

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE STUDY OF PIONEER LIFE: TWO REPLIES TO MR. DAVIS

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, January 24, 1930

DEAR EDITOR:

Having in my boyhood days experienced the life and trials of a pioneer upon the prairies of western Minnesota, I was much interested in reading in your last quarterly the criticism by Le Roy G. Davis of certain incidents and statements contained in Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.¹

I read this rather remarkable book with a great deal of interest — an interest much enhanced because of my own personal contact with frontier life and because I recognized in the story a substantially correct picture of conditions and the social life prevailing in those far-flung stretches lying out beyond "where the West begins."

Mr. Davis selects a few statements from the book (I presume the most extreme he could find) and sets out to prove that a false picture is painted by the author. My own impression and feeling is that Rölvaag's picture is true in substance and practically so in detail. I will briefly go over the several objections made by Mr. Davis:

1. Mr. Rölvaag states that "original settlers are agreed that there was neither bird nor insect life on the prairie, with the exception of mosquitoes, the first year that they came." Mr. Davis challenges this statement. If I remember rightly, mention was made in the story of the passing of ducks and geese. With that qualification, I believe the statement to be substantially correct. Before the advent of the settler the open prairie, far removed from rivers, lakes, and trees, was practically devoid of bird life. This was to a large extent true in western Minnesota as late as the early eighties and certainly more true out upon the sun-baked open land of South Dakota where the "Giants"

¹ *Ante*, 10: 430-435.

cast their lot at the outpost of civilization. What the author evidently attempts to impress upon his readers is that there was an abundance of mosquitoes, but nothing much else in the way of birds or insects to greet the venturesome spirits upon their arrival. If there was any bird or insect life outside of mosquitoes, it was so insignificant that all original settlers "agreed" that there was no such thing.

Speaking about mosquitoes, we sometimes hear complaints now of that practically extinct species. But the early prairie settler laughs at the complaint. He remembers the days when he had to wear mosquito netting about his head for protection to ward off not a mere baker's dozen of mosquitoes but hundreds and thousands of them swarming about his body. To him it seems that this insect has now become extinct.

2. Fault is found with the claim that Per Hansa "breaks one and a half acres of sod in one late summer day." Mr. Davis thinks this highly improbable. Using oxen he says one acre would be a good day's work. I am inclined to believe that Mr. Davis never held the handles of a breaking plow behind oxen. I did that very thing. And not only did I follow the plow behind oxen but I have broken the virgin land behind a plow pulled by two teams, a pair of oxen and two small Indian ponies. Misfits were not objectionable or infrequent forty or fifty years ago. It was not a question of appearance but a question of getting things done in any way possible. Resourcefulness was in demand. We used every available means at hand. There was little or no choice.

One acre is a strip of land one mile long and eight feet, three inches wide. A fourteen-inch plow turns over more than one foot in width. It follows that four times up and down the strip (eight miles in all) turns over more than one acre. Traveling twelve miles would turn over considerably more than one and one-half acres. Walking at the old-fashioned speed of one and one-half miles per hour, the distance of twelve miles would be covered in eight hours. That would be a day short enough to be called a half holiday and would leave plenty of time for permitting the oxen to graze. Many a day have I plowed more than two

acres per day with oxen. Driving from our farm to Montevideo and back, a distance of thirty-six miles, in a day with oxen was a task that we often accomplished, although I will admit that this took all of the day and a considerable part of the night. The claim that the prairie was harder to break in the late summer because of grass and roots does not impress one who knows the prairie. To say the least there is plenty of prairie land where no such conditions prevail and also prairie land that can be broken with one team of oxen. There is a great deal of difference between the gumbo land of the Red River Valley and the light sandy soil to be found in some other sections.

3. Mr. Davis takes exception to statements to the effect that grasshoppers came in such large quantities as to obscure the sun and states that they were not brown in color and not as destructive as Mr. Rølvaag claims. *Nelson's Encyclopaedia* describes these grasshoppers as being of a green or brown color. The *Americana*, a leading and standard encyclopedia, says that these grasshoppers "swept from one region to another in swarms many square miles in area and so dense as to darken the sun, feeding on grasses and herbage and consuming not only crops and pasturage as if by fire, but stripping bushes and trees of foliage and even the bark." This is fairly substantial support and proof of the statements made with reference to the grasshoppers.

