



Pothook Pioneer, A Reminiscence by Ada Blayney Clarke

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Article Summary: Ada Blayney had been a stenographer ("a pothook maker") in Chicago before she homesteaded with her father in South Dakota. After fourteen months during which she displayed a real talent for improvisation, she returned permanently to her job in a bank in the city.

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Photographs / Images: Ada Blayney (1908 photo), the first shack for the Blayney-Holbrook homesteading venture, Blayney-Clark outside with her sewing machine, cupboards with curtains, an improvised dressing table



Ada Blayney, Pothook Pioneer
(Photo about 1908, courtesy Ada Blayney Clarke)

POTHOOK PIONEER

A REMINISCENCE

BY ADA BLAYNEY CLARKE

EDITED BY MONROE BILLINGTON

IN an age of jet planes and atomic bombs, members of the younger generation often forget that there are people living today who were actual pioneers. Mrs. Ada Blayney Clarke, now eighty years old, was one of these modern-day pioneers. Before her marriage Miss Blayney and her widower father took up homesteads south of the Black Hills about thirty miles north of Chadron, Nebraska. Thirty years later, Mrs. Clarke recorded her experiences, and twenty years later still they are being published as an example of twentieth-century homesteading in the Great Plains.

Before moving to Fall River County in the southwestern corner of South Dakota, Miss Blayney had been a stenographer, a pothook maker, in Chicago for nine years. Earlier she had taught in rural schools near her home town of Alexis, Illinois, but after two years of this she decided

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not to continue teaching as a career, and after completing a course in stenography at a business college in Valparaiso, Indiana, she had gone to Chicago.

In 1909 she joined her father, sister and brother-in-law in a homesteading venture near Oelrichs, South Dakota. After fourteen months of pioneering on the Great Plains, she returned to Chicago in 1910 to continue her stenographic career which was terminated six years later when she married Charles A. Clarke. Since her husband's death in 1947, Mrs. Clarke has lived with a niece in Norman, Oklahoma. The following is her account with a minimum of explanatory material added in footnotes.

The train stopped with a jolt, and I opened my eyes to look around sleepily in the dim light. Suddenly I was wide awake, the whole incredible reality coming back to me. I sat up in my berth and reviewed the past few days that had changed me from a tired, stereotyped stenographer in a Chicago bank to an excited girl on her way to South Dakota to become a pioneer.

I had always wanted to try my hand at homesteading, but I had never really expected to do it. My older sister Mildred had made it possible at last. Her husband, John Holbrook, was in poor health, and on the advice of his doctor he had sold his business in the small midwestern town of Manson, Iowa, in order to file claim for a quarter-section of South Dakota land.¹ My seventy-year-old father who lived with them also wanted to move west, and I had been invited to join the party too; so here I was, early in April in the year 1909, actually on my way.

¹ The basic law regulating occupation of the public lands was the Homestead Act of 1862 which provided that a citizen, or one who had declared his intention to become a citizen, might acquire 160 acres of the public domain by paying a nominal filing fee and by completing five years of continual residence and cultivation on the claim. Numerous laws which altered public land policies were passed by Congress after 1862, but many of these applied to restricted areas. For example, the Kinkaid Act of 1904, which allowed the homesteader 640 acres, applied only to western Nebraska.

Mildred and John had previously selected a homestead site² and returned to Iowa to pack for shipment the things needed. My contribution to the furnishings consisted of one old Smith Premier typewriter with folding table, one new box camera, a few books, some sofa pillows, and thirteen sterling silver teaspoons, all different. Everything had happened so quickly that there had been little time to prepare.

It couldn't possibly be true—but it was!

I had no job, and this scared me—but I liked it!

From pothooks to pioneering—this was adventure!

I gathered up my belongings and dashed to the train's dressing room, unmindful of the fact that it was hardly light. I could not bear to miss a minute of this wonderful day.

Father met my train along the way, and we went on together to the little South Dakota town of Oelrichs³ from which we would drive seventeen miles out to the place selected by Mildred and John. This trip was merely a form;

² The site was within the boundaries of land which the Sioux Indians had relinquished to the United States by the Treaty of 1876. (*U. S. Statutes at Large*, XIX, 254-264. For a detailed account of the signing of the treaty, see Doane Robinson, "A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians," *South Dakota Historical Collections* [Pierre, 1907], II, Part 2, 440ff.) The treaty was the result of pressure from whites who wanted the federal government to take away the Black Hills and the surrounding plains from the Indians since gold had been discovered in that region in 1874. (Charles Lowell Green, "The Administration of the Public Domain in South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XX, 27.) The Black Hills region was officially opened to settlement in February 1877. The original settlers were gold prospectors who were seeking precious metal only. The next wave of whites into the area were the cattlemen who allowed their animals to roam freely over the land. In the 1880's the range cattle industry declined, and at the same time homesteaders drifted into western South Dakota, but much of the land had not been homesteaded by 1909. (Harold E. Briggs, "Ranching and Stock-Raising in the Territory of Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, XIV, 463.)

