



A Latsch Valley Farm Book

Winding Valley Farm

Annie's Story



Anne Pellowski



Winding Valley Farm:
Annie's Story

By Anne Pellowski



Illustrated by Roseanne Sharpe

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Also by Anne Pellowski

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*Dedicated to the memory of
my mother and my father*

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1. The Seeds Get Blessed

ON THE MORNING of April 25, 1908, in the kitchen of a farmhouse in Wisconsin, a little girl was watching her mother sort out seed packets. Her name was really Anna Pelagia, but because her mother was also an Anna, she was called Annie.

Over in another corner of the kitchen, Annie's older sister, Sally, was helping the three youngest boys get washed and dressed. Roman was five years old, Leo was four and August was two, but they looked so much alike, with their red curly hair, that sometimes Annie had to look twice before she was sure which was which. They were giving Sally lots of trouble that morning because they did not want to get washed behind the ears.

"Behave yourselves, boys," said Annie's mother in Polish. Sometimes she spoke in Polish and sometimes in English. Usually when she was scolding them she did it in Polish.

"Should I put on their flannel shirts, Mother, or the cotton ones?" asked Sally. The children always called their parents "Mother" and "Father" when they answered in Polish, but in English they called them "Ma" and "Pa."

"I guess you can use the cotton ones. The weather has turned so nice it's more like summer than spring."

The door burst open and Annie's two older brothers came in from doing their chores. Joe was fourteen, the oldest, and John was eight and a half, exactly two years older than Annie. Sometimes she wished John were a girl; then maybe they wouldn't argue so much.

"Wash up quickly, boys, and get dressed for church."

"Oh, Ma, do we have to?" complained Joe. "Can't we stay here and do some planting or something? It's not a Sunday."

"Not go to church on spring Rogation Day?" Ma's voice sounded shocked. "Whatever are you thinking of? You should know we would not do any planting without getting the seeds blessed."

Annie could see Ma gently shaking her head at Joe and John.

"Won't the seeds grow if they aren't blessed?" she asked.

"Of course they'll grow," answered Ma. "But we don't want anything to happen while they are growing. A blessing asks God to protect them. And we have to thank the good Lord that we have seeds to plant at all."

They heard the sound of feet scraping on the step outside the door.

"Have you got your seeds ready, John?" Ma directed the question to Pa as he came in the kitchen door.

At first Pa did not answer. Then he turned around slowly and spoke: "I was wondering whether it's worth the trouble."

Ma was speechless. Joe and John looked as though they couldn't believe, either, what Pa was saying.

"I don't mean the blessing," Pa added hastily. "I mean, is it worth planting at all?"

Ma still could not say a word.

"I've been thinking of what we talked about the other day," continued Pa. "Maybe we should give up the farm and move to town."

Annie gasped. "Give up the farm? Where would we live?"

"Hush, Annie!" Ma found her voice at last. "There's nothing to worry about." She glanced at Pa with a secret kind of look and then spoke quietly. "I thought we had settled that once and for all, John."

"Yes, I know," said Pa. "But I just got to thinking today about all the work for you, now that . . . well, you know, now that another's coming."

“Never mind,” said Ma quietly. “We’ll manage somehow. It’s too late now to start looking for town work. That would be too risky. Let me pack the seeds together and you get ready for church. We can talk more about it afterwards. Little pitchers have big ears.”

Annie knew that meant the children were listening to things Ma and Pa did not want them to hear. It was the first time she had heard them talking about leaving the farm. How could they leave? Who would take care of the cows and the pigs, the horses, the chickens and geese, the dogs and the cats? And what was that about somebody coming? Were they going to have company? She wanted to ask these questions aloud but she did not dare.

Pa directed the horses and buggy down to the main valley road. It was called Latsch Valley Road, but there were so many curves and twists that Annie always said to herself: “I think it should be called Winding Valley Road.” Around each bend was another farm, and in some of the farmyards she could see horse-drawn buggies and people ready to climb into them. Everyone in the valley went to church on Rogation Day.

During the long ride to Pine Creek Ma and Pa did not say much to each other. They pulled up to the church and Joe jumped down, ready to hitch the horses to one of the posts. Other families were coming from all directions, each carrying baskets or small sacks of seeds.

