In 1938 professional photographer Don Ultang captured on film the ritual of an Iowa farm family moving on March 1. His image reminds us that this tradition, like so many practiced in rural communities, generally involved neighbors helping neighbors.

Moving On in 1917

by Hazel Phillips Stimson

March 1st, 1917, arrived cloudy with an east wind and twenty above zero. Papa arose about five o’clock and built the fires before he called us, but none of us lingered that morning, we were so excited. Mama nursed the baby while we set breakfast on, big bowls of oatmeal, slices of homemade bread with butter, and lots of milk. I was twelve and Junior was eleven, so we could help with the moving, but Papa took the girls (Edna, nine; Blanche, six; Nona, three) and six-month-old Donald to stay with a neighbor.

Lizzie. Edna wanted to help move but she had to help Lizzie with Baby.

Papa shook out the grates and emptied the coals outdoors, allowing the stoves to cool. Mama and I folded the bedding and nightclothes and packed them into dresser.
Moving on in 1917

The end of the First World War brought about the beginning of a new era. People were tired of the fighting and the destruction that had taken place. They wanted peace and a better life for themselves and their families. The war was over, but the world was different. The old order had been broken and a new one was being created. People had learned that war was not the answer to their problems. They wanted a better way of life. The war had been a terrible experience, but it had also shown the world that people could work together to solve their problems. The war had been a test, but it had also been a test that people had passed. The world was a better place because of the war, and the people who had fought in it had shown the world that they were capable of great things.
drawers and big boxes, while Papa knocked down the beds and removed the mirrors from the dressers.

Having already packed everything possible, yesterday Mama had made a big baking of bread, a cake, two pies, and many cookies. Now she fixed egg sandwiches and filled a peach basket with baked beans, the sandwiches, and baked goods. She set the big coffee pot on top.

Neighbors’ wagons backed up to the front door to take on their loads. Glen was first and the stoves were loaded. The men emptied the reservoir into dishpans, so now Mama did the breakfast dishes and packed them into the round washtub with many towels and washrags. She washed the pantry shelves and cleaned the floor where the stove and cabinet had stood. She kept back a broom and hurried upstairs to sweep and dust the floors, finishing on the narrow stairway. Mama made sure that the boxes containing the good dishes, glassware, and the mirrors went with a careful driver, and she helped him pack quilts and pillows around them.

She swept the front and back porches and each empty room, checking each to be sure it was empty.

Crates had been borrowed from the Produce house, and neighbors caught, crated the two hundred hens, and loaded them and the six brood sows into wagons. Milo, Lizzie’s husband, with his two boys and Junior, was driving the cattle along the road.

Everything was carried up from the cellar, and the potatoes and canned stuff were packed in our 1916 Overland Touring car. Mama and I went with the first carload and we passed the cattle and wagons on the road. I was excited over the big house, but I’m afraid Mama looked at the big windows and open doors with misgivings. Glen was firing up the kitchen range, which soon took some of the chill off the room, but Papa had to go to town and purchase another length of stovepipe for the living room stove. He also bought several sacks of coal to tide us over.

Mama made a pot of coffee, put the beans on to warm, and set out the baked goods on the short counter. We emptied several boxes onto the pantry shelves and filled the reservoir from the pump just outside the door. One of the wagons with bedroom furniture arrived and Mama flew upstairs to help the men set up the beds and dressers.

There was a big sink with a hand pump for soft water, so Mama hung up a roller towel and set a basin in the sink so the men could wash up. About one o’clock, the table and chairs arrived and the men came in to lunch amid much joshing and horseplay. Soon some of the wagons were rattling off toward home just as the cattle arrived. More mouths to feed but first the boys must race up and down stairs, trying every door. Had they just walked ten miles? They wolfed down the last of the sandwiches and scattered to watch Papa bed the stalls and pens and help with the poultry and sows as they were unloaded.

The last wagon arrived but alas, the tub of dishes had fallen off the wagon, and we found every dish was broken, as Mama sorted through the welter of towels and broken crockery. She didn’t say much in front of the men, but was I glad I didn’t do it! Papa then had to take Milo and his boys home and pick up the rest of our family as Mama and I hastened into the cold upstairs to make up the beds. Junior would have a single bed in a room by himself, but we had to have two double beds in the west room for us girls, and Baby’s bed was in the east room with Papa and Mama’s.

Back downstairs, we warmed ourselves and Mama found us some cookies. She sat for a few moments and stared at the mess around her. Sighing, she noted, “That washing machine should have been left on the porch and most of these boxes should have been carried down cellar. Papa and I’ll do it after supper.” Mama was uncomfortable, her breasts painfully full, as she waited for the baby to come [home from the neighbors].

“Gee, Mom, the new barn is super. It’s warm and the hay falls down right in front of the cow mangers,” said Junior, still excited. Mama found a cheesecloth and strained the milk into a flat crock and set it to cool on the pantry shelf. Papa arrived with a lustily crying baby. “Here is your mama. Did you think you had lost her?”

Baby clasped his mother and started to nurse hungrily. Mama smiled at her excited little girls and sent me to show them the house. Supper was simple: bean soup, bread and butter, cookies and milk. We were so tired we all dropped into bed, but Mama somehow managed to find time to hear our prayers and to tuck each of us in. 

Iowa Heritage Illustrated