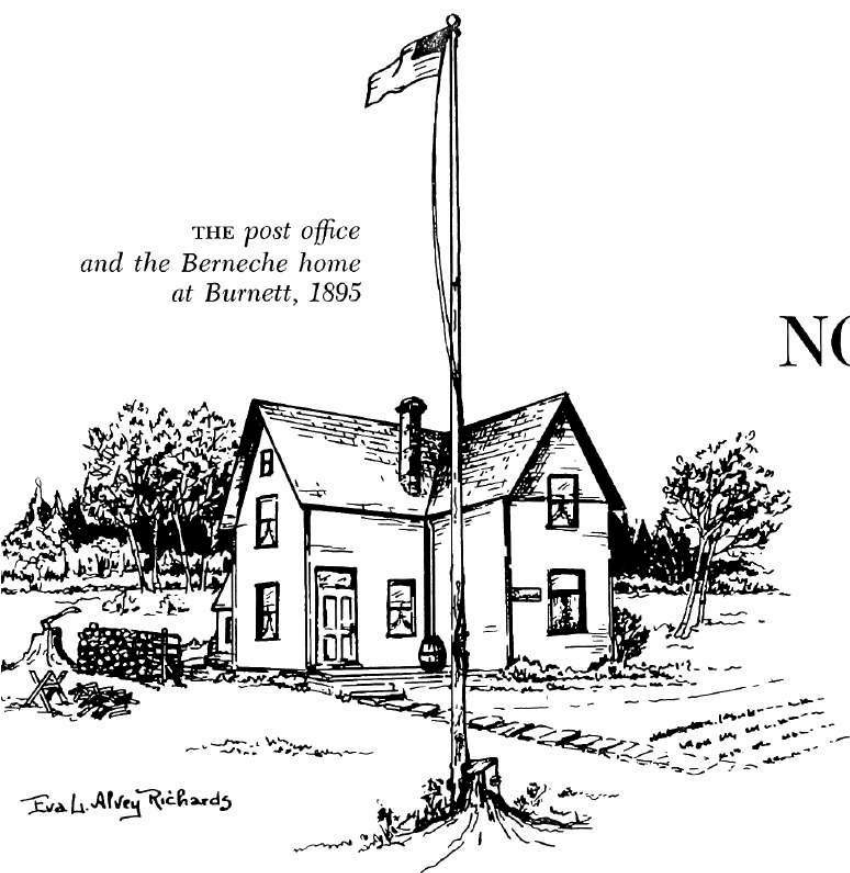


THE post office
and the Berneche home
at Burnett, 1895



NORTH COUNTY

THIS IS the second extract to
Richards' forthcoming book,
"Pioneers in Iron Land," was
1951. The author, who now
Duluth, from 1893 to 1898.

EVA L. AL

FATHER THOUGHT it was enough that Mother should accompany him to the northern wilderness without asking her to live in a primitive log cabin. So he built a fine house on a slight rise of ground about a quarter mile north of the station of Burnett, and about a block's length west of the railroad track. We could see the station from our front porch and from the windows of the parlor and dining room. We could hear the rumbling of the trains too, as they crossed the bridge.

All trains stopped at Burnett. Sometimes the empty ore trains were so long that the engine, with a great puffing and steaming, came to a stop right in front of our house. When the southbound trains stopped, the caboose was there, and we children used to wave to the brakeman from the porch. These were the exciting events of the day, and we never missed them.

Because the quarters at Grandpa's were

crowded, we moved into our house before it was finished. Father wanted to get a garden started, and as he said, he did not choose to walk a mile or more from Grandpa's before breakfast to plant his potatoes. I can well remember the day Grandma and Mother cut the potatoes for this business. Grandma taught Mother how to do it—how to leave two or three eyes in each piece—a job altogether new and different for Mother's hands to be doing. It was amusing to learn that potatoes had eyes. The next thing I was helping Father plant them, following him as he hoed out the long furrows.