³ In 1910 the town of Oelrichs had a population of 150; in 1950 its inhabitants numbered 168. (U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Population*, III, 691; *Seventeenth Census of the United States, Census of Population: 1950, "Characteristics of the Population,"* II, Part 41, 14.)

the law required us to swear that we had seen the land on which we filed. We hunted up the real estate man who took us over miles of rolling prairie to what he assured us were our plots. Since he could show us no cornerstone, this was more or less a guess on his part,⁴ but there was no guesswork about the price, which was fifty dollars each for locating. In this way he collected a hundred and fifty dollars from the family, simply by driving twice to a spot seventeen miles from town. But there was no other way. No stranger could even pretend to find the places, and the realtors had a fixed price.

In town we went to the hotel to spend the night and to wait for a train to take us to Rapid City to the nearest Government Office where we would file. The hotel had just been built, and although the rooms were floored and plastered, there were no doors. When I saw the crowd of rather rough-looking men in the place, I asked my father if he and I could have a room together. This was arranged, after which we tacked a sheet over the doorway.

To reach the Government Office we rode sixty miles on a freight. It made good time when it ran, but it stopped often and always seemed loath to start again. The conductor was a genial fellow, inviting us to sit in the cupola of the caboose with him. From there we had a splendid view of the country, and he pointed out everything of interest. He informed us that the railroad ran between two entirely different kinds of land. "On this side," he said, pointing to the west, "there is some sand in the soil and fairly good crops can be raised when we have rain; but on the east side there is nothing but gumbo, unfit for anything but grazing."⁵

⁴ Actually the first locations shown by the land agent were wrong, and the corners of the property he located the settlers on were inaccurate.

⁵ The sandy land mentioned here represents an extension of the sandhill district of western Nebraska. However, most of the plain adjoining the Black Hills is underlain by Pierre shale, a thick, dark-colored formation consisting mainly of clay. Since the rainfall in the region is limited, there is little dissolving action in the soil, and thus the soil is high in mineral content. It also tends to be alkaline rather than acid. As a result of an overlapping geological formation,

Since we were on our way to file on a part of the latter, we had some temporary misgivings about our venture.

After filing,⁶ we returned to Oelrichs to meet the Holbrooks. The railroad car with their belongings did not come for several days; therefore, we spent our time at the hotel (which now had doors) getting acquainted with the people in the little prairie town.

Mildred, who was a natural executive, spent her time interviewing lumber dealers and carpenters. After much bargaining the lumber for a twelve by twenty-four foot building was sawed in town, taken to the site, and put up on John's quarter. The cost was held down to a hundred dollars. A frame of two-by-fours was erected, and to this was tacked heavy blue building paper in horizontal strips. Over this was nailed a layer of shiplap, the cheapest kind of siding. The lumber was green, and it later shrank terribly, but in the fall an outer coating of tar paper was added, held in place by lath nailed on the seams. The building had what was called a car roof, elevated slightly in the middle, so that the roofing boards, which were long enough to reach from one side of the building to the other, curved upward in the center. Covered with rolled composition roofing, this made a tight roof which was thought to be safer in a wind storm than a roof of the shed variety. This was to be the central dwelling, but because each homesteader was required to live on his own land, two smaller shacks

the region east of Oelrichs is comprised of "bad lands" of moderate extent. The most barren areas and most infertile land in Fall River County lies around Oelrichs. (C. F. Marbut, "Soils of the United States," *Atlas of American Agriculture, Physical Basis Including Land Relief, Climate, Soils, and Natural Vegetation of the United States* [Washington, 1936], p. 78; Nelson Horatio Darton, "Preliminary Description of the Geology and Water Resources of the Southern Half of the Black Hills and Adjoining Regions in South Dakota and Wyoming," *United States Geological Survey, Professional Papers*, No. 65 [Washington, 1909], pp. 502, 533, 581.)

