

# Rise and Shine

A short story about farming in Washington State in 1930

*by Susan Frederick*

In 1930, twelve- and fourteen-year-old sisters Hope and Faith Renninger lived on their family's farm in the foothills of Mt. Rainier. The farm was just down the road from the little town of West Fork, Washington, population 300. The majestic 14,000-foot mountain, looming up behind their farm house, seemed more like a set on a stage than a real mountain. They lived in the house built by their grandfather, made of logs harvested from nearby forests. A wide porch spread across the front, and Faith and Hope shared the bedroom above the kitchen. Out their bedroom window, they could see the fields of wheat, corn, and alfalfa, spread out like a beautiful patchwork quilt created using every shade of green and gold.

*Bolinger farm, circa 1930*



*Photo used by permission of the Bolinger family*

This early winter morning, Faith had been awake for almost an hour, studying for a test in her freshman science class, grateful that the light from the kerosene lantern didn't seem to disturb her sister's sleep. She glanced out the window, using the lightening sky to guess the time. Through the frost on the inside of the window, she could see just the faint glimmer of stars surrendering to the light, and she knew Papa would soon be calling to wake them. Facts crammed into her head, she stacked her books, closed her notebook, and slid them all into the canvas bag on the floor next to her bed.

"Rise and shine, girls," Papa called from the kitchen below. "The cows won't stand around waiting for you to take your sweet time." Winter, spring, and fall, Pa called up to them as he pulled on his heavy canvas coat, heading out the door to the barn. Faith knew his voice sounded harsher than he meant it to, but it was a reminder of what must be done each day.

Almost immediately, Hope tumbled out of bed and knelt, her hands clasped together.

"Thank you, Jesus, for this beautiful day."

"For pity's sake, Hope. Can't you talk to Jesus while you're milking?" Faith asked. But the minute the words were out of her mouth, she knew how she sounded. Impatient. Unkind. "I'm sorry, sis. Really."

"It's fine," Hope said, smiling as she stood up. "You're right. I can pray anywhere." Hope's sweet nature made Faith feel like a horrible older sister. She moved quickly to the hook that held her barn clothes and pulled on a pair of scratchy wool long johns, a warm shirt, and then a pair of heavy coveralls. Papa was right; the cows wouldn't wait. Her stomach growled as the smell of sizzling bacon wafted up the stairs from the kitchen. That bacon might not see her stomach for an hour, depending on how willing the cows were to be milked quickly.

The sisters headed down the narrow back staircase. Faith knew that Hope was as hungry as she was, but the cows came before breakfast, so they headed out the kitchen door and across the side yard to the barn. The fields were tinged with winter frost and the land was quiet, except for a low whistle from the north wind blowing across the farm. They hunched their shoulders, leaned forward,

and headed into it. At the door to the barn, Papa slid the rough piece of wood to the left, the door swung open, and Faith and Hope followed him into the still-dark barn. The heat from the animals kept the inside of the barn warmer than the outside, but it was still cold.

“How you doin’, girls?” Hope’s voice was soft and gentle as she walked into the shadows toward Bessie, her favorite milker. Hope believed that cows gave more milk when you sweet-talked them, so she kept crooning, “You doin’ okay today? You wanna be milked, do you?”

Faith walked quickly to Darla, pulled a stool over, and sat down, resting her forehead against the cow’s silky hide. Breathing in the musky smell as the warm milk hissed into the bucket in staccato streams, she wondered if their father ever wished she and Hope were boys. He hadn’t said it exactly, but there were times when he seemed frustrated that they were girls. So she tried extra hard to do everything that a son would have done, only maybe even better. She knew Hope did, too. Then she thought about the baby brother she hardly remembered.

When she was four and Hope was two, their mother gave birth to a boy they named Joshua William. He was in perfect health, but before his first birthday, he contracted influenza. He died soon after. It was a pandemic that spread across America and the world, eventually taking the lives of millions of people worldwide. By some miracle, though, Faith and Hope, two strong, healthy little girls, survived. Under the apple tree behind the house was a small white cross. Mama had written on it, in her neatest penmanship, “Joshua William Renninger, January 4, 1919-September 25, 1919.” There was always a bouquet on the little grave. In the summer, it might be daisies or sun flowers. In the winter, it was blue hydrangeas that Mama had dried by hanging them upside down in the root cellar.

