

relatives, acquaintances, and friends. And may the Lord by His grace bend, direct, and govern our hearts so that we sometime with gladness may assemble with God in the eternal mansions where there will be no more partings, no sorrows, no more trials, but everlasting joy and gladness, and contentment in beholding God's face. If this be the goal for all our endeavors through the sorrows and cares of this life, then through his grace we may hope for a blessed life hereafter, for Jesus sake.

Always your devoted

GURI OLSDATTER

Write to me soon.

THE STUDY OF PIONEER LIFE: A COMMUNICATION

SLEEPY EYE, MINNESOTA, October 15, 1929

TO THE EDITOR:

I was considerably interested in your news comment on pages 341-343 of the September number of MINNESOTA HISTORY. The question whether or not "American historical studies of pioneer life have succeeded in coming to grips with the truth" is a fair one to ask, but the answer must necessarily be, I think, that they have not, except in a very vague way. So vague that in many instances one would never recognize the glowing descriptions and the truths (if they could be come at) as referring to the same incidents or happenings.

Speaking of contemporary newspaper accounts, here is one instance within my personal knowledge. When the Davis family had been in Minnesota only a few months, we received a copy of a Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, paper from a relative near Rochester. The paper contained a three-quarter column article giving a detailed account of the massacre of our whole family—father, mother, and nine children—by the Indians. It was to all appearances a very accurate description of the killing, told in good reporter style. It gave a vivid word picture of the appearance and location (with reference to the house) of each horribly mutilated body and even the names of each individual member of the family as well as other gruesome details.

At that time we had only trekked as far west as Mankato and had not seen a single Indian. We never made any special effort

to deny the "news" and I have no doubt that the editor of that paper and many of his subscribers, if alive, as well as those of later times who look over his old files regard the Davis family as utterly wiped out — a sacrifice to the pioneering spirit of that time. That same pioneering couple, however, have left a sizable number of descendants as positive proof of the inaccuracy of reports of local happenings that are beyond the personal knowledge of the editor.

I have been taking notice of newspaper accounts of early historical incidents ever since I was old enough to read and comparing them with the details of the actual happenings such as I personally knew of, and others the actors in which I was personally acquainted with, and it is not too harsh to say that so far as my observation goes at least seventy-five per cent of each and every account is either pure "bunk" or extremely inaccurate. I have never seen a single newspaper article on local historical incidents which was not subject to this criticism. This is not the fault of the editors, usually. Most men like to tell the reporters glowing accounts of remarkable exploits and these descriptions pass into the papers at least not pared down and become veritable (?) history.

Some, of course, may say that a boy's memory of happenings is not reliable; but a boy's mind, if it varies from reality, does so on the side of exaggeration. That is, things are more likely to look big to a boy. Articles of the kind referred to, however, are all exaggerations, as compared with the usual recollections from boyhood.

As to historians gaining reliable information from mouth-to-mouth sources, I shall call your attention to a very widely read book and one of which a certain school teacher said, "It is true to life." Incidentally, this teacher was not over twenty-five, had spent no part of that time on the prairie, and consequently could know no more about pioneer life on the prairie in the seventies than a hillbilly in Tennessee. The book referred to is Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. I have no criticism of the author. He was undoubtedly conscientious and careful in selecting and sifting his material, but unavoidably he got his facts from second- or third-hand sources. That is, he saw none of the incidents or

conditions himself nor their like; and of course there could be no reason for him to doubt the veracity of his informants. He could not be expected, therefore, to draw a very accurate line between fact and fancy. Then, too, there seems to have been a tendency on the part of his informants to view the things they were describing through mental eyes accustomed to seeing genii, fairies, demons, and the like. Old histories are not entirely free from this mental slant.

Note, with many other remarkable statements in the book, that on page 38: No birds, no insect life on the prairie except mosquitoes.¹ Where were the plovers, killdeers, curlews, dickcissels, bobolinks, meadow larks, and other distinctly prairie birds? And the cranes, geese, and ducks, flying over and nesting — some of them — in the marshes and near-by uplands, elsewhere described? The settlers were doubtless too busy to think of birds or insects that did not bother them, but the same climate and ponds that would hatch and support mosquitoes would furnish moisture enough to support other insects and also birds. Then, too, most insects would not await the white man's coming, nor would the ordinary prairie birds.