⁶ The exact locations of the three homesteads were NW $\frac{1}{4}$ (Ada Blayney), SW $\frac{1}{4}$ (Robert Blayney), and NE $\frac{1}{4}$ (John P. Holbrook), Section 31, Township 8 South, Range 9 East, Black Hills Meridian. (Fall River County, Office of Register of Deeds, *Book of Patents* No. 3, pp. 30, 48, 334.)

were to be built later. The first building was erected near the center of the section and the others were afterward built nearby, each in a corner of its own quarter. Incidentally, we discovered that the locater had mistakenly shown us a smooth, good-looking section which joined ours, but which had been set aside as a school section and could not be homesteaded. Our own land was cut into many queer shapes by a large draw which became a good-sized creek after heavy rains.

On the day of moving we all arose early and loaded our belongings into two hired wagons. One wagon was driven by its owner, Father riding with him. They left right after breakfast so that the driver could get back before night. John drove the second wagon, Mildred and I riding with him. We also took the two cows that had come in the car and a pup that one of my friends had given me. When everything seemed about ready, John decided that the load was not put on properly, and he rearranged nearly all of it. As a matter of fact, he knew very little about loading, and he made it worse than ever. Realizing he was doing a poor job, he made change after change. By the time it satisfied him the forenoon was nearly gone and it had begun to sleet. On the advice of the hotel-keeper's wife, Mildred and I put on stiff sunbonnets to protect us from the cutting sleet, since a strong wind was blowing.

After we had gone a few miles, we began to have trouble with one of the cows tied to the rear of the wagon. Time after time she would stop, brace herself, and break her rope as the wagon moved. Sometimes the gentle Jersey became excited, imitating Black Betty, so we took turns walking behind the cows to keep them moving. This was no easy task for by this time the sleet had become rain and the ground was wet. The wet gumbo mud clung to our shoes and wheels until the accumulated load became so heavy that it fell off, this process continuing without ceasing. It was a matter of opinion whether the ones who rode

on the load with teeth chattering were any more comfortable than those who walked with mud-laden feet.⁷

Occasionally we crossed a patch of buffalo grass which made for more comfortable walking, since the roots of this grass made a thick cushion on the ground. This, however, was not an unmixed joy; the springy turf showed no wheel marks, and it was impossible to see the faint trail made by the first wagon. At times we felt completely lost. Mildred was reduced to tears, and I was tempted to cry with her. The pup had disappeared some time before and was given up as lost. Afterward we found him at the hotel, and we admitted that he had shown good judgment.

At last the rain stopped, but the cold wind still blew and there was no sign of a trail. Presently we came upon a new shack and stopped to ask the way. It proved to be the home of two young men, one of whom was at home and assured us that we were only about five miles from our place. He heated milk for the almost hysterical Mildred, then went outside while she changed to dry clothes. This was my idea of the height of hospitality, and all the time we lived on the prairie I found it on every hand.

Comforted and cheered, we took up our journey. Each time we got to the top of a slope on the rolling prairie we expected to see the shack in the distance. Always we were disappointed. The team was tired and moved more and more slowly up the slippery slopes, the cows became irritable and began their monkeyshines again, and we knew that it would soon be dark. Just as the last glimmer of daylight was fading we topped a rise and saw the shack a little way ahead. There was smoke coming from the stovepipe chimney, but no light. We found Father sitting in darkness by the cookstove, resigned to spending the night alone. He had found a lamp in one of the barrels, but the can of kerosene, as

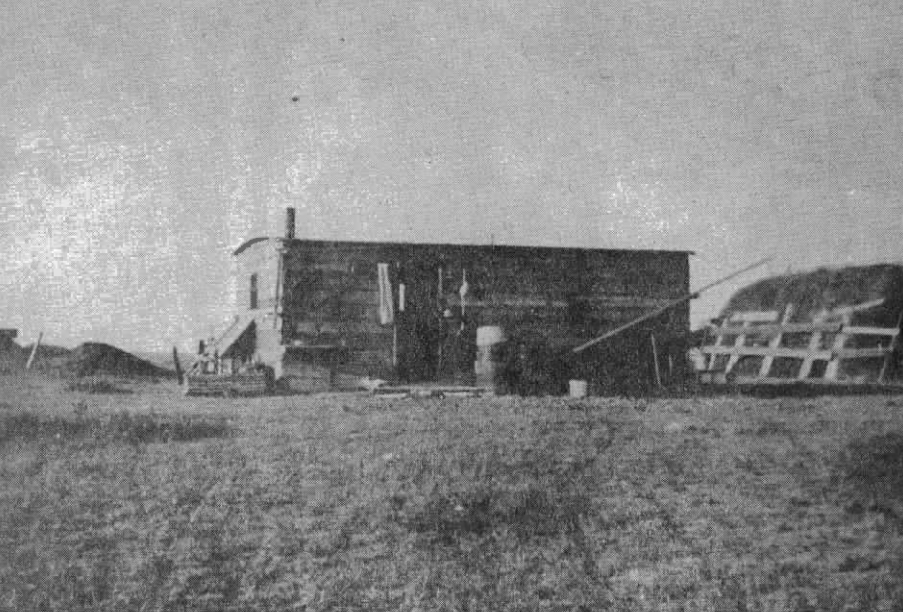
⁷ Called Bentonite, the clay of the Pierre shale was formed by weathering of volcanic ash. Usually hard and brittle, it has almost unbelievable viscosity when it is wet. The "balling up" process not only makes traveling difficult in the rainy season but it also makes the soil particularly difficult to handle agriculturally.

