

# Some of Those Years\*

by Enid Bern

North Dakota's weather was at its finest when they first came to this Far Country. The green springtime prairies under blue and open skies enhanced by balmy weather increased their confidence and hopes for the new venture and helped dispel their apprehensions. Thus, a new style of life for the Bern family had its beginning.

The adventurous spirit that had brought my father from Sweden to America 18 years earlier, as well as his atavistic love for land, led him to the homesteading frontier in southwestern North Dakota. My mother, much less venturesome, had not favored this move, but it was the same old story once again repeated, although in varying circumstances, "Whither thou goest, I will go."

Now, three springtimes later they stood gazing at the charred remains of all they had struggled to achieve. A prairie fire fanned by a 60-miles-per-hour wind had cut a five-mile swath and left only hundreds of reeking, pungent smoke curls and ashes. There had been many problems during those first years, but they had been successfully overcome. This devastating occurrence, however, overshadowed all the others, and my father thought out loud about giving up and going back to Wisconsin. It was almost paradoxical that now it was my mother who declared, "We'll stay; we'll make a go of it." That was all that she had to say — with instant courage my father turned to building our lives anew.

Taking the feed pail from the buggy, his first step was to carry water from the creek to drown the fire in the pile of still-smoldering wheat from the burned granary. Later, after more pressing matters had been taken care of, he salvaged what wheat he could from the charred remains. Then followed the search for the livestock. The horses were found in a fence corner, so badly burned they had to be shot and buried. The cows that were still alive were kept for a time to see if they would survive, but none did.

In following days, he turned his attention to arranging for a place to live. Temporarily, we lived in a shanty and used the furnishings belonging to a lady homesteader near our home. Then a shack was purchased from a construction camp along the Northern Pacific railroad grade, but getting it moved required a month's time. Because the building was so different from those we had seen, my brothers and I (age six, eight and 11) were excited about it. Rather than the conventional pitched roof, the one in this single-story building was arched, fashioned by bending long boards crosswise over rafters running lengthwise. The entire shack, including the roof was covered with tar paper nailed to studdings and rafters. Shiny tin, convex shields kept the paper from tearing through the nail heads.

What intrigued us most was the door with an old fashioned latch. This consisted of a small wooden bar fastened

inside the door. The bar fitted into a grooved piece of wood mounted on the inside wall and kept the door closed. A rawhide thong fastened to the end of the bar was threaded through a small hole in the door a few inches higher than the bar. This permitted anyone outside to open the door by pulling on the rawhide thong and raising the bar. To lock the door from within, one merely pulled the thong inside. We now understood the meaning of the expression of welcome, "You'll always find our latch string on the outside," but a stern warning was given us about pushing the latch string inside if there was no one in the house.

The shack was to be our home for a year and a summer. It was very livable and cozy, but it had drawbacks. The lack of insulation made both the heat of summer and cold of winter quite noticeable. When the wind blew from the south, downdraft from the stovepipe forced smoke into the house. Indeed, we never felt very secure during the many windstorms that year. I remember seeking shelter under the creek banks until the down-pour of rain forced us back to the house.

Realizing that we needed some form of shelter for times of emergency, father cleared the rubble from the basement of our old house, built a roof and heaped a mound of dirt over it. The cave-like cellar was fitted with hanging shelves to hold milk, butter and cream, and during the intense heat so common to that summer, it served as a cool place of refuge for my brothers and me.

When the opportunity presented itself, father sorted the wheat. Much of it was badly charred and was shoveled to one side to be discarded; the rest was run through a borrowed fanning mill onto canvas which had been spread in front. My brothers and I took turns at turning the crank while our father shoveled grain into the mill and shifted the cleaned wheat into a pile. Between times he took his turn at the crank.

Our old lumber wagon had escaped the fire because it had been pulled into the creek earlier in the spring to serve as part of an improvised bridge. It was now repaired to haul the cleaned wheat to market. On a very hot, windy day, father set off for Lemmon, South Dakota, which by this time was served by the Milwaukee Railroad on the prairie main line. He

*\*Editor's Note: This is the second article Enid Bern has prepared for North Dakota History in which she recalls the homesteading era in Hettinger County. The first, "The Enchanted Years On The Prairies," appeared in the Fall, 1973 (40-4), edition and concerns the Bern family's life on the homestead from 1907 until the devastating prairie fire of 1910. It is at that point in time that the present article begins.*

A picnic after the prairie fire. Pictured are (l-r, standing) Charles Ellertson and Homer Ellertson; (middle) Ed Ellertson, Mrs. Charles E. Bern, Mrs. C. Putnam, Charles E. Bern, and Mrs. E. Ellertson; (front) Enid and Ivan Bern, and Burt schoolteacher Frank Jache. The ladies, of course, are wearing their husband's hats.

