

PIONEER WOMEN  
IN  
FACT AND FICTION

Kansas  
Nebraska  
South Dakota

1860 - 1900

by  
Sandra K. Rundell

Presented to the American Culture Faculty  
at the University of Michigan - Flint  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Liberal Studies  
in  
American Culture

June 24, 1993

First Reader



Second Reader



## INTRODUCTION

What motivates people to leave their homeland, family, and friends and journey to a different part of the country or to a foreign land? What prompts people to settle in a veritable wilderness where the climate and geography are so alien to their previous lives? What inspires people to tackle the hardships of building an entirely new life amid an environment that offers so few resources? Such questions have been asked since the first settlers arrived in the New World. The motivation, Westward migration, and overcoming obstacles have been recurrent themes in American history and literature for hundreds of years. Settlers on America's frontiers have interested many people because they represent qualities that have become identified with the American culture. The pioneer qualities of hard work, independence, self-sufficiency and adventure have defined some of the basic elements of the American character.

Accounts of many such pioneers are available: history books record the pioneer experience; personal accounts provide first hand information on the westward movement and frontier life; and fiction abounds with conflicts faced by American pioneer families. Historical accounts offer a factual, informative point of view, and have a secure place in our educational institutions. Schools emphasize history textbooks as a means by which most people begin to learn of the past. First person accounts are another means by which we can learn about history. Such accounts are often in the form of diaries, recorded for personal reflection, or letters written, not for the purpose of instruction, but as a means of communication to distant families. Many of these personal accounts are published by descendants who recognize the content to be historically significant. These first-hand accounts also serve to humanize history by offering

a more personal source of information. In addition to history texts and personal accounts, fiction can add another dimension to the study of history, and such historical fiction may be based on the experiences of an author or the author's family. While fictional characters explore a historical setting, movement, or event, the author can control his characters' reactions to those forces in the world around them. Imaginary accounts offer opportunities for interpretation on the literary or symbolic level – an option that the more factual accounts do not offer. Using all three types of literature together provides a multi-dimensional viewpoint that results in a fuller understanding of history and the people who made it.

Each of these types of literature, while useful, also has weaknesses which need to be considered. The history texts, because they cover such a vast amount of material, must be generalized in nature, and they rarely cover the notable exceptions to general trends. Personal accounts offer the opposite pitfall because they supply information from a single point of view. Credibility of the author is crucial here so that the account presents valid experiences that are representative of the general situation. Fiction must also be evaluated as to which elements are historical and which are contrived. Creative license is essential to any good fictional work, but it can also damage the historical credibility of that work. The disadvantages mentioned above can be diminished if all three sources are used in conjunction with one another. By using a combination of these forms, a reader can test sources for common elements and should be able to see any obvious discrepancies between the works. Obviously, there is no foolproof method for understanding a subject in total exactness, but by using a combination of sources and testing for consistency, readers can gain a more thorough and balanced understanding of history.

From early childhood history lessons, young people commonly read about pioneering men such as Captain John Smith, Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. Even Natty Bumppo was a heroic role model to many a youth who found himself fascinated with wilderness adventure. Literature is filled with such heroes. But what of the young girl in search of a frontier heroine? Where are her role models? What roles did women play in the pioneer days? Why did women come to the frontier, and were they equal to the task of survival in the wilderness? By looking at history, fiction and personal accounts, it will be evident that women were not only involved in the westward movement, but also assumed roles equal to those of the pioneer men.

Using the three types of literature mentioned, this study will focus not only on pioneer life, but also on the role played by women in the settling of the prairie. Furthermore, fictional families who made their homes in Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota between 1868 - 1890 will be the primary focus of this study. Historical and personal accounts will serve to validate the imaginative literature and serve as a basis for comparisons of the pioneer experiences. This study by no means attempts to be conclusive, but it does attempt to examine representative literature to determine what the role of women was in the pioneer experience as a whole. Limiting the geographical and chronological setting makes this study regional in nature, and allows for a number of parallel experiences to be examined.

Historical sources for this study included both general, regional and specific state information. The most inclusive work was Ray Billington's Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier, which was published in 1949. His comprehensive treatment of the frontier in general provided a extensive background from which to continue more in depth study. Carl

Frederick Kraenzel's 1955 book, The Great Plains in Transition, provided a narrower scope than Billington, but also provided a broad view of the role played by the Great Plains in the context of the entire United States of America. The History of Nebraska, written by James Olson and published in 1955, and History of South Dakota, written by Herbert Schell and published in 1975, provided in depth information for each of these states.

