and Esther had always raised geese, and the geese had always been bad-tempered.

On Sunday, following services, Fred gathered with fellow farmer-parishioners on the sidewalk outside the church to compare yields and complain about prices, bantering back and forth until the women, who always finished the Sunday chit-chat ritual first, gave the group a collective look that said, "Dinner's in the oven, It's time to go".

The men nodded to each other, murmured a meek 'So long, don't work too hard.' and headed for home; a familiar rite which would be repeated the following October, and all the Octobers after that -- including this one.

Once, during the late 1940s', Fred had taken his young wife and left the valley behind, traveling all the way to Arizona, a far-away place Esther found depressingly absent of family and friends. It might have been she was simply homesick, but more than likely she knew deep in her heart they weren't made for that place, that life, so they returned home, where they would spend the rest of their lives raising kids and crops, and, despite their best efforts, grow old.

During his declining years Fred managed to slam the door in death's face more than once; each time confounding the doctors with his stubborn German determination. But the most recent setback proved his last. Following an aching long month in what the young euphemistically describe as 'a retirement village', and the elderly realistically call 'an old folk's home', he died. Last Monday I played the organ at his funeral.

Fred the brother, the husband, the father, the grandfather, the friend -- and yes, the farmer -- was remembered in poignant story and song; some brought tears, others laughter. When a beloved grandson, who spoke a few words for the family, asked if anyone had a story to share about his Grandpa, I saw my mother lean towards my Dad and mouth a few sentences. Dad grinned and shook his head. Later she would confide she had asked him if they dared tell the "Big Margarita" story in church, a humorous tale I would guess none of Fred's grown children had ever heard.

After everyone had left the church, when the doors were locked on the silent sanctuary, and the street had emptied of cars and farm pickups, I started for home driving the route our four-year-old grandson calls "the back way," a washboard gravel road running past Fred and Esther's overgrown farmyard. I stopped at their driveway, turned off the engine, and sat lost in thought until a dog trotted around the

corner of the house and looked expectantly in my direction. When he saw I was a stranger he lay down, dropped his head to his paws and resumed his wait -- for a master who would never again call his name.

Fred's daughter Diane had told me, just the day before, of her father's love for this dog, and all its predecessors. "Dad's obituary should name the dog among his survivors, and print the names of all the others as 'preceding him in death.'" She said, her voice breaking with sorrow at the harsh relentlessness of time.

I turned the key, started the engine and hurried home, but before I slipped back into my own busy life I took time to pet the dogs and look around -- at the cornflower blue skies, the bronze and gold cottonwoods, the geese flying overhead.

In the span of a lifetime a person doesn't get many picture-perfect Indian-summer days so gather them while you can, like the last wildflowers of the season, into a bouquet of memories; a personal treasure that will serve you well when your world shrinks to one room, one bed, and a nightstand bearing a photograph of the last in a long line of faithful dogs.

In the end they'll be worth more than all the gold in California.

Editor's note: You can read previous articles by Karen online in Your Country Neighbor archives; just click on "publications" at: www.yourcountryneighbor.com

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THE WOOD-CHOPPIN' PARTY...

by Vicki Harger

To tell the truth, folks....No one ever *chops* wood at the party... It's a misnomer, actually. We cut and carry and stack and split huge piles of firewood with a wood-splitter...But no one ever chops. Ever.

Each year, we gather on the Brownville bluff...loyal friends of Albert Austin...neighbors, loved ones—professionals and ordinary folk. We've come to replenish the winter wood supply... Each year we invade those deep, mysterious woods: Mr. Austin's Paradise. He reigned as King of the River Bluff for years, but now the old man is gone and his Christmas Tree Farm has passed on to his daughter, Nancy.

Nance called me the night before The Party. "Vic—you've got to help me out," she said. "I'm making chili for the party and I'm all out of seasoning. Without chili powder, it tastes awfully flat!"

Chili powder. I made a mental note. "Anything else....?"

"Not that I can think of," Nancy said, "...but you should see Squeaky! The cat's all upset about what's happening. The noise of hamburger frying in the kitchen is scaring her to death. Tells you how often I cook!" Nancy laughed. "I guess I'm no domestic diva!"

I nodded. It was going to be an interesting weekend.

I showed up at Austin Acres the next day, fully armed. In my car-trunk were spices and cans of store-bought chili just in case.... I took one look at the simmering crock-pot in the kitchen and I sighed. A quarter-inch of grease floated on top of the chili "Ummm Nance...?" I said.

But Nancy was gone. Out of the house and down the hill she went, to supervise her many workers. Nancy flitted amongst the volunteers like a pretty sprite amid the evergreens. "Wonder Woman" was what her daddy called her—and she certainly looked the part, today, as she breezed through her troops, waving her arms to the chorus of chainsaws.

Everyone at Austin Acres was busy, and I set to work, too—dipping grease from the crock-pot. I taste-tested the chili. Nance was right... it was flat—flat as a board!

I put in the chili powder, and tasted it again. Still needed something. I grabbed a few cans of store-bought chili out of my car, and dumped them into the crock-pot. Reaching for the spice rack, I started sprinkling. Garlic powder. Seasoning salt. And sweetener...?

A bit of sugar always makes chili good.

My search of the kitchen turned up nothing but a box of sugar cubes. I grabbed a handful and dumped them into the crock-pot. I stirred quickly. Chili splattered on my white shirt and a bit splattered on the newly-painted wall. Oh crud.... I was making a terrible mess.

I heard voices outside. Someone was coming. Crew members were heading up the hill toward the house, and the Wonder Woman was sure to be among them.