— Courtesy Enid Bern



later told about sitting on the load to pick out scorched kernels all the way.

The weather was depressing and our lowered spirits set the mood for a gloomy day. We had bought two little pigs and now that the grain had been loaded we turned them loose to feed on whatever grain remained on the ground. While my mother and I were at the garden, we noticed the pigs going into the house! Horrified, we ran to drive them out. The thought of pigs going into my fastidious mother's house was just too much. After the scramble to chase them out, I went outside to the side of the house and wept bitter tears. Where, oh where, had those enchanted years gone!

That same hot, windy afternoon, a passer-by, a stranger who was perhaps an itinerant preacher, stopped for a drink of water. Noticing the vibrating roof-boards and fearful that the tar paper would be torn off, he carried large stones and placed them along the edge to serve as anchors, and then drove off on his way.

There was a stillness on the prairie in the evening after the winds had died down, and whenever our father was expected home we began to listen for the sound of the lumber wagon rattling over the choppy prairie trail before he rounded the hills and came into sight nearly a mile or so from home. And although he had left only a day earlier, the time passed so slowly that we began watching for him in mid-afternoon. When he finally came into sight, we ran to meet him. It wasn't until we reached home that he gave each of us children a mouth organ, our first playthings since the fire.

This trip marked a turning point. The conditions that had been so disturbing suddenly took a new direction. The horse father bought to complete a team<sup>1</sup> for the Lemmon trip

<sup>1</sup> My father had not been at home during the fire; therefore, the horse he with him had not been burned.

proved to be a good riding horse and remained our favorite for several years. My longing for reading material was fulfilled when some friends from Mott brought us their accumulation of magazines — *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Delineator*, *McClure's*, *Harper's* and *Hampton's*, to name a few. Our mother didn't look upon them with any special favor because we had so little living space, but we promised to keep them orderly. Here was diversion that absorbed my attention for hours on end. *To the North Pole with Peary* was serialized in one of the magazines, and how intriguing that story was! The ghost stories made me tremble, but I read them all anyway. The departments for children in some of the magazines were delightful, especially the paper doll cut-outs with sets of clothes. So, suddenly my three wishes had been granted — a riding horse, reading material and a close substitute for dolls.

New mysteries occupied our imaginations. An unbroken section of burned-over prairie revealed a small area of teepee rings. Our fantasies were spurred by the things we found nearby — an Indian pipe, arrowheads, buffalo bones and horns. Baffling to us were the few large rings of different-textured grass. These "Fairy rings," as we called them, have long since disappeared from their old location on the still-unbroken prairie land.

We awoke one late-summer morning that year to find we had overslept. It was 11:00 a.m., but still dark. In wonder we looked outside and could barely see through the heavy, coppery atmosphere — one more strange phenomenon in this year of Halley's Comet, terrific thunderstorms, windstorms, drought and extremes of temperature. We later learned that forest fires in Montana caused the near-black-out. That day, however, my father went to milk the cows and found they had left the barnyard and could not be seen in the darkness.



**Eighth-grade graduation exercises in 1912 brought students from all the country schools in Hettinger County to the Mott school auditorium. The author sits in the front row, sixth from the left.**

— Courtesy Enid Bern

We came upon them a half mile from home. The chickens, conversely, were still on their roosts.

In addition to our personal problems and the forces of nature in 1910, our area changed suddenly from the peace of homestead life to marked activity. The railroad grades completed by both the Northern Pacific and the Milwaukee Road buzzed with track-laying and trestle-building crews. The inland store and post office named Liberty, two miles from our home, was moved to the old Bentley site in Adams County. New towns sprang up along railroad grades — Watrous, Burt, Bentley, Odessa, New Leipzig, Elgin, and Regent. Mott increased in size and all eventually became thriving, prosperous towns except Watrous and Odessa.

A large farm operator and crew moved on to the section adjoining Watrous to the west, and his two coal wagons and water wagon made continuous trips past our temporary home. The day the boss stopped to see father was an exciting one for us. When he was ready to leave we were told that we could ride to school with him. We wasted no time because this was to be our first car ride. Before we had our shoes tied, we were in the car and were on our way — bumping over rough ground in low gear and finally reaching the well-worn ruts of the prairie trail to soar off in high. It was a proud moment when we arrived at school. Our classmates all stopped playing to watch us step importantly from the car.

