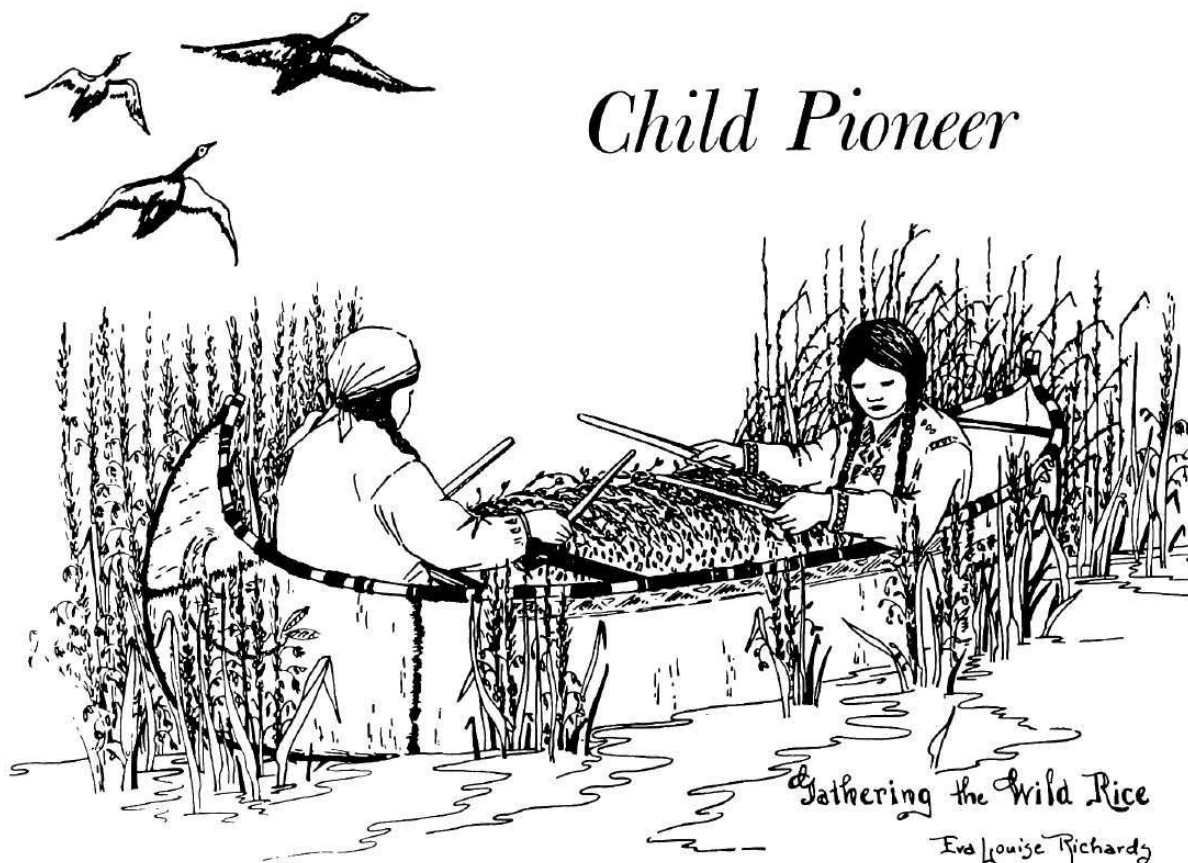


# Child Pioneer



North Country reminiscences of EVA L. ALVEY RICHARDS

THERE WAS TALK of school in the air. It began over at Grandma's one day in the summer of 1894—or perhaps I should say it began at the Brousseau's and continued at Grandma's. Mrs. Brousseau, our neighbor, had asked Mother to help her fashion some dresses for Nellie, and we had spent the day there—Mother and Mrs. Brousseau busy with fabrics and patterns, Nellie and I joyously absorbed in the fashion books.