Father could turn from gardening to carpentering, or to the digging of a well, as easily as he could change from boots to slippers. By the end of the summer of 1893, when the country was in the grip of one of its worst panics, our farm was a going concern. We had a fine barn built of logs;

POST OFFICE

*in this magazine from Mrs.
'ioneer." An earlier chapter,
l in the issue for September,
Seattle, lived at Burnett, near*

CHARDS

the loft was stuffed with hay, and it sheltered two pigs, a horse, a cow, and a flock of hens. Water flowed icily cool in the new well; several cords of wood were stacked against winter; and our house was all finished on the outside. What's more it was painted white with gray trim and looked very prosperous surrounded with the varied greens of the garden sloping gently away from it. Mother had longed for flowers and vines, but she knew it was too much to ask the first summer. She mentioned this to our hired man the day he cleaned up the building debris, to which he replied, "Oui, ce beaux, Madame, but it is we cannot make the good soup from the flowers."

On the inside, the rooms were ready for the plastering. Father and our hired man put in an hour or two every evening tapping the laths on. Even Mother helped. Every day she would find time to nail on a

few, working up as far as she could reach, and she seemed to take great pleasure in the compliments Father would bestow on her work. Much of our furniture was still crated, waiting, as was Mother, for finished rooms, curtained and carpeted, so she might know the joyous peace of ordered living once again.

It had been arranged for us to move back to Grandpa's during the plastering upheaval, but the very day we were to go, who should arrive to visit Grandpa and Grandma but Father's two sisters, Aunt Agnes and Aunt Minnie, and with them their small daughters, "Little Aggie" and "Little Minnie," as we called them. Imagine our plight! The house was completely dismantled, the men were mixing the sand and lime, the bedding and china and clothing were all packed away—all save the few things we were taking with us for our brief sojourn. And now four more in Grandma's little cabin! Our hired man saved the day. This good servant was my Father's right hand—and Mother's too for that matter—for all the years we lived in Minnesota.

A French Canadian, his name was Perreault. No one knew his first name. We called him Le Blanc—the "White One." Everyone called him that, and not without reason. His hair and eyebrows, even his eyelashes, were silver white and since he was too young to have come by these naturally, folks all believed there was truth in the story told of him—that he had seen a ghost one night.

Le Blanc lived across the river, near Saginaw in the next township. He owned a piece of timberland there which he shared with his brother, Elzear. With scarcely a dollar to their names, they had made a comfortable home for themselves in this wilderness, and now that the railroad needed their timber in the shape of railroad ties, they felt very prosperous indeed. So we went to the Perreault farm to stay instead of at Grandma's. It was our luck that Elzear was hauling railroad ties

that day, loading a flatcar on the switch spur just across the river. It did not take Le Blanc long to get word to his brother that we were to ride back to the farm with him. Mother hurriedly packed a basket of food for our supper, while Father dashed down to the barn to gather all the eggs he could find. At the last minute, Mother remembered to take a "starter" of yeast.

You should have seen us going across the bridge on a handcar, sitting between our rolls of bedding and bags. Father said we looked like a family of Irish immigrants, but Mother told him we were still very French and to use his blarney to hurry up the plastering. We used to say it was a hundred miles to Perreault's. Actually it was only a little over four miles. But distances seem so much greater to children.