It became evident before summer had advanced very far that the homesteaders were to experience their first crop failure. The future could have looked bleak had not the new growing towns of Burt and Bentley given my father an opportunity to fall back on his old trade, painting, paper-hanging and sign painting, when he could spare time from home.

The Christmas season was far from what it had been the year before, but the humble gifts in the warmth of our shanty were joyously received: pop guns and leather mittens for the boys, an iron bank for Ivan, a checker board for Efford and me, as well as a thick volume of the *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Gulliver's Travels*. There was stationery, a writing tablet,

hair ribbons and a pair of mittens, hand-knitted in fancy stitches, for me, as well as the usual "candy, nuts and apples."

The final event of 1910 came during the Christmas vacation and involved our school. When the schoolhouse was built in 1908, some controversy had occurred about its location. As a result of considerable pressure by the two homesteaders nearest the southeast corner of the school section, the building was located there. The two individuals were both childless but were motivated by the value the school would give to their land. Two other families were benefitted by its location as well.

Our family was therefore  $2\frac{3}{4}$  miles from school, one of our neighbors 3 miles and another  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles. When one of the favored patrons moved away, an unsuccessful attempt was made to change the school location. Finally, the affected families took matters into their own hands. A crew got together one Sunday morning during the Christmas vacation to move the building with a steam engine.

Time lost in crossing a ravine gave the nearby homesteaders an opportunity to see what was happening, and they were soon at hand to protest. Some of us who wanted to watch the moving operation arrived just as the opposition was leaving to secure an injunction, but the proper authorities could not be located in Mott because it was Sunday. By the time the men returned, the school house was in its new location and there it was to remain. Five families were thus favored (one of the distant families had by this time moved away), but one was a mile farther away than before. As for the two men without children — they had the new town of Bentley and its two-month old schoolhouse in close proximity to enhance the value of their land. Thus ended what was perhaps the only controversy among the good people of Cannon Ball School District, one probably duplicated in many others.

December had been quite mild, but January, 1911, true to form, was cold. Our shack depended entirely on the kitchen

range for heat; if banked before bedtime, it gave off very little heat during the night. Frosted nails with large heads formed patterns on the blue Klondike paper, and the single window panes were covered with ever new, fascinating, imaginary designs. We woke to the sound of the coffee grinder and the odor of fresh pork sizzling and pancakes frying, all of which reminded us that another school day was at hand. Reluctantly we thought about the tramp across country through snow drifts and over rough ground. Finally, bundled with overcoats on top of sweaters, leggings, three-buckle overshoes, a layer of leather mittens over woolen knitted ones, stocking caps, and fascinators tied over our heads, necks and faces, we were sent into the dark of early morning. Once on our way, our reluctant attitude diminished as we centered our attention on our destination.

Our school life on the prairie had begun in the Fall of 1908. By this time we had grown accustomed to the great difference between our former city school and the now one-room country school, and accepted it unquestioningly. There were eight students under the age of ten, and 12 that were ten or older. Placing them in the proper grades presented a problem, particularly in the lower grades. For instance, even though I had already completed seven months in the third grade, that was the grade to which I was assigned; since there were no third grade text books I was given those for the second grade.

Our 17-year-old teacher was replaced (because she did not meet the age requirement) by a man after a few weeks and further re-arrangement of classes ensued. I was placed in the fourth grade, but I had only arithmetic, reading, language and spelling on which to center my attention, and I spent most of my time listening to what was going on in the room. Classroom procedure intrigued me. Classes recited from benches in front of the teacher's desk which stood on a rostrum. The class to recite was announced and the routine was: "Turn; stand; pass; be seated." Pupils were called upon in turn to stand and recite on a topic until the assignment had been covered.

I was alone in my class and had no subjects that could be recited by topics. Finally I mustered enough courage to ask if I could take physiology and was delighted when given a book and the first chapter was assigned for my initial lesson. I spent the evening memorizing the chapter word for word, and went to class the next day all prepared to recite on the amoeba and the human cell. To my great disappointment the teacher merely asked a few questions and dismissed my class. I hadn't been permitted to recite like the others after all. Dejected, I went to my seat: what was the use of studying if the teacher didn't really test my knowledge!

