

In 1887, The Prairie Was A Land Of Vast Silence

Along The Trails of Yesterday
By Nina Farley Wishek

There is a passage in Nina Farley Wishek's book, *Along The Trails of Yesterday*, that is haunting. The time is 1887, the last year of the Dakota Territory, and she describes her earliest impression of the boundless prairie as a land of "waving grass and a vast unbroken silence."

Today, a vast unbroken silence is a rare event, almost a treasure. How different this land must have been with its absence of machine-made noises—no radios, traffic-sounds, or airplanes! Our world has unalterably changed. This is one reason why *Along The Trails* makes such compelling reading—the book shows us the way we were. In big ways, such as our advances in public education. But also in little, inconsequential ways, like the vast unbroken silence which is no more.

The book was first published in 1941. Since then it has become an excellent resource book about the pioneer experience in the Dakotas. The only problem was that virtually every copy was sold. The demand for it the past dozen years steadily rose so that a second printing (now recently completed) became a necessity.

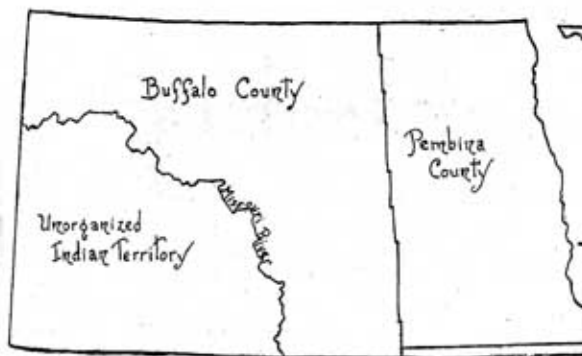
First-hand experience

It is easy to understand the book's popularity. Nowhere else can one find first-

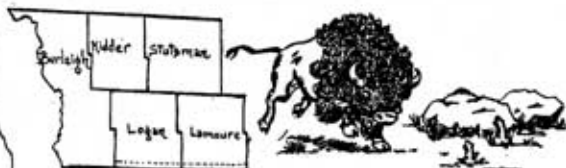
hand glimpses into the problems, fears, and joys of pioneer living in the Dakotas. For example, Nina Wishek's account of the infamous winter of 1887-88:

"Late that fall of 1887 our new Dakota home was finished and the long low sheds for the cattle, but the work was not done as it should have been to provide comfort for man and beast. The barns were too cold and there was not enough of hay and feed. The house, two-storied and commodious for territorial days, was finished inside with a reddish building paper, as there was neither time nor money for plastering that fall. Water could not be found near our high hill in sufficient amount for our horses and cattle; consequently the barn was located too far from the house. We had no near neighbors, and Hoskins seemed far away. So we met the terrible winter of 1887-88, which has gone down in history as one of the worst ever recorded. January 12, 1888, was the first day of the big blizzard, still remembered by the old pioneers.

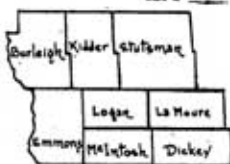
"It raged nearly three days with unabated fury, and while I have seen many storms since, I have never seen one to compare with that. It was appalling to open the door and look out. It was not merely a snowstorm but a thick avalanche of snow, just sweeping past the door at a terrible velocity, never stopping for a moment. Anyone out in such a blizzard was hopelessly lost. Three hundred people in Dakota Territory lost their lives in this storm. In McIntosh County, still thinly settled, there



First division 1870-71—Two counties in that part of Dakota Territory now North Dakota



Later divisions 1873



Last division—McIntosh County formed in 1883

Sketches by Justina Wishek add illustrative interest to the book.

was but one lost, Christian Kaul of Jewell township. It is reported that after the storm, his footsteps were traced and it was found that he had passed directly between his house and barn, unable to see either.

“For three days the boys were unable to reach our barns, so far away, and the poor cattle were without hay or water. It is small wonder that many later weakened and died. Arthur had been told that cattle could sometimes graze out for a good share of the winter, but such was not the case this year. There was heavy snow which lasted late in the spring. In Michigan, my father had built up a fine herd of Holstein Friesian cattle, the first in Lapeer County. From Holland he had imported a sire, Atherholt, and a fine pureblood cow called Trientje, both of pedigreed stock. The cow was father’s pride, and she was so kind and intelligent that we all loved her. While the other cattle had fought wildly every foot of the way up into the cars, Trientje calmly walked up the ramp and into her place, for she was by this time quite a traveled cow and felt at home either on train or shipboard. But poor Trientje was too finely bred to withstand the awful cold and the inadequate food. She got down in her stall and

was never again able to get on her feet. For a time she was fed but eventually was shot to end her suffering.

“I was glad that Father did not see the hard fate of Trientje, but perhaps had he lived everything would have been different under his better management. Scrub stock could have lived through this severe winter, but as it was the herd came through, thin and depleted in numbers. I often pondered the question of animal intelligence. How much did they understand about everything? Did they wonder why they were seemingly neglected and left cold and hungry? With their lesser animal intelligence, did they compare their present condition with their past? Did they remember the big warm barns of their Michigan home, the fragrant well-filled hay lofts, the overflowing granaries, the bulging cribs of yellow corn, and the sheltered barnyard where they gathered on mild winter days, nosing into big rounded stacks of yellow wheat straw? Poor animals! That abundance of the past was for them forever gone.”

