



Mrs. Kate Roberts Pelissier

REMINISCENCES OF A PIONEER MOTHER*

By KATE ROBERTS PELISSIER

I remember seeing my mother's wedding picture. It was a small tintype, showing her dressed in a style much like that of today. I know the dress was an orange-colored cashmere. The basque was buttoned down the front with self-covered buttons. It had long sleeves and a little white at the neck. The skirt was just a little longer than the suits worn now. The tiny hat was trimmed with white orange blossoms.

She was a pretty little Irish girl with black, curly hair and blue eyes. She was then 17 or 18. Her maiden name was Margaret Barr.

Father, three years older, was John Lloyd Roberts, called Lloyd. He was a tall, robust, red-haired, happy Welshman. For the wedding he wore a gray suit and white gloves. In the picture his feet loom large.

They were married in the Presbyterian church in Manchester, Iowa, on April 23, 1871. It will be 85 years ago in April this year of 1956.

Mother was from a nice substantial family who had got ahead in this country and had nice homes and were educated. My father was one who longed to see the "other side of the hill". Some of Mother's relatives said that they were afraid Maggie would have the sunny side of a baggage car.

The young couple lived in Waterloo, Iowa, where two little girls were born: Elizabeth and Mary Jane. With Elizabeth Mother had a doctor; for the rest of her family she was in the hands of friends.

The first day of their housekeeping, Father came home with a big wall clock with weights on the side. He said that he wanted his home to look like other homes. Each night this clock was wound up.

They also had a lovely large Bible with colored pictures and pages for family records. Both of these possessions were cherished by Mother as we moved from place to place.

From Waterloo we went to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where in 1875 on September 28 I, Kate, was born. In 1877 in March we moved to Bismarck, then the end of the railroad.

Whenever we moved, Father always went ahead. We followed. For this trip it took three days and nights, as the train did not run at night. We three little girls were the only children on the train.

*This most interesting account of life in the North Dakota Badlands, when Theodore Roosevelt was a neighboring rancher, was prepared for Mrs. Ethel Roosevelt Derby, a daughter of Theodore Roosevelt. Mrs. Derby visited Medora in 1954. The account was told to Allie R. Dickson of Dickinson and typed by her for Mrs. Pelissier.

It was the days of the Black Hills gold rush. Some men moved out of a shack for us. With four bed sheets Mother covered the ceiling of the shack. She made a bed for me in the clothes basket under the table.

Later we moved to a better place, where my chum sister Anne was born. She was a wonderful sister to me. We were always agreeable. She was a much brighter child than I. I was with her at the last when she died of cancer. She had made good in the world.

Before long again Mother packed her clock and her Bible, and by stage coach we went to the Black Hills. There were outriders to protect us from Indians, and Mother had her money sewed in her petticoat. Father's work in the Hills had something to do with issuing meat to the Indians.

While we were there, my sister Anne, still a baby, tried to take a bone from a strange dog. The dog bit her, injuring her face, almost tearing her cheek away. Mother got a soldier doctor from Fort Mead. He sewed the cheek back into place without the use of any drug to kill the pain.

Mother was then worried, thinking her coming baby would have a birthmark. From the Black Hills we moved back to Bismarck to a good house, where the fifth and last child was born and named Nell. (There was no birthmark.) Father always said, "That fifth girl was as welcome as the first."

Our next move was across the Big Missouri in a steamboat to Mandan. There we had bad luck: both Mother and I had typhoid fever. Father next took a homestead west of Mandan, and there Mother and we children were for a short while during a time of Indian scares and bad storms. Again we were in Mandan.

Mother always tried to make a home, but always Father had other plans. Before long we were traveling in a freight-train caboose from Mandan to Little Missouri, across the river west of what is now Medora. Of that little place not much is left to see. Your father was there when he first arrived in Dakota.

The day after our reaching Little Missouri, we went out to live at the Custer Trail Ranch. There we spent six weeks in a tent, until a log house was built. This ranch was the place where we first met your father, and is the place you visited.

