

Daybreak Woman Returns to Minnesota

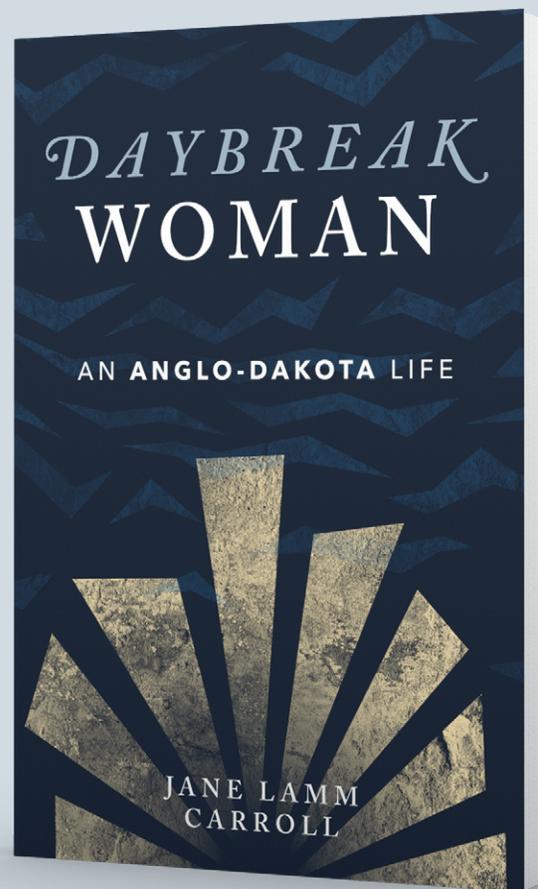
Daybreak Woman, the daughter of an Anglo-Canadian trader and a Scots-Dakota woman, was born at a trading post on the Minnesota River in 1812. She left Minnesota when she was 12 to join her father, Thomas Anderson, who was an Indian agent for the Canadian government on Lake Huron. She attended Canadian schools, taught, and then accepted a proposal of marriage—on the condition that her groom bring her back to Minnesota.

*In 92 years of life, Daybreak Woman witnessed seismic changes, survived cataclysmic events, and, with her children, endured to rebuild lives as Anglo-Dakota people in an anti-Indian world. This extract from Jane Lamm Carroll's *Daybreak Woman: An Anglo-Dakota Life* picks up her story in 1837, when she returned to Minnesota.*

IN JULY 1837, Daybreak Woman and Andrew Robertson, now married a little more than a year, left Lake Huron and set out to find Daybreak Woman's mother, Grey Cloud Woman. Their son Thomas recalled their tale of this journey as one involving "some thrilling experiences," including crossing Lake Michigan in a terrible storm and canoeing down the Fox River during another thunderstorm in a birchbark canoe. Thomas claimed his mother developed a fear of "big waters" on account of her dreadful experience on the storm-tossed waters of Lake Michigan, such that she "would never consent to go back to Scotland with Father."¹

When they reached Prairie du Chien, they were told that Grey Cloud Woman II had married an American trader named Hazen Mooers and moved with him to his post on the Minnesota River. Daybreak Woman's grandmother, Grey Cloud Woman I, also had left Prairie du Chien to live with her daughter and son-in-law. In the 1820s and early 1830s, Mooers operated a trading post for the American Fur Company at Lake Traverse, near the headwaters of the Minnesota River. By 1837, he had moved downriver to a post at Little Rapids or Little Rock Creek, about one hundred miles up the Minnesota River from its mouth at Bdote and near the future site of Fort Ridgely.