After the milking was done, they carried their buckets to the cool, dark milk house, then walked quickly back to the house. Mama had set out plates of buckwheat pancakes, scrambled eggs, and crisp bacon on the scrubbed wooden table in the big kitchen. Before she sat down at her place across from Faith, Hope poured coffee for their parents from the blue-speckled coffee pot that was always on the back of the stove. Then she took a cup from the cupboard and put it by Faith’s plate.

“I know you were up early studying,” she said, smiling as she poured the cup

half full.

“Thanks, Hope,” Faith said, grateful for this small kindness.

“You’re too young for coffee,” Papa said. His voice sounded gruff, but he was smiling.

“I know, Papa, but I need it to stay awake for a science test today,” Faith answered, taking a quick sip. She took a bite of her eggs, then realized that Hope’s hands were folded together in front of her, her head bowed. Quickly, Faith put down her fork, clasped her hands together, and closed her eyes, still chewing.

“Thank you, Jesus, for this meal and for our family.” Hope’s voice was almost a whisper.

“Amen,” Faith said, feeling bad that she’d been too hungry to even remember grace. “And thanks for breakfast, Mama. It’s delicious, as always.” Her mother smiled and nodded her appreciation.

These were hard times. A year earlier, in 1929, the Great Depression had begun, affecting all aspects of the American economy. But even before that, Papa hadn’t been able to afford to pay a hired man to help him with the farm work, so when they were very young, he began teaching his daughters how to do things they would have learned if they were boys. By the time they were six and eight, they could milk the cows, slop the hogs, muck out the barn and the hen house, and gather eggs. In the fall, when it was time for haying, they could even drive the Farmall. To reach the gas, they put their feet on wooden blocks that Papa had strapped to the pedals.

They also helped with all the inside work. They helped wash clothes, can the fruits and vegetables that grew in the garden, and chop kindling for the wood stove. Dust and dirt were a constant reality of life on the farm, so washing clothes and cleaning the house and the outhouse had to be done every week.

Saturday was a busy day. After milking was done, the girls helped Mama wash clothes. Indoor plumbing hadn’t yet come to the farms in West Fork, so they carried buckets from the barn and drew water from the well behind the house, then heated it in big tubs on the wood stove in the kitchen. Mama added soap flakes to the first tub, and each piece of clothing was scrubbed on a wash board, then washed again in the second tub, and rinsed in the third tub. If the clothes were white, a blue powder that Mama called ‘bluing’ was added to the last tub.

Faith couldn't figure out how blue powder could make white clothes whiter, but somehow, it did.

While the clothes dried on the clothesline outside, the girls helped their mother clean the house, and also the outhouse out back. Cleaning the outhouse was their least favorite chore, so Faith and Hope took turns each week.

"I hate this job," Faith muttered when it was her turn, hoisting the steaming kettle of water off the hot surface of the wood stove. She was strong, but the kettle was still heavy and awkward.

"I know you do," Mama said, "but it has to be done. You wouldn't want to use a dirty outhouse, would you?"

"No, I guess not," she said, taking a bar of lye soap from a shelf by the door. She staggered outside with the heavy bucket, trying not to spill any of the precious hot water. She had to admit that Mama was right. It was much nicer using a clean smelling outhouse than a stinky one, but she still didn't like cleaning it.

Propping the door open, she set the bucket on the floor of the small space, sloshed the rag around in the hot, soapy water, and began scrubbing the walls. Once that was done, she quickly scrubbed the smooth wooden seat. It had two holes, one at each end. Before she knew it, her most-hated chore was done. She threw the dirty water into one of the holes, walked outside, and left the door open to let the air freshen the small space.

After supper, Faith and Hope washed and dried the dishes and swept the kitchen floor while their mother sat by the hearth darning socks. She would push a smooth oval piece of wood she called a darning egg into the toe, then weave the wool thread back and forth across the hole. After she was finished, you couldn't even tell there'd been a hole.

