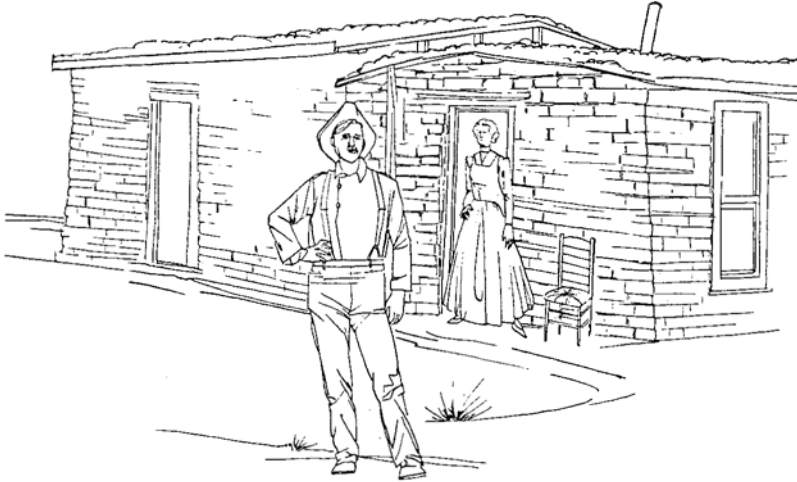


CHAPTER 8***Pioneer Life***

IN SETTLING A NEW COUNTRY, pioneers must often resort to primitive ways—an adaptation to frontier conditions. Later, they can bring in the comforts of civilization. On the North Dakota frontier the railroad made pioneering less primitive and hastened the bringing in of conveniences. But the railroad, by the rapidity with which it brought people to the unsettled country, must have increased the emotional shock of the change. The semiarid climate intensified the feeling of having been uprooted from familiar surroundings and transplanted in a strange land. All of the settlers except the German Russians came from humid regions and were awed by the vast, open, almost barren prairie. It increased their sense of isolation and loneliness. And long winters added to their hardships.

Many of the home seekers soon gave up and left. Others, with more courage and optimism, staved on, met the challenge of the new land, and conquered it. Their victory lay in adapting themselves to the prairie—sod houses and dugouts for shelter, fish and game for food, mutual helpfulness and self-reliance, and a concentration on wheat, the crop suited to the northern grassland.

Pioneering went forward through a large investment of eastern capital in railroads, banks, elevators, and farm equipment. The settlers invested their lives. Money and men together transformed the wilderness, a hard struggle which determined the character of the new society: its emphasis on frugal living, self-reliance, friendly helpfulness, optimism, energetic

activity, and courage.

LOCATING IN NORTH DAKOTA

The settlers came for free or cheap land. That was the great magnet, whether they were Norwegian or German peasants, American farmers or townsmen. Some immigrants came directly from the old country, some after living for a time in Iowa or Minnesota. Often one or two men would come alone, walking from St. Cloud or taking the railroad to some town, such as Fargo, Breckenridge, or Ellendale. They would look about for land, sometimes while working for an earlier settler. Then, having filed on a homestead and a tree claim, they would return to their old homes, sell their land or otherwise settle their affairs, and wait until the following spring, when they would come out to their claims with their families. Often friends came in together and settled near each other. A little Bohemian settlement near Wahpeton started that way in 1871-1872, and some townships in Traill County were more than 90 percent Norwegian.¹

Even after the railroads had reached North Dakota, immigrants would often stop in some more easterly settlement of their countrymen and work a number of years. Then they would buy a team of horses or oxen, a wagon, a cow, and other gear and move slowly to their new homes, hunting and fishing and taking a month or more on the way. The roads were poor, bridges and settlers few.

Native Americans sometimes traveled in covered wagons, but those with more money filled an emigrant car or two with horses, cattle, farm machinery, blacksmith and carpenter tools, and a barrel of dishes and arrived more quickly and easily. A. G. (Guy) Divet's father and uncle, prosperous farmers near Rochester, Minnesota, filled four emigrant cars with two McCormick wire binders, plows, mowers, harrows, seeders, and sixteen head of horses, as well as four hired men, and came to Richland County. When Usher L. Burdick's father, Ozias W. Burdick, despaired of ever paying for his farm near Owatonna, Minnesota, he loaded his few belongings, stock, and implements into a boxcar and took up a homestead claim northwest of Carrington in 1882. Norwegian sea captain M. C. Falck rode the train to Bismarck and outfitted there before moving north to McLean County.