well as all the food, was in John's load. The teamster had left long before, but we had missed him on the way. Soon there was a light, and bacon and eggs were frying. Later, after rubbing our sore muscles and joints with liniment, we lay down on mattresses on the floor and slept the sleep of the dogtired.

The next few days were spent in arranging our meager furniture and making ourselves as comfortable as possible. A heavy curtain was hung across one end of the shack to form a bedroom. In this space a bedspring was placed on four packing boxes and a mattress put on this. Every night beds for Father and me were made on the floor, pending the time when our own houses would be built.

Soon after our arrival John and Mildred had driven to town with the hired team and wagon, staying overnight and returning in their own spring wagon pulled by their horse. They had bought scraps of lumber left over from a new bank building, and they brought home all they could haul of it. This was a great convenience because it furnished kindling, a little fuel, and pieces of boards to be used in making shelves. We even found enough long pieces to build the frame of a privy, the top and sides of which we covered with tar paper. They also brought the dog with them, and thereafter he was a contented and useful member of the party, sharing both our shelter and food. He slept on the floor of the shack quite peacefully except when some strange night noise set him to growling. Owls he disliked, and coyotes made him frantic.

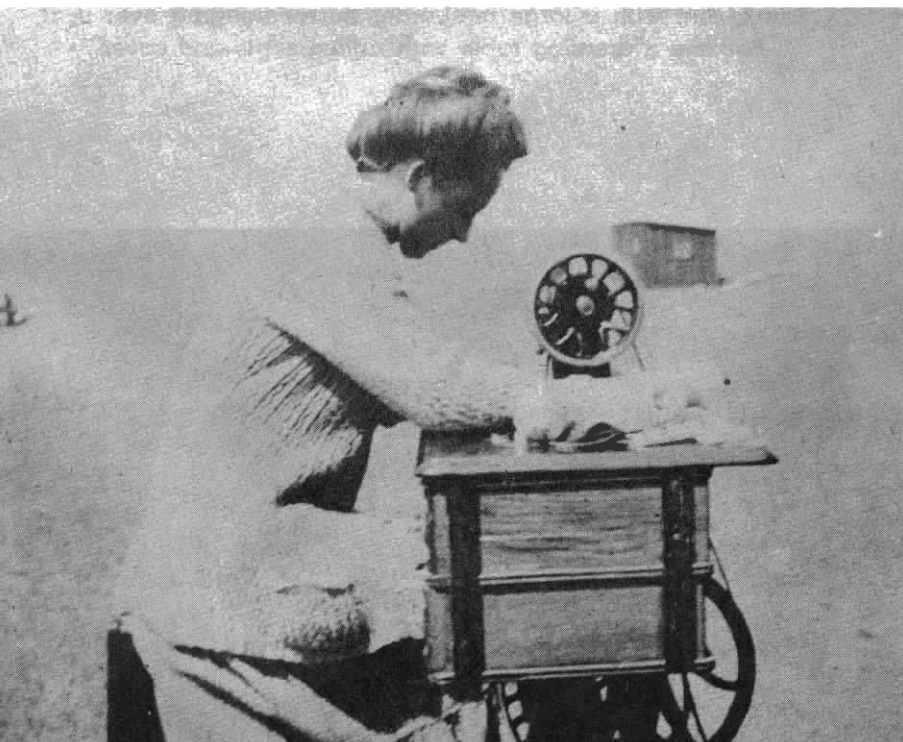
A major problem was our water supply. The big draw was filled with water holes as a result of the recent rains, and since this water looked clean and had no taste, we decided it was safe for use after boiling. A skid was built, and on it water was hauled in barrels from the largest and freshest water holes. We all participated in the water hauling. John was not allowed to lift much, so he drove the horse, and we others stationed ourselves at the edge of a water hole—one near enough to dip a bucket in the water, one farther up the bank, and the third beside the barrel.

