

Hoosier Seasons



Half a Century Ago

RHODE'S

Hoosier Seasons Half a Century Ago

By Robert T. Rhode



SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. — THE BIBLE

Preface

Fifty years before our War of Independence, James Thomson, fresh from his study of natural philosophy at the College of Edinburgh in Scotland, urged his countrymen to respect the plow, symbol of an "exhaustless granary of a world." Two centuries and thirty years after the publication of Thomson's *The Seasons*, I grew up on a diversified farm in Indiana where I experienced the joys of rural life, not to mention the occasional struggles. All too soon, we will think of Thomson as having written his greatest work three centuries ago. Will his poetry then stir only a faint nostalgia? "Nor ye who live / In luxury and ease, in pomp and pride, / Think these lost themes unworthy of your ear," Thomson warned across the ages. To honor Thomson and my farm upbringing, I offer this brief prose poem.



THE JUDGMENT OF EXPERIENCE

Autumn

We fill our wagons with
pale yellow mounds of
soybeans.

Pumpkins store
summer's sunshine in
their thick orange shells.
A few horsetail berries
glow here and there.
Fluttering masses of
Monarch butterflies
spend a night in our
trees.

Soon, we pull down
branches of persimmons
with brown gloved
hands.

A crow talks in Bach
staccato.

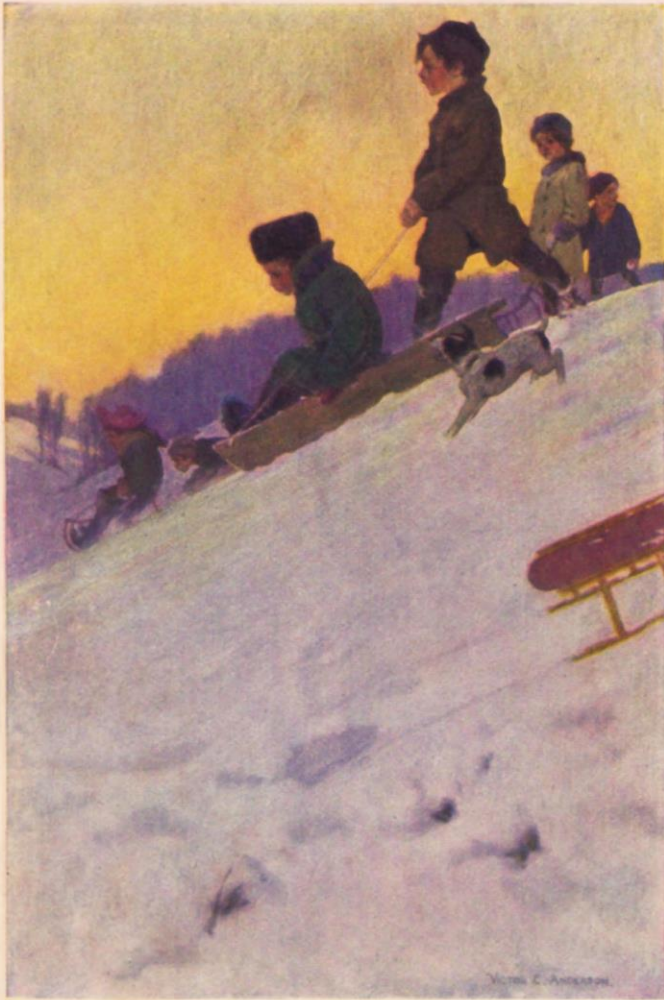
Drops of rain spatter
lonely on the tin roof.
Our father peels back the
shucks to see if the corn
is ready.

On a dry day, our
father's corn picker
rustles and clangs behind
his tractor.

Ears thud in the wagon.
The farm equipment
dealer repairs the
combine.

The veterinarian
vaccinates the pigs.

We retrieve paper packages of meat from the butcher's walk-in freezer.
Small jars of jelly and large jars of beans stand in readiness.
In the dark cellar, ghostly crocks contain the sauerkraut.
We fork manure from the stalls into the spreader waiting beyond the door,
And our father starts the tractor to pull the spreader to the waiting fields.
The contractor repairs the standing-seam metal high up on the barn.
We buy kerosene for lanterns.
We think we can manage another winter.



Tommy had never before had any real coasting like this.