4. Next Mr. Davis challenges the statement made by Mr. Rølvaag with reference to heavy snow falls: "And tunnels had to be burrowed from house to barn, and from neighbour to neighbour, wherever the distances were not too long and where there were children who liked to play at such things." There is nothing wrong about that statement. Those who, in western Minnesota, lived through the October storm of 1880 and the three or four snow winters following that storm can testify to the necessity for tunneling through the snow to get into the straw stables that were then in style. To have not only the stable door, but the whole stable so snowed under that it was not visible except upon close inspection was not unusual. Tunnels and snow trenches were common.

In Lac qui Parle County, near what is now the village of Dawson, where we lived, we had a distance of twelve miles to the nearest town. No conveyance got through in all the winter of 1880-81 to that or to any other village. We made our way on skis, pulling on a small sled the most urgent necessities of life. Our only flour was ground in an ordinary coffee mill of the kind that was fastened to the wall. Our only fuel was twisted hay and our only water was snow melted in a boiler on the cooking stove. If I remember rightly, the Milwaukee railroad running through Montevideo and Appleton did not move a wheel in that neighborhood for six weeks or more, and to meet complaints made by the public, the president of the road offered a large sum of money to anyone who would undertake to keep the roadway open for service. No one accepted the offer.

Your space, Mr. Editor, is too limited to permit of even a brief story of the snow and snow blockades in the early eighties. "Them were the days!" The true story of that day sounds like fiction today. Our humble abode on the prairie consisted of a so-called settler's shanty, unplastered and with only one board wall and tar paper on the outside. The fact that the snow practically buried this shanty saved us from serious suffering from the cold. While the three-day October storm was raging we children were kept in bed day and night to keep warm. The snow in those days did not seem to have any marked preference for the leeward side of the buildings; any side or no side at all seemed to be a suitable place for that particular snow. In the winters that followed we boys looked forward with anticipation to each snow blockade, as each occurrence afforded us the welcome opportunity to shovel snow on the railroad section in consideration of \$1.10 per day, on our own board and keep. And there was usually several days' work before the train could come through.

If Mr. Rølvaag got the snow story secondhand, he had heard it told by some person who had lived the story as did thousands of others. Some of the survivors will read these words and their memories will go back to the days of which I speak for verification of what I say.

It may be interesting to get some definite history with reference

to conditions following this October storm: On Saturday, October 16, 1880, the *Minneapolis Journal* reported a blizzard of such magnitude that all wires were out of commission and "the operators can't even get far enough to even ascertain any details of the storm." On the seventeenth, "All that is known of southern Minnesota is learned from Milwaukee." For several days thereafter the *Journal* was full of tales of the storm to the east and in the lake region but carried no news from the prairies to the west because of inability to reach those districts. On December 27, 1880, a dispatch from Ortonville, near our home, reported thirty-eight degrees below zero. A dispatch from Heron Lake, dated February 3, 1881, appearing in the *Journal*, states: "It is reported that some families have already burned their furniture and part of the flooring of their houses in order to keep from freezing. There are drifts on the track from 7 to 12 feet high."

5. The last objection is to the statement in the book to the effect that when the spring thaws came, houses, wagon boxes, and such things would be carried away in floods, people "sailing away" on the roofs." This comes the nearest to being an exaggeration worth mentioning as such. To those not familiar with the real and true conditions, this presents an unbelievable situation, but to those familiar with prairie life, and the snows and floods of those early years, the "movie" presented is quite understandable and quite true.

No early prairie settler will get the impression from the story that houses standing on hills or on the high prairie were carried away and the distinguished author does not so state. This was the situation: Nearly every settlement was adjacent to some stream or river running through the prairie lands. As a rule, the river banks were as barren of trees as were the prairies themselves, but at places along these streams there were fertile bottom or low lands upon which new-comers settled and built their homes. The flood situation at the time of the spring thaws was entirely different from conditions now. At that time the prairie was hard and unbroken. When the snow melted the water rapidly found its way into the low places and streams, with the result that floods came with surprising suddenness and volume, overwhelming the

dwellers in the low lands. Even in western Minnesota where we lived it was not an uncommon sight to see household articles and small buildings float by.

