CHAPTER 1
The Rising: Baking Bread and Beyond

The best way to begin is by telling how I made my first loaf of light bread.
Papa died when I was five years old. My little brother was three. Sister was
born three months after Papa died in 1895. Mama sewed for the neighbors
for our cash money. That left me to do the cookin’ for three children.
When I was seven, I got so I could make light bread. I made the yeast,
set the sponge, made the dough, baked off the bread. When I was done
I had the prettiest loaf of light bread you ever saw.

Lots of people have never heard of light bread. Homemade light bread is
kind of hard to explain. First of all, it’s kneaded bread. You start with yeast.
Then you make that yeast into a sponge of very thin dough. You work that
dough into your flour. Then you proof it and you punch it down once and let
it come back up again. On the second comeback you make it into a loaf and
let it rise in the pan. After that you bake it.

The length of time it takes that uncooked loaf to rise depends on the
temperature of your room. In winter, we would put it behind the kitchen
stove. Even with the aid of that warmth it might take half a day to rise.
Usually we started the dough first thing in the morning. We were ready
to bake it by nightfall.

I’ve sat up many a night until 11 or 11:30 so I could get the heel of the
loaf for my share. To me, that was my favorite part of the loaf.

I’ve smelled a lot of fancy smells since, many a
memorable aroma, but the smell of homemade light
bread while it’s being baked is still tops in my memory.
Mama would cut the heel off the loaf and butter it. When
I had nice buttered hot bread – well, that was living.

The year I baked my first light bread, Mama worked in Henryville for a
while. Henryville was about three miles from our farm. She went to work
there Mondays peeling tomatoes. She stayed with her brother in town while
we three kids waited for her back on the farm. She came back Saturdays
and spent the weekend with us.
One day while Mama was away I thought I’d try making light bread the way I’d seen her make it lots of times. When I was done baking it I thought it was beautiful. I’d never seen a loaf that Mama baked look any better.

I grabbed up that loaf and with my five-year-old brother and my little two-year-old sister, we trudged three miles across the fields to the highway to reach Henryville so I could show Mama my wonderful loaf of bread. My brother and I took turns carrying our sister piggyback. One of us would carry her part way while the other carried my loaf of fresh baked bread; then we’d switch and the other would carry the bread instead of our baby sister. It felt like she weighed a ton but somehow we made it.

When we reached the peelers’ line where all the women were sitting there peeling tomatoes, I got more kisses on account of my loaf of bread than any seven-year-old kid has ever gotten before or since.

I learned to make bread by watching Mama as she boiled potatoes. She’d take some of the potato water and mash up one of the potatoes in it real fine. That was her first step. Then she’d put some of the liquid she’d saved from her previous batch of light bread sponge (that was the yeast) into that.

When it got to working and bubbling so it looked alive, she’d work that into what she called “the sponge.” She always had a little liquid yeast left over from her previous batch. Nevertheless, she always boiled a fresh potato again every time she did it. That was her “starter.”

When she had her sponge, she’d work the sponge into the dough. Then she proofed the dough and punched it down and made it into loaves. After it rose the second time, she’d put that into the pan. After that, it was ready to bake. She did her baking in an old wood-burning stove. We called it a range.

In those days children did a lot of things youngsters don’t do anymore. Take thrashing, for example. When the boys were thrashing wheat, we carried 160-pound sacks from the thrashing machine to the stock pile with our teeth. When I tell people that today, I can see that they don’t believe me.
But it’s the truth. I guess it’s because I carried wheat like that, that I have such a strong neck right now.

But as I say, country boys dealt with a whole lot of things then that city boys never knew anything about. We had to cut the wood for our kitchen stove ourselves. About 40 acres of our farm was in a wooded lot, so we had plenty of wood to cut.

And even when she wasn’t away peeling tomatoes, she was away doing sewing. Only yesterday I passed the house where she did that.