There was much to see along the way. In 1886, Albert W. Farley of Almont, Michigan, found the hotels and boardinghouses of Ellendale crowded with men, all talking about their expectations as they moved

¹Jesse A. Tanner, "[Foreign Immigration into North Dakota](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), I (1906), 198.

into the raw new country. He saw the railroad tracks there lined with piles of boxes and barrels of household goods which the newcomers had unloaded pell-mell.

Newcomers needed the help of established settlers in finding good land. They wanted fertile soil, water for family and stock, and wood for fuel and building. The early arrivals took up the land along the Red River, the Wild Rice, the Goose, the Sheyenne, the James, and other streams. Those who came later had to be satisfied with open prairie.

The land seeker might first visit the county courthouse, become acquainted with county officials, and talk with men who were making it a business to help homesteaders. Then, walking or hiring a rig at a livery stable, he would set out with a compass and a map showing the townships, ranges, and sections. He would travel, if it were June, over a prairie brilliantly colored by carpets of flowers. There were no roads, only some wagon tracks, but the government surveyors had placed mounds of earth with oak stakes at the corners of each section. The stakes were marked with the range, township, and section, so that with his map, the land seeker could tell at each corner just where he was and just where he needed to go to see the land he was interested in.

After riding about the country and talking to earlier settlers, he would make a choice and hurry to the nearest United States land office. He might buy a quarter-section under the Pre-emption Law, secure a homestead for five years' residence, take a tree claim, or buy from the Northern Pacific Railroad or a speculator. In 1881 speculators in Traill County were offering land for the first year's crop or half the first two years' crops. This arrangement was known as the crop-payment plan.² Everyone took a claim, even though he had a business in town.

HOMES

When the settler arrived with his wagon, stock, and household goods, he had many things to do. He and his family might sleep in or under the wagon the first few nights, or they might have a tent. Water was an immediate necessity; the settler had to find a spring, dig a shallow well, or haul water from a stream. In the Red River Valley, shallow wells, ten feet or so, often supplied water, but many drank river water for a time.

The pioneer hurried to provide a house. If he were near the wooded

²R. M. Black (ed.), *A History of Dickey County, North Dakota, by the Dickey Historical Society* (Ellendale: Dickey County Historical Society, 1930), pp. 80-82; Walter E. Spokesfield, *History of Wells County, North Dakota* [Valley City: The Author, 1929], pp. 42-43; Henry V. Arnold, *The Early History of Inkster, North Dakota* (Larimore: The Author, 1916), pp. 8-9.

banks of a river, he generally built a low log cabin of two rooms. The roof consisted of poles resting on a horizontal beam, then a layer of hay and one of earth. The interior was often whitewashed. A typical cabin had two small windows and a single door.

Away from timber, the settler might make himself a one-room dugout in a coulee bank, finishing only the front with logs and building the pole-hay-earth roof level with the bank. A stovepipe stuck up through the roof. Dugouts made warm but dark homes. When only men spent the first winter in the new country, they sometimes shared a dugout with their horses or oxen.

On the open prairie, the newcomer might build a 14 by 16-foot sod house, laying up tiers of sod. Windows were small. The walls, sometimes two and one-half feet thick, were often boarded on the inside and whitewashed. Some thought that a sod house was warmer in winter than a log cabin. Both might have only an earth floor, but many had floors of cottonwood slabs or boards. Occasionally, settlers hauled lumber from a railroad station and built a 12 by 14-foot claim shanty covered with tar paper, often putting sod outside the board walls for greater warmth.

In McIntosh and Emmons counties and elsewhere, German Russians made large, sun-dried bricks and built thick-walled houses of two or three rooms which they plastered inside and out with marl and then whitewashed. These were cheap and durable, warm in winter and cool in summer. Some of them were sheathed inside and out with boards. Roofs might be earth over boards instead of earth over poles and hay. Danish settlers also built houses of sun-dried bricks, whitewashed inside and protected outside with board siding. In Cavalier County, German Mennonites from Russia built long, low buildings, one end of which housed the family and the other the cattle.

The pioneers furnished their first homes simply. They substituted dry-goods boxes for tables and dressers and used a small, four-lid stove, homemade beds, chairs, and benches. Often the children had to stand while eating because there were not enough chairs. For bedding, they might use deerskins and buffalo robes. Immigrants generally had a large chest, brought from the old country, in which they stored their linens, bedding, pictures, books, and more valuable possessions.

Settlers found fuel a problem on the treeless prairies. Those close to timbered riverbanks had a handy supply, but others had to haul wood long distances from such rivers as the Red, Sheyenne, and Missouri or from other timbered regions, such as the Sand Hills in Richland County, and Graham's Island, a peninsula in Devils Lake. They helped themselves to timber on school and railroad lands. In winter, some

homesteaders came fifty miles with ox teams to get wood at Graham's Island, sometimes paying a dollar a load to settlers who held claims there. Wood sold in town for three or four dollars a cord.

