

They Came Alone

By Marleen Ehmann Bussma

It was in the 1800's
When the government decreed
Public lands would then be offered
To the many who had need.

Married women could make no claims
Since they weren't a household head.
All the men and single women
Got this privilege instead.

Women came to claim the prairie;
To get land in their own name.
They each had their private story
With their reasons why they came.

They had come when young and single.
They had come with widowhood.
There were those who'd been deserted
Or divorced; alone for good.

They had come for new excitement
Or for monetary gains.
It was there in North Dakota
They homesteaded on the plains.

They made new homes for their children.
They gained land for family.
They escaped abusive husbands;
A last opportunity.

They broke stereotypes for women.
They broke sod just like the men.
They used guns for their protection.
They built shacks that they lived in.

They endured the fickle weather.
They endured the homesickness.
They learned new skills for survival
And they conquered their distress.

Her shack was a humble dwelling,
Maybe only eight by ten;
Either framed out or a sod hut,
Possibly with help from men.

She used buff'lo chips for cooking;
She hauled water far by hand.
She grew gardens and some flowers,
While she picked rocks off her land.

There were some who traded housework
With a man for heavy chores.
She'd do cooking, cleaning, laundry,
While he worked her claim outdoors.

There were those who took a town job,
Clerking in a dry goods store,
As a teacher, cook, or seamstress.
There were those who just lived poor.

The extremes of life were testing.
Here her guts and grit were honed.
To survive a three day blizzard
She burned everything she owned.

There were angry prairie fires
With no sympathy or care.
Many ate the land to ruin
And they left her landscape bare.

There were flies so thick on ceilings
She would burn them off at night.
She was stalked by wolves and coyotes.
She had mice – a constant sight.

She had problems when her neighbors
Left their cattle unconfined.
Big bulls rubbed against her dwelling;
Scared her near out of her mind.

She was getting low on water,
But her fear kept her inside.
After two days they departed.
She no longer had to hide.

There was good news when she came out,
Like a blessing in disguise.

Future fuel was laying handy
In a yard full of cow pies.

As she rode her bike each morning
To the schoolhouse where she taught
She was somewhat overloaded
On her bike with all she'd brought.

Now, her lunch pail was quite common,
But there also was a broom
For her janitorial duties
And she still had enough room

On that bike for some protection
That she brought along each day.
T'was her trusted .22 that
Made sure trouble stayed away.

There was card playing and dancing
When she took time for some fun.
There were baseball games and picnics
When homesteading chores were done.

If she needed help with something
Or she wanted company
She hung out one of her dishtowels
For the neighbors all to see.

She wrote letters to her family.
Then she waited for replies.
She put thoughts down in her journals
Read years later by strange eyes.

If she was an avid reader
She was not content to sit,
So she did some multi-tasking
Churning butter or she'd knit.

She brought fine art to the prairie
With her instruments in tow,
From piano to accordion
And her fiddle with the bow.

The success rate for these women
Was as good as that for men.
Most were happy to have done it;
Said they'd do it all again.

She developed an affection
For this land where life was spent.
She influenced schools and churches
And the local government.

After coming west to settle
She found courage, strength and pride.
When she came she rode side-saddle.
Now, she only rode astride.