I tossed the empty chili cans in the trash and scrubbed up my mess as best as I could. I could hear Nancy's laughter skipping merrily above the other voices. "Well...Vic!" she said, coming around the corner. "What are you doing?" Her hair was full of sawdust...her eyes bright and curious.

"Oh, just helping out..." I said, dabbing at my shirt-front. "I was skimming the grease off the top of the chili. But it's fine, now. Just needs to simmer a while."

With a nod and an absent-minded smile, Nance trotted off to tend to her party-ers and I escaped to the woods. I spent several hours working with the others, scrambling up and down the slopes of Austin Acres. We cut and carried and stacked and split wood amid the towering trees, until hunger drove us back up the hill toward the house.

People were everywhere. Kids skittered about the porch deck, munching on cookies as they tormented one another—their shouts and laughter echoing along the river bluff.

The TV blared out the score of the Husker game, luring more volunteers out of the woods. They collapsed into chairs to rest while staring at the screen. They groaned and moaned. The game was not going well. The weary fans were grieved, especially the menfolk. They slumped in their chairs till a bevy of bikini-clad Hooter gals paraded across the screen. The masculine sector of fans revived, then, feeling comforted.

Tidbits of conversation drifted about the room. Snatches of nonsense. I picked up my writing notebook and pen. I needed to record some of the foolishness going on here, today.

Nancy's brother, Jim, was going full-tilt, as he wandered about sipping his cappuccino. I followed him outside and we stood watching the arrival of volunteers from the woods. Sawdust-laden people with scratched-up hands and faces. Jim's gal was there, chattering to the other ladies. She looked astounded. Dismayed.

"Man!" she was saying to the others. "Do we have any medical people on hand? A doctor or nurse maybe—just in case...? There's an ol' guy climbing through the treetops like he's walking on a sidewalk....He's freakin' me out!"

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"He must be nuts—"

"...Such an old guy, too—"

"Who? The 73 year-old-man?" I said. "That's my dad, and he's been doing it for half-a-century."

The chattering ladies paused. They stared, noticing me for the first time standing there with my notebook and pen.

"What are you doing?" they wanted to know.

Nancy's brother intercepted them. "Vicki's a journalist and she writes down everything. She's a famous 'Pulitzer Surprise winner'. It's a surprise, see?...even to herself." He chuckled at his own wit.

Still grinning, Jim scanned the crowd. His gaze settled on a group of children squabbling nearby. His grin turned upside down. "What's wrong with those children, anyhow...?" he said. "They're acting like children!"

I sighed and brushed at the sawdust clinging to Jim, accidentally knocking the cup of cappuccino out of his hand. It somersaulted to the ground and splattered everywhere. Jim looked rueful. "You ruined my cappuccino and my cup," he said. "Now I need some duct tape."

"Jim—it's a Styrofoam cup!"

"I know," he said. "Like I'm saying—I need duct tape and some more cappuccino."

I gave up on Jim and wandered back inside. Amid all the voices, I could hear the prattling of the Wonder Woman. Nancy was in fine form, today, as she wandered about chatting with her guests. How happy her father would've been to see her like this.

I looked at the old man's photograph, sitting there on the coffee table. His bright gaze stared past me, watching all the hoopla. He was clearly fascinated.

"Mr. Austin," I murmured. "How we miss you! You loved these Wood-choppin' Parties, didn't you?"

The King of the River Bluff didn't answer. But he was smiling.

The Choppin' Party was turning out to be a great success. With each passing hour, the fresh pile of wood grew higher and higher—a mountain of crisscrossed sticks and slabs—each piece blessed by the camaraderie of friends and family.

The holidays would be a cheery time at the Austin's Christmas Tree Farm, this year....with a home-grown fire burning in the wood-stove and a home-grown evergreen in the corner. Lots of warmth and laughter and wood-choppin' memories on top the river bluff.

I gazed out the great bank of windows at the deck and the forest beyond. Soon snowflakes would whisper past those windows and the critters of the bluff would leave snowy footprints across the deck, in search of leftovers from Nancy's kitchen. Possums, coons, a fox or two...and of course, the hungry winter birds. The feathered friends were even now sitting in nearby branches, waiting for the guests to leave so they could begin a feast of their own. The birds watched the kiddy cookie-eaters, their eyes bright with anticipation.

The children sweetened the deck, scattering crumbs here and there, and the birds waited—patient and knowing. Cardinals. Titmouses. Red-bellied woodpeckers. The ones that the Austins called Greedy-guts. The birds watched—cocking their heads from side to side.

I watched and waited, too. The day was drawing to an end. I knew that a moment of reckoning was coming. And soon.

There was a commotion in the kitchen. The pizza had arrived and the lid of the crock-pot was lifted. It was time to fill the bowls.

Uneasily, I watched as somebody ladled up the doctored chili. What if I'd put in too much garlic salt, or too many sugar cubes? I scanned the crowd, waiting. The chili bowls were full and steaming. Everyone chatted and laughed in the homey atmosphere, feeling relaxed as they reached for their spoons. Everyone but me. I watched their faces as they raised spoons to their mouths.

"Oh Nancy!" one of the ladies said. "Your chili is wonderful! What did you put in it? I want the recipe."

Nancy blushed a bit—exuding the air of a domestic diva. Modestly, she flapped away the compliment with fluttering hands, then rattled off the list of ingredients....airing her chili recipe for all to hear. She smiled...and I smiled, too. The Wonder Woman need never know.

At least not until now, dear readers....Not until now.

Editor's note: You can read previous articles by Vicki online in Your Country Neighbor archives; just click on "publications" when you go to:

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