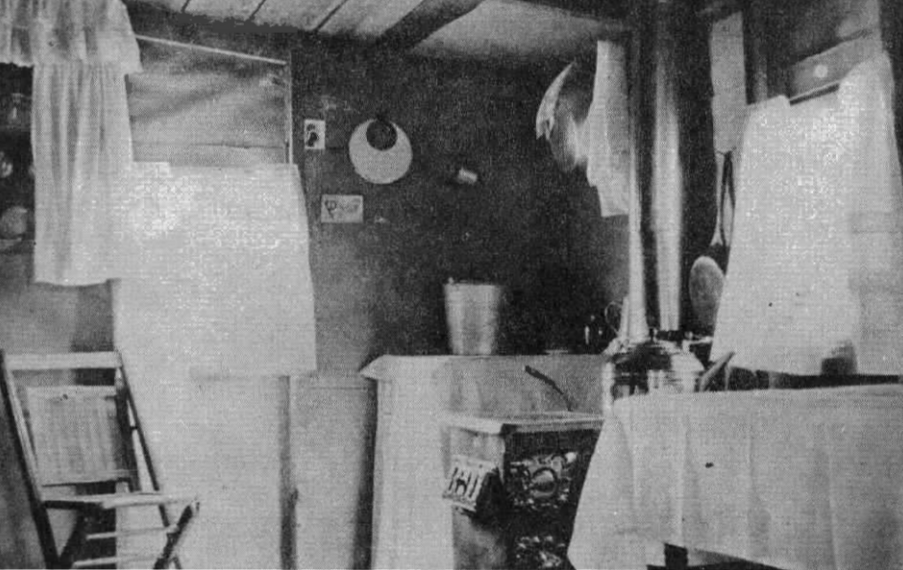


Above—The first shack, central dwelling for the Blayney-Holbrook homesteading venture

(Photos courtesy Ada Blayney Clarke)

Below—" . . . when I used the sewing machine I was obliged first to have it moved out of doors."

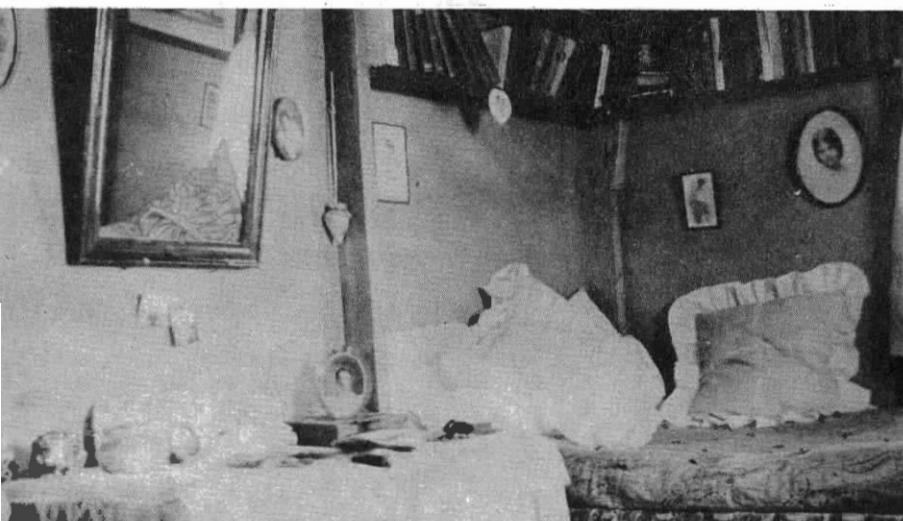




Above—"Cupboards were made by nailing up rows of shelves and hanging curtains on them."

(Photos courtesy Ada Blayney Clarke)

Below—"I also made a little platform to fit the top of a flat trunk, and with a large mail-order mirror hanging over it, it became a dressing table with ruffled skirts and cover."



In this way the bucket was passed from one to another and nobody had to run up and down in the mud, the skid being kept on dry ground where there was no danger of its bogging down.

