

A Favorite Christmas Memory

By Jane Kirkpatrick, author of *The Daughter's Walk*

The book was *Caddie Woodlawn* a popular children's novel by Carol Ryrie Brink which won the John Newbery Medal in 1936 and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1958. I was ten years old the Christmas I received that book about a tom boy in the wilds of Wisconsin, my home state. I wasn't much of a tom boy --that was my older sister -- but I loved books and this was a treasured gift I devoured during the school Christmas break.

I remember that year I was also feeling pretty lost and lonely. A private child, I was prone to melancholy and books were my bridge to happier states. My parents took pity on my loneliness and my mother suggested we try to find "Caddie Woodlawn's house." The story was supposedly set not far from our Western Wisconsin farm and while my dad wasn't all that excited, he agreed to make the trek. I couldn't believe my good fortune!

Perhaps I remember this journey because it was one of the few memories I have of being alone with both of my parents, without my older sister and my younger brother along with us. I think my sister must have been commissioned to take care of my little brother while we were off on our literary trek.

In those days, the county placed wooden fences along the roads hoping to keep snow from closing them off. That winter, the drifts overwhelmed the fences so I remember looking at banks of snow on either side of the road and sometimes in the middle as we drove through whipped cream spewing white into the air. I thought it a grand adventure as my mom, who had apparently done a little research about where Caddie's story was set, directed my dad to an area about 40 miles from our farm.

I loved listening to my parents' chatter as they drove and occasionally I offered a tidbit from the book. Mostly I felt warm and wonderful sitting alone in the back seat of the Dodge sedan, eavesdropping on other conversations, something that as a writer I find I still love to do.

Then my mom said, "Oh, I think we passed it!" We'd met no cars on the road so my dad attempted to turn around in the roadway. He was not happy, especially when the car got stuck.

We got out. He removed the shovel always carried and enabled the vehicle to pull itself back onto the road. A bit of anxiety rose its head as I imagined all that could go wrong, something else I was pretty good at doing. But in no time, we headed back toward the supposed house of Caddie Woodlawn.

"Nope," my mom said as we stopped beside a rural mailbox. "I don't think that is it." She looked at her map and her notes. My dad turned around again, this time without a problem. A few miles

farther she pointed out another house that we also passed. My dad backed up. She decided no, it wasn't and again, we headed on.

"I think that's it!" My mom said at last.

I peered up over the back seat to look out the front window. We were stopped at the end of a long driveway of snow. The two-story frame house was weathered and no smoke came from the chimney. It didn't look like the house of my imagination but apparently it looked like the one inside my mom's.

I rolled my window down. All was still, no dogs barked warning nor welcome. "Will we drive in there?" My voice was tentative as the late afternoon shadows cast their light on snow that hadn't been broken by even a deer trail.

"We could," my mom said.

"No," my father said.

"Well, it's probably not her house anyway," my mom said. "Let's keep going."

"That's her house," my dad announced. "Take a good look. We're heading home. I've got cows to milk."

He turned around one more time and we headed back toward our farm. I looked out the back window of the old Dodge. The house is still a vivid image in my mind. Perhaps that's why when I read a book based on facts, I find myself making treks to the site of that story. Readers tell me they do the same with my books based on the lives of real men and women. But I suspect a greater reason for the memory of Caddie Woodlawn's driveway and that lonesome-looking weathered house is that it frames a day when my parents gave up their afternoon of quiet comfort to comfort me.