Then came the day I was dismissed after an unsuccessful recitation and told to be prepared to recite after school. I had not properly learned the assigned number combinations and felt humiliated and ashamed; I went back to my seat and attacked the assignment furiously and without let-up until the combinations were etched indelibly in my mind. It did not take long after school to demonstrate that I had learned my lesson, but I realized that I had better change my supercilious

attitude toward our country school.

Those younger than I received even less attention than I. Aside from a few class periods and repetitious practice at writing numbers and copying words or sentences written by the teacher as a guide, they were left to their own devices and often got into mischief. My brother (age seven) was the leader. On one occasion, he was rather intrigued by the unabridged dictionary; he had never before seen a book of that size. Having noticed older pupils take the huge book to their desk, he took the notion to do the same. The teacher kept an eye on him for a time then asked him if he was looking for a word. The reply was "No, I'm just counting the pages."

Being mischief prone, Efford was frequently disciplined. At one such time the teacher gave him his choice of punishment — to sit on the rostrum or to sit on his lap. Efford chose to sit on the teacher's lap and snuggled back contentedly while the class continued with its recitation. I was embarrassed and asked him later why he chose that alternative. I was informed, "So I could see if they were giving the right answers."

Opening exercises tended to place us in the proper frame of mind for beginning the day's work. Our first teacher taught us many songs that made the period enjoyable. When Mr. Little succeeded her as teacher, we continued to sing, but he added something different — mental calisthenics or calculations. While standing in front of the class he rapidly announced a succession of numbers involving fundamental arithmetic operations. Each pupil mentally worked the problem and gave what he thought was the right answer.

A later teacher began every school morning with a memory gem. Each pupil took a turn at bringing in one for the week to place on the black board. For roll call, pupils responded by reading the memory gem aloud. The hope was that we would profit from these rules of conduct or principles. Quite practically it was impressed upon us in this manner that:

Clean hands and clean faces and nicely combed hair  
Are better than all the fine clothes you can wear,

and

The fisherman who pulls up his net too soon  
Won't have any fish to sell;  
The boy who closes his book too soon  
Won't have his lessons well.

At a time when book-length stories rarely came into our hands, we looked forward to the part of the opening period when the teacher read a chapter from never-to-be forgotten books. *When the Cobbler Ruled the King*, a story set in the French Revolution, was particularly appealing.

The day's work began with arithmetic and soon the room buzzed with activity as each grade worked simultaneously at its particular assignment. Board space was filled with as many pupils as it could accommodate; others worked on slates at their desks. Screeching and scratching chalk and slate pencils grated on sensitive nerves and sent chills up the spine, but attested to the enthusiasm of the students while the teacher, ready to help when needed, supervised all the classes at the same time.

Twenty children relieved of schoolroom discipline at noontime made no attempt at mealtime behavior, and they raised the proverbial roof with their shouting, each one wanted to be heard as he vied for attention. Eating manners fell by the wayside as they cracked their hard-boiled eggs on their foreheads, preparatory to peeling the shells. The teacher, in the meantime, finished his lunch, slipped the shoestring looped to his alarm clock over his arm and sauntered across the way to spend the remainder of the noontime with the bachelor neighbor. When he left, some students became a little more daring and scratched matches on their teeth, closed their lips over the flame, then withdrew it from their mouths still burning.

After lunch, everyone usually went outside, but during the winter desks were shoved to the sides of the room, someone played the organ and everyone danced — waltzes, two-steps, circle one-steps and frequently square dances with the teacher's 13-year-old brother doing the calling. During the early days, dancing in schoolhouses at any time was strictly forbidden — it just was not permitted in any school, ever. Consequently, when the teacher was seen returning, the desks were quickly shoved into place and most of the pupils dropped into their seats to sit quietly, but unnaturally, while the teacher walked into the room with a quizzical look on his face.

After this had continued for a time, the teacher questioned his ten-year-old brother about what was going on. As a consequence, we had to forego our dancing and content ourselves with singing popular songs that one of the girls could play: "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," "Red Wing," "When You and I were Young, Maggie" and "Listen to the Mockingbird." But favored over all others was "Cheyenne," especially the chorus:

Shy Ann, Shy Ann, hop on my pony  
There's room here — for two dear — but after — the ceremony  
We'll both ride back home, dear, as one  
On my pony from old Cheyenne.

