

Elizabeth Malinda Clefson

A Prairie Woman's Journal

BY LAURA S. BALLMAN, 16

April 29, 1870

We are finally here! After a summer of travel, a cold stay in Severence and two more weeks of travel, we are at our claim.

All around us is vast prairie. On the corner of our claim runs a creek with a grove of trees nearby.

My intuition about this place is good. I am glad to be in a permanent place. It is hard to believe that if we farm this place for seven years it is ours.

August 9, 1870

Our house is complete. It is a wooden house from the trees near the river. The barn is a dugout in the hill.

To celebrate our moving in, we had a feast. I used some of the sugar and wheat flour to make a buttermilk pie. We also had a wild hog that Bjorn shot.

I helped him butcher the hog. First we scalded the hog in boiling water; when it was done, the bristle hair easily scraped off. Then the hog is opened up, and the entrails are taken out. While Bjorn and Hans finished the cutting, Irma and I washed the entrails. We'll use them for sausage casings.

August 12, 1870

Our life is going well. The house is built. The crops are healthy. And the livestock are thriving on this great land. However, this is not enough now. I long for the companionship of another woman. I want to swap recipes. I want to host a quilting bee. I want to share my life. I feel alone.

August 29, 1870

Today we heard Indian drums. I have never been so scared, not even when the ice cracked behind us when we crossed the Mississippi. The Indians scare me. I hope they understand we only want to farm this fertile land.

September 1, 1870

I'm feeling chipper. The Indian drums have stopped.

Soon the wheat will be ready to harvest. Before that Bjorn is going to Trottle, a town three days' ride from here. We need supplies for winter — cloth, sugar, salt, candlewicks and seed. Bjorn is also going to order a plow for spring.

I will be alone with the children for seven nights. The dog will be here, and Hans is strong. We will be alright.

September 5, 1870

Bjorn left today after a hearty breakfast of cornbread and gravy.

Hans has lice. I have spent the morning combing over his head. Irma has completed her cross-stitch so I must start her on quilting tomorrow.

The house is quite clean despite the dirt floor. Irma sweeps twice a day.

These thoughts of daily life run through my head. I wonder about home in New York. I hope Bjorn mails my letter.

September 7, 1870

Indians rode past our house today. They didn't speak a word but stopped in front for

a moment. Then the three rode away.

They were tanned brown from the sun and wore buffalo hides and feathers. It makes my skin creep when I think what could have happened.

September 13, 1870

Bjorn did not return from Trottle until last night. I was worried sick that he'd been killed by Indians. In fact, he had been held up in Trottle because one of the horses injured a leg.

All is well that ends well. Bjorn surprised us with window pane glass. He also managed to buy some leather for new shoes this winter.

Now we have only 15 cash dollars left. But we are well off if the harvest goes well.

September 20, 1870

We started the harvest today. All of us helped.

Back east they would scowl at a woman helping with the harvest. Here in the middle of Kansas it is necessary.

I have learned many skills living on the prairie. I can chop wood, skin a pig, harvest.

September 25, 1870

The wheat harvest is finished. Bundles of wheat were made by collecting small bundles — about the amount I can hug

with both arms. These bundles are then combined with four others. This is called a stock.

October 27, 1870

It froze last night. About half of the corn was left to harvest.

I want to put that behind us. Poor Bjorn. I saw the disappointment in his eyes. He said, "I should have known."

I said, "We will manage."

December 29, 1870

I have not written in quite awhile. I have been too heartbroken. Irma died. My sweet baby...she was only a child.

I thought it was just a cold. I did everything. I hung a bag of mustard seed around her neck. I gave her castor oil. Nothing helped. I do not know what it was that killed her, and I never will.

The worst of it is that the ground is frozen. Irma's little body lays unburied until spring. She is wrapped in her quilt next to the stable in the snow.

No one can understand the pain of losing her child until she experiences it. I can't let this stop me but how it hurts.

Christmas was not cheery. But we tried. I made a pie. Hans and Bjorn went hunting and came back with a buffalo. That reminds me of one of the oddest aspects of prairie life. We build fires with buffalo chips.

It was Irma's job to collect them.

January 15, 1871

A blizzard has blown for seven days. Bjorn has strung a rope from the house to the barn. We walk holding the rope to find our way in the blinding snow. The corn is holding out.

However, today we started to burn wheat — the buffalo chips are gone. We take a small handful of wheat and twist the stalks to form a thin log.

I've limited everyone to two small meals a day. In the mornings, we have warm corn mush. In the evening we eat potatoes or salted buffalo.

Bjorn entertains us with stories and gossip he heard in Trottle. It seems more people are moving to the area. Partially it's because of a grasshopper plague which attacked western Missouri.

I am ready for neighborly contact. Maybe someday there will be enough settlers around to found a church and start a school.

April 29, 1871

A year ago we arrived at this claim. I was confident and excited. This feeling has been challenged and sometimes squashed to the ground. But we have survived our first year. I am proud. I am confident again.

In a month we will plant new crops. The sky is clear today. Perhaps I will make some soap this afternoon. I am inspired.

We can farm this land forever.

If you enjoyed reading "A Prairie Woman's Journal," you might like Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan or The Sign of the Beaver by Elizabeth George Speare. Both books are available at the library.