Mother was then 29 years old. Besides looking after her own family, at Custer Trail she cooked for a large crew of men. She did not get wages, but we had our living. Though there were no boys among us, the men loved us children anyway. They nicknamed us

younger ones; Nell was "Billy", Anne was "Dick", and I was either "Happy Jack" or "Curly".

Mother was not by nature a demonstrative person, and anyway she was too busy to make much over us children. It was Father who did that. He would play with us and cuddle us and let us climb all over him. He was indulgent—too much so at times. The time I was ill with what turned out to be typhoid, he would have given me the candy I wanted, but Mother stopped him.

"My soul!" she exclaimed. "Do you want to kill the child?"

But she did let him open a can of red cherries, and give me some of those instead, and some buttermilk to drink.

The Custer Trail was owned by the Eaton brothers, Pittsburg gentlemen, who soon became Uncle Howard, Uncle Will, and Uncle Alden to us, as later to everyone. They were well known men in this part of the west, and were friends of your father's.

At the ranch there was a lot of wild game. I remember that at one time we had eleven young buffaloes. There were deer and antelope. There were also wild geese. In a cage there was a big "American" eagle, very wicked. There was a young gray wolf too, that we could never trust. Lots of wild game was on our table.

The Indians brought in loads of buffalo hides, which they traded to the Eatons for beads and other trinkets.

I had spent my sixth birthday on the sofa in Mandan, ill with typhoid. Pretty sick. I rolled off upon the floor, and was too weak to call. Mother thought I would surely die. I recovered, but still remember how thirsty I was, and how little water they gave me to drink! (This was by doctor's orders.)

Now at the Custer Trail I had my seventh birthday. My two older sisters made me a perfectly wonderful rag doll. She was stuffed with river sand, had bead eyes, and yarn nose and mouth. From a buffalo forelock the girls had cut a large piece which they sewed on the head to give her long black hair. I don't recall that she had any clothing. I think now that her name should have been Scaryanna, but then I didn't need to call her anything. I just *loved* her.

For the Christmas following that birthday Uncle Howard Eaton sent Anne and me each a lovely doll with hair. He also sent a little doll for Nell, and books for the older girls. How happy we all were!

After a year or so at Custer Trail we moved up the river a few miles to a place of our own. It was the ranch next south of your father's Maltese Cross. This was our last move. Now we really had a home.

The house was built of pine logs floated down the river from the Logging Camp. It by and by had six rooms. In the middle, side by side, were the living room and the kitchen, both opening onto the flagstone walk; off the living room, at one end of the house were the two bedrooms for the family; off the kitchen, at the other end were the "spare" room, and what we called the "dark" room, one that had no window and was used as a store room. There was a cellar. The roof of the house was of split rails laid flatside down, with tar paper over these, dirt on top. The house was tight against snakes, was chinked and banked with dirt, had screening tacked over the windows.

Mother made a garden, and we had a yard. We had rag carpet on the living room floor, and inexpensive lace curtains for the windows. We had a canary bird and house plants.

Mother and Father went to dances together. She would wear one of her two "nice" dresses—a wine-colored cashmere, made very pretty, trimmed with flat, dollar-size buttons that showed many colors. With it she wore white linen cuffs, fastened with real gold cuff links. She also would wear her long, pendent earrings of Black Hills gold. Father had paid five dollars apiece for each of the pair.

Those were sidesaddle days. Mother's other good dress was her riding habit. It was of green lady's cloth. It was double-breasted, with cut steel buttons about the size of a quarter. The swallow-tail back also was trimmed with the steel buttons. With this habit she wore stiff white linen cuffs and collar, and a black derby with a black wing on the side.

Mother was not at all a horsewoman, nor one who likes especially to ride. But of course she had to do more or less riding. She always used a gentle horse. In haying time she would drive the hay wagon back and forth on the field. There was a wagon for the family to go places.

In the fall of 1886 Father, as he had often done, left for his headquarters at St. Cloud, Minnesota, to buy cattle on commission. His last letter came to Mother from Wyoming. In it was a 20-dollar bill and directions to her about where she should send her next letter to him. We never afterward heard from him. We knew that when he left home, he had about \$500 with him—in gold, as people did not then use checks. As time went by, and no word came from him, Mother wrote here and there, trying to find out why, and what had happened. Whenever she heard what promised to be a lead, off would go another inquiry.

