

SOD HOUSES AND PRAIRIE SCHOONERS

INTRODUCTION

This article is made up of two sections taken from an unpublished volume of reminiscences entitled "The Prairie Schooner Passes," by Mr. William A. Marin of Minneapolis. As a boy in 1879 he journeyed with his parents from Michigan to the Red River Valley. His father had been the owner of a hotel in a lumbering town of southern Michigan. The destruction of this hotel by fire was the cause of the family migration to western Minnesota. Mr. Marin describes his father as a "happy-go-lucky Irish American" who was brought up on a backwoods farm in southeastern Michigan; worked at intervals in the woods, on the log drives, and as a Great Lakes sailor; was strong and hardy; "loved a joke, a good story, a song, congenial society, and, though never a heavy drinker, liked the good times and the association which the saloon, the only real place of social contact in pioneer days, afforded to one of his genial and social nature." Mr. Marin's mother, who is still living at Crookston, is of New England and Scotch descent. She enjoyed a high school education and taught school before her marriage. She is described as a woman of sound judgment and practical good sense, a careful planner, a Puritan, reserved with strangers, loyal to friends, frugal and ambitious. The career of these two individuals and the setting of their home life in the Red River Valley form the subject matter of Mr. Marin's extraordinarily vivid account, which it is to be hoped will ultimately appear in full in book form. The material assembled for the present article opens with the late summer of 1880, about a year and a half after the Marins had arrived at Crookston; the scene is a pioneer farm near that town.

During the first seven years spent by the Marins in the Red River Valley they moved ten times. The second part of the subjoined narrative, describing the passing of the prairie schooners, has its setting in a sixteen-by-sixteen shanty occupied by the family in 1882. The elder Marin was then a salesman for a harvest machine company and spent most of his time in Crookston, seldom visiting the shanty on the prairie, where his son watched the panorama of the fleets of wheeled schooners passing on the trail that led toward the western rim. *Ed.*

LIFE IN A PRAIRIE SOD HOUSE

We were living on a claim in Fairfax Township about ten miles southeast of Crookston in 1880, when a neighbor, Ole Anderson, whose farm was a mile east of us, became disgusted with the country and decided to go back to Fillmore County. My father bought his homestead rights and all his cattle — a herd of about thirty head — and relinquished the rights of his own filing to his brother, Uncle Sam, who with a numerous family was coming from Michigan; so we moved late that fall to our new location. Ole Anderson fixed up his old wagon into a prairie schooner, in which he placed his few household goods and his family and took the back trek to Fillmore County. Thus we were established in a typical frontier homestead, and it proved to be a comparatively permanent residence as we lived there two winters and one summer.

The original Anderson house was a one-story, two-room, frame shack, with a gable roof of the lowest pitch possible. The sides were sodded up to the eaves. Heavy sod from the prairie breaking was one of the principal building materials of the time. The sod was cut about a foot wide, a foot and a half to two feet long, and three or four inches thick. It was laid like brick or stone usually on the outside of a frame shack, with openings for doors and windows, though some of the

houses of the poorer settlers were made entirely of sod. A well-built sod shanty or stable is a black, fortress-like bit of architecture. The veneering usually consisted of one layer of sod, but the walls of some of the sod barns were three and four feet thick. Rain, sun, and wind combined with growing weeds, burrowing field mice, and rotting grass to reduce the sod buildings to a pile of dirt in a few years. Houses veneered with sod were warm in winter. Father built a story-and-a-half addition to the Anderson house, leaving the old part as an ell. He covered the addition with black tar paper, fastening the paper to the outside walls with lath. He then lined the inside with building paper so that we had a warm, comfortable house.

We found that the frost would sometimes gather on our windows half an inch thick so that we could not see out and the light could hardly filter in. During warm periods the frost would melt and run over the floors, and sometimes the freezing and thawing would cause the ice to be several inches thick on the lower parts of the windows. So father put on double windows. This is the first time I remember seeing storm windows in Minnesota. I think it was an original idea with him, but now it is customary throughout the state.