Baseball was by far the most popular game during those first years of school, but we played as individuals rather

than teams. Most of the players were older boys and girls, but little ones were given their turn at bat in order to enlist their aid in chasing balls that went beyond the fielders. Sometimes the conventional baseball, bat and mitts were used if an older boy brought his to school; otherwise, a club was used as a bat and a home-made ball substituted for a real one. After the older pupils were out of school, games became more varied, although tag and ante-over were favorites. Boys and girls got along well, but there were the usual complaints among the boys that the girls didn't play fair. There was a time when one after the other of the girls was banished from their play until I was the only remaining. I was rather proud of the distinction and all went well for a day or so, but the situation suddenly changed when during one recess period the teacher sent the boy for a pail of water. They expected me to go along, but I was too embarrassed to tag along with a group of boys and refused. They walked away grumbling, "She's just like all the rest! G-u-r-r-ls!"

A Course of Study requirement for each grade was the memorization of one poem for each school month. The *Rotary*, an educational magazine published by W.G. Crocker, carried the required poems, and the publication was an integral part of North Dakota rural school life until 1922. While these poems and others in readers were of a different type from those found in textbooks of today, they all provided enjoyment and became enriching vehicles affording fleeting



The children's Christmas presents in 1910.



Pennies were scarce for the Berns after the 1910 prairie fire. Only by saving the "Santa Claus" soap wrappers were the Bern children able to give their parents these 1847 Rogers triple-plated silverware pieces for Christmas that year.

— Courtesy Enid Bern

**School luggage. (For those who don't remember, the lard can was a lunch bucket.)**

— Courtesy Enid Bern



transportation back over the span of years as time went by. Among those I remember best was, "What the Winds Bring," which one of the four similar stanzas was:

Which is the wind that brings the flowers?  
The West Wind, Bessie, and soft and low  
The birds sing in the summer hours  
When the West Wind begins to blow.

After the last recess on Friday afternoon, the rest of the day was given over to special activities — spelling matches, geography matches, and arithmetic matches. In the latter, two captains were selected to "choose up sides" and then the game began with the two captains leading off. The teacher read an exercise problem, and the competitor who arrived at the right answer first earned a point for his side and became the challenger. The loser chose someone from his side to take his place.

Excitement mounted when either of the workers arrived at the wrong answer, giving the other a chance to finish first. Most of the pupils were quite expert in handling figures and the determination to excel may well have resulted from these Friday afternoon sessions.

The winter that one of my brothers and I were seven and nine, respectively, our father made arrangements with the teacher to dismiss us at the beginning of the last recess to commence our two-and-a-half-mile walk (cutting across) home over the snowfields. Even so, darkness began to fall toward the end of our journey and thoughts of coyotes lurking around gave us an eerie sensation that ended in thankful relief when we arrived home safely. By the time we were older

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, former President, was at this time forming the movement that eventually became the "Bull Moose" Party in the 1912 election. Jack Johnson, the first Black heavyweight champion prizefighter, reached newspaper headlines for his defiance of the conventional racial attitudes of the period. Jim Jeffries was another boxer, a former heavyweight champion. Finally, Harry K. Thaw was the defendant in a sensational New York murder trial involving members of the "best" society; he was convicted of killing his wife's *paramour*, but subsequently freed on the grounds of insanity after a prolonged court battle and many appeals.

<sup>3</sup> While returning from a meeting of the Toastmasters International of which he was district governor, and a convention of the Maccabees he, his wife and three children (college students) were instantly killed in an auto accident.

and had become superstitious about ghosts, the setting sun cast reflections on windows of buildings in the distance and gave scary suggestion of haunted houses. Filled with a sense of the supernatural, we dared not run because of the frightening and spooky feeling it gave of being pursued by ghosts.

Pupils in our school were all American-born children of English-speaking parents from varied national backgrounds. Progress in schoolwork, therefore, was not hampered by a language barrier, as was often the case in many schools. Some older children were needed at home in the spring and fall; and stormy, cold spells resulted in those living two or more miles from school losing some days of attendance. However, everyone was alert and eager to learn. There were no daily newspapers in the homes, but weekly papers carried sufficient news to keep children abreast of some newsworthy topics, at least enough for conversations. Dan Patch, the champion harness racer, and such personages as Teddy Roosevelt, Jack Johnson, Jim Jeffries and Harry K. Thaw<sup>2</sup> were among those receiving attention, and we were a bit proud of ourselves when we talked about President William H. Taft being for "reciprocity."

