

The Hired Girl

By Mildred Mitchell

You won't like it," my mother said. I was 13, fresh out of the eighth grade, and ready to start my first job at the Johnsons', about 20 miles away.

For girls of my age in 1935, it was housework or nothing. Farmers who were a bit better off than the rest of us employed "hired girls" to help their wives with the housework.

I had great expectations. At \$3 a week, three summer vacations of 12 weeks added up to \$108. By the time I was old enough to buy a driver's license, I would be rich enough to purchase a car. With new Fords selling for around \$500, I figured I could get a good used car and have money leftover for the license. What dreams I had about the figure I would cut on our old dirt road!

"Better put all your money in the bank," advised Pa, "so you won't be tempted to spend it."

I hated housework, and I was scared to death of going to a strange place, but the thought of \$3 a week convinced me to go.

"Best neighbors I ever had," said Ma's brother Bill, who lived next-door to the Johnsons. "I'll keep an eye on her." I guess Ma didn't know her brother as well as she thought she did. If she had even suspected any of the things I learned that summer, she never would have let me go.

The Johnson farm sat well back from the dirt road in a clearing surrounded by woods. Deer came out just before dark and pastured in the fields. The only neighbor, my Uncle Bill, lived at the edge of the woods about a quarter mile away. The four Johnson kids ran back and forth between the two houses and appeared to be at home in either place.

On my first night there, Mr. Johnson loaded us all in his Ford car that he called "the Rattletrap" and sped across the field after the deer. Kids hung out the rolled-down windows and shouted and yelled.

The deer all disappeared into the woods.

One evening a few weeks later, that all changed. They were out of meat. Just he and I began going out a little after dusk, and he took his shotgun. When the headlights reflected a pair of green eyes, he stopped and shot the deer. He loaded it onto the fender and into the barn it went.



Mildred Mitchell in 1936.

"It's like this," explained Mr. Johnson. "We live on venison because we have to sell our own animals to pay our taxes or we could lose our farm." Sometimes we ate venison steak at midnight, and was it ever good!

"I'll teach you how to shoot and you can do the shooting while I drive," laughed Mr. Johnson. I had hunted rabbits with my brothers since we were all big enough to carry a shotgun, but I didn't tell him that.

"But I'm too young to buy a driver's license," I protested the first time Mr. Johnson told me to get behind the wheel.

"You're too young to buy a hunting license, too," laughed Mr. Johnson. "So I'll just issue you a Michigan license that covers it all. Now do you want to shoot or drive?"

I drove. As rough as the going was, it didn't matter that I could barely steer. All I had to learn was how to start and stop.

When I wrote home to my mother, I just said I was having a wonderful time—and I was. If summer had lasted a few more weeks, I probably would have become the biggest outlaw in Michigan.

I did help Mrs. Johnson a little bit. After we ate, I helped with the dishes and put the little ones to bed. I loved that part. Ilsa was about 9, Doug was a couple of years younger, and there were twin girls who were 2 years old and as cute as little girls can be. Blond and tiny, they reminded me of a pair of baby ducks, always trailing along behind wherever we older ones went.

Doug and I carried in stove wood. We filled the big wood box each afternoon and put a few armfuls of kindling behind the cookstove in the kitchen. It was spring and still cold enough to need a fire at night.

Ilsa seldom helped with these chores. "Ilsa's a blabbermouth," explained Mrs. Johnson. Sometimes Mr. Johnson hid a deer carcass under the wood until the kids went to bed and he could cut it up for us to can.

"Hide it," advised Mr. Johnson when he handed me my first week's pay. "Never put money in a bank or you'll never see it again." Lots of people didn't trust banks then. We were still trying to pull out of the Great Depression. I hid my money in the pocket of my Sunday dress.

We planted a big garden—vegetables of all kinds and a row of zinnias along the end closest to the house. But there was one corner of the garden where none of us ever worked. Mr. Johnson grew cabbage there and ordered us all to stay away from it.

The sheep got out one day and ate the tops off most of the carrots. Mr. Johnson chased them around the field. They didn't want to go back inside the fence. He got out the car, and with me driving, we overtook the sheep and he shot the leader. "We won't chase deer for a while," he told his wife. "We'll eat mutton."

I didn't like mutton, but I never said so. I don't think Mrs. Johnson liked mutton either. She said it smelled funny, but she cooked it and we all ate it.

Mrs. Johnson was just as kind and easygoing as Mr. Johnson was. He called me his "hired man" and teased his wife, "One of these days, Ma, I'll get you a hired girl." They always laughed, and one of them would ruffle my hair or pat my arm when

they said it.

On Sunday afternoons, Mrs. Johnson took a long walk in the woods with us kids while Mr. Johnson worked in his cabbage patch.

Summer ended all too soon, and I knew it was time to go home to start high school. The whole family was going along to take me home, and we planned to stop a while at a fair that was going on in the nearest town.

We had hardly gotten there when Uncle Bill came running up to the car. "We left about 10 minutes after you did and I saw your pigs out rooting in the cabbage patch."

Back into the car we went. We fairly flew over the rough dirt road back to the farm.

Mr. Johnson hit the ground running and hollering. The pigs paid him no attention. He dove in among them and came up with a glass fruit jar. Even though it was covered with dirt, I could see that it was stuffed with money—bills and change. He ran into the house with it. Nobody said anything about it.

I still had to go home that afternoon, but first we had to herd the pigs back into the pen and fix the fence. I did not get to stop at the fair, and only the twins went along on the trip.

I don't know if Mr. Johnson ever changed his mind about trusting banks or not, but I did. I put my whole hoard of \$36, all in \$1 bills, in a savings account the first time I went to town.

When we visited our relatives early that winter, we stopped at the Johnsons' and someone snapped this picture of me and the old green car.

I think my folks changed their minds about the family, for I didn't go back the next summer, much to my disappointment. ❖