"Good as new!" Mama would say after finishing each sock, folding it neatly and adding it to the pile on the warm hearth next to her. When the kitchen was clean, the girls trudged up the stairs to their bedroom to get their books, because they still had homework to do.

"I'm so tired," Faith said, looking longingly at her bed. Her pillow seemed to be calling to her.

"Me too," Hope answered. "But we have to do it. Just think, maybe it will mean we can go to college some day!"

“I know, you’re right,” Faith said, hoping that her sister was right. They gathered their books and headed back downstairs where they could study in the warm kitchen.

Faith and Hope were grateful that Mama and Papa wanted them to stay in school. They had friends whose parents had made them quit school after the eighth grade so they could stay home and help on the farm. Those kids didn’t complain: they said that at least they didn’t have to do homework. But Faith and Hope were thankful that their parents wanted more for them, even if it meant more work.

As they spread their books and papers out on the table, Papa came in and sat down. They put their pencils down, wondering what he was going to say.

“I know we ask a lot of you girls,” he said, smiling at each of them. “And I’m sorry that after going to school and helping Mama and me all day, you still have homework to do. I think you know that we want you to stay in school, so we’ve been talking about getting a farmhand to help out in the fall so you can concentrate on your studies.”

“We don’t mind helping, Papa,” Hope said.

“No, we sure don’t,” said Faith. Then, taking a breath, she went on. “I’ve been thinking that after high school, I’d like to go to junior college, to study to be a teacher.” She looked at her father, wondering what his reaction would be.

“Your Mama and I would be very proud to have college-educated daughters,” he said. “I enjoyed school, and especially science, like you do, Faith. Of course, I had to quit after eighth grade to help my Pa on this farm. And I love the farm, but . . .” Then he stopped. “You girls go on and finish your homework so you can get to bed.”

After their homework was finished, they headed upstairs. As Hope pulled her long flannel nightgown over her head, she said, “Aren’t we lucky to be girls?”

“What makes you say that?” Faith asked, yawning as she crawled into bed. Right at that moment, she didn’t feel especially lucky to be a girl. Doing the laundry, helping with the barn chores, and especially cleaning the outhouse, didn’t make her feel very lucky.

“Well,” Hope said, punching her pillow to make it fluffier, “if we were boys, maybe Papa wouldn’t be planning to hire a farmhand. Maybe he would expect us

to stay on the farm like he had to do, and not go to high school or college.”

“Maybe,” Faith said, snuggling under her warm quilt. “But honestly, I think Papa would want the same thing for boys. He would want them to have choices too, just like us.”

Hope thought about that for a minute. “I think you’re right. See, Faith? We are lucky.”

“Yes, we are,” Faith agreed, and she drifted off to sleep.

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## Glossary

**The influenza pandemic of 1918-19**, also called Spanish influenza or Spanish flu, was the most severe influenza outbreak of the 20th century. Total deaths were estimated as high as 100 million. [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/12/1/05-0979\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/12/1/05-0979_article).

**Farmall** was a general-purpose tractor. During the decades of Farmall production (1920s to 1970s), most Farmalls were built for row-crop work, but many orchard, fairway, and other variants were also built.

**Buckwheat pancakes** are made from buckwheat flour, which produces wonderfully, unexpectedly fluffy pancakes with a rich, warm, earthy taste.

**The Great Depression** lasted from 1929 to 1939 and was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a panic and wiped out millions of investors. <http://www.history.com/topics/great-depression>.

**Bluing** is made of a very fine blue iron powder suspended in water (a "colloidal suspension"). Bluing was used by everyone who wanted to have a white wash, and could be found in virtually all laundries. When washing was done by hand or in wringer washers, the second rinse tub was always the bluing rinse.

**Outhouse** An outbuilding, with one or more seats over a pit, serving as a toilet or privy. Common on farms without indoor plumbing.

**Darning egg** is an egg-shaped tool, made of stone, porcelain, wood, or other hard material. It is inserted into the toe or heel of the sock to hold it in the proper shape and provide a firm foundation for repairs.