AT PERREAULT'S

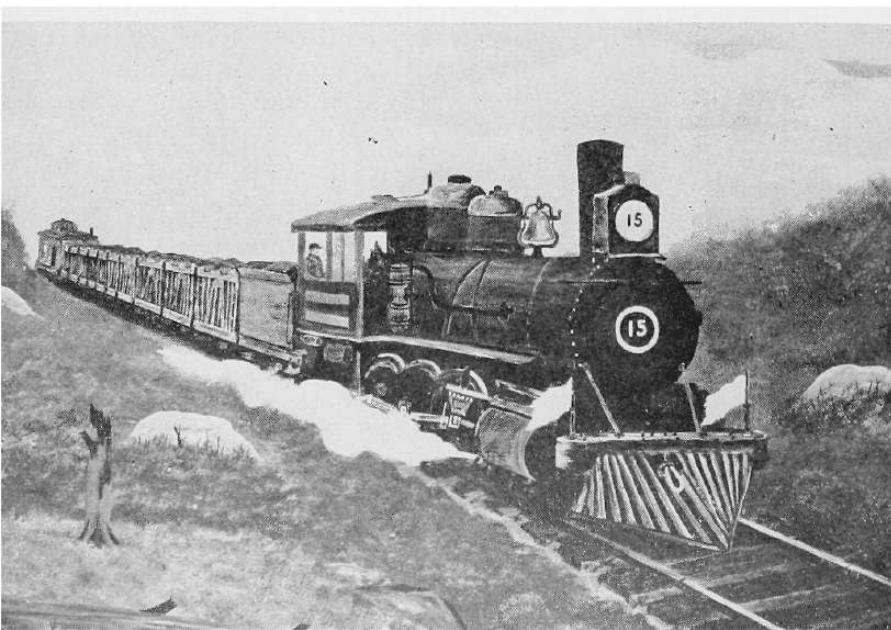
Every day at Perreault's was filled with new and exciting delights. Mother spent her between hours—between meals and children—cleaning beans and peas and washing brown crocks to store them in. She washed the small windows and rearranged the assortment of china plates and cups on the shelves. She made a fine chair pillow by stuffing some feathers into a salt bag she had emptied and washed. Elzear made dolls for us, using small potatoes for heads, cutting eyes and nose with a flick of his knife, and naming each one as soon as it was finished. Here was Felix, and this

bonhomme was Jean Baptiste, another was François, and there was always a quaint tale woven in about each. Mother used to tell Elzear that he ought to have a dozen children of his own, he could amuse youngsters so cleverly.

Sometimes we went for rambling walks in the forest and Elzear would show us deer and rabbit trails, or lift us up to look into empty birds' nests. Mother asked about the trees—which wood was best for a quick hot fire on cold mornings and which would burn slowly for good oven baking. Elzear told her about pitch pine and alder and birch and what a fine slow fire thick bark could make; "she ees like railroad coal that one—ees cook the fine bake bean." Best of all, he showed her how to separate the paper-thin layers of birch bark, which were as good as carpenter's shavings for starting a fire. He would dress up our thumbs in tiny rolls of it and say they were papooses we must rock to sleep, or hang curly ribbons of it over our ears and call us "tete frise."

THE NEW HOUSE

Came the day when we said goodbye to Mr. Perreault's little cabin in the woods. I remember very well hearing the Yooh Whoo! down the skid road and how we all pellmelled out of the door to see who was calling from the clearing. It was Father come for us. We children danced around him in high glee and he had us all on his



ORE train of the 1890's

knee as soon as he could sit down. He thought we had grown a foot since he had last seen us.

Mother lost no time getting our things together. It seems a flatcar was about to load ties at the spur and Father said we could all ride across the bridge on it if we hurried. Mother gathered up bedding and clothes while Elzear led out his old horse and we were soon jouncing down toward the track. You should have seen us children hugging our birch-bark baskets filled with the toys Elzear had made for us.

Father and Mother talked about our house; what had been done and what was still to do. The fine weather had helped the plastering. Aunts Agnes and Minnie had cleaned the floors and the windows; indeed, Father did not tell us, but they were busy in Mother's kitchen that very minute cooking a fine dinner to celebrate our home coming.

Dear me! how happy and excited we were to be going home! All but Elzear. He was very sad—said he had lost his “dear adopted family.” Mother invited him to come over to our house every Sunday. “The children will always be eager for your stories,” she told him. We all felt sorry to see him returning home alone in his old wagon. Mother said even the horse's ears had a lonesome droop to them.