Personal accounts were available in many collections that focused on the women's role in the settlement of the West. The books that provided the most relevant information for this paper were from two sources. Pauline Farseth and Theodore Blegen translated and edited letters of Gro Svendsen, a Norwegian immigrant. These letters, published in 1950, were most appropriate when compared to Rolvaag's fictional Norwegian immigrants. Although Mrs. Svendsen immigrated approximately 10 years earlier than Rolvaag's characters, her similar background invited comparison. (See Map.) Another striking resemblance was that the Svendsens, although residents of Northern Iowa, were less than 100 miles east of Rolvaag's Norwegian community in South Dakota, so the geographic experiences could also be easily compared. In addition to the first hand account of Gro Svendsen, Joanna L. Stratton provided a wealth of information in her book, Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier, which records the experiences of frontier women in various locations in this state. This collection of personal reminiscences, published in 1981, was first begun by Stratton's grandmother, who never finished it but stored it away in her attic. When her granddaughter discovered these manuscripts, she decided to finish her grandmother's book, thereby providing an abundance of different personal accounts as well as her own commentary on pioneer life.

The category of fiction has the most sources represented in this paper, and though a great deal of frontier literature exists, stories that focus on women as main characters are not as plentiful. These fictional accounts vary from one set in frontier Kansas, three set on the Nebraska prairie and four whose setting was South Dakota. Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder, published in 1935, tells of her family's experiences on the Kansas frontier in 1869-70. Although libraries classified it as "Juvenile" literature, it's realistic style does not romanticize the frontier experience.

Nebraska fiction is well represented by Bess Streeter Aldrich and Willa Cather. Mrs. Aldrich's novel, A Lantern in Her Hand, relates the story of Abbie and Will Deal from 1846 - 1926. Published in 1956, this book uses the lives of its fictional characters to represent the bigger story of the settlement of the entire Nebraska frontier. Aldrich celebrates the determination of Abbie Deal to create a better life for her children and to prevail over all the difficulties of pioneer life. Forty years before Aldrich's novel appeared, Willa Cather had already championed the strength of pioneer women in her novels O Pioneers!, published in 1913, and My Antonia, published in 1918. Both novels show life on Nebraska farms in the late 1800's and both focus on strong women who, like Abbie Deal, not only endure hardships, but also survive them.

Fiction set in North Dakota includes another novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder which relates her family's encounter with severe blizzards in their new northern frontier location. The Long Winter, set in 1880-1 and published in 1940, revolves around the family's efforts to survive in DeSmet, South Dakota, while they are snowbound from November until May. Rose Wilder Lane wrote Young Pioneers, which was published in 1933, and set it on the South Dakota prairie. Her story relates the trials of Molly as she attempts to hold on to the

homestead claim that she and her husband had purchased. Both of these selections are classified as "Juvenile" literature, but Wilder's is more "adult" in its presentation of the real problems faced by pioneers, while Lane's story is less realistic and more contrived. Nevertheless, both novels illustrate many elements of life on the frontier that can be linked to both history and personal accounts. Finally, the author whose literature provides the most complex characters is O. E. Rolvaag. His novel Giants in the Earth, published in 1927 depicts life on the Dakota prairie from 1873 - 1881 as experienced by his fictional Norwegian immigrants. The sequel to this work, Peder Victorious, published in 1929, was subtitled "A Tale of the Pioneers Twenty Years Later" and follows the same families into the early twentieth century.

These principal sources constitute the main body of literature used in the preparation of this study. In all comparisons, the history, personal accounts and fiction substantiated and validated the experiences of women who lived in Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota from 1868 - 1890. These comparisons also illustrate their many, positive contributions to the society in which they lived and to our society today. Without their strength, courage, and perseverance, women today would have been deprived of crucial role models. In order to better understand where we are, today, we must look to the past and learn from those who have come before us. It was with this intent that this study was begun.

**Locations of Families  
Persons in  
Companying Accounts**

ro Svendsen  
stherville,  
mmett County, Iowa  
1862 - 1880

ie Ingalls Family  
utland Township,  
Montgomery County near  
Independence, Kansas  
1869 - 1870