There was other fuel. Nina Farley's family bought coal in Ellendale, a round trip of one hundred miles. By 1896-1897 teams were hauling lignite to Bismarck from mines twenty miles north of town. People who settled near rivers or coulees in the lignite region commonly obtained their fuel by digging open pits or tunnels where the seams outcropped along the riverbanks. (In 1884 lignite production was estimated at 35,000 tons and in 1900 at 100,000 tons.) The German Russians burned *Mist*, manure which had been mixed with straw, trampled by horses, then cut into pieces and dried. Many burned cow chips.

Fuel was a greater problem than food. Fish, ducks, geese, and wild fruits were easily obtained. Aagot Raaen's father put a fish trap in Goose River which supplied his own family as well as the neighbors, and the sons of one Traill County pioneer would scoop a bushel basket of fish out of Buffalo Coulee so that their mother could feed the threshers. Usher L. Burdick recalled that settlers and Indians alike frequently speared pickerel through the ice on Devils Lake. Fish were an important item of food for the residents of Graham's Island and the surrounding prairie country. Other settlers, many of them Norwegians and skilled fishermen, set nets in Big Coulee and salted down or smoked great quantities of their catch.

An abundance of ducks and geese, prairie chickens, and rabbits made welcome provisions for money-short pioneers. They would shoot a supply of ducks and geese in the late fall and hang them on the side of the house, where they froze solid and were available when needed. Some settlers shot deer and antelope for their tables. Their wives preserved wild strawberries, chokecherries, raspberries, and plums.

Pioneer families frequently lacked money, so the womenfolk manufactured many items needed in the home. They made soap and candles, ground wheat in a coffee mill, carded and spun wool into yarn and dyed the yarn, knitted stockings, scarves, and mittens, and even wove cloth for blankets and homemade clothing. The men made rakes and crude carts.³

³Omon B. Herigstad, "[The First Norwegian Settlement in Griggs County, North Dakota](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), I (1906), 137; "Pioneer Experiences," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), VII (1925), 265-269; Waldemar C. Westergaard, "[History of the Danish Settlement in Hill Township, Cass County, North Dakota](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), I (1906), 156, 160; William H. Elzinc, "[Bohemians in Richland County](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), IV (1913), 68-69; Hazel

AGRICULTURE

The first year he spent on the land, the pioneer often planted only potatoes and earned some money picking up buffalo bones. The prairie was strewn with them, and every railroad station was a market. Piles of bones became a common sight along the railroad tracks. Most merchants dealt in bones, giving receipts which others honored and which were called "buffalo-bone money." At six dollars a ton, a load of two or three tons brought a sizable sum.

But the great thing was breaking the sod. The first day the settler sank his plow into the prairie, laying over a streak of black earth on the green grass, was the beginning of his new life. It was heavy work. The tough sod made it necessary to sharpen the plowshares each night—a blacksmith's job. Some of the pioneers had little equipment, and two might use a single team of oxen and a plow. Others, without tools or stock, had to hire a neighbor to break their land while they worked on a big farm for wages. The Homestead Act required a settler to break ten acres the first year. Probably many did no more than that, but the Divets, coming with many teams, plows, and hired men, broke 250 acres the first year and 500 the second.

Each year, the settlers broke more land. After plowing, they would put up hay and later plow the new breaking a second time. During the first summer, the settler would build a sod stable, perhaps fourteen by thirty feet, or cover a dugout in a coulee bank with branches and straw as a place for his stock. The second season started with seeding; poor settlers had to broadcast wheat by hand. Then followed the breaking of new land, haying, harvesting, threshing, and, finally, plowing the stubble and backsetting the new breaking. On fall nights, burning strawstacks dotted the prairie.

The work was extremely difficult, but the pioneers had plenty of energy and were driven by a consuming ambition to succeed. "The country is alive with seeding and dragging," wrote Mary Dodge Woodward in her diary. At the Divet farm, one or two men would be up at three o'clock to feed the horses. More arose at four, curried and harnessed the teams, ate breakfast, and were in the field ready to start as soon as it was light enough to see. They worked until dark. Young Guy

J. Loynes, "[Mennonite Settlements in North Dakota](#)," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), III (1910), 325; J. N. Van Sant and R. C. Ellman, [Methods and Costs of Mining Lignite in North Dakota](#), United States Bureau of Mines Circular 7891 (Washington, 1959), p. 7; L.W. Sperry, [Early History of Bismarck](#) (N.d., n.p.), p. 31.