The spring rains lasted for six weeks. The draw became a creek, the gumbo softened and seemed bottomless, and the hills became too slippery for travel. It did not rain constantly, but it rained every day, this delaying the delivery of our lumber for the two smaller shacks. When the shacks were finally built, each was made eight by ten feet, with shed roof, a door, and three small windows. There was a mattress for me and a feather bed for Father, but no bedsteads. I did not have a knack for carpentry, but I exercised all the ingenuity of which I was capable and built a bed for myself. I found two two-by-fours in the lumber scraps long enough for side pieces, two for end pieces, and one for a leg. With John's brace and bit I bored regularly-spaced holes along the side and end pieces, and then built them into the corner of the shack, using the leg at the only corner that was not nailed to the wall. Taking a clothesline that had been tied around a heavy trunk, I laced it back and forth through the bored holes making a spring on which to place the mattress. When it was finished I cut the mattress down to fit the narrow bed. It made a comfortable place to sleep, and with a cretonne valance tacked on and a pretty cover and pillows, it was smart looking, besides providing much needed storage space under its skirts.

Many items we bought from mail-order houses. For Father we obtained a monkey stove, a little heater with two lids for cooking; for me we bought a small cook stove. Folding chairs, linoleum, and a cot for visitors were also added. My typewriter table became my dining table and was large enough except when I had a guest, when our two plates almost touched in the middle of the table. I built shelves in a large packing box, put oilcloth on the top and curtains around it, and had a nice work table and a storage place for linen. Cupboards were made by nailing up rows of shelves and hanging curtains on them. I also made a

little platform to fit the top of a flat trunk, and with a large mail-order mirror hanging over it, it became a dressing table with ruffled skirts and cover. Mildred gave me a pair of portieres to tack on the wall at the foot of the bed, and I put a row of hooks underneath, making a place to hang my clothes. I was quite comfortable in my attractive little home.

Soon, however, I found that my house was too small, John's joke about my having to step outside in order to allow my guest to enter not being far from the truth. I decided to double my space by attaching another eight-by-ten to it, and I engaged a young homesteader from nearby to do the work. Everyone said the addition should be built against the high side, making a ridge in the middle of the roof and a room sixteen by ten, but this did not appeal to me. Insisting on being my own architect, I had one of the end walls taken down and another identical eight by ten built on, thus having a room eight feet wide and twenty feet long. This gave me a maximum of wall space for the size of the building. The fact that there was not much vacant floor space in the middle bothered me not at all. This opportunity of doing exactly as I pleased constituted for me one of the chief charms of the prairie.

Again consulting my faithful catalog, I ordered a rag carpet and a table. I put a strip of linoleum under the stove, built a book shelf in the corner over the head of the bed, and hung white curtains at the little windows. Later I made a screen door from scraps of lumber, so that no mice, snakes, or insects could get in. With screen wire tacked on the windows the place was complete, and to me it was the grandest little retreat in the world.

The township adjoining ours was well marked with stones, but the wooden stakes used for identifying our section were not so obvious. With the old horse and spring wagon Mildred and I went out day after day looking for the corner markers. We tied a white rag to one of the wheels of the wagon, after measuring its circumference and figuring the number of revolutions needed for a half mile. Be-

ginning from a stone in the adjacent township and driving in a straight line as nearly as we could, we counted the revolutions, driving a stake at the point where it seemed a corner should be. Then we searched all around this spot, looking for something to indicate where the marker was buried. At times like this we frequently became confused in our directions, being unable to walk in a straight line. Sometimes when we reached the top of one of the low hills we found ourselves looking at our little settlement from an entirely different angle, or perhaps it would not be visible at all and we would be temporarily lost.

After several weeks of futile search we despaired of finding our section line ourselves, demanding that our locator do it for us. A search of the records showed that between our township and the adjoining one there was a jog of more than eighty rods, which brought our section that much farther east. It followed, therefore, that all three of the shacks had been built on my land. When the locator was made to understand that this was his responsibility, he came out one day with some strong horses and uncereimoniously dragged the houses off to their proper places. Nothing inside was very much disturbed and housekeeping was resumed immediately. So far as I have learned, these were among the first trailer homes.

As soon as the ground was dry enough to be worked, we hired a man with a team to break three acres of sod, at three dollars an acre. We planted potatoes, sweet corn, and garden vegetables. Mildred had brought a two-hundred egg incubator and brooder, and she started in the chicken business in a big way. This incubator was the bane of existence to the rest of us. Nobody was allowed to slam a door or drop anything heavy on the floor, and when I used the sewing machine I was obliged first to have it moved out of doors. The baby chicks had a very frail hold on life. Almost every morning Mildred would tearfully bury another batch and hope for better luck. In all, she hatched nearly eight hundred chicks, but of that number only about one hundred twenty-five survived.