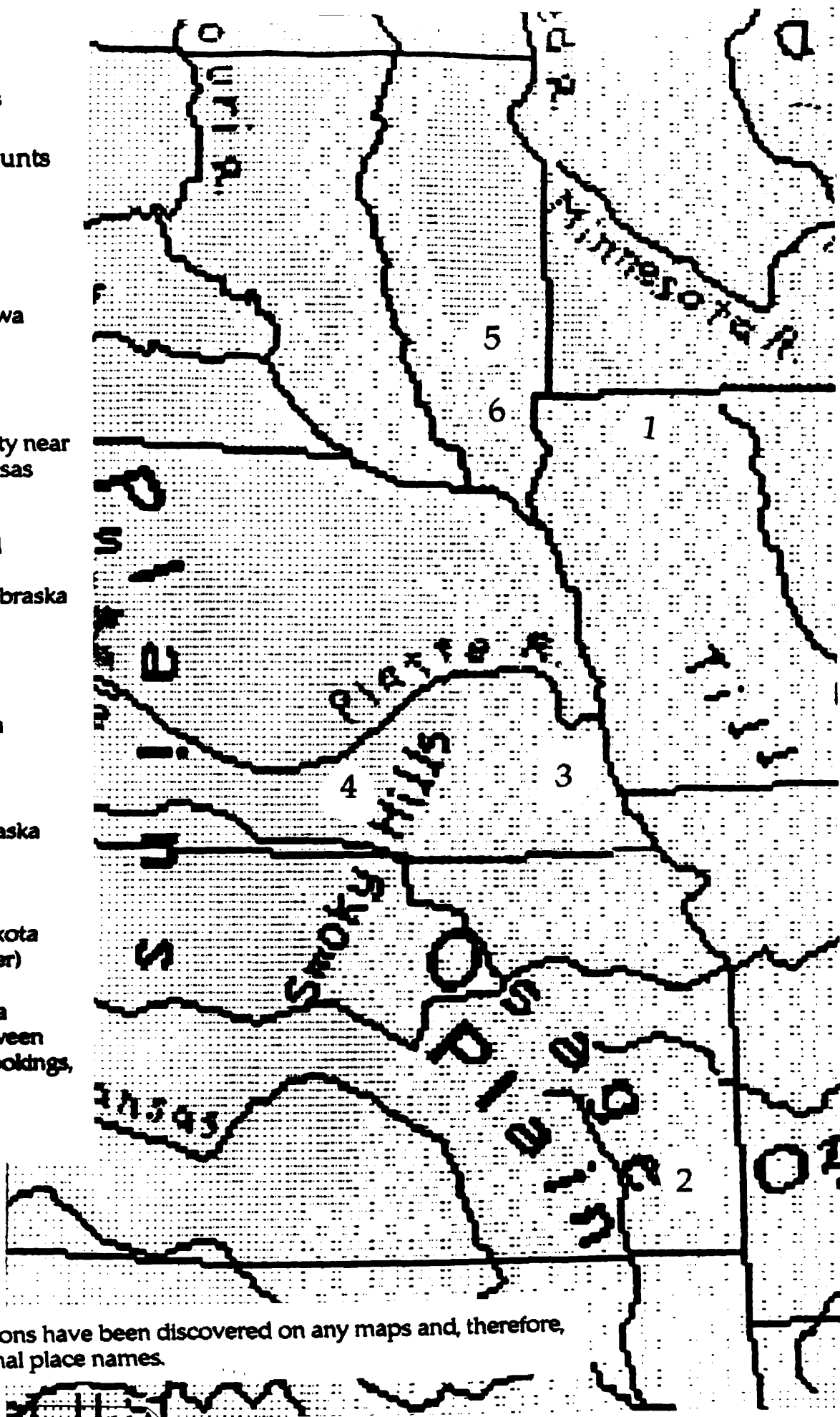
Abbie and Will Deal  
Martown\*, near  
Sleeping Water, Nebraska  
1869 - 1890 Will;  
1869 - 1926 Abbie

Alexandra Bergson  
Lawson\*, Nebraska  
1880-1900

Antonia Shimerda  
Black Hawk\*, Nebraska  
late 1880's

ie Ingalls Family  
DeSmet, South Dakota  
1879 - 1880 (and later)

Frank and Beret Hansa  
Spring Creek\*, between  
Coux Falls and Brookings,  
South Dakota  
1873 - 1881 Per;  
1873 - 1893? Beret



One of these locations have been discovered on any maps and, therefore,  
considered fictional place names.



## THE JOURNEY

What motivates people to voluntarily uproot their families from an Eastern, urban lifestyle and move to the Western prairies? For many settlers, the motivations revolved around economic opportunities or the abstract hopes associated with new beginnings. History can provide some of the background information about these early arrivals to the Great Plains, but personal accounts and fictional characters can add more layers and nuances to the basic, historic explanations.

In his History of South Dakota Herbert Schell documented a major wave of settlers who entered the Dakota Territory during the 1860's. During this decade, "nearly 25% of the settlers were natives of Minnesota and Wisconsin." (79) Some came by covered wagon across northern Iowa or through Minnesota; others came by steamboat up the Missouri River. Later, the railroad at Marshalltown, Iowa, became the departure point for many of the Dakota bound settlers. After leaving the railroad, settlers faced an additional four week journey via covered wagon. A second wave of settlers arrived in the next decade.

Several nationalities were represented in the migration of the early 1870's. The Norwegians . . . remained the dominant Scandinavian element, playing an especially important role in the advance of the settlement up the Big Sioux Valley into Lincoln and Minehaha counties . . . Within a period of five years, over 200 claims were occupied within a small area reaching from the Vermillion River in the central part of Clay County to the Southwest corner of Lincoln County. (115,116)

It was against this historical background that O. E. Rolvaag's fictional Norwegian family, with fellow Norwegians, journeyed to America and settled in this part of their new world. What Schell did not explore is the various motivations that drew these people to this location.