In the spring of 1880 we lived in a house on the bottom lands of the Lac qui Parle River about a mile west of Dawson. The following spring every living thing on that farm had to be moved away and the water stood four feet deep in the house that we had lived in on that farm the year before. Many a loose article floated down the river from this farm and other farms farther to the west. The river banks at this place were about eight feet high; practically the whole farm was under water in this flood. Now that all the lands along these rivers have been put under cultivation, they act as a vast sponge absorbing the water before it reaches the rivers and in that way the flood menace of early years has largely disappeared. In the issue of the *Minneapolis Journal* for March 29, 1881, a dispatch from Pierre, South Dakota (the land of the "Giants"), records this situation: "On the morning of the 27th the [Missouri] river presented a grand spectacle of power and terror as it rolled along bringing enormous blocks of ice. A sudden rise in the water amounting to as much as 4 feet in ten minutes. Water flooded the streets of Ft. Pierre. People took refuge on the bluffs, after attempts to save their personal effects." From Montevideo, April 23, 1881, came this report: "The people in the village have been obliged to move out, the water standing 6 to 8 feet in the houses." From Mankato, April 23: "The debris in the [Minnesota] river tells of the damage done by the floods further up the stream." From Morris, April 23: "The heavy fall of snow melted suddenly and left the level prairies flooded. All the streams are raging." A dispatch from Montevideo on April 26 states that the river reached its peak on the twenty-fifth and that the houses in that village not under water were crowded with people, one house sheltering as many as thirty-eight persons.

From the *Redwood Gazette*, April 7, 1881, this is quoted: "The village of Green Island, opposite Yankton [near the settlement of *Per Hansa*], was entirely swept away by the flood. Churches, stores, dwellings and in fact every building floated off or was

broken up in the ice. At Pierre the people were forced to leave their dwellings and stores." The same paper reports that Mandan, on the Missouri River, was flooded "and 75 of the inhabitants compelled to take refuge in a church. The losses of cattle owners along the river will be quite heavy." On April 28, 1881, the *Gazette* contained this: "Our own Minnesota has shown a determination not to be outdone by larger and more pretentious rivers. At Montevideo waters reached highest limits on Monday morning. Several small buildings were swept away. Iron bridge swept a mile down and badly damaged." Mills and mill dams along the rivers everywhere were swept away and destroyed.

As an illustration of the rapidity with which prairie rivers may rise, we need only remind ourselves that as late as 1919 the Lac qui Parle River at Dawson rose so suddenly that the inhabitants had barely time to get out of houses that became filled with water. The destruction of property was great and one life was lost. Details with reference to this may be found in the *Dawson Sentinel*, which was then published by Governor Christianson.

Giants in the Earth impressed me as being a remarkable and faithful portrayal of pioneer life upon the open prairie as I knew and lived it in my boyhood days. No one who had ever driven oxen through a blinding snowstorm, walking on the leeward side of his team to break the force of the biting wind, could fail to read with intense interest the story of Per's drive through the blizzard. No one who saw the endless stretches of flat unbroken land clad in its wintry garb of white and understood the pressing urge that at times came to the lonely dweller on the plains, could fail to be thrilled by the dogged determination with which Per Hansa strode into the West on that last fatal journey across the snow on a mission of mercy. A hundred incidents bring back memories of days that made men out of boys long before maturity, and heroes out of men who met every adverse condition and every disappointment with stout hearts and a resolute determination to win the fight.

The one thing that I thought made the book incomplete was the failure to give an account of one of the most dreaded and fearful foes of the settler — the prairie fire. No settler in the

west escaped this ravaging fiend of flames. Every fall, when the grasses had turned a golden yellow, this grim spectacle would be sure to make its appearance. Somewhere, many miles away perhaps, someone would carelessly flip a match into the withered mat of grass and in an instant the flames would leap forward, fanned by the wind, like a wolf hound loosened from the leash. When urged by a strong wind, the speed with which these flames would sweep the prairies was almost unbelievable. At night the fire spread over stretches miles in extent. The sky, reflecting a panorama of moving, leaping tongues of fire, made a picture that no artist has ever been able to reproduce. When the illuminated sky far away in the horizon would warn the settler of what was coming, he got out all the gunny sacks or old coats on the farm, filled the tubs and pails with water, soaked the sacks, and with every soul on the place old enough to carry a wet rag marched out to set a back fire against the approaching foe. Failure to take this timely precaution often resulted in much property loss, and at times the humble homes of the settlers fed the flames. What settler on the prairie frontier has not participated in desperate struggles against the prairie fire? It was an inseparable incident of early prairie life. When the next great epic of the pioneer is written let it contain a true picture of the prairie fire, and let it paint the pioneer woman the great and splendid heroine that she really was. She has not received that full measure of credit which is her due.