Anderson had started the building of a straw stable, a structure peculiar to the prairies of the Northwest. Such a stable is built of posts that are forked or crotched in the upper end; heavy poles are placed horizontally in the crotches so as to form a framework, and lighter poles are placed across these to hold up the roof. Following the harvest the grain is threshed near this framework and the straw from the carrier is used to supply a heavy cover for it. Frequently a thatch of heavy long prairie grass is placed over the straw to make the roof shed the rain. The drawback to this kind of barn is that it has no windows or ventilation. It is warm, but dark and insanitary for animals, and when the rain gets in through the roof or the drainage is not good, the ground inside becomes a quagmire. In a few years the roof rots so that it is no longer serviceable

and the straw settles, leaving an opening between the roof and the sides. It is necessary either to put more straw over this framework, or, what is better still, to remove the framework and rebuild. For the horses we built a one-story frame stable.

Our home was probably furnished much better than that of the average prairie pioneer. We had an organ, the only one in the neighborhood, and some of the old walnut furniture that we had saved from the hotel fire, including tall walnut beds and dressers and chairs of the U. S. Grant period. Of course there was a whatnot, and we had a rather fine old cherry center table on which reposed a pressed leather family album. Two beds stood side by side at the end of the room that formed the entire downstairs of the main part of the house. These beds were built up almost like small haystacks. First there was a high straw tick. On top of this were a feather tick and innumerable patchwork quilts. In the winter time the house became so cold at night that it was necessary to have plenty of covering. We also had rocking chairs, cane-seated dining-room chairs, and a sofa covered with large figured Brussels. A rag carpet covered the floor and on it were placed at intervals homemade rag rugs. The pictures on the walls were chromos of the style of 1870 that might now be attractive to the amateur curio-seeker who believes that such specimens are valuable antiques. One was a picture of Valley Forge. Enlarged crayon pictures of grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, and other relatives, so commonly seen in the eighties, were conspicuous by their absence in our home. A large wood heater occupied the center of the room, which was neat, clean, and comfortable, and was the center of family life. I cannot remember that we ever had in our home the sacred precincts of a parlor — musty, dank, and severe, closed to everyone but the occasional guest — for we lived each day as best we could, using the entire house. We did not live in the kitchen as was usual with most pioneers.

The kitchen was in the old part of the house and also served as the dining room. Another room in this part was used as a shed or storehouse in winter and as a kitchen in summer. In one corner of the main kitchen stood a large iron cook stove at the back of which was a reservoir for heating water and for melting ice and snow. Wooden homemade cupboards stood against the walls, and in the center of the room was a walnut extension dining table covered with marbled white oilcloth when not in use and with a red and white tablecloth or, on occasions, a white one, at meal time. Heavy wooden chairs, painted brown with yellow stripes, were set around the edge of the room. The floor was made of wide, white pine boards, and it was kept scrupulously white and clean in spite of grease splashed from fried pork and dirt brought in by the men of the family on their shoepacks and overshoes. For lighting we used kerosene lamps most of the time, but had candles also. The majority of the farmers made much use of candles, employing kerosene only for lanterns.

Instead of a stairway leading to the upper story, a hatch was cut in the floor and cleats were nailed to the studding for a ladder. Mother, father, and my sisters slept downstairs, and I slept upstairs with Uncle Jim, the hired man, and any other male who might be a guest. As I was inclined to walk in my sleep, my mother, fearful that I might fall through the hatchway, had a cover made for it, and she religiously saw that it was in place every night after I went to bed. The upstairs contained beds, trunks, and miscellaneous clothing and furniture, and it was more like an attic than anything else. It was heated by a drum attached to the stovepipe. In the early eighties a brick chimney was a rarity in Fairfax Township.

Many of the early settlers did not have the pretentious home, comparatively speaking, that we had. A large majority of the newcomers were young married couples with small children, so that a one-room shanty was all they required. A single room

of small dimensions served as kitchen, bedroom, and parlor all in one. All the furniture, with the exception of the stove and a few chairs, was homemade. A pine table, benches, beds, a trunk or two, a couple of chairs, and a wooden cupboard comprised practically all the furniture. Sometimes a good-sized family lived in one of these small one-room shanties. Two beds, foot to foot, stood across one end of the room. Under the beds were stored during the day the bedding for two other beds to be made up on the floor, and in this way six, eight, or ten persons slept in one small room. Sometimes there was a small attic, probably just high enough at the peak so that the average man could stand upright in it. A ladder led to the attic, where the boys and men slept. When I have visited some of the small homes occupied by large families, I have marveled how everyone was accommodated with sleeping quarters. At threshing time the extra men slept in the straw pile, barn, haystacks, or granary.