Tragedies in a new land

There were other problems, too. For the young Nina, one of the most tragic was the untimely death of her father. Suffering from

Tragedy Occurs On Return Trip From Ellendale

asthma, his doctor advised him to move to a dry climate. So he sold his farm in Michigan and moved to Dakota Territory. Nina Wishek's account:

"All winter he was busy closing up business and preparing for the sale in March, in preparation for the trip to Dakota. It was hard to tear up by the roots the foundation laid through three generations. After the sale three cars were chartered and filled with stock, feed, seed, implements and household possessions. Father, my oldest brother and a man John Gummer started in March 1887 on the long tedious journey. They disembarked at Ellendale, and in April Mother with the rest of the family followed. The roads to McIntosh were nearly impassable so Father rented a farm west of Ellendale where we made our home that summer. Part of the men put in the crop on this farm, while the others were constantly on the road teaming lumber and goods over to the claim. First a shanty home and shed for tired teams was built, a well dug and garden started, mostly for the benefit of the greedy gophers which abounded everywhere.

"To these little animals with their ravenous appetite for green garden vegetables and grain were attributed the following chain of events. The men had been working at the buildings on the claim and doing other needful things, when it came time for another trip to the Ellendale home for supplies and materials. It was decided that Arthur, my oldest brother, and a hired man should stay on digging the well, while my father and Allison, the next brother, should take the two teams and empty wagons back over the road for more loads. Before leaving, Father went into Hoskins and bought a few provisions, also a small packet of arsenic poison to be distributed over the garden for the gophers. These purchases were all placed in one larger sack and carried back to the claim shanty that evening. The groceries



The writer, Nina Farley Wishek, in 1887 when she came to Dakota Territory.

and the arsenic were taken from the sack, which was thrown aside.

"The next morning they were up betimes getting ready for the trip home. Father prepared lunch for Allison and himself, putting it in the sack which he had thrown aside the night before. Afterwards, he recalled that he had noticed that some of the poison had leaked out through the paper and into the larger package, but in all the hurry and worry he forgot it that morning. On all the trips back and forth between the two places in the two counties they had formed the habit of stopping in the hills to eat lunch and feed the horses. On this particular day they ate lunch and rested as usual before going again on their way, but even before starting they began to feel ill. Driving on towards home, they became more and more ill until finally, unable to sit up and drive, they lay in the bottom of one wagon, having one team tied behind the other. For a long distance through the hills and the flats below, there were no homes nor help, but at last they did come to a farm home where they

stopped and asked for milk. Father had thought it all out during that long drive and through hours of suffering. He remembered the gopher poison and the fact that some of it leaked into the sack which he had later used for their lunch. He well realized the fate that might be theirs. They drank milk, bought more, and again resumed the terrible ride homeward. Father must have taken more of the powder, for he was much weaker. Allison would get up from the wagon bed, whip the horses into a trot, and then lie down again. But the horses were clumsy and slow, and it was hard to hurry them, so that agonizing journey was prolonged.

"At home we had prepared supper and were waiting and watching for the men, who came about every third day. We kept looking towards the west in order to catch the first glimpse of teams far out on the horizon line. At last we saw them coming, but slowly. As they came closer we could see no one in the wagons, which were tied so closely together. All afternoon, Mother said afterwards, she had a premonition of impending disaster. As the wagons drew nearer, Father raised himself on his elbow that he might look toward the



Old photo of Clare Johnson home moved from Hoskins in 1888. Entire town of Hoskins was moved to new railroad site when the railroad line was built several miles away.

16-101

TIMBER CULTURE.

Assistant
 REGISTERED
 No. 4777

APPLICATION
 No. 4777

Director's Office *Timber Culture*
 (Date) *March 27/89*
 Received of *Nina M. Farley*
fourteen dollars

the sum of _____ cents, being the amount of fee and compensation of register and receiver for the entry of *E. H. Johnson, et al*

of section *12*, in township *13 N*
 of range *7 W*, in the first section of the act of Congress approved June 21, 1878, entitled "An Act to amend an act to hold the Act to encourage the growth of timber on the Western Slopes."

Geo. H. Johnson

1/1/89

Timber culture claim issued to Nina Farley in 1890.

house and see his loved ones. The teams drew up to the house and we rushed to them, all asking the same question, "What is the matter?" Pale, haggard, and hollow-eyed, they rose from the wagon, and Father said in a weak, changed voice, "I think we're poisoned." With fear in our hearts we helped them into the house and to the tiny upstairs bedroom. Mother immediately sent Karl, my youngest brother, to Ellendale for the doctor, but as he hurried away on horseback, Father said, "It's no use; it is too late." Brokenly, he told us what had happened. We did what we could for him and for my brother, who appeared to be less seriously ill. After an anxious hour or two of waiting, the doctor came. There was nothing he could do except for my brother, who recovered after days of sickness.

"And thus my father passed away, out in this lonely prairie country far from his old Michigan home, friends, and associations. He saw the end of all his high hopes and ambitions, a victim of one of the many tragedies occurring in pioneer life on the frontier. He died at ten o'clock that night, with Mother and me beside his bed." □