

*A harvest crew
in the Dakota
wheat fields, 1887*



On the PRAIRIE

A Sketch of the Red River Valley

KNUT HAMSUN

Translated by JOHN CHRISTIANSON

*KNUT HAMSUN, the Norwegian novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1920, is widely known as the author of *Hunger*, *Pan*, and the monumental *Growth of the Soil*, each of which has appeared in several American editions. But it is not so well known that he spent several years in the United States, and particularly, in Minnesota. During his first sojourn in the New World, from 1882 until the autumn of 1885,*

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Hamsun worked for a time in a Madelia lumberyard and later went to Minneapolis as secretary to the Norwegian poet and Unitarian minister, Kristofer Janson. His second trip in 1886 took him first to Chicago, where he was a streetcar conductor for a short time. Then during the summer and autumn of 1887, Hamsun hired out as a laborer on a huge bonanza farm in the Red River Valley. Whether he was employed by Oliver Dalrymple cannot now be definitely established. When the season ended, he went back to Janson and other friends in Minneapolis, and remained with them until his return to Norway in 1888. His first book, published the following year, was a bitter

attack on the materialism of American society.¹

Some years later, in a more mellow mood, Hamsun described life on the bonanza farm in a little autobiographical sketch entitled "Paa Praerien" ("On the Prairie"), which first appeared in 1903 as part of a collection called *Kratskog* ("Brushwood"). The sketch has been used by Hamsun's biographers, and part of it has been rendered into Swedish by John Landquist, but it has never appeared in English translation.² It gives a fine picture of the rugged bands of men who labored in the immense fields of Red River wheat and recalls an interesting chapter in Minnesota history.

THE WHOLE SUMMER of 1887 I worked on a section of Dalrymple's immense farm in the Red River Valley of the North. Besides myself there were two other Norwegians, a Swede, ten or twelve Irishmen, and a few Yankees. We were twenty-odd men all told on our little section—but we were a mere fraction of the hundreds of laborers on the whole farm.

The prairie lay golden-green and endless as a sea. No buildings could be seen, with the exception of our own barns and sleeping shed in the midst of the fields. Not a tree, not a bush grew there—only wheat and grass, wheat and grass, as far as the eye could see. Nor were there any flowers, although now and then one might come across the yellow tassels of wild mustard. Cultivation of this plant was forbidden by law, so we destroyed the prairie's only blossom; pulled it up roots and all, carted it home, let it dry, and burned it.

No birds flew overhead; there was no movement except the swaying of the wheat in the wind; no sound but the eternal chirrup of a million grasshoppers, singing the prairie's only song.

We would almost collapse from the heat. When the chuck wagon came out to us at noon, we would lie on our bellies under the wagon or the horses, in order to have a bit of shade while we gobbled our food.

The sun was brutal. We went about in nothing but a hat, shirt, trousers, and shoes; and it was impossible to wear less. If someone tore a hole in his shirt, for example, the sun would burn a red sore on his hide under the hole.

We worked a sixteen-hour day during the wheat harvest. Ten mowing machines drove after each other in the same field, day after day. When one field was finished, we went to another and laid it down as well. And so onward, always onward, while ten men came behind us and shocked the bundles we left. And high on his horse, with a revolver in his pocket and his eye on every man, the foreman sat and watched us. He exhausted two horses every day. If something went wrong—if a machine broke down for example—the foreman was there immediately to repair the damage or to order the machine sent back to the yard. He was often far off when he noticed something was wrong, and because there were no roads he had to ride through the thick wheat all day, until his horse lathered with sweat.

In September and October it was still cruelly hot during the day, but the nights were frosty. We almost froze many nights, and because of the cold we never got enough sleep. We were called out at three in the morning, when it was still dark as pitch. We fed the horses and ourselves and drove the long distance out to the fields, and then day would finally break and we could see what we were about to begin. Then we would set fire to a pile of straw, warm the cans of lubricating oil, and warm ourselves a bit at the same time. But it was not many minutes before we would have to clamber upon the machines and set to work.

¹ Knut Hamsun, *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv* (Copenhagen, 1889). For a full account of Hamsun's Minnesota experiences see John T. Flanagan, "Knut Hamsun's Early Years in the Northwest," in *Minnesota History*, 20:397–412 (December, 1939).