The family she sewed for had eight or nine girls and each fall they all had to have four or five school dresses made. So Mama would sew over there for three or four weeks – sometimes more than a month. She also made boys’ suits by hand. I never owned a store-bought suit until I was 13 or 14. She used a foot-pedal sewing machine. That was the main way she made her money.

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Papa died when he was 29. I can hardly remember him. I recall only a couple of things. I’d hand up lathes to him when he was building our house there on the farm while he was getting the wall ready to plaster.

One day, Papa came home in the middle of the day and went to bed. Mama told us children to be quiet, that Papa wasn’t feeling well. For what seemed like a long time, Papa had a fever. The doctor came twice. Then one day the doctor took Mama into the kitchen and talked quietly. I got scared because Mama started to cry and I’d never seen her cry. We lost Papa that day.

I got my first job when I was ten years old. I was hired by Charlie Norris, a farmer. His place was about two miles cross country from where I lived. I was to be paid two dollars a month plus board.

Although I was only ten, I was a pretty big chunk of a boy. When I went to work, Charlie Norris put me in his wood lot clearing new ground for him with an axe and a saw. There were bluebirds and red squirrels and other things that attracted a boy’s interest and I didn’t clear as much ground as I ought to have cleared.
At the end of that first month Charlie Norris fired me. I went home, gave Mama my two dollars and I told her what had happened.

She really lit into me. I’ll never forget the lecture she gave me. She asked me what I was ever going to amount to. “Here you are, my oldest son,” she said. “Your father’s dead and you’re the only one I can look to for help with the other children. And you’re no account. You can’t even hold a job at two dollars a month.”

I didn’t cry. I just felt confounded, small and full of remorse that I had done such a thing and that I had disappointed her. Right then and there I made up my mind that if I ever got a job again, I’d put in enough hours and do enough work to give anybody who hired me satisfaction. Like I say, I was only 10, but Mama pounded it into my head. The only way, she said, I could get work and hang onto it was by giving the best there was in me. After that I never shirked a day in my life.

Next summer, I went to work for Henry Monk. He lived six or eight miles from us. Henry was a German farmer. I had never eaten cornbread at home but when I went to work for him he even had cornbread for breakfast. In addition to cornbread for breakfast we had cottage cheese with sour molasses.

When I was working for him he’d put a team with a plough ahead of me. I’d be the second team. There was another man behind me with a plough. Every time those men went around a field I went around with them. It was rough but I stayed on the job.
In the end, Henry Monk said I was the greatest hand he’d ever had.

The way I looked at it, I was redeeming myself with my mother. Henry Monk paid me four dollars a month. I worked for him all that year. We started plowing each morning as soon as we could see the sun coming up. When the sun went down behind the tops of the trees we unhitched our horses. We fed them, went up to the house, ate our supper, then came back down to the cow barn to milk. I milked 16 cows. It was 10 o’clock at night before we got our milking done. Afterward we strained the milk, put it away and washed out our milk buckets.

The next morning we’d get up at 4 o’clock, groom the horses, harness them, feed them and go back to the house and eat breakfast. Then we’d milk the cows again. When the horses were done feeding, we’d get them out into a field and we’d work until the sun went down. It made for a long day.

That summer I not only redeemed myself with my mother but in spite of the long hours I put in, I learned to love work. Once you get used to it, there’s great pleasure in it.

I’ve never believed in holding back or stinting on anything I’ve ever done and I’ve only had two rules: Do all you can, and do it the best you can. It’s the only way you ever get the feeling of accomplishing something.

Henry Monk had a wife and daughter. They did our cooking. There is a theory that people on farms eat better than people in towns. That is true. And people who live on farms just naturally eat more. We worked harder so we demanded more food. We ate family style. We all helped ourselves from the same bowls. I even got so I liked cottage cheese with sour molasses.

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When I was 12 years old, Mama married again. She married a man up in northern Indiana. He was a gardener. Winters I came home, lived with Mama and went to school. We had no school buses. I walked about two-and-a-half miles to school each way. If there was snow, I plodded through it.
I lived with Mama and my step-daddy for only a year. Stepfathers are not usually very kind to their new wife's children and this one didn't take to us either. So I went out again into the world myself and worked on a farm another year or two. I was just 13 when I did that.

