



Was the friend and great comfort  
Of my great-grandparents and my grandparents,  
A place of refuge and safety  
In the face of violent prairie storms  
Raging across their homestead.  
The relief of taking the family to the storm cellar  
When the winds stilled, waiting,  
    The sky turned ominous green-gray,  
    Clouds roiled and rumbled overhead—  
Into the welcoming arms of the storm cellar,  
Knowing safety until all danger passed.

Children played in the cool cellar  
On hot summer days;  
It protected chilling jugs of water  
Field-bound to refresh harvest crews.  
Root crops and canned goods  
Took their place in the winter.

The cellar remains a link to ancestors,  
They who toiled and feared  
On the wide wind-swept prairie,  
But loved the high skies  
    Sweet grasses  
    Teeming spring flowers  
    And rich earth enough  
To make it their home,  
    My home.

## Fiction Winner -- Adult

### *Whither*

by Jo Ann Cool Albán -- Glasco, Kansas

SHE reached out and grasped the teakettle with the bird on the whistle and poured a little hot water into her cup of coffee. Got it too strong today, she thought. As she set the kettle back on the stove she glanced out the kitchen door window to the patio. Oh, my God, it's so beautiful this morning! The glow of the sun hitting the last of the early morning mist startled her; the very air seemed to glisten as it laced among the trees. The sight of it gave her a pang as waves of memory swept over her. She set her coffee cup down on the checkered table and stepped through the door.

She moved toward the shimmer, just down past the end of the garden and its rows of green beans and tomato plants. The grass shook itself free of dew as she made dark swishing tracks across the little patch of lawn. The path beyond the garden led through the rutted dust and sand-burrs down to the creek. Must be careful not to get cuffs dirty and full of stickers. At the crossing the creek was shallow, a mosaic of flat stones that the clear water swirled lazily around on its way to pass through narrow channels with shadowy green fringe arching halfway over from the bank. She carefully picked her way across the stones and went up the farm road on the far bank to the meadow at the top. It was still cool, but the sun was beginning to warm the stiff butterflies and grasshoppers immobilized by the night chill. She walked slowly through the meadow, her eyes caressing each glorious Indian Paint Brush and Snow-on-the-mountain. Bunches of Butter-and-Eggs and their miniature Snapdragon faces made golden patches in the prairie grass. She breathed deeply as she caught a draught of the heavy scent of humus rising from the earth. In the distance a Redwing Blackbird whirred cheerfully from its perch on a dried-out milkweed stalk left over from the last year.

She slowly became aware of another sound; a car horn honked again, more insistently. Damn! The carpool! She quickly grabbed her coffee cup for one more swallow. As she set it down a little wave of coffee slipped up over the rim and splashed onto the yellow checks. She picked up her brown lunch bag, gave one last pat to her hair as she passed the mirror. She headed out the front door of the apartment in to the gray morning filled with rush hour traffic noises on the freeway a block over, for the hour ride to work.

## Essay Winner -- Adult

### *Harvest Time in the Solomon Valley*

by Janice McIntosh -- Manhattan, Kansas

The year was 1939 and I was five years old. Dad, Mother and I drove 750 miles from Waukesha, Wisconsin to Glasco, Kansas to see my grandparents, Oscar and Ovedia Olson. My Dad was going to help my Grandfather with the wheat harvest and Mother would help Grandma with all the extra cooking and baking required when you are feeding threshers.

The harvest usually took about two weeks. In this part of the Solomon Valley, all the farmers helped their neighbors thresh their fields. They would draw lots to see whose fields would be first, then go around to each farm in turn until all the wheat was in. If the group of farmers was harvesting your field, it was your turn to provide the dinner at noon and refreshments for the threshers.

I recall when it was my grandparents' turn. What fond memories! Since I was the only child and grandchild, I received lots of attention from four adults. Everyone would rise before dawn and eat a hearty breakfast. The men would leave for the wheat fields and there they would join other neighbors and friends for a hard day of harvesting in the hot Kansas sun. Grandma and Mom would begin preparations for the noon dinner. First of all, Grandma would go around and shut all the windows and pull down all the shades, in order to keep the dining room as cool as possible. It was nearly impossible to keep the kitchen cool with all the cooking and baking, but Grandma did her best.

We all had work to do. Mother gathered up the breakfast dishes and washed them. I dried them while I watched Grandma feed the old iron cook-stove with more wood so it would be hot enough to bake bread. Once she had mixed the dough and kneaded it, she divided it into two pans and set them on the stove to rise.

By now it was midmorning. Grandma would make up a big container of fresh Kool-Aid, and pack two dozen of her big spicy ginger cookies in her basket, along with tin cups for the men. I begged to carry the basket for her, but Grandma said it was too heavy for a little girl.

Together we would walk to the wheat fields with a snack for the hard working harvesters. The men were always glad to take a break and have something cold to drink and a crunchy cookie to munch on. All too soon, they needed to return to work. Grandma and I would trudge back up the path to the house, but this time I proudly carried the basket.