Everybody was alongside the track to help us down off the flatcar—Le Blanc and Grandpa, Mr. Brousseau and Willie. Grandma and our aunts were at the house, waiting on the porch. Mrs. Brousseau was there too, wearing her best white apron. She had brought Mother two geranium plants, all beautiful with crimson bloom and looking like Christmas on the table. You would have thought we were guests just arriving, everyone was so considerate for our comfort. Mother went up and down the stairs inspecting and admiring the new rooms with Father, while we children ran to the barn to see our cow and the little pigs and to try the new swing Le Blanc had made for us.

Father had indeed planned a fine surprise for Mother. Not only was the house all plastered white and clean, but the woodwork trim was done around the windows, with baseboards and picture molding all complete. What's more, the larger pictures and Mother's tall mirror were up and all the carpets down and smooth. Mother had only to arrange the furniture, drape the curtains and portierres, and spread out her precious bibelots to make our home the comfortable and liveable place it was during those Minnesota years.

OPENING A POST OFFICE

Early in 1895 Father decided to apply for a post office at Burnett. Columbia Junction was too far away and the mail deliveries from there too uncertain. We never knew just which ore train would bring down the papers and letters and when the Indians began to predict “big snow” and Father thought of the long walk to the station, not for us, but for the Brousseaus and Grandpa and the few Danish families living to the eastward, a post office at Burnett seemed the solution.

A long important envelope soon arrived containing Father's appointment as postmaster. It was dated May 6, 1895, and signed by Grover Cleveland, president. With it came the equipment necessary for such an office—an imposing array of official requisites for the handling and stamping of mail. Father lost no time meeting the provisos. There was to be a sign—POST OFFICE—conspicuously placed and easily read; also the United States flag must be displayed. But first Father made a desk, part of which came from an unused table stored in our attic. Le Blanc fashioned the cubby holes above it and the whole was installed in Father and Mother's bedroom in the corner nearest the sitting room door.

After Father had put up the neat sign—we could read it plainly from the tracks—he cast about on plans for a flagpole while Mother and Aunt Clemence made

the flag. Mother decided to use one of her fine linen sheets for the white in it and Father went to Cloquet for the blue and the red — “Turkey red cotton,” Mother told him; “it will always hold its color.” For the blue, all that Father could get was a navy jean printed with tiny white stars — but Mother said they would never show flying high up, and anyway, when the white stars were appliqued, the blue field would be like to the heavens: “big stars against a multitude of little stars.” When Aunt Minnie heard them talking about this she added, “Yes, big stars and little stars, and the eyes of God back of them all.” It was Aunt Clemence who helped Mother cut the intricate stars — allowing a quarter inch all around to turn under for the firm applique. Father warned them to sew them on stoutly, for he didn’t want the states to blow off the flag.

It was a beautiful banner, made entirely by hand. Mother insisted that machine stitching could never hold in a wind. Mrs. Brousseau said it was more work than piecing a quilt, for which Aunt Minnie had a witty retort. She said it wasn’t a question of work — it all depended on how you influenced the disposition of your needle; some women made section-gang work out of mending a pair of baby stockings. And Mr. Cunningham told Mother she was an artist with her needle, that the flag was beautiful enough for Queen Victoria’s palace. Mother thanked him and laughingly told him that Queen Victoria would without doubt be far more pleased with the flag of Great Britain.

Meanwhile Father and Le Blanc had peeled the bark off a fine straight spruce, rubbing the yellow wood with melted tallow until it shone. The place for planting the flagstaff was dug alongside a large tree stump which Father had purposely left near the house to hold a lantern at night. The stump was hewed in shape to fit the staff, and to allow for two long heavy iron bolts through them both. Thus a stout prop was provided for the base, which was very