² John Landquist, *Knut Hamsun hans levnad och verk*, 27–29 (Stockholm, 1931). Landquist includes the incident concerning Hamsun and the Swede.



WORKERS on a bonanza farm in Norman County, probably in the 1880s

There were no holidays. Sunday was the same as Monday. We could accomplish nothing when it rained, however, so on rainy days we would pass the time playing casino, chatting, or sleeping.

An Irishman there was, an amazing fellow. God only knows what he once had been. On rainy days he always sat on his bunk and read the novels he kept in his locker. He was a big, handsome fellow about thirty-five years old, and he spoke an exquisite tongue, not only in English, but German as well.

This man came to the farm in a silk shirt, and he continued to wear silk shirts all the time he was there, even while he worked. When one was worn out he put on another, a new one. He was not a good worker—he did not have the “knack”—but he was a remarkable person.

Evans was his name.³

The two Norwegians were not much good. One of them quit because he could not stand the work; the other held out.

During threshing we all tried to get a job as far away from the machine as possible, because dust, chaff, and straw puffed out a regular storm from the scoops and openings. For a few days I was in the midst

of it, but I finally asked the foreman to put me somewhere else, and he did. He gave me an excellent job out in the field pitching bundles. He did not forget that I had done him a favor early in the year.

It happened like this. My jacket was a uniform jacket with shining buttons, which I had worn while I was a streetcar conductor in Chicago. The foreman was impressed with the jacket and with its magnificent buttons. He was a regular child about such finery, and there certainly was not much finery of any sort out there on the prairie. So one day I said that he could have the jacket. He wanted to pay me and asked me to name my price. When I insisted upon giving it to him, he thanked me profusely. At the end of the harvest, when he saw that I had no jacket to wear on my travels, he gave me a good coat in place of the one I had given him.

I remember an episode from the days out in the field pitching bundles. The Swede came after a load one morning. He wore his trousers tucked into high boots. We began to load the wagon. He was a regular demon for work, and I had my hands full trying to keep up with him. I pitched the bundles up to him, but he stacked them faster and faster, and at last it got on my nerves so that I began to explode angrily into the work myself. Each shock consisted

³ Hamsun apparently could not keep his Gaels straight; Evans, of course, is Welsh.

of eight bundles, and we usually pitched one bundle at a time. Now I took four. I flooded the Swede with bundles, smothered him in bundles.

Then apparently a snake was in one of the heavy loads I sent up to the Swede. It slipped into one of his boots. I did not realize what had happened until I suddenly heard a scream of terror and saw the Swede throw himself down from the load with the thrashing snake sticking from the top of his boot. But it did not bite, and the fall to earth knocked it out of the boot. The snake disappeared into the wheat in a flash. We both poked for it with our pitchforks, but we could not find it.

We agreed then that the Swede should work at a more reasonable pace and that I should send him only one bundle at a time.

WE PLOWED and sowed, mowed and harvested the wheat; then the job was finished and we received the season's wages. With gay hearts and full pockets we wandered twenty strong to the nearest prairie town to find an eastbound train. The foreman came along to have a parting drink with us. He wore the jacket with the bright buttons.

A person who has never taken part in the celebration of a crew of prairie laborers can hardly imagine how wild such men can be. Of course everyone immediately buys a round—that makes twenty drinks for each man. But you are wrong if you think it stops with that, for certainly there are some gentlemen who consider it proper to order five rounds at a time. And Lord help the bartender who tries to object to such absurdities, for he is instantly hauled from behind his own bar. Such a mob knocks down everything that stands in its way. After the first four or five drinks, the mob becomes a law unto itself, and it rules without opposition. The local policeman is powerless; he joins the crowd that drinks with the laborers. There is drinking and gambling, fighting and shouting, for several days.