I vividly remember the day Grandma took me with her out to the chicken yard. Grandma had a long piece of wire with a hook on one end; she always took it with her to catch a chicken for dinner. The chickens were scratching around the chicken yard where they had been fed grain. Grandma would chase the chickens until she was able to corner one, then she'd slip the wire hook over the chicken's leg and pull it tight. We all heard the squawking chicken prisoner plus the echoing squawks from the chickens left behind. Grandma would march over to the tree stump she used as a chopping block, lay the chicken down, grab the ax standing next to the stump, and with a deft stroke she chopped the chicken's head off.

Grandma would then hang the chicken up on the clothesline for a short time to let the bird bleed out, then she would drop the chicken in a tub of boiling water to loosen all its feathers for easier plucking. She would take the chicken back to the house and singe off the small pin feathers over an open flame in the old iron cook-stove. She would wash the bird, remove the insides and cut it up. Before long, I could hear the chicken sizzling in hot lard in the cast iron frying pan. When it was tender, Grandma would remove the chicken and make gravy from the drippings for the famished workmen to pour over mashed potatoes. I can still picture that beautiful bird, even after sixty years. I've never tasted such delicious chicken as Grandma's.

While we were gone, Mom had finished peeling potatoes for dinner and set them on the stove to boil. When we returned, Grandma checked the bread to see how well it had risen, then she put it in the cook-stove to bake. After that, she mixed up lard, flour, and salt and rolled out some pie crust. I watched her set the bottom crust inside the pie pan. Then she looked up at me, a merry gleam in her eye.

"Janice, would you like to come to the storm cellar with me?" she asked. I nodded so eagerly that Mother laughed. They all knew how I loved the storm cellar.

Grandma and I went out the back door and crossed to the right side of the back yard to a mound topped by two long grey plank doors. Grandma opened the grey doors like wings, and we walked down into the cool, musty darkness of the cellar. When our eyes adjusted to the dimness, I could see three shelves lined with rows and rows of the fruits and vegetables she had canned during the year. Grandma chose a quart jar of cherries that she had canned in the spring. I loved looking at the shelves; there were gleaming jars full of apples and corn. The carrots glowed orange between the light green jars of peas and the dark green beans. But my favorite was Grandma's famous home made pickles. They were as crisp as a cool breeze and so spicy they made your tongue tingle. I asked Grandma if I could take up a jar of her pickles for dinner. She told me "Of course you can!" and we carried them back up to the bright Kansas sunshine.

When we got back, we saw Mother had finished slicing the cabbage while the potatoes were cooking. As Grandma drained the water from the potatoes and mashed them, Mother added vinegar, sugar, thick cream, salt and pepper to the shredded cabbage to make coleslaw. Grandma pulled the bread from the oven. She tapped the tops of the light brown loaves. The loaves sounded hollow, so she knew the bread was finished baking. She left the bread to cool on the sill. Then she poured the canned cherries which had been mixed with sugar and flour into the pie pan, set on the top crust, trimmed the new pie and set it into the oven.

I helped Mother finish up the dinner preparations. When we were done setting the table, Mother spooned the coleslaw into my favorite bowl; Grandma's pink Depression glass bowl with the scalloped edges. I put the pickles in one of Grandma's cut glass relish dishes, sneaking a pickle when I knew Grandma and Mother weren't looking.

We set out the dish full of pickles beside a bowl of radishes and green onions recently gathered from Grandma's garden. There was a dish full of sweet, dark red strawberry preserves and a plate of fresh butter beside a platter of sliced bread still steaming from the oven. There was a bowl heaped high with vinegary coleslaw and a bowl full of feathery mashed potatoes, and in the center, the crispy, golden brown fried chicken on Grandma's best china platter.

As the old grandfather clock struck twelve, Grandma went out and rang the big dinner bell, signaling to the men that dinner would soon be ready. The men would walk up from the fields and wash their hands and faces with cold water from the outdoor pump, then dry themselves off with the stack of clean towels Grandma had left for them. The men laughed and joked, glad for some food and rest.

Soon they would come in and sit down for dinner in the cool dining room, hungry and grateful that they could always look forward to such a delicious meal when they came to work on Oscar and Ovedia's farm. Grandma would take the pie out of the oven, so it could cool on the window sill until dessert.

We all bowed our heads while Grandpa led us in saying grace. As I heard Grandpa's quiet, steady voice say "Thank you for this food, O Lord . . ." I peeked through my clasped hands at the dish of gleaming green pickles and added "Thank You especially for Grandma's pickles!" "Amen," Grandpa intoned.

When I looked around the table at the shining faces of the family, friends and neighbors who had come to help with the harvest, the genuine goodness of the people of the Solomon Valley was deeply ingrained in me. Even today, sixty-five years later, I am often guided and sustained by the rich values and the love shown to me during my visits to the Solomon Valley during the era of the Depression.