The weather soon became very hot and dry. The water holes in the draw got lower and lower, and every day the water became less usable, even though it was boiled. Whenever we drove to Smithwick⁸ for the mail and food, we brought home a ten-gallon milk can of water from the railroad well. We needed a well badly, but John was not able to dig, and Father became ill every time he worked in the hot sun. They had managed to dig a cave where things could be kept cool, but it was hard on both of them, and not long afterward John temporarily lost part of the use of his left arm and leg. I decided to dig a well myself. After digging down about a foot I found the ground was like rock, and I had to use a pick. An hour or two of this was enough to convince me that I was wasting both time and energy.

In a shack not far away there lived two brothers who were earning their way by digging wells. They contracted to dig a well for me at a dollar a foot, plus board.⁹ They found clear, cold water at forty feet, but it proved to be in a vein of alkali, tasting like a mild dose of Epsom salts. The stock refused to drink it even when it was mixed with good water. This was quite a blow since my Chicago bank account was dwindling rapidly. Later in the summer John had a shallow well dug in the bottom of the dry draw, and good water was found; but when the rains came, it again became part of the creek.

⁸ Smithwick was a crossroads community six miles west of the homesteads. It had a small general store, including a post office. Coal and staple groceries were bought here, but little else. Only occasionally did the families shop in Hot Springs about twenty miles away. Rapid City and Chadron, Nebraska, the larger cities in that region, were about sixty miles and thirty miles, respectively, from the homesteads. But for all practical purposes they could just as well have been one thousand miles away. Supplies which could not be bought at Smithwick or Oelrichs were ordered from Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck mail-order houses. (Mrs. C. A. Clarke to the editor, July 23, 1957.)

⁹ This seems to have been a reasonable price. One authority states that in 1914 the charge for digging shallow wells in western South Dakota ran about \$2.00 a foot. (Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925* [Cambridge, 1957], p. 500.)

Later the two brothers dug us two small cisterns. They were jug-shaped holes cut into the hard, dry ground with a coating of cement being put right on the dirt. With spouting on the shacks, they afforded plenty of water when there was rain.

Our nearest neighbor was Mr. John McMeekin. We often shared work and implements with him, our friendship growing by the months. Mr. McMeekin had a large supply of flour, but he did not know how to use it for anything but biscuits and pancakes. Mildred and I baked good bread, so we invited him to bring over a pail of flour from which we furnished bread for both him and us. Our neighbor had bought two cows, both range stock, but knowing nothing about milking (he tried it once, sitting down on the wrong side of the cow, with disastrous results), he was obliged to let the calves have all the milk. Besides, the cows did not like the water on his place, which was somewhat alkaline, and they drank so little that they looked like skeletons, giving hardly any milk. Finally Mr. McMeekin and John drove them over to our place and shut up the calves. The cows were soon broken to milk, Mildred and I thereafter taking care of them. With our own cows, we all were furnished with plenty of milk, butter, and buttermilk.

When the prairie hay was ready to cut we hitched our team to Mr. McMeekin's mower. By this time John had practically no use of his left side, so Mildred cut hay on our place and our neighbor on his own, all of us working together to get it in. Father wilted in the hot sun, but the neighbor was a hardy person and could pitch hay all day long. Mildred and I learned to build the load, taking turns while Mr. McMeekin pitched it up to us. The hay was thin and wiry and easy to handle, and we put up enough of it to last through the winter. We had built a small barn and the hay was stacked against its north side, helping to make a warm place for the cows and horses.

During all the first months before we built a fence we had quite a lot of trouble with herds of range cattle. I had a rather odd experience with some of them one night. Be-

ing rudely awakened by what seemed to be an earthquake, I sat up hastily and looked out of the window. By the light of a full moon I could see dozens of cattle lying or standing close by, one of them scratching himself vigorously on the corner of the shack where the ends of the siding came together unevenly. With my bed built fast to that very corner I got the full benefit of every motion. There being no trees, the poor things welcomed anything against which they could rub themselves; and later, when the fence posts were being set, it was quite a job to keep them from being rubbed loose before the wire could be put on.