They filed into church and sat down in their pew. Sitting in the front rows were the fourth- and fifth-grade girls, wearing white dresses and holding baskets of leaves and pussy willows. Before long, the priest came out, preceded by the altar boys and two deacons. Everyone stood up, and the priest started to sing the Litany of the Saints, rolling the Latin phrases off his tongue as easily as if he were speaking English or Polish.

“*Sancta Maria,*” chanted Father Gara.

Down the steps marched two altar boys, and behind them came the girls in their white dresses, the deacons, more altar boys, and then Father Gara. Row by row, the people filed out of the pews and joined in the procession, answering the priest in the chant of the litany.

Annie could not understand any of it, but it sounded beautiful. Ma, Pa, and Sally followed the words in their prayer books that

had Latin on one side of the page and Polish on the opposite. They knew when to say "*Ora pro nobis,*" or "*Liberanos, Domine,*" or "*Te rogamus, audinos.*"

Around the outside of the church they went and up to the fields behind the Wnuks' house. There they stopped and Father Gara sprinkled holy water in all directions, while everyone held up their seeds. Then they marched back to the church, singing a hymn in Polish.

"I like this a lot better than just sitting in church," thought Annie. "I wish we could march around every Sunday."

Father Gara finished the Mass and everyone moved slowly out to the big space in front of the high stone steps. In winter, the families hurried quickly to their buggies and set off for their homes as fast as they could. But in nice weather, they stayed for a while and chatted or exchanged the news.

As her parents walked slowly down the steps, Annie could see, just ahead of them, the Pellowski family, who were their neighbors on the farm to the east. They had even more children in their family than Annie had in hers. There they all were, standing in a circle around their parents: Effie, Zenon, Emil, Damazy, Vic, Florian, Daniel and the baby, Julius, who had just learned to walk. Annie did not know exactly how old they all were, except for Vic. He was the same age as she was and they would be in first grade together in the fall.

Mr. Pellowski turned to Pa and Ma as they reached the bottom of the steps.

"Hello, John! Hello, Anna! How goes it? Stop a minute—Mary and I want to ask you something."

"Hello, Barney! Hello, Mary!" Ma and Pa exchanged greetings and then Barney continued.

"Say, we thought tomorrow would be a good day to celebrate Old Frank's birthday. He was eighty in January, you know, but the weather was so bad no one could get up to our place. Then, before we knew it, Lent was here and we had to put off the celebration."

Annie knew that Old Frank was Barney's father. He was the oldest person in the valley and he had come from Poland a long time ago to homestead on the first farm there.

"Why sure, we'll be glad to come, won't we?" answered Pa, and he turned to Ma; she nodded her head in agreement.

“My sister Anna will be coming from Winona with her children, and so will Anton and his family. Jake and Young Frank and the others from around here will probably all show up. Hey, there’s Pauline. I want to catch her before she leaves,” said Barney as he moved off with Pa toward a tall, dark-haired lady.

“Isn’t that Mrs. Jereczek, Ma?” asked Annie.

“Yes, but she’s Barney’s sister and one of Old Frank’s daughters, too,” answered Ma.

Annie looked at Mrs. Jereczek, who was holding a small boy in her arms. There were eight other children standing close to her.

“Those are my cousins,” said Vic. “I have more than forty first cousins,” he bragged.

Annie sighed. Vic was lucky. She had only five first cousins and two of them were babies, too young to play with.

Ma chatted with Mary and several other ladies and then Pa came up to her again.

“Time to get going,” he said. “If we’re going to plant, then I want to get as much done today as I can. Come Joe, John,” he called to the boys, who were standing off to one side of the church, laughing and talking with their friends.

They climbed up to the buggy seats, Pa clicked to the horses, and off they went. The April air was as soft and mild as a June morning. On both sides they passed field after field of freshly plowed soil. The earthy smell, the bright sunshine, the party invitation for the next day—everything combined to make them feel good.

“I wish we could go on riding like this forever,” thought Annie. But all too soon, they were at the edge of the small town of Dodge, where Ma and Pa bought groceries and sold their cream.

“I’m going to buy a pony of beer,” said Pa as he pulled the horses to a stop in front of the tavern. “I told Barney I’d bring some tomorrow.”

“All right, but don’t linger to have any now,” said Ma.

Annie watched as Pa pushed through the swinging doors. She stood up on the back buggy seat and craned her neck, trying to see what was going on inside the tavern.

“Watch out,” warned Sally. “You’ll fall off if the horses jerk a little bit.”