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MRS. RICHARDS, author and artist whose family pioneered at Burnett in the 1890's, here presents a third extract from her forthcoming book, "Child Pioneer." Earlier articles appeared in the September, 1951, and Spring, 1952, issues of this magazine, and a fourth is scheduled for the autumn number.

We thought the illustrated ladies would make the most gorgeous paper dolls.

Yes, Nellie was going away. She was going to Duluth to attend school, and to live while there with her married sister. And, she was going with a trunk full of beautiful clothes. Mother had fashioned the loveliest dresses for her and Mrs. Brousseau was proud. All day Mother cut and designed, and Mrs. Brousseau sat beside her threading needles or winding the bobbins, which then always were wound by hand.

In the early evening we walked over to Grandma's. Aunt Minnie said to come to supper. There would be baked beans and corn bread, she said. And so came the talk of school. Mother remarked about the fine

Cathedral School in Milwaukee. She cherished a wish to send me there, whereupon Aunt Minnie expressed her views. "It's the last word in folly to send a child away to school, away from home, away from a mother's care. Convents are built for orphans, poor children! You make a stranger of your child, sending her away to school. And anyway, what's the matter with our own school?"

Mother answered that she did not know about Minnesota schools, but that she had been told the one nearest us was an Indian school. This talk of school concerned *me*. I was all ears.

"Well — what's the matter with the Indian schools? They have desks and books and employ trained teachers. What's to keep your girl, or mine, from learning what there is to learn, providing they set their heads to it?" "School is not intended to be a playroom," Aunt Minnie went on. "School is a place where you learn to read and write and do the work with figures your father knows how to do in his head, and the sooner you learn all this the sooner you can be doing the bigger things in this world." All the while Aunt Minnie was busy setting the table and stirring cream and taking pans from the oven; she could keep her mind on so many things at once, and with capable directness.

I shall not soon forget how she looked that evening, her hair shining like a crown of gold in the firelight — a goddess ladling steaming brown beans onto Mother's plate, pausing to say, "Conserve your energies, Josephine. A trunk of fancy clothes does not help teach a child anything, unless it be fool extravagance. What's more important, no convent ever could take the place of your good and wise mothering, Josephine, and you may be sure the mild Indian children will do our *little tree* no harm."

Grandma was of the same mind. "And it isn't the same as if our little one was to be alone with *les sauvages* — there are the little Columbe girls, Helene and Corinne; they go to the Indian school." Grandpa put

in a word about it too, the while buttering corn bread for us children. "You must remember the Columbes live just across the track from the school; Helene and Corinne do not have to walk three miles." "Well, three miles won't kill children; they run ten miles in a morning going nowhere."

So the talk of school went on, Grandpa taking Mother's part, as was his wont; but every time Aunt Minnie spoke, my heart was warmed by the expectations she encouraged. I felt confident that her words would take me, certain as if her hand were leading me, to the Indian school.

Mother kept her thoughts to herself while at Grandma's and all the way home. I ran ahead with the lantern, skipping nimbly over the ruts in the road, proving with audacious pride that to walk a mile was nothing, nothing at all for me.

After supper, when we were watching Le Blanc whittle the kindlings, Mother asked him if he had lately received a letter from his sister Seraphine, and *where* was the convent she attended. I went to bed with heavy steps. I wanted Aunt Minnie. From my pillow in the darkness I appealed to Julia, the Indian girl who helped Mother with the housework. "Please, Julia, please ask Mamma to let me go to your school." But Julia was no nearer than Aunt Minnie. She was fast asleep.

Next morning Aunt Minnie bustled in, the folds of her old plaid cape bulging from her basket. "I thought you might turn this, Josephine, to make Eva a good coat for this winter. I'm on my way to Cloquet and can get some red flannel for a warm lining, or if you wish I can stop at the Reservation for rabbit skins. The Indians usually have some good ones. And will you need thread for stitching?" All this in one breath. Mother hesitated. "But Minnie, if we send her to the convent she will need a dark blue coat." "My Saints! haven't you and Ed settled the question of school? Here! I saw him at the barn as I came in. Throw the cape over your head and go down there and settle it. I don't go to

Cloquet every day. If you decide on the convent I'll get the blue cloth." Presently my parents were back in the house and Father was turning a key at his desk. "How much money will you need, Min, for the red flannel?"