From the time school opened in 1908, one boy exerted a tremendous influence for good on all his schoolmates. Pleasing in personality, genuinely good without making it seem evident, and unusually intelligent, he was a leader without assuming to be one. Because he was liked by all, he was imitated to a marked degree. He informed us one time, for instance, of preparing a written schedule of his daily activity that he adhered to conscientiously; others tried it, also. Again, as an example, when he came to school one morning with a map of North Dakota that had the counties neatly drawn and colored, others admired it and were inspired to make one of their own. Some new expression, perhaps used as a sort of battlecry, was immediately picked up by others. Should he come to school with something such as stilts, others soon made a pair for themselves. So it was with whatever his creative mind brought to the attention of others. His unassuming leadership carried over into conscientious schoolwork and behavior on the part of all of us. On the whole, he was a living example of the influence of good character on others.<sup>3</sup>

By the fall of 1910, Bentley had 15 children of school age, but no school building; consequently, the children were brought to our school two miles from town in a horse-drawn bus, filling the school's capacity to overflowing. The largest class in school consisted of beginners and required a good share of the teacher's attention. Desks were arranged in two's, side by side, from wall to wall, with very little aisle space throughout the room. I, then in the sixth grade by myself, sat for two weeks before receiving any attention whatever from the teacher. Left to my own devices, I assigned lessons to myself, copied poems, worked what problems I could, and listened to the upper grade classes. The Bentley school building was completed in November and our own school was moved the next month, as previously mentioned, to a location a mile closer to our home.

Throughout our early school years our books were limited to the few texts that we had. There was a set of *Carpenter's Geographical Readers* that were of no interest to me, but I did have access to someone's *Aesop's Fables*. In 1912, I sent to Secretary of State Patrick D. Norton (frequently referred to as *Piccadilli Norton*) for a copy of the 1911 *North Dakota Blue Book* and received a beautiful cloth-bound book printed on excellent quality paper, a book to be treasured and poured over for here was a wealth of information about

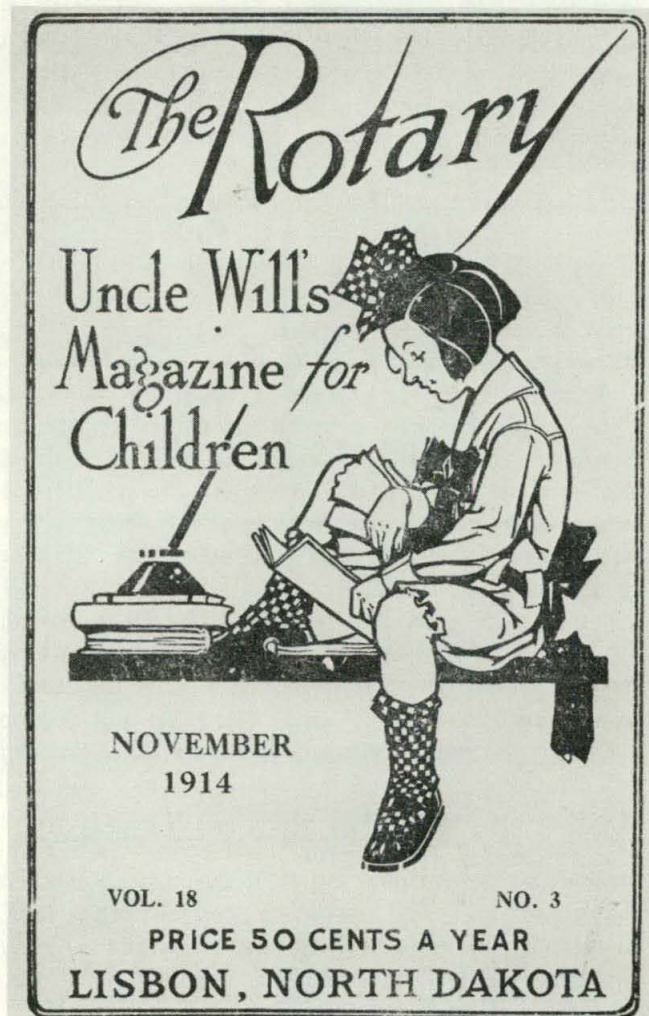
our state. When I was in the seventh grade, our teacher lent us her book, *Wonders of the World*, and another on the three assassinated presidents (previous to that time) and their assassins. It was then that I acquired hero worship for President William McKinley, who was in office when I was born.