Winter

A plain of snow glistens
at moonrise.
Cut-glass frost decorates
window panes.
Tops of fence posts
resemble raisins in
whipped cream.
We use coffee cans to
scoop the ground feed,
And we pour it in the
feedboxes for the cows.
We see their breath in
puffs from glistening
nostrils.
Our father fires corncobs
in a heater to try to
keep the water from
freezing,
And he uses a hatchet to
chop ice around the
heater in the water tank.
He pays for a year's
subscription to *Crops
and Soils*.
He renews his
subscription to the *Iron-
Men Album Magazine*.
He brings home peanut
hulls for the floor of the
brooder house.
The mechanic repairs
the radiator of the
pickup truck.

Our parents contribute to the fund to fix the church's stained-glass windows.
We stamp cold boots waiting for our father to bid on hog troughs at auction.
We bring home boxes of cheeping chicks from the hatchery.
We store gallons and gallons of antifreeze.
Our father buys Bell-Ellen, a Guernsey cow that becomes our pet.



WOODS IN SPRING—Dogwood in Blossom

Spring

We stride along a
country road with wind
carrying us on in great
gusts.
Low massive gray storm
clouds scud above.
Our father pays taxes.
The vet treats the sick
cow with antibiotics.
Peeper frogs sing around
the pond.
Their eggs balance near
the surface.
A robin climbs the air to
a branch.
A killdeer skitters on pin
legs.
A green heron sways to
the universal melody.
Mallards preen beside
the rippling water.
Calls of birds near and
far announce the
mornings.
Green beams sift down
on mayapples.
The clover and timothy
seed arrives to refresh
our meadows.
We stare in wonder at
the greenness of the
field of winter wheat.
We stare in wonder at

the whiteness of the fur on the new Holstein calf.
We pay the Holstein-Friesian Association a fee to register Buttercup.
Our father makes daily visits to the hardware store for parts.
We plow field after field, polishing the shares like mirrors.
We disc and harrow the plowed soil until it is fluffy as flour.
We plant corn,
And we plant beans, trying to keep our rows straighter than the neighbor's.
The blacksmith welds the plow,
And our father buys a new power take-off and universal joint.

We mow the hay, rake the hay into windrows, bale the hay,
And we lift the bales to the mow of the barn.
Dust sticks to the sweat on our necks.



Excepting some classes of insects . . . , man is the only animal that has tamed plants and other animals and made them serve him. And man alone has improved plants and animals. — NATHANIEL S. SHALER

Summer

Catalpa flowers reveal orange, caramel brown, yellow, and purple centers.
Sunlight paints the lacy curtains.
Our mother prepares peaches, her wrists above the enameled bowl.
The sudden fragrance of blanched peaches fills the kitchen.
The incubator gives birth to ducklings, goslings, and chicks.
Breezes delight like piccolos.
A green gate creaks as our mother returns from the garden.
She carries a basket full of tomatoes.
Pigs murmur in warm dust.
A turtle carries the world on its back more lightly than Atlas does.
We carry bagged ground feed from the pickup to the storage shed.
We repair the fence—again.
Holsteins sway on the path toward the milking parlor.
We pump fly sprayers, and the malodorous scent drifts.
The mechanic repairs the brakes on the Minneapolis–Moline tractor.
Yet another tractor needs a new muffler.
We cultivate the corn, trying not to get on the wrong rows.

We harvest the golden wheat and bale the golden straw.
Our cows, pigs, and other 4-H projects earn ribbons at the county fair.
Our father runs the sickle-bar mower along the fences.
Our parents lightly sand the grime from the eggs to sell.
We split icy bottles of soft drinks on a steamy afternoon at the feed store.
Our father pays the Farm Bureau dues.
We help him load boards at the lumber yard to repair sheds.
Red heaps of fruit ornament the back porch.
Our father hauls hogs to market.
We hope we see no mice while we scoop the last of the corn from the crib.
Ground fog flows on an August evening.
A moth's velvet petals brush the screen door.
We catch moments in a firefly jar and let them go.

Illustrations

Preface

Henry Jackson Waters' *The Essentials of Agriculture* (Boston: Ginn, 1915)

Autumn

Waters' *Essentials of Agriculture*

Winter

Thomas Nelson Page's *Tommy Trot's Visit to Santa Claus* (New York: Scribner's, 1908)

Spring

Andrew M. Soule and Edna Henry Lee Turpin's *Agriculture: Its Fundamental Principles* (Richmond: B. F. Johnson, 1907)

Summer

Waters' *Essentials of the New Agriculture* (Boston: Ginn, 1924)

Title Graphic

Paul R. Hanna, Genevieve Anderson, and William S. Gray's *Susan's Neighbors at Work* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1937)