


COOK-FIRE SMOKE

Poems by *Marvin Hass*



Words are said
When the heart is full
If not captured by the pen
Drift away like cook-fire smoke
Forgotten on the wind



Introduction

Cook-Fire Smoke is a collection of poetry about growing up on a blow-sand farm in Central North Dakota. It is memories of the 1940's & 50's in a rural community where folks were neighbors and corrected young boys when their parents weren't there to make sure they minded their P & Qs.

Herd milk cows when the pasture gets thin, remember when mothers wore aprons, bring in wood for the "Monarch Range," snare gophers, drink milk not an hour old, visit with "Uncle Andy" the rural mail carrier, feel the goose down feather tick and the frost in the rafter room, picnic "Down where the lilacs grow", kiss Sweet Susie, eat Mama's spring chicken, experience the team work of the "Threshing Crew" and enjoy "Saturday Night" in a "One Horse Town."

Just some of the boyhood memories that drift back like ...Cook-Fire Smoke.

Marvin Hass

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BOYHOOD



**Did you ever use some gum weed
on the seat of a kitchen chair,
or stick a pebble up your nose
and found that it stayed there.**

**Did you ever snare a gopher,
then let him go...minus his tail,
or spill the morning milking
as you whirled that old milk pail.**

**Did you ever find a nest of eggs,
rotten through and through,
and peg 'em at your sister
as she turned yellow, green, then blue.**

**Did you ever buck a pail calf
right out the cow barn door,
and lose him on the second jump
as your face met fresh manure.**

**Did you ever get the tom cat drunk
with home brew in a tablespoon,
and tell him if he really tried
he could howl at the moon.**

**Enjoy your boyhood buddy
'cause soon will come a time,
when your Mama plans to tame you
and make you toe the line.**

**When you have grown to manhood
and your Mama steps aside,
another gal will take her place
to keep you calm and civilized.**

**So enjoy these days of freedom
and your life will turn out fine,
the ladies might just tame you son
but not the memories...in your mind.**

FARM BOY

**I made my gum from harvest wheat,
drank milk not an hour old.
Helped Ma can in the summer heat,
froze my toes in the winter cold.**

**Kept fire flies in a Mason jar,
threw frogs in our old stock tank.
My uncle let me drive his car,
a fine man, my uncle Frank.**

**A farm boy with a farmer's tan,
split wood for our kitchen stove.
Swept up the dust with a goose wing fan,
had a swing down in our grove.**

**Ran a stray cat up a high-line pole,
chased a Killdeer just for fun.
Loved to tie two chickens at their knees,
then encourage them to run.**



**Dancing with my memories,
guess that's just an old man's plight.
But I still might sew a few wild oats
If my wife thinks it's all right.**

HARD LUCK APRON

Mama wore a hard luck apron
She'd made from a flower sack,
It had stripes like feather ticking
and was soft as a duckling's back.

That apron found a dozen uses,
As it covered Mama's dress
She'd use it when we gathered eggs,
or strawberries, or to wipe a mess.

She could take it off to shoo the flies
Or swat a wayward son
Or wave my Daddy to the house
When the supper was almost done.

I still recall the rabbit nest
With the mother cold and small
the newborn babies huddled there
Mama's apron held them all.



It gave me comfort as a child
When grown folks talked to me
I could hide my eyes beneath it
'til it was safe to peek and see.

She would spit on it and clean my face
when company was at the door.
Oh, she'd smile them in with little hugs
bring food...and smile some more.

She wore a frilly thing on Sundays
a prairie rose stitched on each side.
She rarely sat and enjoyed her meal
but fed a house full all with pride.

I think back when my Mama died
and the grief to think she'd gone.
The flowers, the singing, the Reverend's words
sent a kind old lady home.

But most of all that apron
Yes, my memories still recall
That hard work, hard luck apron
Mama's witness to us all.

THE CAKE

**“Come on now Bud, let’s get to work
Got’ta keep my men well fed.
We’ll surprise your Dad with a frosted cake
The recipe’s here in my head.”**

**“It’s good old Swan’s Down flour,
Calumet to help it rise
three eggs will make it tasty
While the salt brings it alive.”**



**“Now you give it twice a hundred beats
‘til your arm is good and sore
then five beats for the cake, Bud
And ten more for the Lord.”**

**I got a Mother’s course on values
In my Mama’s kitchen school
She’d use that down home saying
To share her golden rule.**