But nothing came of it all.

Years later there was found a Cheyenne police record telling of the finding of a man's body. Details of the description given tallied

with those of Father's appearance, but we couldn't be sure. That was all there was to go on then, and there was never anything further.

Now it was up to Mother alone to support us five girls and bring us up to good, decent womanhood. And 1886 was the worst year in Badlands history. Most of the Badlands ranchers went broke that year.

Mother was then thirty-three. She had good health. She could cook and sew and knit and garden. She had lots of determination. She could "turn her hand". And she was not afraid of work.

We had the house, a place for us all to live. Father had had about a dozen head of cattle, five horses, a small band of sheep. There was enough food in the house to last us a while. Fuel was no problem—wood for the cutting, lignite coal for the digging.

For the plowing, looking after the fences, putting up hay, getting the wood and coal supply, she had to have hired help. This would sometimes be a young chap wanting to learn to be a cowboy, but often not very capable; sometimes an older person needing a place to stay. During the busy summer he was paid a little; in the winter he worked for his board. He had his own quarters in the little log bunkhouse, but ate with us.

One of these "hired men" I remember especially well. An older man, rather odd. Different in appearance. Quiet in his ways. But very good to us children. In the evenings he would help Anne and me with lessons. We'd sit around the table and work at Ray's Third Arithmetic, or he'd read geography to us. He hadn't had much schooling himself, but did what he could for us, because there was no school for us to go to. I went through that arithmetic book three times, and arithmetic has ever since been my best subject.

Much of our food we had without buying. Mother liked to garden, and was very successful with her garden. From it we had our potato supply and other vegetables, and in addition tomatoes and watermelon and muskmelon.

In the center of the garden patch was the well. There was no pump, but a pulley arrangement for the long rope to which, at each end, a pail was fastened. By means of this, every morning by hand Mother would haul up four barrels of water and let it stand all day in the sun. In the evening we three smaller girls took off our shoes and stockings and watered the garden, Mother pointing out which plants were to be favored.

Along the edge of the vegetable garden she always found some space for a few flowers, and these were a joy and pride to all of us.

For meat we had all the game we needed. The hired man would shoot a deer or an antelope, or once in a while butcher one of the cattle

(just part for our own use). Mother would fry down some, pour hot lard over it, and store it in stone jars in the cellar. It was easy to keep meat in the winter, because it could be frozen and hung in the shed. In the summer we had to use smoked meat, bacon and ham which we had to buy, or use our chickens and grouse. When the round-ups went through, they invariably gave us a piece of fresh beef.

In turn, Mother treated them to cake and cellar-cold milk, and if we had it, to watermelon.

In those days buffalo meat was still abundant, more than could be used, and was to be had at all seasons. What we liked especially was the tongue. Mother had a large iron kettle in which she boiled the tongues. These were small, and the meat was dark. When they were cold and had been peeled, Mother sliced them and served them with a little vinegar.

At Custer Trail, when I was a smaller child, I could help. Standing on a box, I had the job of peeling the tongues. Another of my jobs then was to help when coffee was to be made. With the coffee mill held firm between my knees, I would sit turning the wheel and grinding the coffee beans.

Many, many times when a buffalo was killed, it was only the tongue that was taken for meat. Sometimes not even that was used, but the hunting was done only to get the hides. At that time we accepted the common practice of slaughtering the buffalo, but later we saw what a mistake, as before long the buffalo were gone from the prairies, and only their bleaching bones remained. The West had lost one of its distinctive features, and people then had come to feel as your Father expressed it once when seeing a large herd, "What magnificent animals!"

There was wild fruit we could have when the season was good. We had eggs and milk, and butter was churned in the old dasher churn.

But the place did not furnish everything we needed. There had to be "cash money" too.