Oh! then I am going! Going to the Indian school! I rushed over and threw my arms around Mother, kissing the folds of her apron in joyous rapture. The world and everything in it was mine.

THE FIRST days of September came in with heavy frosts. The leaves on the birch trees at the edge of the clearing hung like yellow spangles. Every little wind fluttered them off like a flock of canaries. Along the river bank the bush cranberries and swamp maples had been steeped in cherry dye. Everything was beautiful and I loved everybody. I danced to every little task that was mine to do. I polished the milk pans until they shone like mirrors. Three times a day I dusted the parlor. I pieced my quilt blocks with religious fervor, my needle singing in and out with tiny stitches. I gave Julia two of my brightest hair ribbons. I carried great bunches of carrots and beets for Le Blanc, who was busy storing them in the root cellar. If my parents expected the heavens to fall they did not remark it. But they were quite suddenly aware, I think, that a child of theirs had been made supremely happy and that she was doing her best to tell them so.

One Saturday morning the passenger train going south made a stop at Burnett—a full stop. Two short toots from the engine sent us all to the windows curious with excitement. Some one was coming to visit, and who could it be? Just where our path met the track a young woman was stepping off the train, the conductor beside her pointing the way to our house.

It was Miss May Grettum, teacher in the school at Columbia Junction. She had come to register the white children of her district. She had been to the Fond du Lac Reservation to enroll the Indian children, but found that many families had not yet returned from the rice country—she hoped to complete the registrations the following Monday. Father added an encouraging note by telling her that on his recent surveying cruise he had come across several camps of Indians. The red men had been jerking deer meat, but were now on their way home.

Miss Grettum was delighted with the number of white children she was to teach. There would be about eight, she said; perhaps ten, if she could persuade the Danish family to the west of us to send their children. The Brousseaus would have made a happier number, only for Duluth taking them.

Mother was at her most gracious and happiest. Here was company, someone charming, and gentle, and cultured—graces she most loved and admired. The



NORTH Shore  
school and  
Indian pupils

pleasant hours of getting acquainted went by winging. The passenger train did not run north until late afternoon, so there was dinner and talk in the parlor and, best of all, a walk to the river. We children trooped along.

We came back by way of the gravel banks near the bridge, and there Miss Grettum introduced us to a new and fascinating pastime—searching for agates. These unusual stones were a hobby with her and she had much to tell about them. Her ring and a pendant she was wearing gave us an appreciation, colorful and enriching, of the beauty we were seeking, and with good luck might find, there among those mounds of gravel on the railroad right of way. There was more talk about agates—how they were cut and polished, when, later, Mother served chocolate and cakes.

Train time came all too soon. Reluctantly we saw our fair visitor depart, but not before Mother gained the promise from Miss Grettum that she would come to see us as often as her duties would permit and make sure it was again and soon. As for me, I walked on air. Wasn't I going to see this wonderful person every day? The Brouseau children could go to Duluth ten times a year if it suited them. Where, in all the schools of that city would they find a teacher like Miss Grettum? Where indeed? Mother said as much—with far less flippancy—at the supper table, but then Mother was an angel when speaking of folks.

At the south corner of Father's acres, on the opposite side of the track from the Station, lay a wide and deep bed of gravel. After Miss Grettum taught us to look for them, we children used to find the most beautiful agates there. Frequently on pleasant Sunday afternoons, Mother and Father would join us in this always fascinating pastime. At the lower end of the bed, the gravel was washed by the river eddies where in shallow pools we could dip and wash our accumulation of finds so to discover how beautiful agates can be. Best of



*CHIPPEWA boy, by Eastman Johnson*

all, it was a delightfully safe place for small folks to go wading. We named it White Fish Bay after our favorite resort near our old home city of Milwaukee.