**“Use the gifts that you are given
Always do the best you can
Give folks an extra measure
Be an honest, caring man.”**



**I grew in understanding
As the years helped me to see
Wish I could have lived life better
But my Ma was proud of me.**

**Came the time her life was over
We knew it was her day
She asked me to bend closer
In whisper she would say.**

**“Would you a make a cake Bud, just for me
with bright sprinkles just for fun
make sure you all get a great big piece
have a party when I’m gone.”**

**Well, I made that cake for Mama
Remembering every word
Her voice still guides me day by day
“Give ten more for the Lord.”**

**Make a cake or live a life
It’s all there in Mama’s word
“Give five more for the cake, Bud
and ten more for the Lord.”**



FIRST LOVE



I was fourteen when I fell in love.
With sweet Susie down the road.
I asked if I might have a kiss
She said, "Not 'til the cows come home."

I did everything to please her,
gave her my boyhood heart,
brought her lilacs in the springtime,
dreamed she'd kiss me in the dark.

February is when it happened.
Me and Dad were hauling hay.
Ma said Susie had stopped by,
Then she smiled in a knowing way.

Susie's Valentine was sweetness,
words like from Old Shakespeare's time.
It took me by complete surprise
the way she ended this love rhyme.



"I know that you've been patient Dear,
so I wrote you a lover's poem.
Bud, I'm sure you won't believe it,
But...the cows...they just came home."



THE MONARCH RANGE

Mama cooked on a cast iron range
Said "Monarch" on the door.
Were four round lids on the left side
The right had a reservoir.

Two warming closets up above
With a pipe right through the center
You'd start with good dry kindling
Adjust the damper for the weather.

It was a temperamental cuss
But Mama would change its views.
She'd shake the grate, talk nice to it
then light a page from the local news.

My job was to fill the wood box
and a scuttle with lignite coal.
Heat from the range on a snowy day
Would warm your very soul.

We'd feed family and the neighbors
All those that came to the farm.
How did she cook ten dishes
On an ornery hunk of iron.

We had salt pork in the cellar
Canned goods from the garden patch
The recipes in Mama's head
that were pretty hard to match.

Well, I've sat at many tables
These years out in the west
But oh those meals on the Monarch range
I know they were the best.

THE FEATHER TICK

My Grandpa staked a prairie claim
sent for his wife and family,
with three lively boys and a little girl,
Grandma came across the sea.

They had more hope than money
in a land that was brand new.
Some odds and ends to make a home
with a feather tick or two.

My Mama was the little girl
that came from the old country.
She married Dad in Thirty Nine,
raised wheat and dust and me.

The church mouse they talk about
didn't have a thing on us.
We fit right in with the poorest
but never thought to raise a fuss.

Mama made us goose down ticks
just like my Grandma had.
Our beds piled high with comfort
had my own like Ma and Dad.



The feather tick was luxury
surprised I was so blessed
A poor boy touch by heaven
you could sleep in warmth and rest.

Oh, how I loved those fluffy ticks
they warmed me up just fine.
I slept upstairs in a rafter room
with frost in the winter time.

Well, I've aged into a geezer.
I quit my prairie home.
I oft' think back on boyhood days
the farm, those ticks and home.

Went back last week to see the place
where my folks were in the ground.
Saw all the family markers
just one mile south of town.

There was a plan for their sweet rest
with a comforter from God.
My family sleeps in perfect peace
'neath the Maker's prairie sod.

Guess feather ticks ain't popular,
as when they came across the sea,
but they worked for God and Mama
believe they're still just fine with me.



THE CARRIER

My Uncle Andy was a carrier
for the Rural Free Delivery.
Brought mail to all the farmers,
To my folks and even me.

Some times I'd wait by our mailbox
just to see and talk with him.
It just felt good to hear him laugh
And to know I was his kin.

"Bud, you staying up on baseball?"
"Yes Sir, when I get the time."
"Say Hi to your Dad and my Sister."
Then he'd wink and give me a dime.

He knew the roads like his bible
Folks would ask how it was out west.
"There's pillow drifts by Larson's
Farm-to-Market's still the best."

Folks depended on my Uncle
he never let them down.
He knew he was their lifeline
with that world outside our town.

If a man was feeling worried
as farmers often do,
wondering if he'd get the crop,
if he didn't...what he'd do.

My Uncle would come tearing
stop and tell the latest joke,
he'd wink and laugh and slap his knee
then roll himself a smoke.

He saw his job as a whole lot more
than bringing Johnson all his mail.
Andy helped him face another day,
cheered up by a simple tale.

Every-once-in-a-great-while
comes a caring, friendly man,
gets joy from helping others,
serving people of the land.