Per Hansa in *Giants in the Earth* breaks one and a half acres of sod in one late summer day (p. 66). First, the prairie sod in late summer would be covered by a good coat of thrifty grass and perennial, tough-rooted plants like the shoe string. Second, the oxen would have to be allowed to feed by grazing on the prairie grass for a very considerable part of the day, for the settlers could have at that time no other feed. Third, an acre a day was considered a good day's work for two yoke of up-and-coming oxen hitched to a fourteen-inch breaker. Very few ever tried at all to break with one team. If a settler owned but one team, he would borrow, hire, or exchange. All the references to cattle in *Giants in the Earth* are more or less unreal. No cow would stay around one place on the open prairie for more than a half hour or so unless watched, and that, too, very closely. Often the

¹ "Original settlers," writes Mr. Rölvaag in a footnote on the page referred to above, "are agreed that there was neither bird nor insect life on the prairie, with the exception of mosquitoes, the first year that they came." *Ed.*

limit would be fifteen minutes. The cows would graze a few minutes quite contentedly, then for no apparent reason start off, taking a bite here and there as they went, and in a very short time string along over the prairie for some seemingly definite point. This would be the case with two or three, or more. A single cow or ox had to be staked or hobbled, for when it started to run it was next to impossible for a boy or man to head it off. Once out of sight, over a rise, it would wander indefinitely, very, very rarely coming back of its own accord.

The description of the coming of the grasshoppers beginning in *Giants in the Earth* on page 341 is too long to quote. When I read it the first time, I thought the author was describing the descent of a monstrous flight of bats. I had been through all those grasshopper years on the prairie, but it did not occur to me that those little pests were the subject of this truly remarkable word picture. The contrast between the impression one gets from this account and the real scenes is so vast that it is almost useless to attempt to draw a comparison.

A few salient points may be mentioned, however. The grasshoppers were not fast flyers. They were not dark brown (the flyers), but a rather light gray on the back when wings were folded, with a light greenish yellow belly. Their wings when spread for flight were of a silvery tint, but transparent. They were to be seen flying in the air above by the sun glinting on these silvery wings. They could not by any stretch of the imagination produce the effect of a black, surging, billowing storm cloud. The young "hoppers," hatched out in the spring, were dark brown for some time after hatching, but they faded as they grew to maturity. Nor did they ever literally cover the ground. Had they done so they would not have left a living plant, wild or tame. But always the settlers saved a part of their crops, as the author says later on. Then the frightening of them off by the discharge of an old musket (p. 345)! The gun, I admit, would have made a great noise, but the futility of it was shown (if showing were necessary) by the fact that the gun was used but once and that by only the one man. Half a dozen "hoppers" on one head of oats and the stalk covered with them all the way down—and still the men went on and finished cutting the oats! That load

would have flattened the oats to the ground. "At one place a fork with a handle of hickory might be standing in the ground, and after a few swarms had passed the surface of the handle would be rasped and chewed, a mass of loose slivers; somewhere else a garment might be laid out on the ground to dry—a swarm would light on it, and in a moment only shreds would be left" (p. 352). They didn't come in swarms but in one vast flight, and as they came down they went at it. They did chew garments and wood to some extent, just as they did wild grasses and other wild plants, but that was only in spots on a garment or wooden article and after the manner of crickets or ordinary grasshoppers. They might spoil a garment as moths or crickets would. Leaving it in shreds, however, or the surface of a "hickory" fork handle a mass of slivers is something different.

On page 426, describing the scene after a heavy snowfall, the author writes, "And tunnels had to be burrowed from house to barn, and from neighbour to neighbour." Neighbors were from half a mile to several miles apart. And consider that with ever so heavy a fall of snow, it would be deep enough for tunneling only in deep drifts to the leeward of houses or stables or some other obstruction.² The surplus would have been lodged in the river bottom. Also remember that, if one started a tunnel at his door, as soon as he got a few feet from there he would need only to point his shovel upward to gain the surface—and that is what the pioneers did. There is no doubt about their using their coffee mills for grinding flour now and then, but there can be no doubt, either, that many trips were made to town.

Then, in the spring when the thaws came, people "would go sailing away" on the roofs of houses, on the gables of barns, in wagon boxes even. "Many would perish—for there was no Ark in those days!" Now that is quite a picture for one to contemplate who was raised on the prairie and saw this very spring through in all its exceeding "wetness." On a prairie such as is described in *Giants in the Earth* a melting of the snow in sufficient quantities to float off farm houses and barns with the

² It should be noted that the statement in *Giants in the Earth* about tunneling is qualified by these words, "wherever the distances were not too long and where there were children who liked to play at such things." *Ed.*

people in them — or out — would, practically speaking, be an impossibility. In some gorge or river valley a building might be floated off, but never on the prairie.

I have often enough heard "old-timers" tell newcomers of these and other remarkable incidents and experiences of the early pioneering days in just such terms of exaggeration without suspecting for a moment that these were to be taken in and later to be considered worthy of a place in the history of the first prairie settlements. There appears to be no remedy for this condition of things. The great difficulty is that the public seems to "demand" something glaringly, glowingly, and awfully wonderful from both tellers of historical incidents and historical novelists, and things told in this way must be of the sordid and unpleasant phases of life, never of the enjoyable and uplifting things. Writings of this character are usually described by their publishers and critics as "real literature." Libraries all over the country are absorbing them with avidity. Do they want the truth? Publishers seem to think that the people would not read the truth if they had it at hand. I wonder.

LE ROY G. DAVIS



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