

An inspiring chronicle of self-reliance against odds

★ ONE ★ AMERICAN FAMILY

BY JESSE STUART



With the family Bible
Jesse's mother settles
an argument between
father and son. (Paint-
ing by Frederic Mizien.)

In this cabin at W-Hollow, Kentucky, Jesse Stuart, distinguished American author, was born in 1907. To the right is Mr. Stuart as he looks today.



FROM the time I can remember my mother I knew that she was different to any of our neighbor women. There wasn't another woman in our neighborhood who could do as much work and as many different kinds of work. Maybe it was because she was such a strong woman. I've heard many a man say to my father, "Mick, if I had a wife that would work like your wife, I'd be a rich man." I know now the neighbor men didn't know what they were talking about. If they had had wives like Mom, they would have been keeping somebody in addition to their big families all the time.

Before my oldest sister was born, Aunt Belle died and left one son, Ben. Her husband had left her long before she died when Ben was wearing knee-pants. Ben Stuart was a member of our family long before I was born. I remember Ben from the time I can remember anything, how he used to try to keep a row of corn up with Mom on a steep mountain slope. But Ben couldn't do it, neither could my father.

But there was another family, whose mother and father were stricken and died suddenly, leaving fourteen children. My mother took one of the girls, Ina Deer. "Wish I could take more of the children," Mom said. But Mom had two children of her own now and two she had taken to raise and there were only three rooms in our small shack.

Though Ina was very small, she could cook fairly well. Mom left her at the shack with my sister Sophia, while she went to the corn field with Ben and Pa. Mom walked to the field for she was afraid to ride since she was pregnant. Pa rode the mule; I rode behind him. Ben walked along beside Mom and accepted her as his only mother. Mom took a quilt to the corn field and spread it on the ground and put me on it while they worked.

Mom carried pumpkin seeds in her apron pocket and planted them around rotted stumps through the corn field. Though Pa never liked to have beans planted in his corn fields to choke his corn, Mom had our corn fields stuck full of all varieties of beans. They were a staple food with us. We always had plenty of beans—soup beans, shuck beans, and leather-britches. And when Mom hoed her crooked corn row around the steep mountain slope, with bean leaves sticking to her dress, she left a trail of smoke behind her from her long-stemmed stone pipe.

That summer Mom told me she was going to buy me a baby brother from the doctor. But when my brother was born, there wasn't any doctor. Now Mom and Pa had a family of

five in our small shack. That winter Mom knitted socks, spun wool on her spinning wheel before the big fireplace. She made most of the clothes that we wore then. She ran the house and milked the cows.

Three years later Pa had to rush from the corn field with Mom. I asked Ben why she had to leave the corn field but he wouldn't tell me. When I got to the house another sister was born.

My mother had remedies for everything. She had to have them, for we couldn't always get a doctor. And I remember the nights when a neighbor would come after Mom. She would get out of bed, dress, and hurry off into the night. The next day she would tell us of somebody "buying" a new baby. When anybody was sick, the night was never too full of rain, darkness, or snow, the nights never too cold for Mom to go. I've known her to be away from home two weeks at the time. But there was one life she couldn't save: Herbert Lee died of fever.

Not only could she handle a hoe in the corn field, or use a mattock, an ax, or cross-cut saw like a man; she could use a sewing machine and a pair of scissors as well. She worked far into the night making dresses for the young girls in our neighborhood.

When Ben Stuart married Ina Deer, Mom said it wouldn't work. She said that they had grown up together and should

feel more like brother and sister. When they went away to live in another little shack in the hollow, Mom gave them a cow, chickens, and a feather bed. When their first son, James, was born, Mom was there.

When Grandma died, Grandpa came to live with us. Since Ben had lived fifteen years with us and Ina Deer had lived six years with us, the shack was lonely without them. Then it was hard for Mom to bear the house we lived in since Herbert Lee had died there. So we rented another farm and moved away. When we moved, Mom dug up her flower shrubs and apple and peach tree sprouts and we took them with us, hoping some day we would have land of our own to set them in.

Our new place was a wilderness. Mom helped us clear land to farm that spring. We worked from daylight until dark. But all our work was in vain. We had left the steep hills to farm narrow strips of bottom where the crawdads ate our corn—and corn the crawdads didn't eat turned yellow in the swamp grass. We didn't have our beans, corn and potatoes. And without corn to feed our hogs, we wouldn't have plenty of pork and lard. A terrible winter was ahead of us—and food was scarce. But when Rile Johnson came to stay with us and go to school, Mom said it was all right for him just to make his home with us.