When our school received a chest of books from the State Traveling Library in 1912, we could read to our heart's content. But, in March of that school term, my parents halted my library reading for the remainder of the school year so that I should concentrate on schoolwork. Each year to that point, an eighth-grade pupil in our school had earned the highest state examination average in our county. I had no such aspirations, but reluctantly set aside the library books so that I would at least pass the state examinations; it so happened to my surprise that I succeeded in maintaining the school's record and had to prepare a speech of my own writing, "The Farmer's Position is the Best of All," to be read at the graduation exercises at Mott.

The 1910 crop failure was followed by another in 1911. It didn't slow the growth of the new towns, but did make things more difficult for our family. However, father didn't want to experience another winter in the shack and began building a house. Part of it was ready for occupancy in December and later we sent of Wisconsin for the furniture we had stored there before moving to North Dakota.

It was an exciting time when the furniture finally arrived. Even though it had been more than four years since we had left it behind, its familiarity came flooding over us as we unpacked the pieces one by one. There was the golden oak dining room table, the one on which my father had been operated when I was a baby; the stained-oak secretary with its curved glass door; the rocking chairs our parents had received as wedding gifts; three parlor chairs; and some prized pieces of hand-lathed furniture my father had crafted in his cabinet shop; a table of maple with ornate decorations and a top with designs of inlaid walnut, a drawing room table and a smaller one to match. There were two wall-to-wall carpets and smaller ones, several framed pictures, an ornate globe lamp, books and numerous smaller ones. The contents of the drawers and boxes interested me most of all. Included in them were the doll I had received for Christmas when I was six weeks old, an R. Bliss doll house, things I had made in the first and second grades at school and a scrapbook my mother had begun for me when I was very young.

Having all the old familiar things again gave us a much-needed boost in spirits. With our large hard-coal heater (we used lignite) set up on our "front room," we often spent



**The Rotary**, published at Lisbon by Will G. Crocker, was a favorite of North Dakota schoolchildren in the early 20th Century. Not only were there stories and pictures, but letters from students from throughout the state appeared in its pages. The editor styled himself as "Uncle Will" and often wrote tidbits of advice and guides to proper behavior to his readers.

— Courtesy Enid Bern

### The author's first doll.

— Courtesy Enid Bern

winter evenings around it watching the leaping flames through the isinglass windows.

In this setting we listened to the many stories told us by our parents. We learned about our maternal grandparents and how they had become acquainted in Norway while they were waiting to sail for America and how they sailed on different ships but eventually found each other in Wisconsin and were married. Mother remembered her father's failing health and how they sold their blooded cattle and land to move back to Norway so that the family could be with relatives if he died and of their dissatisfaction in living there; on the return trip to America, a doctor in England prescribed rhubarb and hops and cured him. Grandfather lived 40 years longer and faced the task of rearing seven children after grandmother died when my mother was eleven months old. There were stories of walks to school and church through the forests and of deep snow of winter and of the care they had to take whenever they walked through the woods for fear a panther might leap down upon them.

Our father, a gifted story-teller who was thoroughly acquainted with Swedish history, enthralled us with countless stories of our Swedish heritage; he related in detail the accounts of Viking exploits and early Swedish kings. We thrilled at the stories of Gustavus Adolphus, 17 years of age when he ascended the throne, who added greatly to the Swedish dominions and died on the battlefield, and of Charles XII who at the age of 18 headed his army against the army of Peter the Great and gained one victory after another in Europe until he, like Gustavus Adolphus, met his fate on the battlefield.

We learned about our father's boyhood as a herdsman, of watching the Royal hunting party in some of their organized hunts there in the woods, of swimming, skating and skiing. In his patrols far into the rugged mountainous area, his father, a patrolman or forester in the King's forests, sometimes spent the night in a cabin in the far reaches of his territory and had breath-taking experiences that our father described with much detail and mystery, weaving into it an air of the superstitious quality the region seemed to inspire.

Distinct shadows cast upon the walls by lamplight fostered shadow play. Our mother was quite adept at forming strange figures upon the wall with her hands for our amusement. Our evenings were frequently spent around the dining room table, and we were required to amuse ourselves in some quiet manner. Our parents taught us many games to be played on slates, parlor games, tricks or stunts and some sleight of hand. They seemed frequently to have something a little unusual to us from time to time to show us, such as how we could make gum by chewing wheat. We learned that a large button with a cord threaded through and looped over each thumb could be manipulated somewhat on the principle of a yo-yo, and we learned that a blade of grass could



be stretched between the thumbs to produce a sound when blown on. We also learned to whistle between two fingers as well as between cupped hands.