A single man keeping "bachelor's hall" in a claim shanty enjoyed another variety of "home life," if the manner in which the average bachelor lived could be called living at all. He had a bed or bunk in the corner, with blankets, quilts, and buffalo robes — no sheets, no pillows, or pillow cases. Here he probably slept every night with most of his clothes on, and he seldom made up the bed. His one room was probably ten by twelve feet, the floor being made of rough, wide, and warped pine boards, with large cracks. It was swept only occasionally and it was never scrubbed until it became enameled with a black coating of gumbo mud and spattered pork grease. The one small dirty window let in a dim light, so that it always appeared to be twilight in the shanty except at night, when a small kerosene lamp, lantern, or candle made one vagrant spot of light in the darkness. The cooking was done on a small rusty cook stove, the tin stovepipe of which went directly through the roof. Against the wall was built a small pine table, on which reposed from day to day the owner's tin

dishes, knives, forks, and coffeepot. A few shelves built against the wall for a cupboard and a couple of pine benches completed the equipment. Outside the door were a bench and a tin washdish, with a grimy flour sack for a towel, and near at hand an old kerosene barrel containing water brought from the nearest buffalo wallow. The housekeeping particulars of such an establishment would not be at all edifying.

The prairie farmer should have been proud of the magnificence of his "machine shed," for the roof was the high dome of the blue sky and the floor the size of his farm. The sun lighted it by day and the moon and stars by night. The machinery was washed by rains and dried by the sun; it was protected by the snow banks in winter; and it was always easy of access when needed. Usually the plow, binder, harrow, and seeder were left just where they were last used in the field. Most farmers were thoughtful enough to remove and put in the granary the canvases from the binder. Around the yard was a miscellaneous assortment of farm machinery, — rusted, faded, and dilapidated, — broken parts, hayracks, old wagons, piles of manure, half-used haystacks, logs hauled from the river for firewood, all landscaped in a shrubbery of ragweed, thistles, and sunflowers.

In winter before going to bed at night the men first removed their boots and heavy clothing, and then their footwear, which was left around the stove — a motley and aromatic array of woolen socks, felt boots, German socks, shoepacks, and overshoes. Stripped down to their pants and red flannel underwear they made a dash for the beds upstairs. Unless father kept the fire going all night, which he did in very cold weather, getting up in the morning was a chilly undertaking. Around the stove we crouched, half asleep and shivering, until we had put on all our heavy, cumbersome clothing by the dim light of a kerosene lamp. Each one then took his turn at the tin washdish, which was on a bench near the kitchen door. We hurried out to the barn with our lanterns to feed the horses and cattle

and do the necessary chores. The cold air of thirty degrees below zero hit our lungs with a burning sensation, for it is usually coldest just before dawn. In the winter the men did the milking. After the chores were done we hurried back to the house for breakfast, which mother had been preparing, and sat down to a meal of salt pork, fried potatoes, pancakes with plenty of pork grease, molasses, and tea. There was a great deal of rivalry as to who could eat the most pancakes. I was told by Uncle Jim that they "would stick to my ribs."

The winter of 1880-81 was a very happy one as I remember it, for we enjoyed visits by friends from town, our neighbors, and the cousins from Michigan; and mother's two brothers, Uncle Jim and Uncle Lant, single men who had filed on claims near by, lived with us most of the time. Several times during the winter our friends came out from town bringing with them old Jeff Martin, a fiddler, and had a dancing party at our house. The downstairs was cleared, the carpets were taken up, and two sets were formed for dancing the square dances that were then popular. Old Jeff played the fiddle and called off at the same time. He sang his calls, and one that I remember was this:

Sashay your pardner,
Bow to the other and sashay back,
But not with honest Johnny.

Then, "tum te um tum" on the fiddle:

First two gents cross over
And leave the ladies stand,
Second two gents cross over
And take them by the hand.

Again, "tum te um tum" on the fiddle:

Oh, your right hand to your pardner,
And your left hand to your neighbor,
Your right hand to the other,
And promenade all.

Then the fiddle went "tum te um tum, tum te um tum, tum te um tum," and so on until old Jeff came to the next call, when

he started the singing again, beating time on the floor with one foot and rasping out the tune on the old fiddle. But I cannot express in print his inimitable tune, peculiar voice, and expressive rendition of his doggerel rhymes. Mother served a lunch, and the evening was spent most enjoyably; as the local paper would say, "A good time was had by all."