Soon two more were to come to our house. Ben had run away to join the army, leaving Ina with James. That was the last we ever saw of Ben. The next we heard of him was:

"Benjamin Harrison Stuart was killed in action in France."
"I'll never raise a child that was dearer to me than Ben," Mom said, weeping as if her heart would break. And it was still sadder when James Stuart, Ben's son, died. Ina left us again to go to her own people. [Continued on Page 35]

HOUSEHOLD

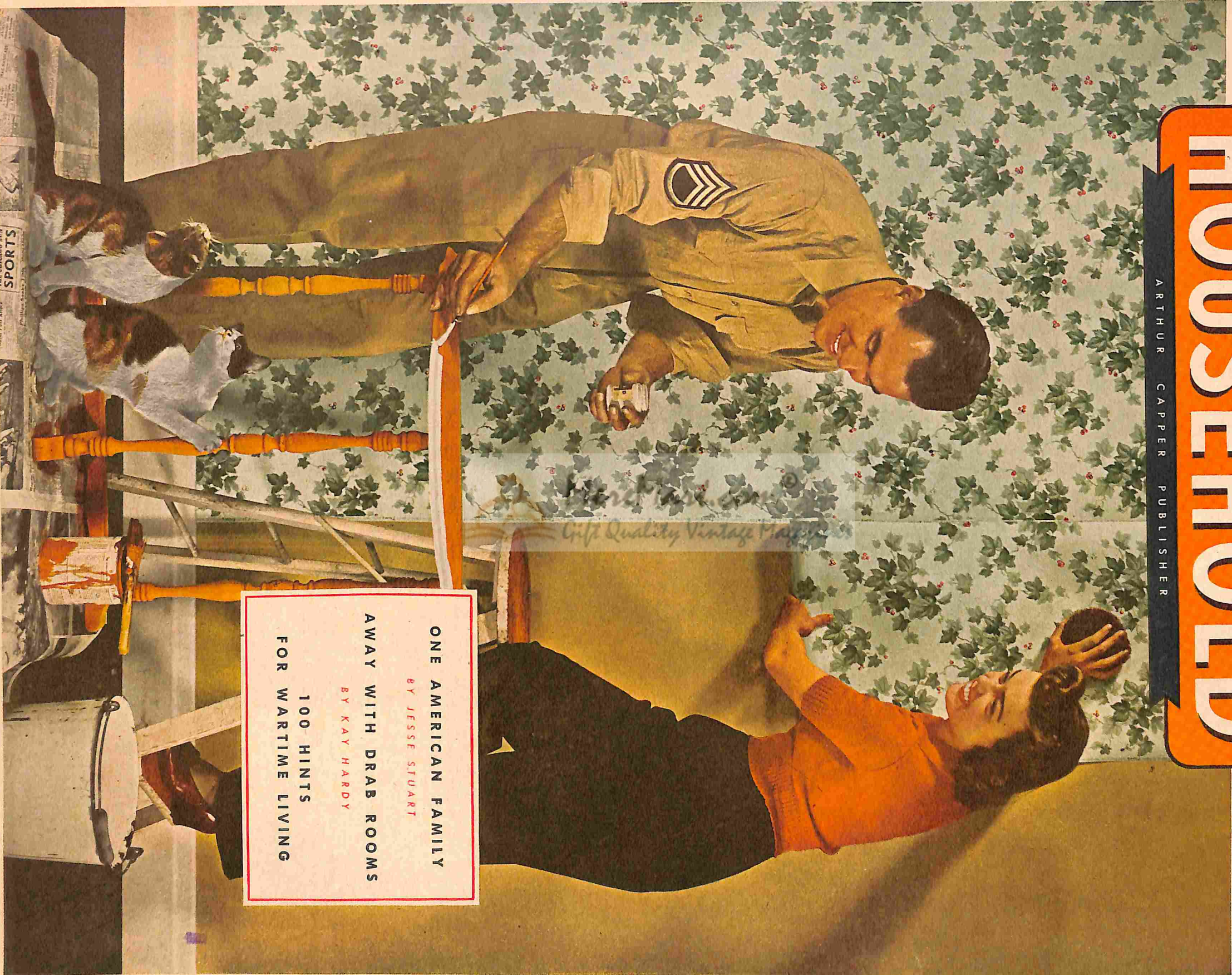
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ONE AMERICAN FAMILY
 BY JESSE STUART
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