1-1-1998

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OUR PRAIRIE MOTHER

BY JANE CLAIRE

Child of the wind-swept plains, our Mother, Lydia Gates, was born in 1872, 126 years ago, near Nebraska City, Nebraska. For well over half of her eighty-two years she lived in prairie states where she developed independence and self-reliance in response to the wide expanse of openness around her.

When Mother was nineteen, her young husband died of typhoid fever, leaving her with an infant daughter and a second child on its way. Since she had no education beyond the grades and no preparation for independent living, in order to support herself and her two small daughters, she took a brief normal school course and found a job as a teacher in a rural Kansas school, leaving the little girls with their father’s parents part of the time.

Three years later she married a young farmer, Peter Dirks, who became our father. They set up housekeeping near Pawnee Rock in western Kansas not far from the home of Mother’s parents and her younger brothers. Family ties were strong. In a few years, with little Charlie and baby Katie, our parents moved to a home about three miles from Mother’s only sister.

In this small dwelling the main room, an area of about 12 x 14 feet, was made of sod cut from the prairie soil. That room served as living and bedroom. Its sod walls were papered. Each year after harvest a layer of fresh straw several inches thick was spread over the earthen floor and covered with a hand-woven rag rug. The room had four small windows, each about two feet square, and was warm in winter, cool in summer. One entered the sod room through a smaller wooden framed kitchen.

The furnishings were sparse and consisted of a kitchen cook stove, which heated both rooms, a small table, a straight chair for each person, a bed, a trundle bed for the children, a rocking chair which did double-duty as crib for the baby, perhaps a small chest of drawers, a trunk, and not much else.

Here, two more daughters were born. Much of the picture of Mother and her early life has emerged from reminiscences of these elder siblings.

At that time—about the turn of the century—at least half the land between the sod house and the town of Burdett, seven miles away, was unbroken prairie where herds of cattle ranged at will.

Prairie dog towns, occupied also by owls and rattlesnakes, were common. Coyotes roamed about feeding on prairie dogs, smaller rodents, and grasshoppers.

Near windmills, where cattle gathered to drink and rest, accumulations of “cow chips” dried rapidly in the summer sun. From time
to time, Father took the older children in a wagon to one of these areas to gather a supply of fuel for their summer's cooking and winter's warmth.

One lone 25-foot cottonwood tree beside the well across the road, stood out in sharp contrast to the unbroken prairie pastureland and small wheat fields.

The only other trees anywhere near were a mile away--a windbreak of plums which a neighbor had planted on three sides of his house. To the children that place was a veritable oasis, for a windmill there was kept a pond filled with water, and sometimes they could catch a fish on a hook baited with a ball of dough.

As a young girl Mother had enjoyed riding horseback, so she would confidently hitch "Old Jin" to the buggy and take the children for visits at the home of her sister's family.

Charlie remembered one of the delights of his childhood was crossing the creek on the way to Aunt Dell's. He was fascinated as they passed through the thicket of shrubs--cottonwoods, blackberries, and elms and intrigued by the wild gourds, devil's claws, giant sunflowers, rattlesnakes, and strange creatures he saw. In contrast with the treeless plains this seemed to him a vast woodland. He could not imagine a forest like those Mother read about, stretching for miles and miles--so large and dark that a person could get lost.

Trials and vicissitudes were met with courage and imagination. A blue racer snake crawled into the sod house. Not knowing what else to do, Mother had six-year-old Charlie bring two flat irons from the stove to hold the snake down while she ran outside to get a hoe with which to kill it.

Centipedes living in the sod walls, broke through the wallpaper now and then and dropped onto the table or the blanket covering the baby. Once a little skunk got into the sod wall and couldn't get out. Father took down part of the wall from the outside to remove the skunk because its crying kept him and Mother awake at night.

Every home had a dug-out "cyclone cellar" near the kitchen door. Violent thunderstorms, often cyclonic in nature, came up suddenly on the prairie. Katie recalled one cloudy and sultry summer afternoon when Mother thought it best to take the children to the cellar until the funnels moved away from the horizon and rain began pelting down as the storm passed by.

One of the little girls got a clock wheel stuck in her throat and the parents tried desperately to get it out. Finally in near-panic they rushed her to the neighbors' home where somehow, to the relief of all, the wheel was finally dislodged.

In the late fall of Katie's sixth year the weather became unusually severe, and she developed bronchial pneumonia. That illness hung on so long that the doctor held no hope for the little girl's recovery unless the family moved to a milder climate, suggesting the Ozarks of Missouri.

So it was that the Dirks family left the sod house and, like many other farmers and renters, began a series of frequent moves, always looking for a better place but often slipping backward because of crop failures. Life
was hard. Besides Kansas and Missouri our parents lived in eastern Washington, Arkansas, and Oregon—making at least 27 moves before the final one to Arlington, Washington, where they spent their last years.

The number of children increased to ten. Mother’s first two daughters spent much of their time with their father’s family. Before I, the last child, was born, the older children were beginning to leave home and make their own livelihood.

Like many other families of the era we were largely raised by adage. We often heard:

“A child should always say what’s true
And speak when he is spoken to,
And behave mannerly at table
At least as far as he is able.”

And such expressions as “Waste not, want not,” “A stitch in time saves nine.” “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again,” And Myrtle says she can still hear Mother saying, “What can’t be cured must be endured.”

The apparent sameness of the prairie challenged Mother to develop a sensitivity to its beauty and detail, an ear for its myriad sounds: the strident chirping of crickets, the melodious song of meadowlarks, the plaintive cry of killdeer, the sharp staccato voice of coyotes, the whisper— or roar—of wind sweeping across the prairie. This appreciation she shared with her children. She treasured all life forms—flowers, birds, prairie dogs, even skunks—and encouraged little Charlie’s curiosity about grasshoppers, walking sticks, and other insects, a fascination which led him to a career as professor of entomology.

The following verse by Irene Stanley, as paraphrased, might have been written about our Mother:

“This was our mother, always slight of form,
Yet great of strength in any chilling storm—
Our prairie mother, brown haired, gray-eyed, warm
Possessor of the poet’s heart and eye.
Entranced by all things beautiful and high,
Her gaze turned often to the open sky.”

Harshness of the environment may have stimulated in Mother the gentleness which governed relationships all through her life. She was always soft-spoken, uncomplaining, not judgmental towards others. A peacemaker.

To me Mother was the epitome of the virtuous woman described in Proverbs.

Mother constantly sought good schools for her children. No doubt some of the frequent moving was the result of this quest, though she must have realized that such moving was psychologically and socially disruptive.
to us. I was the only one of the children who was privileged to attend the same high school for all four years, and that came only after I had gone to at least seven different grade schools.

In spite of many difficulties, financial and otherwise, four of us graduated from college, one son and a daughter each earned Ph.D. degrees, the other son attained the rank of Captain in the US Coast Guard, and the remaining daughters, largely through their own efforts, became more literate than the average person.

I like to think that the nearly limitless visible expanse across the prairie gave rise in Mother to a far-sighted, distant vision of the future. Realizing that she and Father would never be able to give us--their children--much in the way of worldly goods, she encouraged us in our efforts to obtain an education--a far more valuable heritage.