I was permitted to sit up and watch the dancing until the party was over, and sometimes a young lady asked me to dance, which made me feel quite honored and grown up. From watching the dancers I knew the different figures and could go through them as well as the grown-ups. Old Jeff played the popular songs of the day and all joined in singing them. Among the most popular were "Little Brown Jug," "Goodbye, My Lover, Goodbye," "Beautiful Isle of the Sea," "My Brave Laddie Sleeps in His Faded Coat of Blue," "Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight," "Dem Golden Slippers," "A Flower from My Angel Mother's Grave," "Silver Threads among the Gold," and a number of other popular lugubrious ballads. It was the vogue to compose verses to "Goodbye, My Lover, Goodbye." I remember a few of these original compositions. One was:

I saw the train go round the bend,
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.
 It was loaded down with railroad men,
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.
 Bye baby, bye O,
 Bye baby, bye O.

Another was:

I saw three crows sit on a limb,
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.
 And one fell off and sang a hymn,
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.

And worse still:

I saw a crow sit on a peg,
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.
 But he fell off and broke a leg
 Goodbye, my lover, goodbye.

There were other verses also about crows, as they were very plentiful on the prairies and aesthetic subjects seemed to be rather limited. So the crow took the popular fancy.

There was a favorite schottische that the dancers sang:

There's a corn on,
There's a corn on,
There's a corn on my toe;
Don't you step on,
Don't you step on,
Don't you step on my toe;
There's a corn on my toe,
There's a corn on my toe,
Don't you step on my toe.

And a polka:

Right foot, left foot,
Any foot at all,
Jennie lost her petticoat
Dancing in the hall.

This is not very subtle humor, we must admit, not "high-brow" and aesthetic, but it bears a strong similarity to some of the recent popular effusions of the "Tin Pan Alley" variety; and human nature was about the same on the prairie as it is today in the city. A woeful ballad that we sang was entitled "Ten o'Clock the Rain Begins to Fall and Nellie is Far from Home." How times have changed! What would the pioneers think of Nellie now? She would not even start from home as early as ten o'clock and nothing but a cyclone or a blizzard could stop her! I presume that Nellie of the present travels more miles in one evening than Nellie of 1880 traveled in all her life.

Obtaining fuel was a problem for the prairie farmer. Many of the farmers stole their wood from the timber along the river. Father owned forty acres of timber land, and in order to save the wood from being stolen he spent a good share of the winter cutting it, hauling it to the farm or to town, or selling it to those neighbors who preferred buying to taking something that did not belong to them. But it was not considered a very serious offense to filch wood from the timber. Even

the owners seemed to take but little interest in the matter. About fifteen miles east of our farm the timber country, where timber and prairie were combined, began, and as it had not yet been surveyed and opened for settlement it was available to nearby settlers. Several times father took me to the woods, where he had built a hut of logs with brush and straw for a roof. The chinks between the logs were not filled in, so it was as cold inside as outside. There was no floor. In the center was a big heating stove, which father kept filled with green wood. The beds were made on the floor of brush and straw and were covered with blankets and buffalo robes. At night we went to sleep wearing all our clothes and footwear and with our caps on our heads. I dearly loved these adventurous trips to the woods, even though I had to eat father's biscuits.

Securing water for the horses and stock and for family use was another difficulty that we had to meet. Water could not be obtained by digging an ordinary well. For a few weeks during the spring there would be surface water in the well, with a bitter alkali taste, but it would soon dry up. Our water supply came from the buffalo wallows and the nearest one was about half a mile away. The horses and cattle were driven there to drink, but the supply for the family had to be hauled in barrels. We kept an extra quantity on hand in case of a blizzard. This water was stagnant and not fit for drinking purposes, so mother boiled it and made tea, which she let cool. Our usual drink was cold tea, of which we always had an ample supply. I think that this sanitary precaution, which she did not take from any scientific knowledge but because the water was itself so unpalatable, saved us from having typhoid fever, then prevalent among our neighbors. For drinking purposes we also melted ice, which we hauled from the Red Lake River in huge blocks nearly three feet thick. A disagreeable side of the water problem that fell to my share in winter was cutting the ice out of the barrels. A coating of ice would form on the inside of the barrels, until after a while they held little water and became too

heavy to handle. They were then taken into the shed, and it was my duty to chop out the ice with a hatchet. When no one else was available I went along to the buffalo wallow with father or the hired man and stood on the wagon step while he dipped the water out of the water hole and handed the pail up to me to empty into the barrel. My mittens got wet and my hands freezing cold. The water dripped over my clothing from head to heels and froze until I was a mass of ice. A gunny sack was filled with straw and placed in the hole that we had chopped in the ice in order to keep it from freezing over.