So sometimes Mother sold or traded a few pounds of butter or some eggs or a piece of meat. She would sell vegetables at the Medora store on Saturday, and buy sugar and flour and other staples that we needed. She took orders from people in town for wild fruit, and we girls picked and washed and cleaned bushels of berries and wild plums. There were Juneberries and chokecherries and bullberries which we whacked off on to a tarpaulin spread on the ground. Later on when the town was booming and had several hotels or boarding places, she sold garden flowers to those for bouquets for the tables.

She had taught us all to sew by hand, and we learned to do plain sewing for people in the section house. Mother did some washing on

the board for a few people. I think your father was one. From Minnesota she got homespun yard and dyed some of it red or black. Out of this she knit our own stockings and mittens, and also knit socks and mittens that she sold to the cowboys.

She could knit in the dark, and did so to save kerosene. She made little candles out of tallow and a piece of string, and used those when a bigger light was not needed. We scrubbed the floor with soft soap Mother had made. Any money there was she had to make go as far as it could.

We had little candy after Father left. I can remember seeing Mother buy a stick of candy a few times for her baby Nell. She made us be careful with sugar, too, because it cost so much. The rule was: "a rounding not a heaping teaspoon".

A man once gave Mother five dollars to buy something for us girls. She bought a small barrel of apples. While those lasted, every night before we went to bed each of us had an apple to eat.

Mother made a lot of our underclothing out of flour sacks, after much washing and bleaching. It wasn't until we were older that we had muslin underthings. By that time we had learned to sew on the much prized sewing machine, which Mother had taught us to treat with care. The gingham dresses and many starched petticoats that then we wore to dances we girls made—and "did up" ourselves. My sister Anne crocheted the lace for my wedding underwear.

None of us ever wore overalls. In cold weather Mother wrapped herself in her heavy shawl. In cold weather we girls seldom went to town. When we did, we had plenty of buffalo robes, hay, and hot rocks in the sled to keep us warm.

When we were little girls, the same hired man who had helped us with the lessons made us moccasins, more like sandals really, with soles of elkskin and with uppers of deerskin.

This Dave gave us a Christmas gift I have never forgotten. He let us choose from among three things that he would send away for. We picked out what we called a "grind organ". With it came about twenty "rollers" for the pieces it would play. For holding these he fashioned a small cabinet, a pigeon-hole for each roller. To us children this hand organ was very wonderful, and we spent many, many happy hours playing the records over and over.

As time passed there were some financial setbacks. One of the team of horses died. Another time a wolf killed twenty head of sheep. The hired man skinned the sheep, and Mother sold the skins, so this was not a complete loss, though very heavy for us anyway.

However, one way or another, Mother made ends meet. She had to contrive. But she always had enough for us to eat, and she always fed the stoppers. She never owed any money. She paid her bills, and she expected others to pay theirs. The only government aid that I remember we received was when one year the county commissioners told the assessor to skip us that year. Mother thought that saved us about nine dollars tax money.

In later years your father said of her: "Mrs. Roberts was the most wonderful woman in Dakota. She was so resourceful. And she was a good neighbor."

Mother had no special gift in nursing, but we were, in general, pretty healthy children, and we met with no bad accidents. She taught us what to do in case of snake bite. For the most part she believed in letting Nature have the chance to work its healing.

In an emergency she would act. One winter day a man came to the door—George Woodman, who had come from Boston to manage the HT, at that time the largest horse ranch in the United States. He was almost frozen. He had got his horse down in Garner Creek, not far from the Maltese Cross Ranch, and when he saw the smoke of our chimney had headed for our place. Mother took him in, directed the hired man to care for the horse. She then got down on her knees, took off her patient's shoes and stockings, put his feet into lukewarm water in our treasured wash bowl, slowly washed and rubbed his feet. She got from the bottom drawer the pint of brandy always kept there for emergency use, made a knot sling, held it to his mouth so that he could sip it. She had him put on some old underwear of Father's, and lie down on the cot behind the living-room stove to sleep warmly covered. In the morning, fed and warm and well, he went on his way.

About schooling for us she could do little. In the Badlands there was no school for us to attend, no trained person to teach us. Later, when I was thirteen or fourteen, Medora had a one-room school. Twice Mother rented a little house in Medora and took us there so that we could be in school for a few months. Other opportunity to give us more chance at learning from books, she had taken when earlier such had been offered.