In his novel, Giants of the Earth, O. E. Rolvaag gave his main character Per Hansa a fairy tale vision of life in the new world. Drawn to America by the promise of land and adventure, Per Hansa joined fellow Norwegians in making the long journey to pursue his dream. After the Hansa family settled on their claim, Per beheld his land. "This vast stretch of beautiful land was to be his — yes, his — . . . His heart began to expand with a mighty exultation. An emotion he had never felt before filled him and made him walk erect. . . 'Good God!' he panted. 'This kingdom is going to be mine.'" (35) Per had accomplished his goal of owning and working his own land, but he also possessed another representative pioneer quality: adventurousness. Per's love of adventure was noted by his wife Beret: "She knew too well how hasty and fearless her husband was, plunging headlong into whatever lay before him!" (98) Having acquired land, Per Hansa was now living out the adventure of conquering the unknown and taming the wilderness, thereby proving that he was master of his world and provider for his family. Yet, Rolvaag hinted that a force larger than Per Hansa was involved in this decision to immigrate. "Destiny had held up America as an enticing will-o'-the wisp and they had followed." (219) The image of Destiny, flirting with the dreams of immigrants and luring them to seek their fortunes in America, was strongly presented in that passage. Many settlers did place their fortunes in the hands of a thin, flickering hope only to find that the harsh realities of life on the plains severely tested their determination to reach their dreams. The will-o'-the wisp never offered the reality, just the

fleeting, elusive hint of the American Dream. By presenting the role of Destiny like the classical Three Fates controlling, and even toying with, the lives of humans, Rolvaag gave his characters a tragic dimension. Ironically, Per Hansa was not the king who presides over his kingdom, but merely a small player controlled by a larger, force.

Rolvaag continued to comment on the immigrants' westward progression.

But no sooner had they reached America than the west-fever had smitten the old settlements like a plague. Such a thing had never happened before in the history of mankind; people were intoxicated by bewildering visions; they spoke dazedly, as though under the force of a spell . . . 'Go west! . . . Go west, folks! . . . The farther west, the better the land! . . . Men beheld in feverish dreams the endless plains, teeming with fruitfulness, glowing, out there where day sank into night – a Beulah Land of corn and wine! (220)

The undertone of religious fervor and the promise of Canaan was repeated several times in this work. Per Hansa and his fellow Norwegians identified themselves with the Israelites in the Promised Land and served as a reminder of the religious motives of the first Pilgrims in the New World. These settlers viewed themselves as a Chosen People, destined to bring the new world under their domination. Rolvaag further amplified this religious fervor as he described the vast numbers of people who flocked to the west.

Human beings gathered together. . . Ever westward led the course, to where the sun glowed in matchless glory as it sank at night; people drifted about in a sort of delirium like sea birds in mating time; then they flew toward the sunset, in small flocks and large – always toward

Sunset Land. . . Into this feverish atmosphere [Per and Beret] had come. Could Destiny have spun his web more cunningly? [Beret] remembered well how the eyes of Per Hansa had immediately begun to gleam and glow! (220)

The gleam and glow of land fever from within Per was so strong that it surfaced as a supernatural force that took possession of his being. Perhaps even his soul burned with the desire for land and the challenge of becoming a king in the new world. Per's internalization of the promise of the frontier impelled him to work with a single-mindedness and determination that astonished all his friends. Thus, Rolvaag's westward bound settlers were portrayed as being under the influence of a fever or spell and not completely in control of their own wills. Blinded by opportunities of wealth and land, the pioneers mindlessly poured into the wilderness, driven by their own dreams of success.

So Per Hansa, motivated by visions of grandeur in his new kingdom, settled on the quarter section of land deeded to him on June 6, 1873 and located 52 miles from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He had begun his reign. But not all was well in his kingdom; his wife, Beret, had not shared his enthusiastic vision of life in the Promised Land. From the beginning, Beret had reservations about leaving her homeland. Per

recalled keenly all the scruples and misgivings that had obsessed his wife before they had started out on this long journey – both those which had been spoken and those which had been left unsaid. The latter had been the worst; they had seemed to grow deeper and more tragic as he had kept prying into them in his clumsy way. . . (15)

But whatever the fears of Beret, she loved Per and was bound by their marriage vows to follow her husband – even to the desolate prairie of South