In dry summer seasons the buffalo wallows dried up. Then we got our water from the well of a neighbor who had dug deep down into the blue clay. But the water had a bluish color, a fearful smell, and a worse taste. We let it stand several days before we could drink it. Some years during the threshing season, water for the threshing engine had to be hauled from the river five miles away.

It was my job to bring the wood from the yard into the house, and, as we burned a considerable quantity, this kept me fairly busy during the day. Often I stood at one end of the crosscut saw and helped saw the logs. Some of the cottonwood logs were very large. The best wood was oak, but we also used basswood, "popple," and elm. During a good share of the winter father and my two uncles were down on the timber lot, and the chores around the farm were done by the hired man and myself.

By the time the second winter on the prairie arrived we were aware of the fact that we were living in a very severe climate and that the heaviest and warmest clothing was necessary for our comfort, especially for men working out of doors, driving teams and hauling wood, grain, ice, and logs. Our clothing included at least one suit of red flannel underwear, — sometimes two, — a flannel shirt, a heavy coat, a vest, two pairs of pants, either a fur cap or one of heavy fur-lined cloth, a muffler, and a buffalo coat. Two or three pairs of

mittens with leather ones on the outside were absolutely necessary. Even with all this clothing it was impossible to keep warm when sitting on top of a load with a slow-moving team. The driver had to get off the load frequently, walking and slapping his arms around under his shoulder blades to keep himself warm. It took us several years to solve the problem of proper footwear. The first winter we had woolen socks and shoepacks. The socks did not come up to the knees and the shoepacks, which were made of cowhide without soles, became so slippery that it was almost impossible to walk without taking a tumble. The shoepacks were soon discarded for heavy overshoes and the woolen socks for felt boots, made of a brown and gray mixture a quarter of an inch or more thick and shaped like a sock. They were very cumbersome and clumsy to walk in, would wrinkle, crack, break, and wear out at the ankle; and so in a few years they also were discarded as impracticable. They were succeeded by German socks reaching up to just below the knees and fastened at the top with a small belt and buckle. In later years the footwear that was found most serviceable was a heavy rubber shoepack with a rubber corrugated sole and a leather top, laced, reaching to the knees, and large enough to permit the wearing of several pairs of socks.

The early settlers were ignorant of the best farming methods suitable for the Red River Valley and had to learn through dear experience. Many mistakes were made. Fortunately the soil was fertile and had not become foul with foreign seeds or worn out by constant cropping without proper rotation. During the first years we raised our potatoes in a primitive way. When we did our breaking in early summer, the seed was dropped into the furrow. A second round of the plow covered the seed. There was no subsequent cultivation during the summer. When the breaking was backset in the fall, the crop was turned and picked. We did this during the first few years in the region until our farms were under cultivation.

During this period we produced immense crops of wheat. There were very few cattle, almost no hogs, and sheep were a rarity. No horses were raised at first, so horses were shipped in principally from Iowa, a good team costing from four to six hundred dollars. The southern horses were not acclimated and died off by the hundreds; thus the settlers literally paid for dead horses. We had a binder that used wire instead of twine, which cost three hundred dollars and was not a very efficient piece of machinery. It took at least five horses to haul one of these cumbersome machines, and at times I have seen seven or eight used, depending upon the stand of the grain. My job during harvest was to ride the lead horse next to the grain. I ended a day on a horse with a grain sack for a saddle galled, weary, and about "all in."