Divet—doing, like many a boy, a grown man’s work at thirteen and sometimes falling asleep as he rode a farm machine—resolved to get away from farming. He was teaching school at seventeen and soon reading law.

There was so much work that women sometimes milked the cows and helped in the field: Aagot Raaen’s mother hurt herself with too much hard work. At threshing time the women of the house would be up most of the night preparing to feed twenty-five or thirty hungry men. Mary Dodge Woodward, glorying in the harvest rush, boasted in her diary: “I baked seventeen loaves of bread today, making seventy-four loaves since last Sunday, not to mention twenty-one pies, and puddings, cakes, and doughnuts.”⁴

When they finished threshing, the men would haul their wheat to town and lay in supplies for the winter. They followed a wagon track across the prairie and sometimes marked the way with piles of sod or with willow sticks set in the ground and bearing pieces of cloth. Many traveled two or three days going to town and as many on the return trip. On the way, they would spend a night or two in the open or with some hospitable settler.

In town, as many as one hundred men with wagons or sleighs might be waiting to sell their loads. Grain buyers were often not too honest, and cheated the farmers in weighing and grading the wheat. The buyer graded by merely looking at a sample and biting a kernel or two, often grading too low and taking off too much for dockage.⁵ In self-defense, the farmers would work off screenings and bin-burned grain on the buyer. He would be so rushed, with many men waiting, that he could not always watch the hopper where the grain was dumped. Sellers might plant a scoop or two of the inferior stuff in the middle of each sack or dump some sacks of it while others diverted the buyer’s attention. With his grain sold, the settler would buy large quantities of supplies, for trips to town were dangerous in winter.

TOWNS AND TOWN LIFE

The towns served the farmers, but townsmen too often looked down upon farmers as “hayseeds” or “country jakes.” The farmers, in turn, viewed townsmen with distaste.

⁴Mary Dodge Woodward, *The Checkered Years* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1937), p. 90; see also pp. 35-36, 41.

⁵Henrietta M. Larson, *The Wheat Market and the Farmer in Minnesota, 1858-1900*, Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, Vol. 122, No. 2 (New York, 1926), pp. 97, 155, 163.

In boom times, new towns grew up with amazing rapidity and then, when the boom died, often slowly declined. At the beginning a collection of small, boxlike frame buildings, cheaply built and without architectural pretention, would spring up on the bare, flat prairie. There were usually no trees or shrubs to give any touch of attractiveness. If a town appeared before the railroad entered the region, it often moved to a location on the railroad when the line came through. Some towns away from the railroad were served by stage lines. Daily stages ran from Bismarck to Winona and Fort Yates; another ran north to Washburn.

The new towns, even small ones, quickly acquired many business and professional enterprises. They would have general and hardware stores, drugstores, one to three doctors (often Scots), a lawyer or two, sometimes a dentist, a veterinarian, and a photographer, several hotels and banks, harness shops, blacksmith shops, lumber yards, implement dealers, poolrooms, a school, a newspaper, churches, livery stables, and many grain elevators and saloons.

Banks and newspapers were numerous. Sometimes a bank was the first building in a new town and a saloon the second. One man in Ellendale was said to have started a bank with thirty-five dollars. In the 1880's, Bismarck, with some three thousand people, had five banks; Munich, with only a few hundred, had three banks soon after it came into existence in 1905.

Almost every village had a newspaper. In 1890, North Dakota had about 125 newspapers and only 50 incorporated towns and villages. Grain elevators dominated the landscape, but saloons (or "blind pigs" when and where liquor was illegal) were often as numerous. In 1905, Omeme, a small village in Bottineau County, had seven elevators and seven blind pigs. Drugstores sold much liquor for allegedly medical purposes.

Many of the raw little towns, especially those at the end of the railroad, were rough places with many drifters, prostitutes, sporting houses, and gambling establishments. Usher L. Burdick recalled the Munich "at one time had 13 pigs....Gambling of all sorts was carried on in daylight; sporting houses lined the outskirts of the town to the east of the railroad tracks." In early years, Bismarck, Grand Forks, and presumably many other towns also had their share of prostitutes and sporting houses. Fights, beatings, and shooting were common. Burdick himself engaged in many fist fights in cleaning up Munich; by 1907 it was a fairly law-abiding place.

Livery stables were an important feature of every town. On Sundays a hundred horses and hacks would be rented out in Grand Forks for

pleasure driving: the biggest stable had stalls for fifty horses. The streets of early Bismarck were often full of ox- or mule-drawn wagons from the Black Hills, with swearing teamsters cracking long whips. Runaway horses sometimes caused accidents in the streets.

