

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A NEBRASKA PIONEER

By Clarissa Palmer Griswold

The strain of pioneer blood in some families seems to ever beckon them onward to the west. Some of my English ancestors settled in Ithaca, New York, where my father William H. Palmer, was born. The family moved from there to Ohio, and later to Grant County, Wisconsin. I, his eldest daughter, came to northwest Nebraska to live, and one of my daughters has her home in Hawaii, which goes to prove my point of the westward urge.

My father received his education in Wisconsin, studied law and was admitted to the Bar, but soon gave up this profession for that of teaching, which he followed for most of his long life. He was married shortly before the Civil War, but enlisted and served until its close.

I was born in Wisconsin, but soon moved to Iowa, and later to Minnesota. It was to our home there, that glowing reports came of thrills experienced, and fortunes made by some of those who took homesteads in the territory of Dakota. In some case young women had taken claims adjoining, had a house built covering a corner of each piece of land, and lived together until time to prove up, and receive a deed to the land. These talks were most alluring to me, and some of my girl friends; but before any plan of ours matured, an invitation came to me from a friend, Mrs. F.W. Sellors, to visit her at her home on a ranch near Ainsworth, Nebraska: with the added inducement that land could be procured in western Nebraska by meeting the conditions of the federal government. I embraced this opportunity and reached Ainsworth September first, 1885.

I had always been accustomed to the hills and woods near the Mississippi river, and did not find the prairie attractive; but youth likes change and I found the people cordial and friendly. Mr. Sellors had started a store at Rushville, some two hundred miles further west, and intended to put in another in Sioux County the following spring; at which time the Northwestern Railroad was to be extended on into Wyoming. It was predicted there would be a town just east of the Wyoming line which would doubtless be the county seat of Sioux County. Private surveying had been done there and desirable claims were available.

I went to Valentine the nearest land office, and filed for a pre-emption and a tree claim. These pieces of land proved to be near the future town of Bowen, which name was later changed to Harrison. Let me say there that Mrs. Sellors promised to be with me during the six months necessary to prove up but later found she was unable to do.

Mrs. Sellors talked much of a certain Dwight Griswold who had come west in search of relief from inflammatory rheumatism. He had come from Harlan, Iowa to Ainsworth, then gone with Mr. Sellors to Rushville, and they were to partners in a new store in Sioux County.

I accompanied Mrs. Sellors to Rushville that fall and well remember how the town looked when we reached there in the early morning. All buildings were new; many of them just boarded up and down with no floors but mother earth. It was in a building of this sort, used as a restaurant, where we were taken for breakfast, that I was introduced to Mr. Griswold whose wife I became fifteen months later. Of this facet we had no premonition at that time, and I little dreamed I spend the rest of my life in western Nebraska.

Mountain fever was prevalent during these early years of settlement. I nursed Mrs. Sellors through a severe attack that fall, and had it myself some two years later. Tea made from the wild sage native to the prairie was prescribed for the malady.

The law was that one must make settlement on a claim within six months of the date of filing; but this provision allowed me to spend the winter months with an uncle in Colorado. To reach Denver, the only way to go by train was by way of Fremont, where I had to remain overnight and take an early morning train for Denver. It seemed a long days ride, and though I was eager for my first view of the mountains, I was also a little fearful of arriving in the evening and meeting relatives I had not seen since a small child.

I had a happy winter with my uncle's family, made some lifelong friends, and had several thrilling experiences on trips over the mountain, all of which made it exceedingly hard to leave there and go on with what seemed to my friends the hazardous undertaking of holding down a claim, alone in the new land beyond civilization. But I was determined to go through with what I had commenced, and also felt I could not afford to lose the money I had already invested.

Mr. Sellors had engaged men to build a log house for me during the winter; and necessary household supplies were to be on hand by April first. I decided to go north from Denver by train through Cheyenne, and Fort Laramie, Wyoming, and thence by stage to Rawhide; trusting that Providence would furnish some means of transportation across the uncharted wilderness between Rawhide and my destination in Nebraska.

