PROFILE OF A PIONEER WOMAN

By

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By a grateful daughter-in-law

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Pioneers had to be brave, adaptable and indestructable; they had to be other things as well, but these three were the most important characteristics. My mother-in-law, whose name was Hansine, was a perfect example, as she combined all the virtues needed to survive in the 1880's, when life may have been simpler but sometimes a lot more strenuous.

Ever since she got married, Grandma had worked as a horse. Up to a day or two before their oldest girl, Nora, was born, she had spent six to eight hours every day, pitching marl up out of pits, that gradually got deeper as she dug. Marl is heavy, claylike stuff, wet and cold. She dug it, and pitched it up from the pit, and Grandpa loaded it on a low wagon and hauled it out to the nearby field, where it was spread like manure. As their farm was very sandy it needed a lot of marl.

Grandpa's mother stayed with them till she died. But as she was very old and feeble, she couldn't help much with the housework or cooking. And Grandpa would never go out in the field or to the marlpits until Grandma finished her daily morning chores and was ready to go with him. Apparently he never forgot the time he had been strawboss over three or four farmworkers, but that didn't ease Grandma's lot very much. I hope my readers realize all this happened before the family emigrated, and I'll just mention one more thing. Before they were married, when they both were working on one of the big estates, I believe, though no one is sure about the time, Grandma was allowed the use of an acre of land to raise flax on. She did all the work on this, from cutting and soaking it, and carding it, then spinning it, at last paying a weaver to weave it into sheets. These -- there were four -- she brought with her to South Dakota. As she didn't have any furniture with drawers or any chest when she lived in the sod shack, she dug a square space like a cupboard out of the hillside that formed the back wall of the cabin. When she needed the linen for good dresses for some of the girls and took it out, the rain had leaked down on her precious sheets and they were completely ruined by rot and mildew. It nearly broke Grandma's heart.

We will never know how she dared to cross the Atlantic, when it took a small ship six weeks of poor grub, uncomfortable sleeping quarters, and vermin (lice) that infested everything she had been so particular to have immaculate before embarking. And she was not alone; far from it. She brought ten children aged from two to twelve years and a cantankerous husband who required as much attention as the children.

After the long trip at sea, came the landing and confusion of New York, then the tiresome train trip to South Dakota. Here, glory be, were other Danes that she could talk to and understand and so learn what the conditions were like and how to cope with them.

The family lived the first months in a typical "homesteader's cabin". It consisted of one room only and when the weather was bad it was a tight fit, but as soon as they got a barn built, the boys slept in the loft. Grandpa knew how to crack the whip and he got as much work out of the boys as he could, but as soon as they got big enough they left home, and

worked somewhere else where they got money besides bed and board.

But Grandma and the girls carried on. In the beginning Grandma had a baby every year, if not more. Once she had a boy, Mike, January third. Then the beginning of December she had twins. Only the girl lived, Sine. As a rule she didn't carry them full time as she was working too hard. After the twins she only had one girl that lived -- Dagmar -- and she stayed at home after all the rest got married or got jobs away from home.

The first few years they had no transportation but a stone-boat and oxen. Then they some way acquired a buggy and a mule, which made them as happy as it would make you or I to get a Cadillac. They all, except Grandma, rode the mule when they took the stock down to the James River, spent the day herding them, and took the cows home at milking time, which the cows knew better than the kids. This job fell to the ones who weren't old enough to go to school.

There were lots of tragedies in the colony. But Grandma never turned down a call for help; whether it came day or night, for birth or dying, Grandma went to help her neighbors when they were in trouble. There were not very many good rigs in the district then and many times she rode on a stone-boat, in the dark of night, for several hours, only to be beaten an hour or two by the stork. Things got better as time went by. One year the corn was simply magnificent, and hopes were high for a good harvest. But the day before the harvest was to start, a cyclone and tornado winds brought such a downpour of rain and hailstones that the corn was completely flattened and all the smaller chickens were killed.

Another year, everything seemed to go well and Grandma was figuring on how many nice dresses she could sew on the sewing machine Nora had got instead of wages when she had worked in town. Then one fine warm day the swarming locusts came, and when they moved on, they took everything with them but the sewing machine; that year the only income came from Grandma's butter, and that almost failed as the storekeeper had no cold storage to keep it in and everyone made butter that year.

Then came a year when there was not enough moisture in the ground or in the skies to get the seed to germinate. So Grandma and the girls that were left, carried water from the creek and watered the vegetables until the creek went dry, so there were a few vegetables to eat with the fryers and the eggs, and nobody really starved. After a few years there was a nice bunch of cows to milk, and the girls that were still home and Grandma, walked the three miles down to the river, where the stock stayed most of the time, milked the cows, and hauled the milk home on the stoneboat that was pulled by the ox. But once, after a really hot day, Grandma got the scare of her life. When her favorite cow got up from the grass, a big, fat gartersnake was hanging on one of her teats! She never would milk that cow again, though it was one of the easiest to milk, a fact which the snake had been lucky enough to discover.