Sanitary conditions were poor. Many towns had stinking slaughter-houses on their outskirts where cattle and hogs were killed for the local meat markets. There was no systematic refuse collection; during the winter, people threw ashes and tin cans in their yards to be hauled away in the spring. Every house had an outside privy, and water came from wells which were easily contaminated.

In early Bismarck, water was peddled from door to door by tank wagons until 1886, when Alexander McKenzie formed a water company. It pumped untreated water, often quite muddy, from the Missouri River to the town's houses through a system of pipes. Grand Forks, taking its drinking water from the Red Lake River, into which Crookston dumped its sewage, suffered a typhoid epidemic in 1892-1893. Fully 10 per cent of the population contracted the disease and more than 150 died.

Many townspeople owned milch cows. At Bismarck, cows were herded outside the city limits by town herders. When some of the residents began to plant lawns about 1890, they had to fence them in to protect them from wandering cows. Until about 1906, some two hundred cows were kept and milked in Bismarck.

Towns were quite naturally centers for diversion and entertainment. Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck had theaters. In 1879 the Fargo theater (called an opera house) presented, according to English visitor Finlay Dun, "dramas, nigger and other songs, and dancing" with good singing and acting and a good orchestra. The performances, Dun reported in the *London Times*, were seen by large numbers of "dark-visaged farm fellows with slouch hats, many with blue guernseys, some lumberers in red flannel jackets, an occasional Indian, and many half-breeds."

Grand Forks and other towns had fairs. Many also organized baseball teams. By 1887, Fargo and Grand Forks had semiprofessional teams playing in the Red River League with Minnesota towns. Fourth of July celebrations were popular. As a boy of nine, Usher L. Burdick won two sheep in a foot race at Minnewaukan's celebration of the Fourth. While gaining a great reputation as a football player at the University of Minnesota, Burdick played baseball for Hampden, a tiny hamlet in Ramsey County. In 1905 he gave the address at Munich's celebration of the Fourth and then put on a Wild West show.

Track events, especially the hundred-yard dash, were an important part of Fourth of July celebrations in the northeastern counties. The British

settlers there had a traditional interest in track and field events—running, “jumping with rocks,” and throwing the caber. Sometimes races by professional runners caused betting and excitement; a bitter rivalry grew up between Park River and Grafton from such a contest.

Towns were important centers for the isolated settlers in many ways. They disseminated news and mail. Farmers, picking up news in town, would spread it to neighbors on the way home. Towns on the railroads had telegraphic communication with the rest of the nation. Mail came from the towns to country post offices, often only a box in a settler’s cabin, once a week.⁶

RECREATION, SCHOOLS, AND CHURCHES

Mail and visits to town boosted the settlers’ morale. They also drew together to combat the loneliness of the empty prairie. Those who had come with friends and neighbors already had a social circle that was helpful, and on Sundays they would gather in each other’s homes to visit. The young people often organized dances and card parties, either in homes or in hotels. A home which had a reed organ would become a social center where neighbors gathered to sing and make taffy. In Emmons County, Braddock supported a lyceum and also staged plays to help civic causes. Many enjoyed fishing and hunting.

When winter came, neighbors sometimes joined in skating and sleighing parties. But cold and storms tended to keep people at home and indoors. Shut up, the men often became restless. To pass the time, they made furniture, repaired tools, or cleaned seed wheat by picking shriveled kernels and weed seeds out by hand. They talked, told stories to their children, and played checkers, chess, and other games.

Often in the long evenings one member of the family would read aloud to the others while the mother knitted. The Scandinavians had a traditional love of literature, and most homes had some books. Nina Farley’s father brought a large library from Michigan, including bound

⁶John M. Molberg *et. al.*, *Bottineau County Diamond Jubilee* (Bottineau: Diamond Anniversary Publication Committee, 1959), entry under 1886; Clement A. Lounsbury, *Early History of North Dakota* (Washington: Liberty Press, 1919), p. 548; Black, *Dickey County*, pp. 82-92; Dakota Territory Commissioner of Immigration, *The State of North Dakota, 1889*, p. 84; Robert S. Anderson, “A Social History of Grand Forks, North Dakota, 1880-1920” (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1951), pp. 30-31; James Grassick, *North Dakota Medicine: Sketches and Abstracts* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Medical Association, 1926), p. 204; Lowell A. Barsness, “The History of High School Track and Filed in the State of North Dakota” (Unpublished M.S. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1958), pp. 4-16.

volumes of the *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, and *Galaxy*. After his death, her mother continued to buy some of the best magazines and recent books in spite of a need for economy.