In Denver, I purchased supplies to help make my log house home-like, and with most of these packed in a large wooden box and my trunk well filled, I only needed physical safety assured by the possession of a revolver to be well fortified for what might

await me! (City restrictions had forced me to learn to shoot this revolver in the basement, where we hoped no one could hear).

I started north amid dismal forebodings of my relatives. and when the stage deposited me at Rawhide, which proved to be only a store and Post office in the home of a ranchman, I imagine I was rather a forlorn looking little girl! I was rather anemic and pale and only weighed ninety-five pounds. But the Patricks, who owned the ranch, were splendid, well educated people from the east; Ms. Patrick very enthusiastic over the west, and over Woman's Suffrage which was already a law in Wyoming. She said women were treated with more respect when they had a vote. They were excited over the expansion of the railroad into Wyoming, and they knew of the proposed town of Bowen; but it was a problem how to get me and my baggage over there! Mrs. Patrick suggested Mr. Reynolds, a squaw-man, as the only man she would trust to take me. He was thoroughly reliable, and knew all the country well. We waited some days before he came to the ranch for his mail. After some hesitation he was persuaded to make the trip. It would take more than a day and they forewarned me that at the Van Tassel ranch where we must spend the night, there would be no women, and probably never had been one there. Mrs. Patrick assured me that I would be treated with the greatest respect; which prediction proved true there, and in all my later experiences.

There was not the slightest evidence of a road to follow, but horses are sure footed, and took us and all my baggage, over fifty or more miles of unbroken prairie without a mishap. When we reached Van Tassel, I found it to be a fact I was the first white woman ever there. They insisted that I be given the foremen's room. Supper was a strange meal, with all those cowboys, and one scared woman seated at the long board

table with primitive furnishings! They seemed embarrassed and hesitant about talking during the meal, but sent Mr. Reynolds later to ask me to talk to them. They questioned me about the outside world, and I them about conditions in this new country. They knew some of the men who had taken claims near Bowen and said they were fine fellows.

I felt strange and lonely that night, and made sure that my revolver was safely under my pillows! We reached Bowen the next day, after I had spent ten days, and sixty dollars to come from Denver, and I had taken this wild trip to save time and money!

I found my new log house a pretentious dwelling, in that country of shanties and dugouts, but unfortunately the weather had been bad and the freighters could not get through with supplies so the house was yet without a door, window-glass, stove, and other necessary furnishings. Mr. Case, on the claim adjoining mine, graciously moved out of his dugout home, turned it over to me until my own quarters were ready for occupancy two weeks later.

The day after I arrived the railroad construction camps came, with foreman bringing their families. I made the acquaintance of two of these women and found them intelligent and companionable.

The first through train arrived about three months later. There was now quite a town of tents and rough buildings, with plenty of saloons and dance halls. I was glad my little house was a good half mile away, and out of sight from town. I papered the walls with newspapers and made them gay with pictures; put a carpet of gunny sacks on the dirt floor, and white curtains at the windows. I had a small cook-stove, a home made table, and a box cupboard for my dishes. A "bunk" had been built in one corner and I used a

muslin draped box for my bed-side table. On this was a candle, later replaced by kerosene lamp, and at night my trusty revolver.

A little six year old girl who lived near, spent much time with me, and our editor's wife, Mrs. Charles Verity, stayed often in her husband's absence; otherwise I was alone for the seven months I was there. I had the required amount of breaking done on my land, and was thrilled to see my planting of beans grow so fast.

The climate helped me to grow stronger, and I had a wonderful appetite. I spent much time gathering the wild flowers growing everywhere. A cousin interested in Botany, visiting me in later years, found one hundred and fifty varieties in three weeks. That first summer I copied these flowers with oil paints on silk and velvet pieces sent me from home. The crazy quilt I decorated and pieced then, is now quite a showpiece to be handed down to my little grandson, Dwight III.