We were exceedingly friendly towards one another during those days. Perhaps we had gotten along only moderately well all summer, but now that we were parting, everything bad was forgotten. Our hearts grew greater with every drink, and we nearly succumbed with emotion as we threw ourselves into one another's arms. The cook, a beardless, hunchbacked old dwarf with a woman's voice, confided in hiccuping Norwegian that he was Norse the same as I was, and that he had not identified himself sooner because of the Yankees' general contempt for Norwegians. He had often heard the other Norwegian and me talk about him during meals, and he had understood every word. But now everything was forgiven and forgotten, for we were lads of the same stamp. Oh yes, he was "born of old Norway's sturdy sons, was *födt* in Iowa *den 22de Juli 1845*." And therefore we should be good friends and partners as long as the Norse tongue flowed from our lips. The cook and I embraced one another; our friendship would never die. All the laborers embraced one another; we squeezed each other flat with our sturdy arms and danced around and around with gusto.

We offered one another drinks. We went behind the bar and helped ourselves to the best bottles. We took down the unusual bottles from the top shelf, bottles with magnificent pictures which passed for real elegance out there. We served our good friends the contents, drank and paid laughingly, with big money.

Evans was probably the worst when it came to buying a round. His last silk shirt looked sad now, the sun and rain had taken its gay colors and the sleeves were tattered. But Evans himself stood huge and proud and bought drinks for the whole crew. He acted as if he owned the place—as if he owned the world. The rest of us paid an even three dollars per round, but this was not generous enough for Evans, and he insisted on buying six-dollar rounds. For there was nothing in the whole wretched

place that was too good for such gentlemen as we were, said Evans. It was in order to find liquor expensive enough for a six-dollar round that we had to have recourse to the remarkable bottles on the top shelf.

In his elated mood Evans took me aside and tried to persuade me to follow him to the forests of Wisconsin, to spend the winter chopping cordwood. After he had outfitted himself with some new shirts, a pair of pants, and some novels to read, then he would head for the forests again, he said, and stay there until spring. And when spring came, then he would find a job out on the prairie once more. That was his life. For twelve years he had divided his seasons between the prairie and the forest, and he had grown so accustomed to it that it seemed a natural way of life.

But when I asked him what had happened to set him upon such a track in the first place, he did not answer, as people in their cups often do, with a long, sad tale of how it all came about. He replied with the single word: "Circumstances."

"What kind?" I asked.

"Circumstances," he repeated, and would not come out with more.

Later in the evening I saw him in a little nook off to one side of the tavern; he was shooting dice. Evans had lost. He was pretty drunk and did not worry about money. When I came in he showed me a few bills and said, "I still have money left. See here."

Some of the players advised him to get out of the game. One of his countrymen, by

the name of O'Brien, hinted that Evans would need his money for a train ticket. At that Evans stopped.

"No, you'll have to lend me ticket money," he said.

O'Brien sullenly refused, and left the room.

Now Evans was stirred up. He put all his money in the pot at once, and lost every cent. He took the loss quietly. He lit a cigar and said to me, with a smile, "Will you lend me the ticket money?"

I had finally become a bit unsteady due to the last tricks of a sweet wine from the top shelf. I unbuttoned my jacket and handed Evans my wallet with everything I owned in it. I did this to show him how willing I was to lend him money for his ticket, and left him to take what he needed. Evans looked at me and at the wallet. A strange expression came to his face; he opened the wallet and saw that it contained all my money. When he looked up at me, I simply nodded.

He misunderstood that nod. He thought that I was giving him all the money in the wallet.

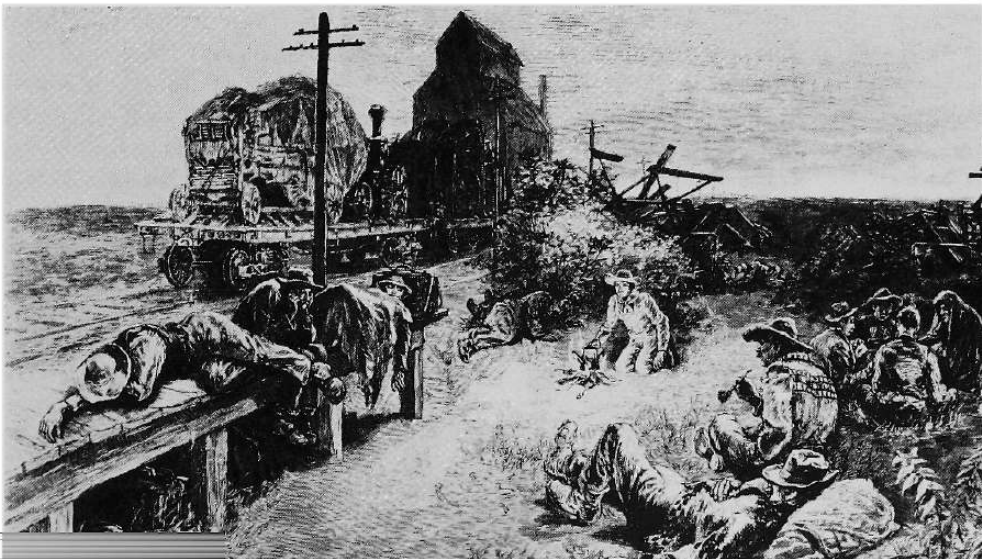
"I thank you," he said.