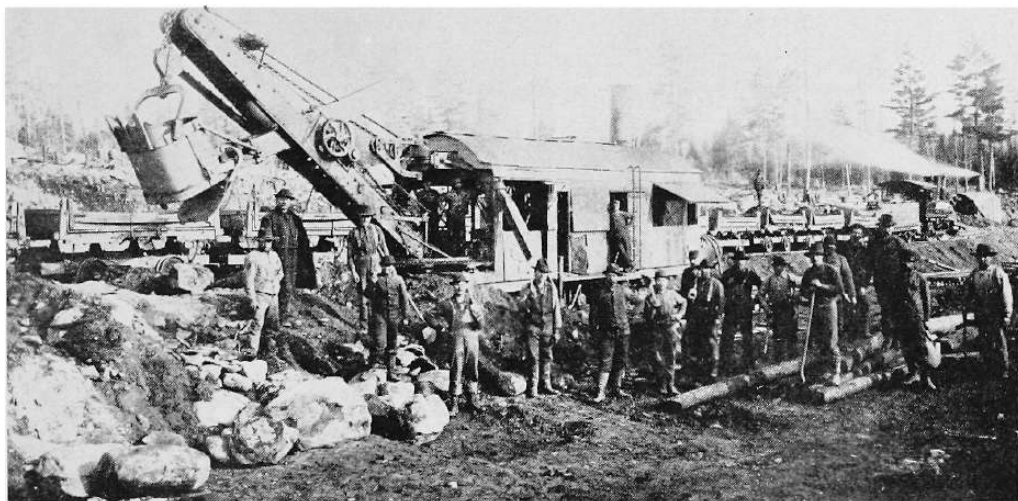
necessary in the subsoil of loose gravel on several acres of Father’s land.

The beautiful days of Indian summer attended the flag raising. Father had sent invitations to every family living anywhere near. John and Henry Beargrease gave the word to the Indians on the Fond du Lac Reservation and everybody came. Mother and Aunt Minnie and Julia had been making doughnuts for days. Coffee and doughnuts for the older guests, and when Father came back from Proctor Knott, where he went to purchase the line for the halyards, he brought with him treats for the children — a big wooden pail of mixed candy and a shoe box full of tiny penny flags.

It was a great moment — exciting, colorful! The day was warm and bright. Sunshine played upon the polished staff, lighting it from the gilded ball at its tip down to the yellow clumps of goldenrod at its base, and causing an effulgence as if a shimmering veil of golden gauze were floating from it. Le Blanc said it made him think of the tall gilded candle in the church at Easter time. The Indians, dressed in gaudy shawls over full skirts of gay calicoes, their heads covered with red and purple bandannas, made a colorful wreath of life as they squatted around the base of it.

Father timed the actual unfurling to the arrival of the daily passenger train from Duluth — the “mail train” for us. Against a background of green boughs, which Father had arranged to screen the old stump, our little brother, dressed in his velvet Lord Fauntleroy, stood facing the crowd, his eyes big in wonder as to what it was all about, but he never let go of the red, white, and blue folds held tight in his small arms. He had been told the flag must never touch the ground. And because he was such a little boy, he needed assurance for his big role; thus Mother, lovely in a brown silk that day, hovered near him, whispering her sweet encouragements.

Presently the long shrill whistle sounded on the bridge, and suddenly, amidst all



LOADING ore cars at Mountain Iron in the 1890's

our shouts and cheers, the breeze caught the flag to gayest waving, and by the time Father had it hoisted clear to the top, the engine with its bell still ringing stood puffing in front of the house, the engineer and fireman waving their caps from the cab, the entire crew joining in our glad celebration and hurrahs! Aunt Clemence ran down at once with a plate of doughnuts, her pink ruffles looking like a full blown rose beside the great black engine. Her cheeks were as pink as her dress when she came back to help Aunt Minnie with the refreshments again. Father teased her about it later, saying he never knew a train crew could be so particular about choosing doughnuts, as doughnuts all looked alike to him.

I passed out the tiny flags, feeling very important. The Indian children were shy, hiding under their mothers' ample shawls, but they were soon peeking out at me again. I loved their little faces so brown and so fat, their big black eyes and white white teeth—the cunningest children in the world and so pretty. The children of the two Danish families ran behind their wagons; they were timid children who looked like little old men and women. The

boys were wearing shoes with wooden soles and hats of black felt that came down over their ears so that all one could see were fringes of tow-colored hair and small chins. The little girls hid their faces in their hands, watching me through spread fingers as they bashfully sidled over to their mothers. Father coaxed these Danish folk to the porch, where Mother gave the children some milk with their doughnuts. They understood Father, who spoke with them in German.