I wrote innumerable letters, and the replies helped my morale, as my friends all thought me brave and courageous. Nevertheless I was lonely and nervous, and there were many things to make me so. Field mice scampered over my floor every night. Once I was awakened by something digging under my wall. By the time my shaking fingers had a light, an animal appeared, and stopped in the middle of the room! Apparently our surprise was mutual, for it turned and quietly disappeared! From my description, I was told it was probably a badger, hunting chickens. Another dark night I was roused by galloping hoofs and a man's rough voice asking the way to some place unknown to me. In answering I tried by make by voice a deep base. On one occasion, as I sat peacefully sewing with the door open in front of me a horse and rider appeared suddenly, with forelegs upraised as if about to plunge into he open door. At sight of me,

and the startled look on my face, the rider raised his cowboy hat, begged my pardon and hastily backed away.

One hot summer day, when I was at Mrs. Verity's we had to fight one end of a prairie fire to save ourselves and her home and young baby. The men were fighting it nearer town, but it was getting too close to us for safety. We were exhausted when we had beaten it out with wet sacks.

In November I went to visit Mrs. Sellors in Rushville, and was married at her home, December first 1886. Mr. Griswold had a room added to the log house and floor put in and with new carpet and furniture it was cozy and inviting. Some women who had lived in the west some years and had few comforts, told me to enjoy my new things, as I'd probably never have more. Mr. Griswold and I had many a laugh over this in later years.

Many of the bachelors in this new country were well educated, shrewd, wide-awake young men from the east, who were following Horace Greeley's advice to "Go West!" Most of them were good sports about "roughing it" but had been accustomed to comfortable homes, and we were happy to make them welcome in ours.

Some of these men remained in the west but a short time; others acquired land and interests which brought them back frequently; while many became permanent residents.

I well remember Holly Jones, a fastidious young man from Baltimore. He had a "dugout" on his claim but preferred spending his time in town, until he was told that his claim might be contested if he made no pretense of living there. So he gathered supplies

and made ready to “keep house,” but the first night he slept there a mouse fell in his face and he never went back to stay.

We were a cosmopolitan group, and in that small community came to know each other well, and to appreciate each other’s faults and virtues. John Marsteller came from Pennsylvania, entered the mercantile business and linked his life permanently with the new country, always standing for what was highest and best. He spent much time in our home and was a friend true and true through all the years.

Robert Brewster of Boston, in spite of his accent and a degree from Harvard, became a true westerner, and the owner of S-E (S bar E) ranch, retaining his interest there for many years, though he spent his winters the east. The careers of two of his cowboys are typical of the west. John Anderson had come from Norway at the age of thirteen. He came from Estes Park, Colorado to the Brewster ranch; later purchased it, and is now one of the wealthy and influential men of Sioux County. Charles Jamieson came there from California and Nevada. Upon the organization of Sioux County, he became county treasurer; later becoming a banker in Harrison, and then in Chadron, and afterwards becoming manager of the famous “Spade Ranch” in Sheridan County, one of the largest ranches in the entire west!

However, there were many drifters and much wild life. On Saturday nights the cowboys came into town to spend their money, and peace loving citizens went home and locked their doors. There was a custom for the cowboys to use force, if necessary, at these times to compel any man of their choosing to “set ‘em up” meaning to treat the crowd to drinks. A lawyer named Walker once hid under the depot platform, to escape this pleasure, but was spied and dragged forth.

While I spent the summer in 1888 in the east, Mr. Griswold often stayed in town with “Doc” Andrews, a druggist, who acted as doctor in the absence of a regular physician and occupied a room back of his drugstore.

One of my husband’s favorite stories was the tale of one wild night, when on their locked door came a terrific pounding, and many voices, demanding Doc’s presence at once to attend someone very ill. In no uncertain terms he told them he would stay where he was, but they were so insistent that he finally opened the door. He was instantly grabbed and taken through the usual procedure. Anger and chagrin were mild terms to apply to his emotions when he returned. They finally got to sleep, only to be roused again by someone frantically calling that Charlie Weller (the saloon keeper) was about to die! “Doc” used strong language telling them to “let him die!” and the next morning found their story was true and he had nearly died.

Large cattle ranches had existed in this corner where Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming meet, long before homesteaders and railroads came. Many of these cattlemen had comfortable, attractive homes, and were charming people. We spent many happy week-ends and holiday seasons enjoying the hospitality of Mr. Brewster, C.F. Coffee, R.J. Wilcox, Joe Morris, John Anderson, Robert Niece and A. McGinley on ranches located on the north in Hat Creek valley, and south on the Niobrara river. In that early day, we also visited at the home of the former government scout, Captain James H. Cook, on the Agate Springs ranch, since well known for its fossil deposits.

