

Annie Slocum
by Marilyn Reeves

Driving east along some old back roads, past farmland just beginning to show a hint of green, and pastures still being plowed – the dark loam giving off the rich, earthy scent of Spring – I approached what appeared to be an old, forgotten cemetery enclosed by a fallen down board fence. Since I was getting sleepy I decided to stop and rest for awhile, then perhaps go take a closer look at the old headstones to see if any names and dates were still visible.

So I dozed for awhile, then got out and cautiously walked through the tall grass toward an old crumbling marker. I could barely make out the first part of a name: Ann S-I-o ... then a blur, and underneath, a date: 1840 to 18-something. Too bad I couldn't read the rest. It would have been interesting to learn how long she had lived.

"Mind you don't step on that there snake, lady!" said a voice directly behind me. Startled half out of my wits, I jerked around and shrieked, "Snake? What snake?"

"Over to your right, about a yard from your foot. Just a little one, you probably didn't even hear it rattle."

"Oh my goodness!" I cried, making an ungainly leap to the left. Then I turned to see a middle aged woman wearing a long, tattered calico dress and an old fashioned bonnet.

"Them little ones is sneaky," she said. "And they're still poison, but not near as bad as them big ones. How I hated them big ones! One of 'em got my Jeremy, when he warn't no more than a tyke. Right off he went into convulsions and then died later that night. T'were the year eighteen hunnert and sixty-six. Never got over it."

Perhaps it was the heat from the sun, or just my general state of drowsiness, but I felt disoriented. The whole scene seemed surreal.

Then she offered, "I'm Annie Slocum. That there is my headstone. I died from childbirth at the age of 46, if you want to know.

"My husband Herb and I homesteaded a little farm down by that creek over yonder. See that rocky outcropping? Our house sat at the edge of the creek right by them rocks. Herb built us a one-room sod house to begin with, but when the kids kept comin' and comin' he eventually got help putting up a board house with an upstairs and a downstairs. Six rooms in all. It's all gone now, 'course. The wind and the weather tore it down over time and blew it all to kingdom come.

"So you were a farmer's wife?"

"Yes'm. And a harder job ye can't imagine. Cookin' and scrubbin' and sloppin' the hogs. Had to be careful around them hogs! Always kids and babies underfoot when you was trying to put food on the table, squabblin' and squallin', least till they was growed enough to help out in the truck garden, or fetch eggs from the chicken coop.

"I got so tired of being pregnant, that I finally told Herb, no more! He was a handsome man with dark curly hair and I loved him, but I told him the next one would kill me, so if he needed to make a trip to town onest in awhile I wouldn't ask him no questions.

"But then there came a night with a full moon and he looked so doggon good to me, and both of us so lonely, that we took a chance, and that there's what killed me, as I knew it would. The baby was stillborn, and they buried the poor little thing – it would've been a girl – right in that old grave alongside me.

“I suppose Herb musta remarried, 'course I'll never know for sure, but men usually went through two or three wives before they was done killing 'em with all them babies. I believe that's his resting place over there.

“I had a hard life but a good one, none-the-less. Kinda nice of you to come by and wake me up so's I could come out and take a look around. Appears things have changed a bit since I drew my last breath, but I don't really care to know about that. I think I'll go back and lie down now, and you best be on your way. Thanks for stoppin' by.”

And then she was gone and I just stood there transfixed, wondering if I had been dreaming, and watched the snake slither away in the grass.