I guess it's a unique calling
Uncle Andy would agree,
when you're singled out for special work
To carry mail for the RFD.

CASH POOR



Living on a blow sand farm
We often came up dry.
Sunflowers and Russian thistle grew
Didn't really have to try.

The fence rows stood above the plain
With another set below.
The Thirties piled up boundary dunes
sand drifts like winter snow.

Kosha weed and wild oats
Also seemed to thrive
Whenever moisture came our way
That barely kept the crops alive.

My job was herding milk cows
when our pasture got real thine.
I'd run 'em in the ditches
Ol' Sport helped to bring 'em in.

Made hay around the dried up sloughs,
rank but filling, Daddy'd say.
I guess you do the best you can
Hoping some day it might pay.

We weren't alone in poverty
The neighbors were the same.
When you live cash poor in blow sand
No use looking for who's to blame.

There always was the family
And love through all the pain.
The good Lord saw us through it
We'd just wait and pray for rain.

My Daddy shared his wisdom
'bout why this was our lot.
The fact that we were singled out
To farm this worthless spot.

If we were rich like a Kaiser
With a foot of black top soil
We'd puff up fat and sassy
forget who blessed our toil.

We have been truly chosen
To farm on sandy ground.
It makes us thankful for our bread
we see how God smiles down.

I heard my Daddy's wisdom.
I knew that he was right.
So I asked for a little help
When I said my prayers at night.

Lord...just a little more rain in springtime
some cash money in the fall.
It sure would help my Ma and Dad
And I'll stay humble through it all.





THRESHING CREW

Harvest time on the prairie
I worked on the threshing crew.
Made me feel like a grown up man
field pitched in fifty two.

Bundle teams, spike pitchers
a separator man.
Mr. Nelson own the rig and all
lost his fingers on one hand.

Run-a-ways, cloudless days,
straw stacks that touched the sky
the machine with the look of a dinosaur
with wings it might just fly.

Three tine forks for pitching,
number tens for scooping grain
Saw horses go a-flying
When the belt took off one's mane.

Threshers' meals with food piled high
each family served a feast.
Courtesy and manners showed
you weren't broke yet, at least.

If a neighbor had an accident
couldn't help out like he ought.
They'd thresh his when it came his turn
without a second thought.

It was the days of team work
yes, worked to all survive.
The threshing crew was community
playing out before our eyes.

The Good Lord gave the harvest
farmer's reaped from east to west.
The threshing crew brought in the crop
and we all were truly blessed.



SPRINGERS

Now "Free Range" is what they call 'em
Didn't know that we had that.
My Mama called 'em Springers
She'd fry breaded with some fat.

They'd be cheepin' in our post office
Through boxes with mouse holes
We put 'em in a brooder house
Where a heat lamp warmed their souls.



We fought weasels, skunks and chicken hawks
Diseases in the spring.
Used purple pills in the water
The Watkins man would bring.

Come butchering time it got real wild
When those Springers lost their spark
sightless birds a-hoping' skyward
ol' Snooks would growl...then bark.

We'd dunk 'em in a big ol' vat
Then plucked away their dress
Dad singed 'em with wood-alcohol
Then exposed that inner mess.

Mama sold 'em for a dollar
To the ladies in our town
Surely wasn't for the profit
Just...cash money to lay down.

Free Range or commercial
Call 'em what you like
Their not like Mama's Springers
That I'd coop up every night.

Sunday dinner for the preacher
Shucks, he acted like a king
When Mama fried those Springers up
Heaven didn't lack a thing.





SATURDAY NIGHT

Saturday night in a one horse town
farmers came to trade and congregate.
Kids'd talked and laughed and ate ice cream
and got to stay up kind-a late.

Folks caught all the latest news
how they loved to come and see
their neighbors and their kin folk
and a brand new grand baby.

We'd sell cream and eggs to Wally.
He was in back of his brother's store.
Had a freight elevator with a hay rope
I once rode it through the floor.

I'd get ten cents of my very own
but can hear my Mama yet,
"Don't spend it all at once, Bud.
You know that's all you'll get."

It was a time to buy our groceries
Mama gathered from her list.
She'd buy peaches every August
I'd eat three...she never missed.

Was a gold rush at the taverns
men got dry when it was hot.
There'd be music from a squeeze box
with tunes I've since forgot.

Sunday morning found us all in church
Mama made real sure of that.
We all had on our Sunday clothes
Daddy came with his Stetson hat.

One horse towns and Saturday night
They're all just history.
They've all died out like *cook-fire smoke*
but not the small town memory.