Mother taught us it was a disgrace to act afraid, and tried to keep us from feeling afraid. I did sometimes, when she had to be gone all day, but she told us no one was going to harm us young ones, for if anyone did, the cowboys would hang him to the nearest tree. (I believe they would have.) I used to look about for the nearest tree, and took comfort in knowing there were lots of trees.

One night the dog kept barking. We said to Mother, "There's something out there in the dusk!"

Mother replied. "What kind of a pack of cowards have I raised?"

And out she went to see what it was, we girls keeping close on each side of her, and the dog running ahead.

Suddenly a big mountain lion jumped up in front of us and loped away over the hill. We hauled Mother back in a hurry, and she was quite willing to come!

In the country then there were very few mountain lions, but this one had followed the sheep in, hoping to get one.

As we grew older, Mother allowed us to go to dances at Medora—and went with us, or knew who would be there, and who would take us. At that time no boy who had been drinking came into the dance hall. Indeed, no boy smoked in the dance hall. We had fun at the dances, where the young men greatly outnumbered the girls. We liked to dance. As a child, Nell could play the mouth harp, and to her music Anne and I had long ago learned to dance on our kitchen floor.

Mother had always been strong in discipline. Now when she set a time for us to be back from any pleasure outing, we knew that she meant that time, and we got back.

Our main pastime was riding. We would go in a little group—usually Anne and I, sometimes Nell—with the friends, often Rachel Foley and the four Foley boys, big and little. Sometimes Mother rode with us. Often their mother—a lovely woman—was with the Foleys. One of those boys—Jim—became North Dakota's well-known poet.

We girls liked the riding parties. It was fun to ride. It was more fun to have a boy help you onto your horse, put your foot in the stirrup, arrange the long skirt carefully over your feet—all of which we were perfectly capable of doing—and did do—for ourselves when we were alone.

When a boy became really interested in a girl, she could expect to receive a pair of buckskin riding gloves with ornamented gauntlets. These were made by an old man up the river.

We girls all married young. My own wedding took place in Medora in the sitting-room of the Ferris home over the Ferris store. It was in 1893 on June 25. Everything was trimmed with wild roses. Anne was my bridesmaid. The old gentleman who married us wanted to give us his blessing. However, as he shook my hand, instead of saying, "God Bless You" he said, "May God help you!"

That Ferris building, now the Rough Riders' Hotel, was the place where your father made his headquarters when he was in Medora. The old place is still standing. It is owned by Mr. John Tester.

After we were gone, Mother took a homestead adjoining Medora.

It was on her mind that the children of the community had no church school. So she gathered them together, regardless of creed, and on Sundays in one corner of the dining-room of the Rough Rider's Hotel she would read them a Bible story and teach them to say a prayer. She took a collection of their pennies or nickels, and with that money sent away for Sunday-School papers for them to read.

By and by Mother moved from Medora. When she had saved some money and had inherited some, she built a lovely home for herself in a good location in Dickinson. There she lived for years. She rented rooms, and had things nice for herself. One of her enjoyments was her yard. She had pleasure in her flowers and her houseplants, and she never got over the wonder of having lights and city water.

She loved to recall the experiences and the people of her early Medora days, and it was always a great moment for her, as for the other Dakota Associates of your father, to see him on those occasions when he returned, and there was a chance to greet him again. To them it wasn't just the thrill of seeing the President. It was also the joy of meeting an old friend once more.

On one of those occasions I remember how he put his hand on Mother's shoulder and said with a smile, "Mrs. Roberts used to try to feed me buttermilk. I didn't like buttermilk, but I did like Mrs. Roberts."

After she was 80, Mother began to weaken. She said, "I have no aches nor pains. I am just tired."

She would not willingly go to a hospital. Her doctor neighbor advised letting her have her own way about that.

I was with her when, at 85, she slipped quietly away.

She had all her business arranged and her affairs in order.

Mother's picture hangs in the Liberty Memorial Building in Bismarck. Close to her grave in the Dickinson Cemetery is a cedar from the Badlands she loved so much.

