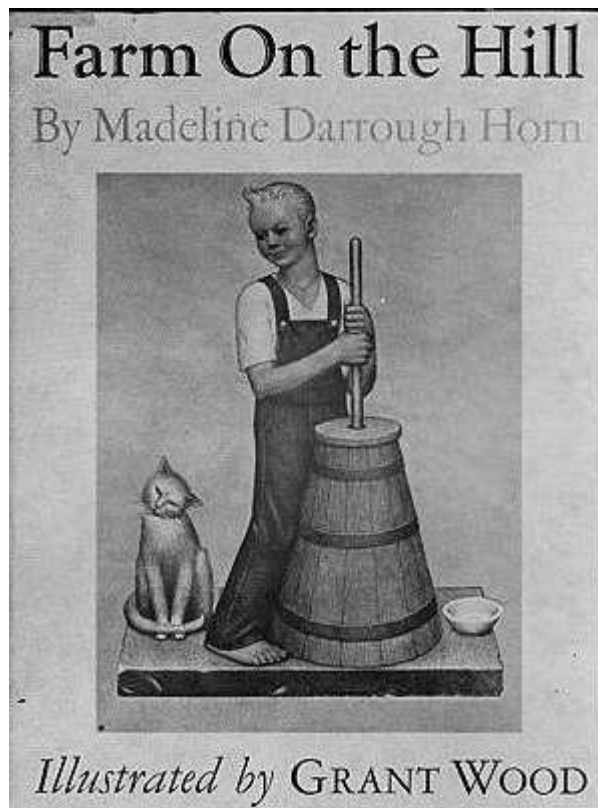


# IOWA HISTORY

by Cheryl Mullenbach



## Grant Wood Illustrates Children's Book

“Grandma, let me churn awhile. You rest and tell us a story. Tell us something that happened when you were a little girl,” said Bill. Grandma had been churning very hard, so she was glad to sit down in her rocking chair and rest.’

Those were the beginning lines from a story titled “Churning” from a book by Iowa children’s author Madeline Darrough Horn. The book, *Farm on the Hill*, captured the antics of two young boys, Bill and Tom, as they spent a summer on a family farm in the mid-1930s.

Because the author had made a name for herself at the university in Iowa City, her book was widely known and became quite popular. However, the 12 small humorous drawings of the boys interacting with the farm animals included in the book held the attention of many readers—both children and adults. And that was because the artist was a man who had painted a very famous portrait six years before.

By 1936 when *Farm on the Hill* was published, most Iowans knew Grant Wood as a famous Midwestern artist who was born on a farm near Anamosa in 1891 and grew up in Cedar Rapids. He had painted “American Gothic” in 1930 and gained instant fame all over the country for this portrait of a stern looking couple standing in front of their Gothic style wood farm house in Eldon, Iowa. He eventually was recognized as establishing a movement in the art world known as “regionalism” which celebrated rural American themes. But Wood’s work as a children’s book illustrator has been overlooked by most when they think of the renowned Midwestern painter.

How did it happen that Grant Wood produced art work for children? Madeline Darrough Horn and her university professor husband, Dr. Ernest Horn, were good friends of the artist at Iowa City. When Wood suggested he contribute the drawings for Madeline’s book, she readily accepted.

Wood’s children’s illustrations were included in an exhibit at the Walker Galleries in New York City in 1936—the same year the book was released. An art critic wrote in *Art Digest* magazine that “as usual” Wood had paid “close attention to details” in the drawings from the book. His “sly humor” and “understanding observations” made the characters “genuine farm folks.” There was bewhiskered Grandpop enjoying a big bowl of hot popcorn while grandma patched a pair of pants. There were illustrations of the “inevitable hired man” and the “plain looking” hired girl with a “fine collection of farm pets.” One drawing depicted a little boy who “got mixed up with a milk pail.” And another portrayed one of the boys trying out an oldfashioned butter churn.

While creating drawings for a children’s book was outside Wood’s usual realm, featuring rural scenes was typical Wood. His background as a farm boy himself came out in his work. Although he traveled and studied in Europe as he developed his style of painting, he never forgot his roots. He once said. “All the really good ideas I’ve ever had came to me while I was milking a cow.”

(*Farm on the Hill* is still available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com))

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