Daybreak Woman and Andrew continued up the Mississippi to Bdote, where a trading depot known as



Mendota (an anglicized version of Bdote) had developed across the river from Fort Snelling, built in the early 1820s. There they were told they could find Grey Cloud Woman and Mooers at Little Rock Rapids. At Mendota they briefly reunited with Daybreak Woman's brother, Angus Anderson, who had found employment as a clerk at Henry Hastings Sibley's American Fur Company trading post. From there the Robertsons continued up the Minnesota River to Little Rock, to find Mooers's trading post.²

Hazen Mooers was a New Yorker who began trading in Mni Sota Makoce in about 1818. He, like Thomas Anderson, had been employed by Grey Cloud Woman's father, James Aird. Prior to his marriage to Grey Cloud Woman, Mooers was married to a Dakota woman from Red Wing's village, with whom he had a son, John. In 1837, when the Robertsons first met Hazen Mooers, he was forty-eight years old and described by one visitor to the region as "a thin, good-looking man." Mooers was a popular trader among the Dakota because he honored kinship ties and their custom of reciprocity; he was especially favored among the Sisitunwan and Wahpetunwan, with whom he had traded on the Upper Minnesota River since the early 1820s. In fact, his generosity to the

Dakota men with whom he traded got him fired: in 1835, his American Fur Company employer, Henry Sibley, removed Mooers from his Lake Traverse post for being too liberal with his credits to hunters. Subsequently, Mooers moved downriver to Little Rock and set up as an independent trader. There the family farmed and he traded with the local Dakota band, who were his relations through his wife.³

Shortly after Mooers established his post at Little Rock, an English visitor to the region, George Featherstonehaugh, encountered the family on his journey up the Minnesota River. Featherstonehaugh noted that the Mooerses were living in tents and described them as follows: "He [Mooers] has an Indian wife, a middle-aged bustling woman, and is building a house consisting of two rooms, one where they are to sleep and the other where he is to keep his goods. Mooers was in a canoe fishing with his children, and appears to be fond of them; they have more of their mother than their father in their faces." The children Featherstonehaugh describes were Daybreak Woman's three Mooers half-sisters. In 1837, they were Mary (eleven), Jane Anne (ten), and Madeline (seven).⁴

Daybreak Woman must have been thrilled to finally be with her mother again, having sought a reunion for years, and Grey Cloud Woman's joy at the return of her daughter must also have been considerable. Grey Cloud Woman had sent away her then twelve-year-old girl in 1823, and after so many years of separation, she probably did not expect to see her again. Now the woman standing before her was twenty-seven, with an older husband by her side, and she was pregnant. Daybreak Woman's first child, James Wabasha Robertson, would be born a few months later. It must have been tremendously reassuring that her mother was with her to help bring her first child into the world.⁵ □



Daybreak Woman (Mrs. Andrew Robertson), approximately 1890.

(MNHS COLLECTIONS)

Notes

1. Thomas Robertson, "Reminiscences of Thomas Robertson," *South Dakota Department of History Collections* 20 (1940): 561.

2. The last entry for Angus on the Indian Department account books for the Coldwater settlement was March 31, 1837, four months prior to the last entry for Andrew. This suggests that Angus left Coldwater and traveled back to the Upper Mississippi earlier than Jane and Andrew. Angus Anderson was Sibley's clerk from 1837 to 1839. Nancy and Robert Goodman, *Joseph R. Brown: Adventurer on the Minne-*

sota Frontier (Rochester, MN: Lone Oak Press, 1996), 148–49.

3. George Featherstonehaugh, "Journal," microfilm frame 0054, George Featherstonehaugh and Family Papers, Manuscript Collections, MNHS; Gary C. Anderson, *Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 140–41, 223; Goodman and Goodman, *Joseph R. Brown*, 149n55; Robertson, "Reminiscences," SDDHC, 561; Alan Woolworth, "Hazen Mooers and John

Mooers," Woolworth Papers, Manuscript Collections, MNHS.

4. Featherstonehaugh, "Journal," George Featherstonehaugh and Family Papers; "Register of Claims Under the 1837 Treaty," Library Records, Sibley House, Mendota, MN. Mary was born in 1825, Jane Anne in 1826, and Madeline in 1829.

5. John Case, "Jane Anderson Robertson," John Case Papers, Manuscript Collections, MNHS, 6.



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