

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### GURI ENDRESON, FRONTIER HEROINE

Over the grave of Guri Endreson in a Kandiyohi County churchyard stands a monument erected by the state of Minnesota in commemoration of her heroism at the time of the Sioux Massacre in 1862. The story of what she did after an attacking party of Indians had slaughtered her husband and one son, wounded another son, and carried off two of her daughters as captives has been told and retold many times and is familiar to thousands of people.<sup>1</sup> Particular attention has been devoted to the tale of how she aided two severely wounded men from a settler's cabin to an ox-drawn wagon, after dressing their wounds and attending to their wants; then started with them, her small daughter, and her wounded son for Forest City, about thirty miles distant; guarded the party through an all-night vigil; and doggedly pushed on the next day until the haven of safety was reached. Though much has been published about these and other details in the saga of this frontier heroine, her own story of the events of 1862 has not been known. Indeed, it has been altogether unknown to Minnesota historians that she ever wrote anything about the tragic happenings of that summer. She has been regarded as one of those inarticulate spirits who have left a legacy of courage expressed in action alone. The truth is that Guri Endreson did write her story — but she waited four years, and then set it down in the form of a letter to her relatives

<sup>1</sup> See Victor E. Lawson, Martin E. Tew, and J. Emil Nelson, compilers, *Illustrated History and Descriptive and Biographical Review of Kandiyohi County, Minnesota*, 24, 110, 146 (St. Paul, 1905); Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth H. Buck, *Stories of Early Minnesota*, 217-223 (New York, 1926); and Agnes C. Laut, "Daughters of the Vikings — Guri Endreson," in *Outing*, 52: 413-423 (July, 1908). Miss Laut's article is one of a series on "Pioneer Women of the West."

dwelling thousands of miles away in a lonely district of western Norway. The letter was treasured in the family circle, and last year when the present writer was in Norway collecting letters and other materials pertaining to Norwegian immigration to the United States, this letter, mailed from Harrison post office, Monongalia County, Minnesota, in December, 1866, was called to his attention. The original is in the possession of Mr. Arne Larsen Rosseland of Kvam, Hardanger, Norway, through whose courtesy the writer was enabled to make a transcript and to photostat the manuscript.

A few discrepancies between Guri Endreson's own narrative and the well-known tale of her deeds will be apparent, and the reader will be struck by her omissions. Her story, it must be remembered, is written in the language of simplicity and sorrow and comes from a woman who would perhaps naturally understate or avoid mention of her own services to other people. Meanwhile, the letter supplies something that has been lacking from the familiar tale: a picture of a very human woman, with no inkling that she is a heroine, sustained in her sorrow by a pious faith in God, taking up the tasks of life again in the reconstruction period that followed the early sixties, retaining ownership of her land with a view to resumption of farming, and looking with courage to the future. For those who like to interpret human actions in the glowing terms of heroism, the spectacle of Guri Endreson four years after her harrowing Sioux War experience, making 230 pounds of butter from the summer product of her cows, writing encouragingly about America to her daughter in Norway, and holding aloft the promise of her faith, is not less impressive than that of the same woman helping others in the August days of 1862, when she was carrying the burden of fresh agony in her heart.

The letter, herewith translated from Norwegian into English, is of interest not only for the light that it sheds upon the character of Guri Endreson but also for the picture that it gives of the resumption of normal conditions in the area that had been visited by the horrors of the Sioux Massacre.

It should be noted that the surname of the Endresons was Rosseland. Lars Endreson Rosseland was the full name of Guri's husband. She signs her own name simply as "Guri Olsdatter."

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL

HARRISON P. O., MONONGALIA CO.,  
MINNESOTA,<sup>2</sup> December 2, 1866

DEAR DAUGHTER AND YOUR HUSBAND AND CHILDREN,  
AND MY BELOVED MOTHER:

I have received your letter of April 14th, this year, and I send you herewith my heartiest thanks for it, for it gives me great happiness to hear from you and to know that you are alive, well, and in general thriving. I must also report briefly to you how things have been going with me recently, though I must ask you to forgive me for not having told you earlier about my fate. I do not seem to have been able to do so much as to write to you, because during the time when the savages raged so fearfully here I was not able to think about anything except being murdered, with my whole family, by these terrible heathen. But God be praised, I escaped with my life, unharmed by them, and my four daughters also came through the danger unscathed. Guri and Britha were carried off by the wild Indians, but they got a chance the next day to make their escape; when the savages gave them permission to go home to get some food, these young girls made use of the opportunity to flee and thus they got away alive, and on the third day after they had been taken, some Americans came along who found them on a large plain or prairie and brought them to people. I myself wandered aimlessly around on my land with my youngest daughter and I had to look on while they shot my precious husband dead, and in my sight my dear son Ole was shot through the shoulder.<sup>3</sup> But he got well again from this wound and lived a little

<sup>2</sup> The northern half of the present Kandiyohi County constituted Monongalia County from 1858 to 1870.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief account of Lars Endreson, see Lawson, Tew, and Nelson, *Kandiyohi County*, 110.

more than a year and then was taken sick and died. We also found my oldest son Endre shot dead, but I did not see the firing of this death shot. For two days and nights I hovered about here with my little daughter, between fear and hope and almost crazy, before I found my wounded son and a couple of other persons, unhurt, who helped us to get away to a place of more security.<sup>4</sup> To be an eyewitness to these things and to see many others wounded and killed was almost too much for a poor woman, but, God be thanked, I kept my life and my sanity, though all my movable property was torn away and stolen. But this would have been nothing if only I could have had my loved husband and children — but what shall I say? God permitted it to happen thus, and I had to accept my heavy fate and thank Him for having spared my life and those of some of my dear children.