I shall never forget one occasion when we were invited together with Mr. and Mrs. Walker, to take Sunday dinner at the Wilcox ranch, some twelve miles or more north of Harrison. Mr. Walker had been there and anticipated no trouble finding the

place, though there were no well defined roads or landmarks to follow. We made an early start, and talked much of the good dinner that awaited us! but alas! by the time we had crossed and recrossed trails, it was three in the afternoon when we reached there and we were all famished! But they took it for granted that we had eaten dinner before starting, and voiced their regret we had not come when they expected. We could not find our way home after dark and we women knew our husbands would never survive starting back in their hungry conditions, so with much embarrassment we made known our dilemma, and kind Mrs. Wilcox hastily brought out the remains of their midday meal and set before us.

Some of these ranches were from sixty to a hundred miles away, and merchants did practically a wholesale business. It was done largely on credit also, and when winter brought a heavy snowfall, which was hard on cattle, it was a worrisome time for us all.

The first winter of my married life was such a one, often for weeks at a time, I could see nothing but snow drifts high about my windows!

After several years in the mercantile business, Mr. Griswold took charge of the bank which had been established by Colonel C.F. Coffee, and this was the beginning of a life-long partnership. Mr. Griswold remained in the banking business up to the time of his death in 1928 at Gordon, where he and Mr. Coffee had bought banking interests in 1900.

Our log house had proved most comfortable. The roof was made of boards covered with sod, which kept it warm into the winter and cool in summer. But in the spring of 1888 a long rainy spell came on, and one day the roof began to leak. Though I put out pails and pans everywhere to protect our pretty carpet, the muddy water came in

ever increasing quantities, and when Mr. Griswold came home at nightfall, he found me weeping on the bed in the driest corner, with my most cherished possessions around me.

This experience made me willing to move to his homestead west of town, where a frame house was built that summer. There were low hills near our new home, and it was a common sight to see antelope; and coyote making off with one of our prized "Plymouth Rocks" in his mouth, he loped leisurely away with it in spite of my frantic efforts to take him drop it! Another time a skunk made sad havoc, which ended our experience with chickens.

During the winter of 1890-91 the battle of Wounded Knee occurred in South Dakota. Though this was a hundred miles east of us, there was great fear and excitement in our community. An Indian victory might cut off our contact with the east and leave us at heir mercy. Some of our people who had lived in Minnesota at the time of Indian uprising there, left at once for eastern points. Ranchers moved into town and occupied the courthouse. State militia came to protect us and remained for some weeks. During this time I stayed alone during the day, with my four months old baby, making sure the doors were kept carefully locked, lest she be carried off when I wasn't looking!

When our little daughter began to walk, we put a woven wire fence around the house and yard to keep her near. One day as she played outside with our little rat terrier, I head the dog barking furiously. Upon investigating, I was horrified to find a large rattlesnake in the yard with them. I shut the baby and dog in the house, and went to work to kill that snake. I thought it dead, but upon going out later to make sure, there was another one very much alive close to the dead one. I had broken the hoe on the first out piled stones on the second so it could not get away, then sat down to wait until my

husband came home. Later that evening a third big rattler appeared on the scene! Need I say I was ready to leave this little home I had previously enjoyed so much? We moved into town the following spring and that fall our son was born and three years later another daughter.