And to my great alarm, he began to renew the play with my money.

At first I wanted to stop him, but I caught myself. Let him use his ticket money as he will, thought I. But when a reasonable sum is gambled away, I will take back the rest.

But Evans did not lose any more. It was as if he had suddenly become sober again,

*HARVEST hands on
their way to
the wheat fields of
the Northwest*



and he played surely and rapidly. The confidence I had shown in him before so many people seemed to transform him. He sat tall and silent on the whiskey case which served him as a stool, playing and taking home the profits. If he lost one time, he doubled the ante next time. He lost three times in a row, doubled every time, and finally swept in the whole pot. Then he bet half his earnings and said that if he won he would quit.

He lost.

The game went on.

After an hour, he handed back my wallet with the same amount I had given him. Even after repaying all he had borrowed from me, Evans still had a pile of money. He continued to play. Then all at once he bet everything he had. A murmur ran around the circle of onlookers.

Evans said, "Winner take all; I'm quitting after this throw."

He won.

Evans rose. "Will you be so kind as to pay me?" he said.

"Tomorrow," replied the banker. "I don't have it tonight. I'll dig it up tomorrow."

"All right then, tomorrow," Evans said.

Just as we were about to leave, some men tramped heavily into the tavern. They carried a mutilated body. It was the Irishman, O'Brien, the same one who had refused to lend money to Evans. He had just been run over by a train and both his legs were sheared off, one of them right across the thigh. He was already dead. He had gone from the tavern into the dark and had stumbled under the wheels of the train. They laid his body out on the floor and covered it.

WE FOUND places to sleep as best we could. Some lay down on the floor right there in the tavern. The other Norwegian and I found a barn and slept in the hay.

In the morning Evans came down the street. "Have you gotten your money?" the other Norwegian asked.

"Not yet," answered Evans. "I've been

out in the country digging a hole for our comrade."

We buried O'Brien a short distance from the town in a box we found behind a store. Because the body had been cut so short, our box was quite long enough. We neither sang nor said any prayer, but we did stand together a moment with hats in hand.

And then the ceremony was over.

But when Evans went to collect his money, it appeared that the clever banker had vanished. Evans took it with his usual calmness, as though it were a matter of complete indifference to him. After all, he had money enough to buy a ticket and get some shirts, some pants, and some novels as well. And then he would be ready for the winter.

We stayed around until the next day, celebrating until we finally drank the town dry. Many of the laborers were flat broke by the time they left the little town, and those who could not afford a train ticket sneaked into the wheat cars and buried themselves in the grain. But the hunch-backed old cook, the Norwegian from Iowa, had bad luck. He was fortunate enough to get into a wheat car unseen, but once there he could not keep still and began to sing bawdy songs in his drunken woman's voice. As a result he was discovered and thrown off. And when they went through his things, they found so much money that the scoundrel could easily have bought tickets for the whole crew.

We scattered with the winds. The other Norwegian finally settled in a town in Minnesota, and the cook went out to the West Coast. But Evans undoubtedly still goes around clad in silk shirts, handling his money with a free hand. Each summer he is on the prairie harvesting wheat, and each winter he stays in the forests of Wisconsin, chopping cordwood. That is his life now.

Probably as good a life as some others.

THE DRAWINGS on pages 265 and 269 are from *Harper's Weekly* for July 30, 1887, and December 13, 1890. The photograph on page 267 is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.



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