Dakota. Beret and Per, from the start, had contrasting views of this new land. Beret lamented, "how quickly it grows dark out here" while Per commented, "The sooner the day's over, the sooner the next day comes." (13) Even the seven year old son, Store-Hans, thought, "Too bad that mother should be so scared." (8) The differing attitudes of Per and Beret toward life on the frontier reflected a basic division in their relationship that never did heal, largely because it was never really discussed. Both Per and Beret knew that this division existed, but neither was willing to confront their sharply differing perceptions of their New World. Per is forward looking; Beret can not sever ties with the old Norwegian world, and in this sense they represent two distinctly differing pioneer types. Not every immigrant could be assimilated into the melting pot of American culture; many, like Beret, resisted the idea of exchanging the views and ways of life, which many believed to be the better, for ways of the New World, which were perceived as inferior. For example, when Per Americanized their name to Holm, Beret's reaction was vehement: "Well, now they had discarded the names of their fathers, soon they would be discarding other sacred things. The awful spirit that ruled the plains demanded all." (279) When their fourth child was born, Per named him Peder Victorious as a sign of his American born status and promise. Beret rejected this Americanization, and at his baptism, she lost control: "The evil deed shall not be done'. . . This sin shall not happen! How can a man be victorious out here, where the evil one gets us all!" (368) Per carried a hysterical Beret out of the house while she continued to refer to the baptism as the work of the Devil. Not all immigrants immediately embraced the American Dream.

The personal account of Gro Svendsen, a Norwegian immigrant, offered a series of contrasts to her fictional counterpart, Beret, in terms of attitudes

toward the new land and toward the Americanization process. Gro Svendsen's letters, written in the 1860's and 1870's from her Emmet County home in northern Iowa, to her family in Norway provide information from the perspective of a personal account. Gro's letters reveal "occasional hints of protest and nostalgic backward glances at the comfort and security she had left." (Farseth v)

Like many women, Gro and Beret came to America, not in pursuit of their own personal dreams, but because their husbands wanted to try a new life in America. Gro wrote of her concerns about leaving her homeland and of her communication with her husband about those concerns. She said, "My husband fully understands what sacrifices I made when I left everything most precious to me to go with him into the unknown. Therefore, when I am lonely, he tries to comfort me. . . I feel infinitely better when I have talked with him." (27)

Gro, like Beret, felt that she had sacrificed an important part of her life in Norway to follow her husband to a new life on the American prairie. Like Beret, Gro was devoted to and very much in love with her husband. But Gro and her husband Ole communicated about her concerns and apparently reached a comfortable resolution to those conflicts. Beret and Per never reached such an understanding and, therefore, their relationship was marked by constant, silent tension. Another point of contrast between Beret and Gro was in their attitude toward life in America. "Fiercely critical of that life [frontier] passionately loyal to the traditions of her native land, Gro nevertheless is swept along in an immigrant transition typical of millions of Americans who voluntarily sought the Promised Land." (ix) In 1863 Gro's first child was born in America, but named in traditional Norwegian: Svend. By the time her fifth son was born in 1870, the originally chosen name Aslag was Americanized to Albert. In 1871, the next son was named Steffen because, as Gro wrote, ". . . I thought I'd choose one

that was a little more in conformity with American so that he would not have to change it himself later in life. . ." (112) Thus, in contrast to Beret, Gro was more inclined to release her Norwegian ties and to adopt the American Culture.

Fiction writer Willa Cather depicted the Shimerda family who immigrated from Bohemia to Nebraska during the late 1880's. The Shimerda family came to America in pursuit of the American Dream, not at the insistence of the husband, but of the wife who wanted a better life for her children. Mrs. Shimerda explained, "America big country; much money; much land for my boys, much husband for my girls." (102) The driving force in this family was the mother's strong desire that her children be wealthy, own land and marry well. This dream differed significantly from the Hansa and Svendsen families in that the wife made the decision to immigrate, and Mrs. Shimerda's dream was looking to the next generation for its fulfillment. Unlike Mrs. Shimerda, Per Hansa and Ole Svendsen looked to build a new start for themselves and to see a better quality of life in their own time. However, the common element between Mrs. Shimerda and these men was the pursuit of the American Dream of land and opportunity. Just as the Hansa and Svendsen families had one member that was reluctant to be uprooted, Mr. Shimerda had a great deal of difficulty in accepting the move from Bohemia to America. Antonia says of her father, "My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him." (102) In the old world the Shimerdas were relatively prosperous; Mr. Shimerda was a weaver and an accomplished musician. Once a rich man had given Mr. Shimerda a fine gun as payment for playing the Violin at his wedding. Music was a very important part of Mr. Shimerda's life, but after coming to America, he didn't play the violin; the music had gone from his life. In addition to losing his music, the family financial situation changed. The \$1,000 they had when they

left Bohemia was consumed by costs involved in travel, land and equipment. In the "old country," Mr. Shimerda was prosperous and played the violin; in America, he was poor, perpetually depressed, and spoke "almost nothing, and smiled rarely . . ." (98) Willa Cather's fictional characters were consistent with the previously cited authors in presenting both the eager and the reluctant immigrant.