There were many experiences during these early years that seemed hard at the time, which we have found humorous in retrospect. Colonel Coffee and Mr. Griswold were returning from the Coffee ranch in Wyoming one day late in November, when the horses ran away, finally tearing themselves from the “top buggy.” Colonel Coffee was considerably bruised and battered up; it was more than ten miles to the nearest ranch house; and neither of them was used to walking. They decided Mr. Griswold had better start for this house, and when there, send back help, while Colonel Coffee started in pursuit of the runaways. When the long walk over the unbroken prairie was about ended, and Mr. Griswold came in sight of the Anderson house, with “Running Water” which merges into the Niobrara river further east to be crossed, he was too impatient to go further to a bridge; but decided he could make a running jump, and reach the opposite bank. Being so tired, and underestimating the width of the stream, in the gathering darkness, he landed ker-splash in the middle of it! Let us omit the harrowing details of the next half hour! Kind hearts and willing hands helped alleviate his pressing needs, by furnishing him clothes of Mr. Anderson, and a good substantial supper. As Mr. Anderson was at least six feet tall, my husband a short man, one can imagine the ludicrous appearance he made! The man sent with an extra saddle horse to find the Colonel, met him miles away, riding one of the horses he had overtaken, and leading the other. In describing the affair afterward, he said the horse tried to throw him off, but he clung to

the wrecked harness for dear life; for so tired was he, that no bucking bronco could have thrown him! When he entered the warm and lighted house some ours later, and saw his partner in distress, seated by the fire, in his borrowed raiment with his clothes hanging about the room to dry the Colonel was too tired and angry to see any humor in the situation, and when Mr. Griswold started to laugh it was too much for his southern blood to bear, and he held up his hand, and said "No laughing tonight. I could shoot a man for laughing!" After a night's rest and refreshment, things appeared in a different light, and many times since at dinner parties, in his home, and ours, I have heard him describe the whole affair, in his own inimitable way, which always sent us all off into gales of laughter.

A church society had early been organized with Mrs. Jack Post and myself its first members. Although it was organized as a Methodist church, it embraced all denominations, and we worshipped happily together. Besides fulfilling the need for a place to worship, and an inspiration to Christian living, it promoted fellowship and unity, and furnished our only social life as well. Some of the earnest preachers who came to us, were Mr. Glasner, J.D. Clark, and two brothers named Kendall. A.R. Julian and J.A. Scamahorn were outstanding leaders, and as presiding elders, left a lasting impression on all communities in Northwest Nebraska.

The pine-clad hills north of Harrison were always a great source of joy to me. My eyes never became accustomed to the canyons near by. As a rule, after dinner on warm Sundays, we hired a team, and went there to spend the afternoon. A ride of three miles took us well into Sowbelly canyon; where rocky cliffs, streams, trees and grassy slopes

were a never-ending source of rest and refreshment for me, and recompense, I might say, for living high and dry for another week.

The name Sowbelly was given this beautiful canyon by some soldiers, who camped in it some years before and who were storm bound, and ran out of all food but the above, and perpetuated the memory of their dilemma by giving the name to the canyon.

Harrison is situated on a high, sandy plateau, five thousand feet elevation; and since it was necessary to drill very deep for water, there was just one town well. Each home had a cistern, to which this water was hauled; hence, any sort of modern convenience that we now take for granted was out of the question. I became so accustomed to saving water that I still have that habit. Since water was so scarce, we could not use it for grass, trees or flowers, and the little town looked very bare indeed. We fell back on the expedient of having pine trees cut in the canyons and placed in the ground about our house for shade. These stayed green most of the summer, then were used for fuel and replaced for more the next spring.

In most ranch country, wind is very necessary for the windmills must provide water for the cattle, and during the winter must keep the snow from blanketing the ground, so the cattle can continue grazing, but it seemed to me there was more wind that was needed for it blew so on that high plateau, that the sand drifted into our yard, and had to be hauled away by wagon loaded each spring. However, it was a healthy country, we were prospering, and I was busy and happy with my family.

In recent years the little town has acquired city works, modern homes, smooth green lawns, flowers and shade trees; its fine new county high school and court house

would be a credit to much larger towns. The tourist on Highway 20 sees a different town from that I knew forty years ago.

Looking back at those early years of my married life, I cannot but think of the difference between the way my life was spent and that of the young wives and mothers of today. There were no club meetings, bridge parties or movies to attend. But my time was filled with the duties connected with my home. We made the most of our family life, did much reading aloud, and I always had the pleasure of a talk and bedtime story with my children. Though it might seem that my life at this time was a drab affair, it does not seem so to me in retrospect, and I have often voiced as my one regret, the fact that I did not take even more time than I did to be a playmate with my children.

[Written between 1929 – 1933]

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