When I gave the flags to the Brousseau children, Willie made a face at me, and hissed between his teeth, "Wildcat! Wildcat!", but I paid no attention to him because Nellie was there and I was too eager to tell her how many paper dolls I had for her. You see, Mother had opened many packages of Arbuckle's coffee that morning. At that time, paper dolls in lovely colors came with this coffee, a doll complete with wardrobe in each package. They were exceedingly lovely, and Nellie and I were collecting sets of them, exchanging whenever we had duplicates. It took many packages, and endless weeks of waiting, to make up a set, so I hoped that maybe now our sets would be complete. I wanted to

show them to Nellie right away, but Mother soon made us see that paper dolls had no place on Father's flag day.

Two incidents of that day still hold radiance in memory. One is the impatience with which we waited for sundown. The flag was to be lowered at sunset. Save for the cleared area surrounding our home and garden and along the railroad right of way, the forest circled tall and dense around us, so we could only guess when the sun dipped to the horizon. I remember how I ran in and out calling to Father that the sun was still shining through the trees.

The other glows with a tender, more poignant memory—my Mother folding away the lovely brown dress she wore that afternoon. As she knelt on the floor beside her open trunk, arranging its silken folds and laces, her head suddenly went down on her arm, her whole body shaken with grief, crying and sobbing as if her heart were breaking. I tried to comfort her, tried to disengage her fingers from the beautiful lace to which she clung, crumpled and pressed so close to her cheek and wet now with her tears. Kissing her fervently, I coaxed, "Don't cry, Mamma, don't cry! I'll ask Papa to take you back to Milwaukee." With a wild "No! No!" she flung her arms around me. "No! No! you must never tell Papa! Never!" How near did I divine

her heartache, I do not know, but whatever sorrow was hers in that hour, she hid it swiftly and safely away among laces and jewels, treasures confined in heliotrope and pressed geranium—nostalgic beauty and fragrance evoking happier days.

That evening at supper Mother was the gayest of us all. Two or three times across the table her eyes met mine in the most radiant of smiles, her sudden outpouring of grief had become the tenderest of bonds, a cherished secret between us.

Next day came the first sack of mail! Such excitement as we all enjoyed! We almost held our breath when Father put the key to the bag! And letters! Real letters! One for Aunt Clemence from Annie La Rue, a number of big important envelopes for the telegraph station, and happiness for Mother in a letter from her mother, to say nothing of the great rolls of newspapers for Father. It was indeed an exciting morning, and when Nellie Brousseau came in to buy a stamp and mail a letter to her sister in Duluth, we knew the post office was established in Burnett.

THE PICTURE on page 24 was painted by Frank Globokan of Biwabik. A reproduction was furnished by A. V. Rohweder of the Duluth, Missabe and Iron Range Railway Company at Duluth. The photograph on page 27 is from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

WHAT *of the* FUTURE . . .

THIS ISSUE gives only a hint of what we plan to accomplish in our newly designed quarterly. First of all, we hope to use more pictures, possibly some in color. An occasional center spread, reproducing in full color a Minnesota painting or print of historical value, is one of our dreams.

More pictures will mean longer issues, since we do not want to reduce the amount of reading matter. We hope to use better paper, and to print some of the type decoration in color, thus improving both the appearance and the readability of our magazine.

We also are planning additions to and improvements in content. We want, for example, to give our readers illustrated descriptions of some of the treasures acquired by the society during more than a hundred years. We hope also to have space for reading suggestions for historical-minded Minnesotans.

If our budget expands, as we trust it will, we can give you a bigger and better magazine. You can help by telling your friends about our new quarterly, and urging them to subscribe as members of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).