Not all those settlers who arrived on the Great Plains were immigrants. Many Americans followed the railroad as it spread across the continent. A major employer, the railroad offered work as an alternative to or in addition to farming. As farmers needed to supplement meager harvests or were forced to abandon farms that could no longer sustain their families, railroads began to fill the gap for those who were willing to follow the western construction paths. In the Dakota Territory, the railroad boom began in 1877. Schell, in his historical account, says,

Even before its rails crossed the Minnesota border during the summer of 1878, settlers began to stream into Brookings County and the eastern part of Kingsbury from the railway terminus at Canby, Minnesota. The railway surveyors arrived the following spring, and by autumn of 1879 the railroad was graded and ironed as far as Volga. Traffic started across the state line to Aurora in early October and reached Volga by the middle of November. The towns of Elkton and Brookings also made their appearance during the same year. Volga was the terminus during the winter of 1879-1880 and served as a construction camp while grading and track laying was continued in the direction of Huron. (161,2)

This provides the historical background for another semi-fictional family who



journeyed from Minnesota to the Dakota Territory.

The Ingalls family had not had good harvests for several years and decided to take a job offer that moved the family from their Minnesota home to the Dakota territory. Laura Ingalls Wilder tells of her family's Dakota experience in two books, By the Shores of Silver Lake and The Long Winter, that cover the years of 1879 - 1881. Charles Ingalls' reason for coming to this part of the country was twofold. First, was the practical need: an employment opportunity and money to support his family. Secondly, Pa, like Per Hansa, had an adventurous quality about him; he preferred the openness of the prairie to the close quarters of "civilization." Although the Ingalls family saw the need to move in terms of the necessity for work, Ma Ingalls favored towns where the children could attend school. Neither Beret nor Ma Ingalls chose the frontier, but both women maintained a devotion to their husbands and provided support for their spouses' choices.

Another similarity between these two women was a treasured piece from their former, more civilized time and place: Beret had an immigrant chest and Ma had a china shepherdess. Whenever the Ingalls family settled in a new location, the final touch was to place Ma's china figurine in some special place, thus marking the establishment of a new home. The major difference between Ma and Beret is that Beret was not able to transfer her feelings from the old to the new, while Ma Ingalls had the attitude that the new home was a new beginning and one was not to waste time looking backward. The shepherdess figurine itself represents both positive and nurturing qualities. The shepherdess is not only a female figure, but one that also takes active responsibility for the care and protection of those left in her charge. The shepherdess shares many of these qualities with Ma Ingalls, who shepherded her family through both

prosperous and lean times by providing basic survival needs such as food and clothing. Further, she provided emotional stability and security that a shepherdess provides for her flock. The pastoral, caring image is most appropriately associated with Ma Ingalls and her view of her role in the family and in society at large. The china shepherdess may have looked delicate and fragile, but there is a quality of strength and endurance to it. That figurine safely traveled from Wisconsin to Kansas, back to Minnesota and on to the Dakota Territory – without breaking!! Ma Ingalls reflects the practical, stable and strong pioneer spirit that was nurtured by the American culture of which she was a part. Although Ma perceived herself as an American, Beret was the product of her Norwegian culture and refused to adopt the new American attitudes, even when she had been in America for a longer time. Beret personifies “the immigrant’s resistance to the ‘melting pot.’” (Haugen 103) Beret’s dependency on the immigrant trunk sheds light on her self perceptions. Unlike the china shepherdess, the immigrant trunk is immense, bulky and utilitarian. It is used for storage and kept closed and out of the way. It hides things and keeps them from sight. Beret is much the same way: closed and reluctant to express her feelings. When she came to America, Beret brought a great deal of guilt with her – emotional baggage that hindered her ability to enjoy life in the New World. Like the immigrant trunk, Beret remained closed, hiding things inside her, storing the guilt, and periodically unpacking it. The dark and ponderous symbol of Beret’s burdens is most appropriate to her character and makes clear her inability to leave excess baggage behind and the disastrous result of living a closed life.

Although adjusting to the rigors of frontier life was difficult, it was easier for those who, like the Ingalls family and the characters of Bess Streeter

Aldrich, did not have to make the additional adjustment to American culture and language or for those who chose to make such an adjustment. In A Lantern in Her Hand, Aldrich's fictional characters, Will and Abbie Deal, migrated from their Iowa home to Nebraska in 1869. As in the case of Per Hansa, Ole Svendsen and Charles Ingalls, the decision was basically the husband's. Said Will, "We're going out to Nebraska to start for ourselves." Although the recurring themes of new opportunity and independence are reflected in Will's comments, Abbie is less enthusiastic: "'Nebraska?' It had the sound of South Africa." Abbie's first reaction was that they were going to a foreign country, even though it was only a matter of approximately 200 miles. Will, in an effort to sell this idea to Abbie, offered a multitude of reasons that included the argument that there were too many people in Iowa, that he would have to work for his father for a very long time and that he did not want his son to be tied down in the same way. Abbie's objections reflected an emotional difficulty of leaving family, a fear of Indians and concerns about the lack of school and medical care for the baby. Abbie had her own ambitions too: her voice and her painting. But "Will had said he was going West. The era of this freedom had not dawned. Abbie Deal's man had said he was going to Nebraska, and Abbie had to go too. It was as simple as that then." (62) So, Abbie, like Beret Hansa, Gro Svendsen, Caroline Ingalls, and Mr. Shimerda, became an unwilling pioneer by marriage.