Reading in the home was the beginning of schooling. A mother would teach her children to read, or an older child would teach a younger one. Next, a group of neighbors would set up a school in one of their homes. In a few years they would build a schoolhouse or convert a claim shanty to school purposes, and a teacher would hold sessions for a few months in spring and fall. In 1874, Ida C. Hall, seventeen, began teaching the first school in Jamestown in a small shed without even a chair for the teacher. She boarded at the railroad section house, and one day she saw the whole Yanktonai tribe go by—several hundred families with their belongings on wagons, carts, and travois, the men riding and the women walking.

Pioneer teachers often performed admirably under difficult conditions. They boarded around from one family to another, without much privacy, walked or rode long distances to poorly equipped schools, built fires and did their own janitor work, and put up with all sorts of inconveniences for a salary of thirty-five dollars a month. Big, unruly pupils sometimes threw an unpopular man teacher out bodily. Usher L. Burdick took over such a school as his first position after graduating from the normal school at Mayville. He soon had not only the pupils—one was well over six feet—but also their parents studying eagerly at night.

Although at first the immigrants' children might not understand the English spoken by the teacher, they soon caught on. Young people were eager to learn, and they were soon crowding into the state university, the state college of agriculture, and the normal schools. Some young Dakotans went to college outside the territory—to Harvard, Beloit, the University of Minnesota, and elsewhere. Curtis D. Wilbur was appointed to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1884, the first North Dakotan to attend one of the service academics. He became Secretary of the Navy under President Calvin Coolidge.

Like schooling, religious services also began in the home. Parents read from the Bible or a book of sermons and held family prayers, and mothers taught their children hymns. The young studied the catechism to prepare themselves for confirmation. A neighbor might be called in to baptize a dying infant or to read from the hymn book at a burial. Sometimes the settlers gathered in a home for religious services. Itinerant pastors, driving ponies, skiing, or walking from community to community, held services in homes or schoolhouses and later organized the people into congregations.

One missionary, the Reverend Pall Thorlaksson, was especially outstanding. Born in Iceland in 1849, he graduated from college in Reykjavik, emigrated to Wisconsin in 1872, and entered the ministry after studying at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Thorlaksson encouraged the Icelanders to move from their misfortune-ridden settlement on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg to Pembina County and became their pastor at Mountain, Gardar, Thingwalla, and Hallson. When many of his people suffered from a lack of provisions in the winter of 1879-1880, he acted to relieve them. He bought one hundred barrels of flour and forty head of cattle on his own note at Northfield, Minnesota, distributed these necessities among them, and went from house to house with encouraging words. Young Thorlaksson died of consumption in 1882, but a monument in the cemetery at Mountain commemorates his services.⁷

HARDSHIPS

Pioneering meant hardship. Summer brought dust storms; spring and fall, prairie fires. Wind-blown flames could out run a galloping horse, and sometimes leaped over streams and firebreaks, sweeping over large areas of open country and destroying grain, haystacks, buildings, and stock. Farmers plowed firebreaks and fought the flames with wet sacks and blankets. "At night the whole western horizon would be lighted up for miles," Usher L. Burdick remembered, "and we knew some poor homesteaders would be wiped out."

Winter brought isolation, numbing cold, and blizzards. A blizzard in April, 1873, caused heavy loss of livestock; one in March, 1876, marooned two or three hundred people for three weeks on a Northern Pacific train between Fargo and Bismarck; another in February, 1881, killed many cattle. Perhaps the worst struck on January 12, 1888. It covered haystacks, barns, and houses with snow and brought death to nearly a hundred people.

Many were caught out in a storm and yet survived. Young Guy Divet, returning home from Wahpeton when a blizzard struck, let the horses go, turned over the box of the sleigh, and took refuge underneath—protected by hay, grain sacks, and horse blankets. Sometimes fuel ran short in a storm, and people burned whatever was at hand, even part of the house

⁷Pall Thorlaksson, "[The Founding of the Icelandic Settlement in Pembina County](#)," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, VI (January 1932), 150-164; Sveinbjorn Johnson, "[The Icelandic Settlement of Pembina County](#)," *North Dakota Historical Society Collections*, I (1906), 109-110.

itself. When the storm had passed, the settlers dug themselves out, found the barn, and cared for their stock, which might have gone three days without being watered and fed. Many of the Farley's Holstein-Friesian cattle, one a prize cow imported from Holland, died in the blizzard of 1888. Aside from storms, it was hard to keep warm in winter. Many suffered frostbite, and Mary Dodge Woodward once noted in her diary that she was preparing breakfast as usual "in hood, shawl, and mittens."

Spring might bring bad floods. The winter of 1896-1897 saw a very heavy snowfall, and some towns were without train service for a week. When the snow melted in the spring, a great flood spread along the Missouri, James, Sheyenne, and Red rivers. It swept away property, drowned many deer, inundated towns, covered twenty-five blocks of paving in Grand Forks, damaged bridges, and made a lake thirty miles wide and a hundred and fifty miles long in the Red River Valley. Families and livestock huddled on the tops of haystacks.