When spring came around again, John had regained the use of his left side to some extent. He bought a team of heavy work horses and broke quite a few acres of sod, putting in barley and squaw corn, this being a variety which matures quickly. The breaking of the year before, which had proved to be on my land, he also planted. I bought a dozen assorted fruit trees and planted them, digging the large holes myself and hauling water, with Father's help, to pour in each one. I also planted potatoes and a small garden. The potato plants grew wonderfully, until one morning we found that the prairie dogs had cut all of them off close to the ground. They did not eat them; it was merely that they were close enough to their quarters to obscure their view—a thing they refuse to tolerate.

Rattlesnakes played no small part in our pioneer life. They were likely to be found anywhere except in a screened house. I formed the habit of taking a garden hoe with me whenever I walked about the open prairie, since it was an unwritten law that no rattler should be allowed to get away. We heard that the cowboys trampled them to death, or even took them by the tails and snapped them like whips, breaking their necks, but nothing shorter than a hoe would do for me. Even then I preferred to wait until my victim had started into a prairie dog hole before I attempted his execution.

But it was not only in my walks that the enemy showed up. In front of my door was a little platform or step which

did not touch the house by several inches. One day I saw a section of a snake's body across this opening. I ran for Father, who set the edge of a longhandled shovel on the exposed part and stood well back, while I pushed the platform away and killed the snake with my hoe. The more I thought of snakes hanging around my house, the less I liked it. The floor was made of very poor green lumber filled with knots. It was covered with carpet, and I was afraid the hot weather might have caused some knots to drop out. Fearful that another snake might be in the vicinity, I got John to carry my mattress over to Mildred's shack where I slept on the floor that night. Next day I moved everything out in the yard and took up the carpet. The knots were still there, but just to make sure I tacked a small piece of roofing paper over each one (there were thirty-five in all), put down the carpet, moved in, and thereafter slept at home.

Next to snakes, storms caused most of my bad moments. They came up so quickly and so fiercely that, all through June especially, I was in constant terror of them. In the middle of a sunshiny afternoon a cloud would form, and before the chickens had been shut in the henhouse and we had all hurried to Mildred's shack, which was considered the safest, the storm would be upon us, the wind blowing with such force that it was almost impossible to close the door when we opened it to let each straggler in. At such times it seemed to me that we lived on top of the world where there was nothing but us for the lightning to strike. For perhaps twenty minutes the wind and lightning would continue, mostly accompanied by heavy rain and almost complete darkness. Water would stream down the wall on the storm side of the shack, and the wind would come with such force that it often extinguished the light. At these times Mildred became so frightened that the rest of us had to pretend that we considered it more or less of a lark, even though we were expecting momentarily to have the house overturn. Fortunately this never happened.

In all the time spent on the claim I went to town as seldom as possible. I liked the quiet of the prairie, and as

long as supplies were brought to me, I was quite satisfied. It is not surprising, however, that I missed many of the things to which I had been accustomed. Once, on a hot summer day, I had occasion to go to Hot Springs, spending most of the day there. I spent nearly all of my leisure time going from one soda fountain to another, eating ice cream and guzzling cold drinks, for all the world like a sailor on shore leave going from bar to bar. Never in all my life had I tasted anything quite so good.

It became increasingly evident as time went on that none of us would be able to make a living on our land. We all had become fond of the prairie life and would have stayed gladly if it had been possible, but none of us could afford it. My boss had written that my job in Chicago was waiting for me, and John, whose health was much improved, had received an offer from a friend in Minnesota to go into partnership with him in a store. Under the homestead laws it was possible to "prove up" after a residence of fourteen months by paying \$1.25 an acre,¹⁰ and this we did in July, 1910, acquiring patents from the Federal Government.¹¹

From a business standpoint the whole venture was a losing game, since I did not realize enough from my holding to cover what I had spent. But I have always considered it a good investment. When I arrived in Chicago after homesteading for a year and a half on the South Dakota plains, I was lean and brown as an Indian, looking a perfect frump, but I had a rested mind and broadened outlook. I always say—and mean it—that I would not give up my pioneering experience for a fortune. But would I do it again? Don't make me laugh.

¹⁰ These terms had been made available in 1901 for homesteading areas not previously covered, by a process known as "commutation." (*U. S. Statutes at Large*, XXXI, 740.)

¹¹ The titles to the homesteads were granted to Miss Blayney, her father, and her brother-in-law on March 13, 1911, April 10, 1911, and November 13, 1909, respectively. (Fall River County, Office of Register of Deeds, *Book of Patents* No. 3, pp. 30, 48, 334.)