Most of these reluctant pioneers eventually accepted the life in their new environment. A Lantern in Her Hand related how Abbie eventually came to look forward instead of backwards. Will understood Abbie's concerns and tried to offer positive encouragement. When the day of departure arrived, their different attitudes toward the move were apparent. "Only one thing gave her strength for the parting. Only one thing gave her the courage to make the long journey to

the raw new state. Her love for Will . . . If loving Will meant making a new home in a far, unsettled country, why, then, she chose to journey bravely to the far, unsettled country.” (65) Mrs. Aldrich clearly used the word “chose” in conjunction with Abbie’s decision. If love is an act of the will, then Abbie Deal had chosen to love and to act upon that choice. “Will’s eyes, full of the light of hope and courage, looked to the west. But Abbie’s, tear-misted, clung to the east.” (66) The choice was made, but not without some difficulty. After a month’s journey, the young couple arrived at their destination and began to build their sod house. Abbie’s attitude changed as the “soddie” was completed.

. . . something lifted from Abbie’s heart. Perhaps it was only because she was physically better that the deep depression seemed lightened, the intense homesickness for old scenes lessened. . . A revival of hope and courage possessed her. This was their own land. They, who had never owned a foot of ground were now the sole owners of 160 acres. Rich soil . . . a farm of their own upon which to make a home, – a home for Mack, – and one another. . . life here was not going to be so bad. (77,78)

Thus, Abbie soon embraced Will’s dream and became as committed to the new life as he. From this point, the two worked together and eventually realized their dreams. The spirit of cooperation and pursuit of a common goal strengthened their relationship, increased the quality of life in their new environment and made overcoming hardships easier to face.

Rose Wilder Lane’s Young Pioneers, depicted the fictional newlyweds, David and Molly, who also shared the American Dream as they moved from Wisconsin to Dakota Territory. A few years younger than Will and Abbie, David and Molly were both in their late teens, eager to tackle the world, and anxious to

build their future. As David put it, "Next year, with the whole quarter section in wheat, we'll clear around \$5,000. By George, Horace Greeley knew what he was talking about! . . . Molly, we're in the West! We're growing up with the greatest country on earth! Five years from now we'll be riding high, wide and handsome." (24) Such enthusiasm could only come from youth! Unlike the previous settlers, neither person was reluctant. Molly had no qualms about leaving home or facing the great unknown. David and Molly were the most unrealistic of the fictional characters. Neither presented any of the typical inner conflicts mentioned by other authors of fiction or personal accounts. Thus, David and Molly probably do not represent the vast majority of the early pioneers, but they do present the essence of the hope and confidence in the American Dream.

One motivation that contributed significantly to the concept of the American Dream was a large amount of advertising geared to lure both immigrants and Americans to seek their fortune in the West. The Nebraska historian, James C. Olson, recounted efforts by government officials to promote Nebraska as a desirable place to settle. Such Public Relations campaigns were often conducted at the expense of the truth. The chief thrust of their advertising was to overcome the impression "that much of the trans-Missouri region was unsuited to agriculture." Nebraska promoters struggled to counter the bad publicity inherited from early explorers who labeled that part of the Great Plains as the "Great American Desert." (166) In his book Westward Expansion - A History of the American Frontier, Ray Allen Billington shows how advertising was specifically aimed at immigrants through railroad agents. "The agents' principal task was to let every European know the American West was a land of milk and honey." One Union Pacific agent described the Platte Valley as

“ . . . a flowery meadow of great fertility clothed in nutritious grasses and watered by numerous streams.” (616) Another ornate description, reminiscent of the elaborate literary style of the day, described Dakota Territory as a paradise where “ . . . mockingbirds and gorgeous paroquets and cockatoos warble musical challenges to each other amid the rich foliage of the sweet-bay and mango trees.” (616) This description of the Dakota Territory is miles apart and worlds away from the dark Dakota prairie described by the fiction of O. E. Rolvaag. Promoters also utilized brochures, newspaper advertisements and posters that “were glossy examples of overstatement.” (615) One writer pointed out that nature had provided abundant resources and “all that is required is diligent labor and economy to ensure an early reward.” (616) If, by now, potential settlers were not convinced to relocate to the new Canaan, there was always the enticement of marriage for women. “One Burlington brochure reminded them men so outnumbered ladies in the West that ‘when a daughter of the East is once beyond the Missouri she rarely recrosses it except on a bridal tour.’” (616) Surely, this attraction lured many a young woman to make the decision to Go West!! Such emotional appeals to the masses do not seem so far removed from Madison Avenue and its glossy, overstated television commercials of today.