All suffered from such hardships, but the women endured more than the men. They suffered not only from the spectacular hazards of fire, storm, and flood, but also from the whole round of life on the prairie frontier—from living in drab, homely sod houses or log cabins with dirt floors and leaky roofs, from an endless round of pressing tasks in feeding hungry men and caring for ill children when a doctor was beyond reach, from bearing babies with only the aid of a neighbor woman, from listening to the ceaseless wind and the ceaseless talk of crops, and perhaps above all from sheer loneliness. Many times, especially in the first years, the wife and children would be left alone for days and even weeks at a time while the husband was away. He might be working on a railroad construction crew or on a bonanza farm; he might be cutting ties for a railroad or cordwood for a steamboat; or he might be making a trip to town. There were always long trips to be made with slow-moving oxen—to a river for wood, to town for lumber and supplies, to market with grain. It must have seemed to many a woman that she was always waiting for her husband to come home.

Under such pressures many women broke down and became old and stooped before their time. Guy Divet believed that the "crushing burdens of the prairie frontier" contributed to the early death of his mother, "a woman of considerable culture and pride." He wrote that the prairies "devoured" women, that they, like his mother, were "a part of the grist of the frontier's mill, taken for toll in the interest of generations to come." Some even lost their minds.

The burden of hardship was increased by the contrast between life in the old home and the new. Pioneer women were often persons of

refinement and education from well-to-do homes. Linda Warfel Slaughter, for example, had been an Oberlin College student for a time, and Mrs. M. C. Falck was the wife of a Norwegian sea captain. She was living in an apartment in Oslo with leisure time, pretty clothes, and money to indulge her whims when her husband, tiring of the sea, took up a homestead near Washburn in 1883 and sent for her. When she first saw the low, dirt-roofed cabin with its dry-goods-box furniture which was to be her new home, she was dismayed. Other women undoubtedly shared that emotion when they arrived in North Dakota. Coming from forested, hilly country, many must have been shocked when they first saw the vast, flat, treeless plain.

Although for many North Dakota seemed like a Godforsaken country, part of their dissatisfaction probably stemmed, not from the nature of the place, but from the uprooting involved in their move to a new home. A Norwegian immigrant who settled in Griggs County in 1881 wrote to a friend back home:

On the whole it seems to be a good deal easier to make a living [in Dakota]; but there are many hardships connected with the life of a pioneer, especially at first. I should like to see you and others come over, yet consider the matter twice before you leave the Fatherland and the place where your cradle stood. It is not a small matter.⁸

The hardships of pioneering, both physical and psychological, had important effects. For one thing, many of the pioneers left North Dakota a few years after they had come. The women's inability to adjust to the situation probably played a large part in the exodus. Many stayed, no doubt, who would have liked to get away but were too poor to leave. Immigrants who owned land were more likely to stay than native Americans. Guy Divet believed that about half of the original settlers commuted their homesteads by paying \$1.25 an acre, sold out to some ambitious neighbor for a few hundred dollars, and left North Dakota.

CONQUEST OF THE FRONTIER

There was another side to pioneering, as important as hardships and abandonment of the struggle, and that was the conquest of a new country. Many or those who stayed built up their holdings and prospered. For them, pioneering was an adventure, and they quickly developed a feeling

⁸Herigstad, "[First Norwegian Settlement](#)," p. 138; Frank J. Bavendick, [Climate and Weather in North Dakota](#) (2nd ed.; Bismarck: North Dakota State Water Conservation Commission, 1952), pp. 7-8.

of loyalty and affection for the broad, sweeping land (“nothing can excel this endless, enchanting view,” wrote Mary Dodge Woodward), where hospitality was a sort of religion, where people gave each other a helping hand when it was needed, and where, by dint of hard work, rising land values, and frugal living, they were getting ahead. Recalling his youth at eighty, Guy Divet harshly divided the early settlers into “workers and stickers” and “shirkers and quitters.” Some were natural pioneers, born to conquer the land, and some were not. Surely for the latter the wise course was to leave; Divet himself left North Dakota to practice law in Washington, D.C.

