# Chapter 1

## Minnesota Snakes and English Thread

"William! Stop that!" shouted Etta, running as fast as she could. "I'm going to tell Mother on you. You know I hate snakes."

Young William swung the small snake around his head, chasing his older sister across the furrows of the newly plowed field. "This little snake won't hurt you. Come see how harmless he is." He cupped his hands around the snake. A wide grin split his face, and mischief beamed from his eyes.

Father walked behind the plow, preparing the field for spring planting. Often snakes crawled from the overturned dirt. Etta hated snakes, as many girls do, but William found them fascinating and had no fear of them. Fortunately, snakes were not poisonous in Freeborn, Minnesota.

"No, I don't even want to look at it." Etta squinted her eyes and wrinkled her nose. "I know snakes are ugly."

"If you would just take time to really look at one you might think they are beautiful," said William. "They have some pretty markings, and anyway, I don't think God made anything really ugly." He stroked the smooth skin of the little snake. "It's all in how you look at it."

"Just the same, I'm not interested in anything about snakes. You can look and pet them all you want, but don't bring them near me," cautioned Etta.

William dropped the snake to the ground, and it slithered off into the field. He picked up a small stick and threw it into the air. "How about going for a boat ride with me?" he asked. "You like to see the fish, and if there should be a snake you would be safe from it."

"Now that's a splendid idea," agreed Etta. "I'll tell Mother we are going."

Ambrose and Suzanne Spicer reared three children, Julian, Etta, and William, on their farm in the southern part of Minnesota. Since Julian was quite a bit older than the others, he had more responsibility with the farming than his younger brother and sister, but they all helped with the regular chores. The large farm produced vegetables and fruit for the family as well as cash crops of wheat and corn. Cows provided much of the milk, cream, and butter, while chickens provided all the eggs they needed.

The Spicers wanted to provide the best education possible for their children, and religion played a very important part in the home. Every evening the family gathered for family worship after supper, and then it was sharing time.

Picking up her sewing basket, Mother sat in the straight chair by the fireplace, while the children gathered around Father, hoping for a story. Julian usually had a book to read but kept his ears open, listening for anything which might interest him. William sat on Father's lap.

"I'm William Ambrose," said the boy, snuggling into his father's arms. "Someday I will be big and strong like you, won't I?"

"Yes," answered Father. "You do have my name and do you know what my middle name is?"

"I know the letters that come in the mail for you have Ambrose C. Spicer," answered William. "But what does the C stand for?"

"Etta, hand me a spool of thread from Mother's basket," said Father. "Now look at the label on the end of the spool. Can you spell that word for me?"

William studied the letters for a moment. "C-o-a-t-e-s" he read. "But I'm not sure how to say it. I know what c-o-a-t spells, but is that word coat-ees ?"

His brother and sister laughed and Mother smiled.

"No, Son," answered Father. "You say that word as if there was no e-s on the end."

"Oh, then is that your middle name? Coates?"

"Yes, you see, I came from a family that made thread in England. Now it is sold here in America," said Father. "My name is Ambrose Coates Spicer."

The room was quiet for a while with only the squeak of Father's old rocking chair and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner. Julian looked up from the book he was reading. He studied his father's tired but relaxed face.

"Father," he said. "You told me once that you read a lot when you were young. If you grew up on a farm in a log cabin, too, what did you read?"

"Well, Julian, you know we were very poor, as most of the early settlers in Minnesota were. We didn't have a lot of books to read, but one thing most families had was the Bible," said Father. "So I read that a lot. Many nights after the rest of the family were sleeping, I read. Since I didn't have other things to clutter my mind, I found it very interesting. Then, too, in those days about the only diversion from

work that we had was when a preacher came to our area to hold meetings. Sometimes there would be more, than one from different churches, so we would get a variety of ideas from their preaching. Then I would read the Bible to see if it was really true. That made it more challenging."