School opened in the spring of 1881 in Hans Clausen's shanty, about two and a half miles away from our home. Hans was a bachelor who was working for the summer on one of the bonanza farms. One of my sisters and myself were supposed to attend, but we went only off and on. There were no bridges over the creeks, the distance was great, the weather was frequently bad, and we had to pass through tall wet grass; thus we could not attend regularly. I do not think I lost much. The teachers in the country schools were those who could obtain only a third-grade certificate, which was given to almost anyone for the asking. They could teach beginners the alphabet and the first, second, and third readers; have pupils copy from the copy books; and teach spelling; but these things were about their limit. Arithmetic went as far as long division, and it was some time before any attempt was made to teach grammar. Nearly all my education during my prairie life was obtained from the school books themselves and from what mother and my older sister taught me. Early in our lives mother bought us story books, such as *Mother Goose*, *Chatterbox*, and *St. Nicholas*, and from these I learned to read at a very early age. I was far ahead of the other pupils of my age, and I think at

times I was impertinent enough to pit my knowledge against that of some of the teachers. The school was a simple affair. Anywhere from five to a dozen pupils attended, and when we had fifteen we thought it remarkable. We had long homemade pine desks and benches during the first years; there were no blackboards and no other equipment except a globe and a chart for the beginners. Eventually father induced the district to build a schoolhouse nearer our farm, and after that we attended more regularly. But the ability of the teachers did not improve to any appreciable degree.

Our amusements were simple: "pullaway," and "drop the handkerchief," and "one old cat" played with a homemade yarn ball and a piece of board for a bat. We played several singing games, such as "Here Come Two Dukes A'Roving," "London Bridge Is Falling Down," "I Come to See Miss Jennie-a Jones," "Charley, he loves cakes and wine, Charley he loves candy, Charley loves to kiss the girls, when they come round so handy." In later years, after the roads were graded and the heavy clay was thrown up in the center, we would throw hard chunks of clay at one another in contests very much like snow-ball battles. These battles, which took place when we divided up into parties to go home from school, were about the most exciting incidents of school life. The school was in session usually for three months in summer, and as a rule only children under ten or twelve years attended, as the older ones worked in the fields. Once or twice we had an early spring term. In fact I attended school so casually that it has left but little impression on my mind.

We had about twenty-five head of cattle, and in the summer the care of them fell to me. Our pasture was small and poorly fenced with pine two-by-fours for posts strung with two wires. It was soon eaten bare and the cattle broke out, so we had to let them run. The result was that it became necessary to herd the cattle — a job that fell to me. As there were very few cultivated fields east of our place, I usually drove the cattle in

this direction so that they would not interfere with any of the neighbors. I had an old white horse named "Sam." Having no saddle, I used a grain sack with a surcingle; as I had no stirrups I could only mount Sam from a wagon or block of wood or some other elevation. When once away from the yard and on the prairie I did not dare to dismount, as there was not a stump, rock, or elevation of any kind to be found there. Ordinarily the cattle ranged near the farm, so it was only necessary to keep them out of the fields and see that they did not stray too far.

The Red River Valley is the bottom of Glacial Lake Agassiz, which extended from Lake Traverse northward on both sides of the Red River for a considerable distance and included the present Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. This lake drained through the Minnesota River into the Mississippi because the southern end of the glacier melted first. The northern part of the glacier, acting as a dam, prevented the water from flowing north in its natural course. As soon as the glacier disappeared the lake drained to the north through the Nelson River to Hudson Bay. The water, gradually receding, left beaches and ridges of sand and gravel that still can be easily traced. It covered about a hundred and ten thousand square miles, an area somewhat larger than that of the Great Lakes. The country extending about thirty miles on either side of the Red River was the last bed of this lake, and when it was finally drained it left a perfectly level stretch of country with an alluvial deposit of black soil from one to three feet deep — one of the richest soils to be found anywhere in the world.

An old beach or sand ridge about twenty-five to thirty feet higher than the prairie to the west was five miles east of our farm. In the summer on Sundays we frequently took excursions to this ridge, from which we had an extensive view of the valley. We considered this a wonderful trip and a beautiful scene. On the ridge grew buffalo grass, short, wiry, and very

nutritious, of which the cattle were very fond—so fond, indeed, that every time they had the chance they went the entire five miles to the ridge just for the purpose of feeding on this grass. Headed by “Crumpie,” a half Jersey and half scrub cow, they started out in single file, making a bee line for the ridge. Then it was my job to get on old Sam to head them off and bring them back. But sometimes they had too long a start and were too fast for poor old Sam. Then father or the hired man took a faster horse or team to go after them.