Among the natural pioneers were Nina Farley and the man she married, John H. Wishek. A girl of eighteen, Nina moved to McIntosh County from Michigan with her father, mother, and three brothers in the spring of 1887. Her father, a well-to-do farmer, had selected land east of Ashley, but he died that June, and her mother, though unaccustomed to responsibility, decided to stay on. Nina Farley found McIntosh County a raw, empty country with no protection and no cover, much different from wooded Michigan. Yet she was at once attracted by the vast, open prairie, with its pure air and splendid view. Although she was much alone that first, sad summer, she was never homesick. She helped with the farm work, taught country school in the home of German Russian settlers, and then—a bright, comely, courageous woman—married John H. Wishek in 1891. She came to have a great affection for North Dakota and in her old age wrote of pioneering: “It is hard to draw a clear picture of those days, the isolation, the long distances and slow travel, the crude makeshifts and lack of conveniences, the high hopes and bitter disappointments.”⁹

John H Wishek was born in 1855 to German immigrant parents in Warren, Pennsylvania. He struggled through law school at the University of Michigan, sometimes living for days on corn-meal mush when his funds were low, and then practiced law for five years in Prospect, Ohio. He came to Bismarck in 1884 with slender resources. That April, George W. Lilly and others interested in land speculation set out from Bismarck for McIntosh County, an entirely unsettled region. They selected a site for the business center and county seat near Hoskins Lake, filed on the land, put up claim shanties, and helped the government surveyor to divide the townships into sections. Wishek soon joined the enterprise, became Lilly’s partner, and aided the survey party by building mounds at the corners of each section.

⁹Nina Farley Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County* (Ashley, N.D.: *Ashley Tribune*, 1941), pp. 93-96, 109, 175, 180-184, 427.

As Lilly, Wishek, and their associates boomed the new country, settlers began to come in. Some of those who arrived in 1885 were German Russians from near Scotland, South Dakota. Wishek, speaking German, won the confidence of these people and helped them to select land and file on their claims. He became a great promoter of settlement and, with his associates, located ten thousand people on lands in McIntosh, Logan, and Emmons counties in North Dakota and McPherson County in South Dakota. By 1890 there were 2,053 German Russian settlers in McIntosh County alone.

Wishek, a tall, heavy man with a black beard, was noted for his strong will, foresight, and frugality. His and Lilly's "land office" early became a social center where Wishek cheered the settlers with his genial ways and humorous stories. He held their confidence and for years served as registrar of deeds and state's attorney, and sat in the legislature as a member of the McKenzie machine.

Wishek also built up large holdings. He developed the townsites of Ashley, Wishek, Danzig, Venturia, Artas, and Pollock. He owned banks, lumber, coal, and implement firms, and grain elevators—in all having had a hand in forming thirty-five corporations. He acquired much of the land for the Soo Line right of way in his part of the state and finally brought the railroad to McIntosh County in 1898, when the town of Wishek was founded. He became known as "Father Wishek," gave sites to churches, built up a large private library, and died at the age of seventy-eight in 1932. In sum, the story of John H. Wishek was the story of McIntosh County.

Gradually, pioneer life passed. The country was settled. Railroads brought markets closer; land values rose. Trees grew about the homesteads, and frame houses replaced log cabins and sod houses. Horses took over the work formerly done by oxen as settlers won the struggle with poverty.

The immigrants took up the language and customs of the New World. Many Anglicized their names: Laverans Fjelstad became Lewis Fisk, postmaster and saloonkeeper of Hatton. Yet they clung to the language and ways of the old country, subscribed to foreign language newspapers, and on holidays (if they were Norwegian) cooked *lefse*, *flat brød*, *grøt*, *kjøtboller*, and *lutefisk*.

Both immigrants and native Americans brought much to the new country. In turn, it helped to shape their character. Pioneering in North Dakota, with its hardships, dangers, and isolation, as well as its opportunities, placed a premium on certain traits: courage, optimism, energy and ambition, aggressiveness, and compassion. These were

prominently displayed in such men as Norman W. Kittson, Alexander McKenzie, William Lemke, James J. Hill, John H. Wishek, Max Bass, Usher L. Burdick, and many another. From Sitting Bull through Charles C. Talbott to William Langer, such qualities have marked North Dakota's principal leaders. Almost by definition, they who transform a wilderness into a civilized society are public-spirited citizens. While those who soon fled the open prairies naturally disparaged North Dakota, those who created the new commonwealth just as naturally developed a strong loyalty to it.

Many North Dakotans like to believe that the long, open view over the prairie has encouraged the long, liberal view intellectually, and that the people of their state, with ample opportunity for reading and reflection during the long winters, are stable, sound, thoughtful, and independent in their ideas and attitudes on public questions. North Dakotans also like to believe that, having so recently conquered the frontier, they are friendlier toward progress and change than the peoples of older societies. Whether this is true or not—and many would doubt it—North Dakotans still retain some of the pioneer virtues: courage, optimism, self-reliance, aggressiveness, loyalty, and an independent cast of mind and spirit.