I must also let you know that my daughter Gjørtru has land, which they received from the government under a law that has been passed, called in our language “the Homestead law,” and for a quarter section of land they have to pay sixteen dollars, and after they have lived there five years they receive a deed and complete possession of the property and can sell it if they want to or keep it if they want to. She lives about twenty-four American miles from here and is doing well. My daughter Guri is away in house service for an American about a hundred miles from here; she has been there working for the same man for four years; she is in good health and is doing well; I visited her recently, but

<sup>4</sup> Solomon R. Foot, one of the two men whose rescue under heroic circumstances is attributed to Guri Endreson, tells the story himself in great detail in Lawson, Tew, and Nelson, *Kandiyohi County*, 106-110. He, like his comrade, Oscar Erikson, had been badly wounded. Of Mrs. Endreson he writes: “She washed our bodies, bandaged our wounds and gave us every possible comfort. Fortunately my wagon stood so near the cabin that the Indians had not ventured to take it. She drew this as near the door as possible, put into it bedding, blankets and other things we might need. She assisted us into it, propped us up in a half reclining position, placed my gun by my side, hitched the young unbroken oxen to it and started.” At night “Mother Endreson supplied all our wants and again bathed our wounds” and she “spent a sleepless night watching over us, ever on the lookout for the savage foe.” In view of this evidence, Guri Endreson’s statement that she found two persons, unhurt, who helped her to escape, seems inexplicable.

for a long time I knew nothing about her, whether she was alive or not.

My other two daughters, Britha and Anna, are at home with me, are in health, and are thriving here. I must also remark that it was four years last August 21 since I had to flee from my dear home, and since that time I have not been on my land, as it is only a sad sight because at the spot where I had a happy home there are now only ruins and remains left as reminders of the terrible Indians. Still I moved up here to the neighborhood again this summer. A number of families have moved back here again so that we hope after a while to make conditions pleasant once more.<sup>5</sup> Yet the atrocities of the Indians are and will be fresh in memory; they have now been driven beyond the boundaries of the state and we hope that they never will be allowed to come here again. I am now staying at the home of Sjur Anderson, two and a half miles from my home. I must also tell you how much I had before I was ruined in this way. I had seventeen head of cattle, eight sheep, eight pigs, and a number of chickens; now I have six head of cattle, four sheep, one pig; five of my cattle stayed on my land until in February, 1863, and lived on some hay and stacks of wheat on the land; and I received compensation from the government for my cattle and other movable property that I lost. Of the six cattle that I now have, three are milk cows and of these I have sold butter, the summer's product, a little over two hundred and thirty pounds; I sold this last month and got sixty-six dollars for it. In general I may say that one or another has advised me to sell my land, but I would rather keep it for a time yet in the hope that some of my people might come and use it; it is difficult to get such good land again, and if you, my dear daughter, would come here, you could buy it and use it and then it would not be necessary to let it fall into the hands of strangers. And now in closing I must send my very warm greetings to my unforgettable, dear mother, my dearest daughter and her husband and children, and in general to all my

<sup>5</sup> The resumption of farming in this region started on a small scale in 1864. "In the summer of 1864 a few settlers ventured beyond the soldiers' patrol lines into Kandiyohi county, where they sowed and harvested a crop during the summer." Lawson, Tew, and Nelson, *Kandiyohi County*, 33.

relatives, acquaintances, and friends. And may the Lord by His grace bend, direct, and govern our hearts so that we sometime with gladness may assemble with God in the eternal mansions where there will be no more partings, no sorrows, no more trials, but everlasting joy and gladness, and contentment in beholding God's face. If this be the goal for all our endeavors through the sorrows and cares of this life, then through his grace we may hope for a blessed life hereafter, for Jesus sake.

Always your devoted

GURI OLSDATTER

Write to me soon.

## THE STUDY OF PIONEER LIFE: A COMMUNICATION

SLEEPY EYE, MINNESOTA, October 15, 1929

TO THE EDITOR:

I was considerably interested in your news comment on pages 341-343 of the September number of *MINNESOTA HISTORY*. The question whether or not "American historical studies of pioneer life have succeeded in coming to grips with the truth" is a fair one to ask, but the answer must necessarily be, I think, that they have not, except in a very vague way. So vague that in many instances one would never recognize the glowing descriptions and the truths (if they could be come at) as referring to the same incidents or happenings.

Speaking of contemporary newspaper accounts, here is one instance within my personal knowledge. When the Davis family had been in Minnesota only a few months, we received a copy of a Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, paper from a relative near Rochester. The paper contained a three-quarter column article giving a detailed account of the massacre of our whole family—father, mother, and nine children—by the Indians. It was to all appearances a very accurate description of the killing, told in good reporter style. It gave a vivid word picture of the appearance and location (with reference to the house) of each horribly mutilated body and even the names of each individual member of the family as well as other gruesome details.

At that time we had only trekked as far west as Mankato and had not seen a single Indian. We never made any special effort



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