In the late summer and fall when the grass had become dry, the country was traversed up and down and crisscross, depending upon the direction of the wind, by immense prairie fires that would sweep for miles and miles until stopped by farmers' fields. East of our place extending to the ridge, however, was a stony tract of country where there were no settlers and few fields to stop the sweep of the prairie fires. The fires caused great damage if property was not plowed around for protection. The farm buildings were protected by eight or ten furrows plowed in a large circle around the yard. Inside this circle another circle was plowed and the grass in between was burned. The same plan was followed with reference to haystacks and any other property that needed protection from fires.

It was a remarkable sight, especially at night, to watch a prairie fire coming down the wind like a race horse. In the swales the grass and wild pea vines were from two to four feet high. Very little of this was cut for hay. Since there was no market for hay we cut only a small part of the meadows for our own use. As a result there was a wide expanse of prairie for the fires, and many times we had them on all sides until the entire country was black and bare except for the fields, low wet spots, patches, and strips that had escaped. At night we watched the fires race across the prairies, the flames leaping probably ten to twelve feet high in the swales and roaring like an express train. When we did not get our protection furrows

plowed in time there was a frantic effort to plow in front of the rapidly approaching fire. We plowed the furrows on the side from which the fire was coming, but when it had nearly passed, it came in with an attack on the flanks and on the rear. Then it was not with the wind and did not have its original force. If we had not time to plow the entire circle, we fought the side and rear fires with wet grain sacks, pounding them out as fast as we could. The struggle was hot and exciting until we finally conquered, and it left us with blistered hands, scorched faces, and burned clothes.

One day in the fall, father, mother, and the hired man had gone to town. Playing around the yard I forgot all about the cattle until I discovered that they had disappeared. I knew from experience that they would go straight to the ridge. So I mounted old Sam and started after them. I finally overtook them four or five miles away and started back home just before dark fell over the bleak strip of stony prairie between the ridge and our farm. Shortly after I had started in the direction of home I saw in the distance a prairie fire coming up from the south with the wind. I hurried the cattle as fast as I could, but apparently that was not fast enough. The fire was still a considerable distance away, but was coming down rapidly, a line of flame on a frontage of probably three or four miles, with nothing between to stop it. I had no matches with which to build a back-fire, so my only hope was to get home before the fire could reach my line of travel. The fire was coming nearer and nearer. I was still a mile from home when I saw that my situation was hopeless. Fortunately I came to a small meadow of a few acres where the hay had been cut, leaving a short stubble grass. The fire would not be very heavy when it struck this small, cut-over meadow and my only salvation was in keeping the cattle within this area until the fire swept by. The cattle, because I had been driving them so fast, had become much excited by this time. I decided to halt them in the

meadow. I circled around them several times, until finally I stopped them just as the fire was close upon us. Then the cattle became stupefied and paralyzed with fear and huddled together. The smoke came rolling over us with the flames crackling and roaring. When the fire struck the meadow the blaze was not more than eight or ten inches high and when it came within fifty yards I took the grain sack off of Sam and fought the fire, stamping out a piece sufficiently wide to drive the cattle through, back onto burned ground. I did this successfully and, as I could not mount Sam again, I had to drive the cattle home on foot. It was a scared, weary, and blistered little boy who came home about nine o'clock that night to a frantic mother. Mother and father had arrived home a short time before and father and the hired man were out hunting for me, but not being able to find me had just circled back to the house as I came up with the cattle. Much to my chagrin I was scolded and warned never again to venture onto the prairie alone so far from home when the grass was dry and prairie fires were frequent.

THE PASSING OF THE PRAIRIE SCHOONERS

In the summer of 1882 we occupied a shanty about fifty feet from a trail where passed a great many prairie schooners coming from the south and going on to Dakota. The summer previous we saw the schooners from a distance of two miles, but we did not come in close contact with them except occasionally when we crossed the trail going to or from school. Traffic was over the old Pembina trail, which was about ten or twelve miles east of our place. This trail was the route followed by the old Red River carts hauling furs to St. Paul and supplies back to Pembina, a fort on the Canadian boundary in Dakota. The prairie schooners left the main trail southeast of our place, following a slight elevation that ran northwest through our land and that gave them a comparatively dry and solid trail until

they got nearly to Crookston. From there they went west to the Red River, crossing at Grand Forks, and then spread out over the prairies of Dakota Territory.