EINAR HOIDALE

PORT WING, WISCONSIN, January 3, 1930

DEAR EDITOR:

I am today sixty-four years old, and according to what I have been told, I have been in this great America sixty years. When I read the criticisms of Rølvaag in the December number of MINNESOTA HISTORY in regard to frontier life of this country, I recalled happenings of that time. I read Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* and I have also gone through all the angles of pioneering from the very youngest age.

In 1871 my father started west with oxen and covered wagon,

and finally settled on the Buffalo Prairie, Clay County, Minnesota. As he was well fixed financially, he got things in good shape for a winter on the wild prairie. He did not live through the first winter, however, but froze to death in one of those terrible blizzards in the winter of 1871-72. He was found less than forty rods from his home. My memory of actual history dates from that time, as we boys were moved around the country and we learned the ups and downs of the then discovered park region of Minnesota.

Now, a Mr. Davis not only criticizes Mr. Rølvaag's writings but claims that seventy-five per cent of newspaper writings on pioneer happenings with which he is personally acquainted is "pure bunk." Well, Mr. Davis was fortunate, as he did not go far enough into the wilds to get the real experience. If he had been in parts of Becker and Clay counties about 1871 and on, he would have admitted that Mr. Rølvaag's writings were nearly correct as far as they went, and probably would have added some more to them which also would have been true, as for instance, about the Indians and the massacre of the Davis family. This could have meant the Cook family near Audubon. There were eight in the family, and all were slaughtered and their buildings were burned, just two and a half miles from where I spent part of my boyhood. Two miles north of us, a Mr. Carlson and his son were driven out at night and his stable and hay stacks were set on fire. The father was shot in the side with buckshot, and he died some time after. Another family about four miles from the second place where I came to stay was brutally murdered, and the huts burned by the Indians. The name was Swanson.

I remember very well when I was a scout at the age of seven or eight, and how I used to run from neighbor to neighbor telling them to hustle to the stockade at Audubon for safety, as the Indians were on the war path. I tell you, as I ran along the narrow path, every black stump appeared to be an Indian, as I looked back and forth and ran.

Mr. Davis' second criticism was in regard to birds and insects on the prairies. There were not many birds on the larger prairies. What was there on the large prairies in early days that would

attract the birds after the devastating prairie fires had swept over the ground, devouring every living creature and nest in their path? After such fires there was hardly germination left to grow thick grass. But in the mixed prairie, lake, and wooded lands it was different, as the fires crept slowly and missed many places. In mixed prairie, timber, and lake sections, there were birds of different kinds. Just as soon as a couple of acres of grain were grown, millions of blackbirds would come to harvest the grain. So during the ripening and harvest season, the workers had to be in the field early in the morning to keep those birds away. After a while, farmers got rid of most of the birds by using poison.

After the blackbirds were subdued, the grasshoppers came so thick that they clouded the sun as did the blackbirds. I think the grasshoppers lasted three or four years. The government finally supplied the settlers with one-half inch lumber and coal tar. Scoots were made to pull over the grain field, with a man or boy at each end. The scoots were tarred, and we got the hoppers before they were old enough to fly. The hoppers always hopped toward us, and to the tarred scoot they went. The faster we walked the more of them we caught. This work was ordered for the most infested fields. In addition to mosquitoes, which proved a terror, we soon had other insects with which to contend—fleas on the prairies, and flies on the marsh and timber lands. As to any other insects, I cannot remember; as Mr. Davis says, we were too busy with what we had to do to consider trifles. We had plenty of snakes, lizards, and skunks, and an abundance of prairie gophers, pocket gophers, and chipmunks. It surely kept us busy.

Mr. Davis also thinks it an impossibility to plow one and a half acres of prairie land per day by oxen. Now I will say that that would be just an ordinary good day's work on the prairie in the cool days of fall, as one could make greater headway with oxen in the cool fall than in the hot summer. One and a half acres would make about eleven miles a day with a fourteen-inch plow; while I have, from the time I was eleven years old, plowed up to two acres a day with a sixteen-inch plow behind the ox team. I

have many a time hauled cordwood to Hawley, which was twenty miles both ways, with oxen in the winter on a long-runner sleigh. It was a long day, but we also put in a full day when plowing.

Now as to those great snow drifts of the early days on the prairies. They have not been exaggerated either, as I have had experience enough in that line to know. I think the Northern Pacific Railroad can furnish all the information desired on that question. They would not have built three or four rows of high snow fences in those days if it had not been necessary. Even then, the big cuts through the hills were filled with snow even with the ground.