Perhaps none of the children of those times had ever ridden a bicycle or seen a basket ball, but they did not lack for amusement. Often when visitors came, invariably during Sunday daytime hours, we took special pleasure in showing playmates and younger ones our "Dutch Baby." That involved a little finesse and secrecy. To oblige us, one of our parents sent one of my brothers on some plausible errand to throw suspicion away from his involvement. Children were then instructed to stay with the grown-ups while we prepared the surprise for them. My brother then slid under the couch up to his waist. While he held his cupped hands and arms to form the skeleton for the "Dutch Baby," I padded the hands with strips of cloth to form a head, drew a face on a piece of muslin and attached it on the front of the head, tied on a baby's bonnet or hood, dressed the body, banked the exposed part of my brother with pillows and covered them with a light blanket. Looking quite life-like, the baby could move its head and answer questions by nodding or shaking the head for "yes" or "no" and could assume certain attitudes.

When the children were brought into the room and saw the "Dutch Baby" looking from one to the other of them, they stood gazing in wonderment. They were often too much taken aback to respond when they were told they could talk to him. As a starter, we might ask the baby if he liked children; his enthusiastic nodding delighted them and they





The Rotary often offered prizes for compositions based on pictures published in the magazine. The photographs, such as the one from the author's rural school (above), were aimed to stir the imaginations of the readers, and the story by Marcellus Locke of Plaza was the winning response. Editor Crocker awarded small prizes to both the photographer and to the winning writer, as well as to both schools.

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THE ROTARY

## Letters and Stories by the Children

### THE SNOW FORT

MARCELLUS LOCKE, PLAZA, N. D., AGE, 11 YRS.

There goes the gong, now for the snow fort and the battlefield! The children eagerly left their study room and hastened to the place where the combat was to be had.

They divided equally into two divisions, the one representing the Americans, the other the British, for this battle they had planned to be the second Battle of Bunker Hill, as it had been an interesting subject in the morning's history lesson.

Their forts were made of the crusted snow, piled high enough to protect the whole army. Taking their places in front of the fort, with a snowball in their hands—the snowballs serving as cannon balls—they gave the word: "Now come if you dare!" The general no more than said the words when "whiz" a cannon ball knocked his hat off, but this was met by a full charge from the American army.

"One soldier dead and two wounded, send for the ambulance." The order was quickly obeyed, but still the battle raged.

Finally, the snowballs or ammunition gave out, so the Americans now decided to destroy their fort in order that they might have some resource to continue the battle. They now used the pieces of the fort to fire at the enemy. When the school bell rang, they had no fort, but they were happy, for victory was theirs.

were soon asking questions on their own. The lively session was terminated by asking the baby if he was tired and his nod of assent. Aided by the children's parents, we managed to keep the baby a mystery to be shown another day at their request.

My father had filed on our homestead in 1906; therefore, in the fall of 1911 he began proceedings for proving up and received the patent May 16, 1912, bearing the signature of President William Howard Taft (inscribed by his secretary). Now that they held title to the land, my parents had to decide whether or not they should return to Wisconsin as originally planned. The question was brought up to my brothers and me

and we were astounded: Sell Jim! (the riding horse) *Unthinkable!* And what about the cat and dog? They were almost a part of the family; they couldn't be left behind! This was our home and this was where we belonged. Whether or not our opinion carried much weight, the homestead was to remain our permanent home. The area surrounding the buildings is still unbroken prairie covered with native grass where meadowlarks nest and wild *forget-me-nots*, red mallow, pentstemons, wild phlox and prairie roses still appear in season — the area that keeps alive memory of the one-time glorious stretches of the early plains.

## Dakota Poets

### ORPHAN LEAVES

My walking takes in streets and bridges,  
Two flat cities under the snow,  
But then I come to a hanging forest  
That reaches a cliff below,

And farther down I see the movement,  
Grey against white, of an old river.  
So sheer a fall from the everyday  
Threatens my prairie winter.

Fluster of leaves? I turn around.  
Here's a trunk the wind cut through  
Last summer when the leaves were young.  
While other trees have few

Remaining, these keep hold in spite  
Of separation from the ground,  
And clattering together they now make  
The only forest sound.

These children of the too soon dead  
Were unaffected by cold weather:  
They'd turned to images of themselves,  
Replicas done in leather.

I sense the link with higher creation  
But what, I ask, are a man's leaves?  
Perhaps abandoned heart becomes  
The orphan that he leaves.

— Rodney Nelson

*Rodney Nelson, a former North Dakotan, now  
lives in Petaluma, California*