The emigrants were either too poor to pay railroad transportation for their families, stock, and machinery, or their destinations were points not yet reached by the railroads. In the latter case a certain amount of trekking was necessary and they made the entire journey by schooner. The prairie schooner was a wagon with the ordinary wagon box, on which were fitted arched bows. Canvas was stretched over these bows and the interior was the home of the wayfaring family. It held their furniture, clothes, and food, and furnished their sleeping quarters at night. The women and children rode inside. The settlers camped by the roadside, usually near a grove and stream. The styles of the different outfits varied greatly. Some had new wagons, bright with paint, with fine white canvas covers and sprightly teams of horses. Others had old rickety wagons hauled by scarecrows of horses, mules, or oxen; the bows or arches were made of anything they could get — sticks and barrel hoops tied together, or bent saplings — and were covered with old horse blankets, rag carpets, or patchwork quilts.

We watched the schooners come up from the south, zig-zagging up the tortuous trail like ships beating up against the wind. Slowly they drew nearer — sometimes one, sometimes five or six in a fleet. Out to the road we went to watch them pass, as it was the only event of interest from one day to another. Usually the woman was sitting at the front driving the team, and beside her or peeking out of the front opening were a flock of dirty, tousled, tow-headed children. Often she held a small baby in her arms. Behind followed a small herd of cattle or horses driven by the man and the boys on foot, for the rate of travel was a walk.

Sometimes they stopped to inquire about the road or to chat a few minutes. They told us where they came from,

Fillmore or Goodhue County in Minnesota, or Wisconsin, or Iowa. Most of them were on their way to Larimore, Devil's Lake, Church's Ferry, or some other point far distant from a railroad in Dakota. We were never bothered by the emigrants and so we had absolutely no fear of them. They were one of us and we were one of them — only, we had arrived. No doubt they had the same hopes and dreams as we had and went through the same experiences that we did. I have often wondered about them since, whether they passed on to a promised land that at least in part fulfilled their expectations or whether they met disappointment, discouragement, and failure. Have I run across some of the skippers of those schooners or their crews in after life in my journeyings in North Dakota, none of us realizing that we hailed one another near a little tarpapered shanty on the prairie ten miles southeast of Crookston? I know it would give me a romantic thrill to meet again one who remembers the slim tow-headed boy who stood barefooted and bareheaded gazing wistfully as he waved and shouted his greetings, wishing that he also could follow the Gypsy Trail.

As all the water we had was what was hauled for us from the buffalo wallows at intervals by Uncle Jim, the covered wagon travelers did not camp near us, but journeyed on until they got to the river. The only refreshment we could offer was a little cold tea. Probably they had advance information as to the various watering places and made their day's journey accordingly.

The number of schooners that passed our shanty in the summer of 1882 seemed endless. From ten to fifty would pass day in and day out. The year 1882 marked the beginning of a big migration to Dakota. I remember one outfit of half a dozen wagons with three or four hundred head of cattle and horses. The road that passed our shanty was not a public highway, but there was no good reason why we should refuse any peaceable traveler the right of way. It was not the custom of the pioneer to act the dog in the manger. But the road ran

between our wheat field and Uncle Jim's and it was only a trail about ten feet wide, with the green grain just heading out on both sides. If a large herd of cattle and horses went through, it would do considerable damage. Mother, like Horatius at the bridge, went out and halted the party. Politely she explained the circumstances and asked the settlers to drive their horses and cattle around our field to the south. This they refused to do, but she courageously held her ground and warned them that if they went through she would go to town to swear out a warrant for their arrest and she even told me to get ready to go to Uncle Jim's to borrow his team to drive her to town. The leaders, after consultation, decided to go around our field. The schooners passed through and the horses and cattle were driven around. Mother's courageous stand no doubt made them feel that she meant every word she said and would do just as she threatened, and I think they acted wisely when they did as she wished. That was the only trouble we had with the hundreds of schooners that passed by our door.

When the weather became cold the schooners ceased coming and in 1883 they were much fewer in number. A year or two thereafter they passed only occasionally. We had seen what was probably the last of the great Hegira to Dakota by prairie schooner. Slowly the wagons passed on, the children now peeking from the opening in the rear, the schooner receding into the distance, very much like a real ship plowing its way over a trackless sea and then disappearing below the horizon.

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