I worked on Sam Wilson's farm. I lived with him and went to school, too, doing farm work for him before and after school. I milked the cows and fed the stock for my board. Milking and feeding the livestock went on all the time.

That year I was promoted to seventh grade. I went to school for two weeks, then I lost out in a wrestling match with algebra. Somebody had mixed the alphabet with figures. After that I never could figure out what that algebra teacher was talking about so I quit school. The only thing I learned about algebra was that X equals the unknown quantity. Even today, I don't know what that unknown quantity is.

I wouldn't advise anybody to drop out that young today because times have changed. Even if you work hard you can't always make it the way I did with no education at all. Recently there was a big Kentucky Fried Chicken promotion held in Gainesville, Florida. One of our franchisees was a graduate of the University of Florida. He wanted to get me in the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity, but they couldn't initiate me unless I was enrolled in a college. So they set up a special course for me. It was a three-day course in marketing. So while I was enrolled as a student there in Gainesville I got elected and initiated into the Pi Kappa Alpha. I guess I'm the only seventh-grade dropout in the country who ever belonged to a college fraternity.

After I dropped out of school, I painted carriages in Indianapolis at the Fairless Cart Works. Horse and buggies were still big business. Then, when I was 14, I left Indianapolis and went down to southern Indiana and worked on yet another farm there for a year. The following year I went to New Albany, Indiana, and got a job as a streetcar conductor. I had an uncle who'd been with the streetcar there for several years. He got me taken on. I was big and strong. I looked older than I was.

While I was on that job, a fellow got on my streetcar one night and asked me if I wanted to volunteer for the Army for a year and go to Cuba. He told me what the pay was and I thought it sounded pretty good, so I volunteered. I left in October.
I don’t think they asked my age. If they did, I lied about it. Anyhow, I was accepted. I wasn’t quite 16. I volunteered for a year in the quartermaster’s corps. The agreement was if the Cuba trouble was settled inside of a year I could get a discharge. So I was only in the Army from October 6 until the following February.

All my life, it has helped me that I’ve been strong and husky. When I went to Cuba I got on a ship at Newport News. When I got off in Havana, seven days later, I weighed a lot less. I’d been seasick 24 hours a day all that time. I’d never been sick a day in my life but I feel seasick today just thinking about those seven days. I’m surprised I didn’t die losing a lot of weight so suddenly. I’m told people have been known to die of seasickness. Right now I’d like to lose weight – although not that way!

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When I came back from Cuba the whole country was just like Teddy Roosevelt. We were all in a hurry to get some place. We all had new ideas. We figured they would lead us some place and we had very little time to lose.

If anything in those days had a future for a young man full of ambition, it was the country’s railroads. A railroad engineer was a hero to all young men. He was what the jet pilot is today, or maybe the astronaut.

Like a lot of others, I was looking for a place to settle and a job with a future. To me a railroad was all those things. When I came back home from the Army in 1907, I landed in Sheffield, Alabama. I went to work there in the shops of the Southern Railroad as a blacksmith’s helper. To me, a blacksmith’s shop was the most fascinating place in the world. I loved to work the bellows and make the sparks fly. Boys today miss a lot; too much, if you ask me.

The blacksmith I worked for believed in working cool iron. He never got his iron up to a white heat. Without the benefit of blistering temperatures, the metal never got soft and pliable. I just had to pound thunder out of it and let me tell you, it pretty near wore me out.

The other helpers in the shop said the owner could go to hell for making us all work cold iron. I don’t know why he insisted on it. There was no reason
for it. He was just mean, I guess. But, cool iron or hot, I stayed with him for two months.

When I left, I took a job in Jasper, Alabama, “doodling ashes.” That means cleaning the ash pans out of a locomotive after an engine had finished its run. I’d fill the sand box, clean out the ashes and fix everything all ready for the next day’s trip.