Mr. Davis closes by using the fatherly wisdom of excusing the story-tellers. Now, why does he do that? We have plenty of story-tellers in our day; but we do not take everything for granted, especially when we are writing history. There is a way to get at those historical facts yet, as there are quite a number of us younger pioneers still alive and our respect for truthfulness can be determined.

In the narrative on pioneer life, I never read anything about the young people of that time, the barefoot boy and girl. To be barefoot at leisure on a good road or a cultivated field is a pleasure; but to be barefoot on a burnt-over prairie or woods is next to hell. That was exactly what boys and even girls had to endure when at work in the pioneer days. They had to be on the run constantly, helping to save time for the older folks so that the country could be improved for the next generation. I wish that we, in some way, could do honor to the men and women of by-gone days; but what I would like to see most of all is a monument erected to the noble ox and the barefoot boy. They were good companions in all sorts of hardships, even though the switch had to be used.

Now, as for myself, I will say that I owe it to my Great Protector that I came through it all, hale and hearty. I have never lost any time talking about the frontier hardships, and when I happen to think about my younger days, I feel rather satisfied that I have seen and helped to build up the wilderness of this now prosperous country from my earliest time. The trials we

had created interest and love for the country, and we feel very much concerned about it at this time.

J. H. KLOVSTAD

THE NESMITH CAVE HOAX: A COMMUNICATION

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA, December 12, 1929

TO THE EDITOR:

I note on page 467 of the December number of your magazine an item quoted from the *Minneapolis Journal*, written by Mr. A. J. Russell, giving credit to the late David Edwards as the author of the Nesmith Cave hoax.¹ Now I wish to correct this, as it is an error. David Edwards had nothing to do with that little joke, as I believe I can show you. It is of course of small importance, yet in writing history I believe accuracy is considered the proper course to pursue. Mr. Russell doubtless got his information from the book published several years since, written by the late Frank G. O'Brien, a pioneer citizen of St. Anthony.² In this book he gave credit for this story to David Edwards, without any investigation on his part. I spoke to him about the matter and told him who the author was, but he made no move to correct it before his death. Now the facts are that this [*a letter published in 1867 over the pseudonym of "Luther Chamberlin," in which the Nesmith Cave was described*] was written by the late Edward L. Welles, who was an old friend of my parents and for many years a member of our family in St. Anthony.³ He wrote this, and I

¹ The item in question merely calls attention to an article by Mr. Russell in the *Minneapolis Journal* for August 2 in which Edwards is characterized as "St. Anthony's First Wag" and is described as the perpetrator of the "Great Nesmith Cave Hoax." *Ed.*

² One chapter of O'Brien's *Minnesota Pioneer Sketches* (Minneapolis, 1904) is devoted to "David Edwards and His Nesmith Cave Hoax" (p. 160-167). *Ed.*

³ The letter appears in the *Minneapolis Journal* for January 9, 1867. It describes an alleged visit paid by "Luther Chamberlin," one Nesmith, and the members of the city council of St. Anthony to a great cave, which was entered through Nesmith's cellar. Steps of stone with iron railings; great chambers, in one of which was a marvelous tower two hundred feet in circumference; the skeletons of a "serpent of incredible size" and of a man

well remember how he used to read it to us in the evenings at home. The cave in question is on the east bank of the river, located under what was known as the Mineral Springs; it was intended as a power tunnel and was excavated by the Chute brothers. It was started, as before stated, under the springs and was dug as far up Main Street as the present Pillsbury A Mill, when on account of faulty engineering it was stopped by a cave-in. I well remember that a large cottonwood tree sank several feet at that point. The cave-in stopped all work and the project was given up. Mr. Welles was somewhat of a "wag," and he not only wrote this up for amusement, but just to see how far he could go he sent it to the publishers of *Chambers's Encyclopædia* and it was printed in one of the editions of that work. Mr. Welles died several years ago in Brooklyn, New York. I knew David Edwards well and will admit that he was surely a village "wag," but in this case he has been given credit for something he never did. This may be of no particular interest to the society, but I am sure of my ground and know I am right in my statements herein.

C. E. VAN CLEVE

eight feet in height; and various implements of brass, silver, and iron are among the "finds" reported. The party is reported to have penetrated "about 5,000 feet into the interior of the earth, and Mr. Nesmith said that there were still innumerable chambers beyond." Speculation, wrote "Luther Chamberlin," is "rampant as to the origin of the cavern and by what race inhabited." He adds that "Minnesota is still in her infancy, and there is no telling what may yet be found underneath her surface." *Ed.*



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