Grandma had always been religious. When she was a girl she had attended one of the first Folk-High Schools when they were started in Denmark. Later she had sung in a famous choir. So, when anything was planned by the colony, like inviting the circuitrider, it naturally fell to her lot to put him up and feed him, and see that he got to the church or school, wherever he was to preach. It was not always easy to keep ten kids, five of them boys, quiet and decorous during the several days his visit lasted. But it was managed even

if it sometimes required Grandpa's help. One time that help was needed was when one of the boys jumped from the top of the stairs and landed on the broad back of the preacher, whom he mistook for his older brother. This required a good deal of apology and he never came back again.

Another time, when two of the boys were scuffling at the top of the cellar stairs one of them lost his balance, fell down in the cellar, landing in a full pan of skim milk that Grandma was carrying up to give to the pigs. The pigs went milkless that day as Grandma, boy, the milkpan and two gallons of milk all landed on the hard cellar floor. Luckily the pan was tin or there wouldn't have been anything left of it.

By the change of the century all the girls except Dagmar were married; the last of the boys had wangled a job in the roundhouse in Mitchell and boarded with his oldest sister. It began to look as if there would be lots of work on the farm for Grandpa. But then Mike, who was planning to become a railroader, was discovered to be colorblind in one eye, and at the same time the news spread all over the state that there was free land for homesteading in Canada, in Alberta, in fact. So Grandpa took a trip up to Alberta, liked what he saw, went back to South Dakota and had a sale of all his property there. This was in the fall of 1902, and in the spring of 1903 Grandma, Grandpa, and Dagmar arrived in Claresholm, about halfway between the U.S.A. border and Calgary. In another week Mike arrived having made the trip in a box car loaded with furniture and livestock.

So the family started pioneering again. This time Grandma had an extra burden to bear; she had to learn to talk English, something she never had to do, having lived in a colony all the time in South Dakota.

Grandpa and Mike took up land side by side, building a cottage and a barn on the line between the two farms. Mike hauled the lumber from a sawmill up in the foothills west of town. 1902 had been a very wet year and many of the farmers, who had got in on the first landrush, didn't like that kind of climate and sold out their livestock and their implements and left for greener pastures. Grandpa was pretty well heeled after selling all his property by auction before he left South Dakota, so he bought a lot of stock when it was offered to him, and in a few years Grandma and Dagmar were milking about twenty cows, feeding calves and a big flock of ducks and what was left from churning butter fattened a nice bunch of pigs.

As there was no other store or post office or stopping place between Claresholm and the Little Bow river settlements, Grandpa soon built an addition to his house, laid in a stock of groceries and some dry goods, and now he was a storekeeper. As the homesteaders kept coming, he also succeeded in getting a Post Office located in his store. This was called Elinor, for no discoverable reason.

As soon as the country was sufficiently fenced, the neighborhood organized a "barb-wire telephone" and naturally the switchboard was in the store.

There was lots of traffic between the eastern districts around Barhill and Bowville, and the town of Claresholm, where the train made connection with the two big towns, Calgary and Macleod, every day. Most of it was made up of riders and they all, more or less, stopped at the Post Office. They could and did, tie their horses in Mike's barn and sleep in the loft, but it was up to Grandma to feed them. Sometimes if there was one who didn't hit

the Post Office at mealtime, he bought crackers and cheese or sardines and ate, and after watering his horse at the pond, took off again, but mostly there were guests for supper.

Dagmar was roustabout. She drove the fifteen miles to Claresholm three times a week for the mail, come rain or come shine. Then she minded the Post Office and the switchboard when Grandpa was busy. In her spare time she kept track of the growing bunch of horses and cattle that ranged from the United States border to above High River.

Mike had started a blacksmith shop as soon as they had roofs over their heads, and he added a hardware store after a year or so. Here he worked, from sixteen to twenty hours a day, from spring till the snow fell. The place prospered and Grandma got to know hundreds of travellers. This was also pioneering and it was almost more strenuous than her first stint. But there was one thing she had to give up. She simply didn't have the strength any more to spend hours over a woman who was having a baby after having fed a half or a dozen men with almost no help. And we must not forget, she did not get her bread or milk delivered to the door, her stove was a coal range, her illumination came from a kerosene lamp and only the older ones among us know how much time is spent on them, every day, if they are to function properly. No one ever counted how many loaves of bread she baked in a month, or how many pounds of her delicious butter she churned to go with it. Of course, all the cream was skimmed by hand as she didn't have a cream separator. Then figure out how much meat she cured and cooked, not to mention the dozens of eggs she used in her baking, or served on the table.

It must have been a relief to her when her busy life was uprooted after five or six years, most of the farm buildings jacked up and moved into the new town of Barons, eight miles east, that was expected to become a big town on the new Canadian Pacific Railway line from Lethbridge to Calgary.

Barons was the first town to ship a million bushels of No. 1 Northern Wheat in one year. So naturally emigrants flocked in to take up homesteads in this fertile valley. The Post Office was moved first, probably, and in no time it was in full swing, and Mike built a huge addition to his hardware store. But until an enterprising Chinese opened the first restaurant, Grandma still spent most of her waking hours over the cookstove.

As she got older, her bouts with asthma and bronchitis were getting worse, and just at the time when she could really afford to sit back and rest on her laurels, she had to give up the struggle, and she passed away, in 1918.

When you stop and figure out the immense amount of work she accomplished, all this talk of a forty-hour week is pure drivel. And don't forget, on top of all her everyday labor, she had helped at least five hundred babies into the world. That alone would have merited a famous medal or decoration, if she hadn't done another lick of work!

THE END

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