A fireman (the fellow who manages the output of steam on the locomotive) failed to show up for his run one morning. The engineer took me out on his run. I did such a good job firing that when we came back in he recommended me as a fireman. He wanted me on his run as a regular.

Since I wasn’t 17, Mama had to sign a minor’s release for me so I could work on that railroad. The railroad was called the Northern Alabama, a division of the Southern Railroad. I fired between Sheffield and Jasper, Alabama. That was an 86-mile run. Later the Northern Alabama got a franchise which let it run all the way into Birmingham.

I got to be a pretty fair fireman. I don’t want to boast, but I was better at it than any other fireman who ever fired that run. For one thing, I knew how to spread that coal out. I could look in the firebox and tell what kind of combustion was there by the purple, blue and green color of the gasses. When I put the coal in, I spread it just right so it would get full combustion as soon as it hit the fire. That way, I didn’t put in a lot of coal that would just lay there and smother the rest of it into ash.

Nights, I was taking a correspondence course on locomotive work at the International Correspondence School. The pictures in the book they sent me showed the color of gasses and the way a fire ought to look in a locomotive firebox. By doing the thing like it ought to be done, I found I didn’t have to do much work and when I got to the other end of the division I was never tired or dirty. It was a pleasure. I took pride in it. And I always wore white overalls and white gloves when I was firing an engine. I never even got my face dirty. That was pretty unusual – nobody else ever did it that way. Just me.

Eventually, I was made chairman of the Grievance Committee of our Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. We had one fellow the company had
laid off. All the company wanted was a fair day’s work done. If I had to do it today, maybe I wouldn’t do what I did then. But when they fired him and it violated the union’s rules, our Grievance Committee demanded they put him back to work. The company insisted they wouldn’t, but when we took our appeal right up to the Southern Railway’s general office in Washington, they gave him back his job and paid him a year’s back pay.

Before they did that, they pleaded with me not to push the case. “You’re the best fireman on the division,” they told me. “There’s nobody like you. You save more coal than any man we’ve ever had.” They weren’t threatening to do anything to me if I did push the case, but they kind of let me know they thought I was doing wrong.

Not long after that, I had an attack of acute indigestion while I was firing my engine. I was on a passenger run. Another fireman was dead-heading on the train to the other end of the division. He’d fired the same run many a time. I was awful sick and in terrible agony. I went back to the mail coach where there was a toilet, asking that other fireman to take my place on the engine until I got over my suffering.
When I came back to take charge of my engine, the train master saw me climbing over the coal tender from the mail car and asked the engineer where I’d been. He was told I’d been back in the coach and the off-duty fireman had been firing for me while I was sick.

They kicked me out for insubordination. According to the rule book, I should have notified them that I was sick and they would assign a substitute. But if I had wired the dispatcher, it would have tied the train up at the depot and we’d have lost time. The way it was, we lost no time; but that gave them the chance to get even with me, and they fired me on the spot.

It wasn’t a square deal. Nevertheless I was guilty of insubordination and I had always insisted on living by the rules. I went to work as a section hand on the same road with an “extra” gang. An extra gang does special track work like laying new ties. I got 70 cents a day and my board for that. I slept in a camp car on a sidetrack.

There was another reason I took that job. I’d gotten married and my wife was expecting. I’m 19 years older than my first child, Margaret, so that must mean I was about 18 years old when I was married. I met Josephine in Jasper, Alabama. I married the first and only girl I ever went with. She wasn’t going to school or teaching. She was just a home girl. Her daddy was a merchant in that town.

Anyhow, Josephine and I got married and when I was fired from that job as a fireman, I couldn’t leave home to look for a new job. Those 70 cents a day on the “extra” gang would just about pay my expenses and my young wife’s keep, too. It’s hard to imagine that in those days. If it was used right, 70 cents a day could run a house.

When baby Margaret arrived, I got a job with the Norfolk and Western Railway. A lot of coal was being shipped abroad from Roanoke and Norfolk and I had no trouble landing that job since the engineers I had worked with gave me good references.