Sometime in the early summer of 1895, four officials of the railway came to see Father about this piece of gravel terrain. The company had need of the gravel for its new roadbed, and here was a wealth of it right at its doorstep, so to say. The officials spent the day going over the ground with Father while Mother busied herself with preparations for a bountiful dinner, her usual culinary skill soaring to delicious perfection whenever there were guests to serve. Besides her French sagacity was awake to the sure success of any bargain when stimulated by good food.

After fifty years, the memory of one of these railway officials still awakens the exciting joy I knew in my first box of water colors. My mother's pride in my early drawings lent some inspiration to this wonder gift. She had a way of pinning my work to the curtains in the dining room, and as the gentlemen left the house to take the



afternoon train, one of them paused to look at the sketches. He was astonished no little when Mother told him that the pictures were done with colored ores by her "artist daughter," who rushed out to the track every time an ore train went by to gather fresh pieces to draw with. My heart leaped to my ears as I listened to comments flowing on from astonishment to sincere admiration.

Some days later came a surprise. A box of water colors! With brushes! And paper! Oh, grandiose miracle! I kissed them—slept with them—laid my cheek against them, and blessed our recent visitor with all my prayers.

Painting with these colors became a sacred ritual—filling a tumbler with clear cool water, unfolding the soft white square of cloth Mother gave me, placing my chair and table for a careful arrangement of light, I moved in a veritable trance of joy. Indeed, joy elated our entire household. I remember my little sister, somewhat awed, standing by with hands folded at her back, promising with disarming charm never to touch my paints. This latent talent for painting, stirring so brightly for me then, unfolded happily under my mother's wise and tender discipline. The joy it gave never knew surfeit, solely I believe, because she never countenanced the least relaxation of the regular daily tasks for which I was responsible. These done, however, I was free to fly to my paradise of colors.

Mixing color to match that of an autumn leaf held me fascinated for hours, and to reproduce the greens of my Minnesota forest world was a never-ending delight. I recall the days I spent painting the soft greens of the outer petals of water lily buds—soft variegated greens washed with carmine and rose—and the olive green of their stems. Le Blanc would come in with lush moss of richest green, or with bits of birch bark covered with fragile gray-green lichens, enhancing his offerings with words of enthusiastic encouragement and loyal admiration.

The gravel corner was soon humming with activity. Spur tracks were laid and soon a great steam shovel was loading flatcars with what we children claimed were all our agates, since from then on we were not allowed to go down to search for them any more. Nor to wade in our white fish pools either. Nor did we care to, after Father had taken us to the edge of the bank where we could look down to watch the great maw of the shovel eating up our playground. There was too much steam and clanking noise down there, and moving flatcars and engines and men moving rails.

There came a day when the edge of this bank with its dense growth of trees and shrubs began to slide, and it looked for a time as if the shovel were encroaching over the line. It was an exciting day. Father stood watch on the bank from the hour he sent in a warning to the foreman that morning until late evening and even later when the firemen had banked the fires in their engines for the night. And Mother silently went from window to window, upstairs and down, vaguely apprehensive of it all. As she told Le Blanc when he came in with the milk, she could just see the barn, the cows, pigs, and chickens, sliding down the bank to horrible death and ruin, all too dreadful to contemplate. "You make the trouble for your sleep, Madame. Les animals ees not rocks for the railroad. The fresh pork and the feathers ees not make the good roadbed, ees too soft, Madame." Mother relaxed into a smile. When Father came in, the fragrance of French toast and maple syrup greeted him, and all was well again.

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THE DRAWING on page 72 was made by Mrs. Richards to illustrate a talk on her own early school days. The photograph on page 74, picturing a group of North Shore Chippewa children and their school at Grand Portage, and the portrait by Eastman Johnson on page 75 are from the collection of the St. Louis County Historical Society at Duluth. Both are reproduced by courtesy of that organization.



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