"Did they have churches then?" asked Etta. "Yes, in fact in our area there were mostly Baptist believers. But there was a funny thing about them. They were divided into two groups." Father smiled as he remembered. "One group kept Sunday, and the other group worshiped on Saturday. That second group called themselves Seventh Day Baptists. One time I walked six miles to hear a preacher say that the seventh day was the Bible Sabbath. That gave me something to really study in the Bible. As I studied, it seemed to make good sense."

"Is that when you started keeping the Sabbath?" asked Julian.

"No, not exactly. I believed that the Bible said that, but I wanted to be sure I understood correctly. So when I heard that another preacher was coming to a nearby town to hold a meeting, I decided to go see what he had to say about it. I had to work fast and then hurry to get ready to go. It was a twelve-mile run through the woods following cattle paths, but I went anyway. Going really didn't help me much. I talked with that preacher and asked him about the seventh-day Sabbath."

"What did he say?" asked William.

"He told me to forget about that seventh-day stuff because the Sabbath had been changed to Sunday. That really disappointed me because I couldn't find the proof in the Bible. I thought if it were true, my father should know about it."

"Did you ask him?"

"Oh, yes. But Father told me that the seventh day was a Jewish Sabbath. Since we weren't Jews I should just forget about it. He said he would rather give away all he was worth than to have me keep the Jewish Sabbath. I went to hear other preachers, and they said the same thing. It still bothered me, and I kept studying the Bible because I really wanted to do the right thing."

"When did you start keeping the seventh-day Sabbath?" Julian was very interested.

"When I was almost twenty-one years old, I decided I wanted to go to college."

"And you wanted to be a preacher," interrupted William.

"You're right," said Father, as he tousled William's hair. "I wanted to go to a school where they kept the seventh-day Sabbath. The Seventh Day Baptists had a school in Alfred, New York. I knew I should serve my father until I was twenty-one, but was determined to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. It was nine months before my twenty-first birthday.

"I had raised a flock of sheep from the time I was young, so I gave Father my sheep in exchange for that nine months of labor. He was glad to have the sheep because he knew they were good stock, but he felt bad when I left for Alfred Academy.

"Father did everything he could to keep me from going. He had a wealthy friend and talked to him about the problem. His friend offered to pay my way to any school closer to home. He promised me full support, clothing, and all other expenses for eight years if I would go to nearby Hamilton University. But I didn't accept his offer. I wanted to follow my convictions."

"How long were you in New York?" asked Julian. "Did you ever go back home?"

"Only for visits," answered Father. "I stayed at the school for eight years and graduated from the ministerial course."

Etta looked up at her mother and smiled. "That's where you met Mother and fell in love with her, wasn't it?"

Father smiled across the room at Mother. "Yes, she graduated with a Ph.D. in languages. She's just as pretty today as she was when I asked her to marry me. The school invited us to stay there and teach. Later they asked us to go to Milton Junction, Wisconsin, to start a Seventh Day Baptist school. We did, and that school later became a college."

"Why did you quit teaching and start farming?" asked Etta.

"Well, Dear, sometimes mental work can tax one's health, and that's what happened to me. Mother and I talked it over. I decided to give up teaching and go to work outdoors. Mother agreed with my decision, so we moved here and started farming."

"But now we are Seventh-day Adventists, not Baptists," said William.

"That's right, and we are very happy and content because we know that all the Adventist teachings are based on the Bible," Father continued. "I have to laugh when I think of how we spent several days with our dear friends who had become Adventists and tried to prove to them that they were wrong. The more we studied, the more convinced we felt that they were right and we were wrong."

"Yes," spoke up Mother. "I'm so glad we had the opportunity to attend that camp meeting and be baptized."

"I am too," said Julian.

"Someday, I will be baptized too." William was thoughtful for an eight-year-old boy.

"Well, Children, it's time for bed," said Father. "Tomorrow is a school day, and you have to get up early."

"I know, and I don't want to be tired when we walk that two miles to school." William jumped from his father's lap.

"No, and I don't want to hear you complaining about being tired," said Etta.

They all laughed as they said good night and climbed the ladder to the loft.

"Have a good sleep, Children, and remember we love you," said Mother after a good-night kiss.