These diverse fictional, personal and historical accounts show several recurring motives for relocating to the Great Plains. Almost all of the literature cited economic opportunity as high on the list of reasons to move into a new land. Such motivations have been seen when the earliest settlers looked to the Southern Colonies, and the promise of the tobacco industry was born. Closely related to this motive is the concept of a new beginning that not only included economic beginnings, but often some kind of new emotional or spiritual life was

sought. These new beginnings gave people a chance to put past mistakes and sorrows behind them and offered men and women a chance to try something new and different. Motives like these are reminiscent of the Puritans and Pilgrims whose search for religious freedom brought them to the Northern shores of the New World. Psychologically, the need for new beginnings was strong and moving to the the New World or to the Great Plains was just the change in life that was needed. In addition to economic opportunities and new beginnings, there was also a powerful sense of adventure – the same kind of adventure that causes explorers to “go where no one has gone before.” Being there first – getting in on the ground floor – has a universal appeal to the spirit of enterprising people everywhere. Joanna Stratton’s book Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier, gave one Kansas woman’s summary of the motives that kept her going during those first years on the prairie.

It might seem a cheerless life, but there were many compensations: the thrill of conquering a new country; the wonderful atmosphere, the attraction of the prairie which simply gets into your blood and makes you dissatisfied away from it, the low lying hills, and the unobstructed view of the horizon; and the fleecy clouds driven by the never failing winds. The pioneer spirit was continuous in our family. (56)

Her personal account sums up the motives of many an early pioneer, and adds the satisfaction one can find in the natural beauty of the land. So, as history, personal accounts and fiction tell us, motivations for going West were much the same as those of the past, the present and the future.

## THE PRAIRIE

Any examination of the Great Plains experience must begin with a look at the vast land that attracted so many settlers. Historian Carl Frederick Kraenzel, in his book The Great Plains in Transition, reported some interesting facts about this unique land area. "The Great Plains make up one-fifth of the land area of the United States." This 586,461 square miles of land extends from the "eastern slope of the Rockies . . . eastward to the ninety-eighth meridian, a distance of about 750 miles at the widest point." They also extend from Mexico to Canada, "a distance of more than 1,600 miles 'as the crow flies.'" (3) This distinctive geographic area differs in nature from the larger area to the west, which is more arid and from the area to the east which is more humid. Thus, the Plains were described as "a semiarid land" and, because they were so vast and not altogether unfamiliar in climate, they offered the possibility of settlement. As pioneers moved westward to this land region, "The absence of trees, except along the water courses, is, perhaps the most striking feature to the man from the humid land." (29,30) Kraenzel also described this area as "short-grass country" and, as this section of the study shows, the prairie grass was a major feature noticed by the early pioneers. The largeness of the land was another feature of the Great Plains mentioned by Mr. Kraenzel and by fiction writers and first hand accounts. The historian described it in terms of the psychological reaction.

Psychologically, men and women experienced a great fear and dread as they left the forest lands and came on the Plains, which appeared to stretch out indefinitely with only the ever-receding horizon ahead.



The Plains dwarfed men to pigmy stature, . . . With the break from their heritage behind them, the threat of insecurity ahead of them, and the necessity of constant vigilance over present, many emigrants developed deep frustrations that ever after affected their lives. (94)

This passage spoke to the general experiences of the settlers who first ventured onto the Great Plains in search of new opportunities. What the passage did not offer was a glimpse into the individual emotional reaction of one who has journeyed from the forested region into the treeless plains. The study of literature and of personal accounts fills in the gaps in the historical account and provides a personal and deeper study of how the geographical features of the Great Plains affected its first visitors.

In Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder said, "Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they traveled in Kansas and saw nothing but the rippling grass and enormous sky. In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level of the land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle." As the family moved across the prairie, they could never "get out of the middle of the circle." (13) This excerpt highlights several physical aspects of the prairie. Almost every literary selection cited this flatness, as far as the eye could see. The rippling grass was also noted by many observers, but the moving circle was Wilder's unique description. It gave the appearance of a floating microcosm, alone in the midst of a gigantic flat expanse with the image of the minute humans against the backdrop of the unending flatness of the land. As the Ingalls family made its solitary way further into the Kansas frontier, Laura noted that "No road, not even the faintest trace of wheels or of a rider's passing, could be seen anywhere. That prairie looked as

if no human eye had ever seen it before. Only the tall wild grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sky arched over it. " (26) Later, she added, "And on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there." (40) The idea that one might be the first person ever to see or to walk on this land must have given the early settlers a feeling of adventure, wonder and awe. These positive reactions were countered by other feelings of loneliness and insignificance in the overwhelming vastness of the universe that also surfaced in these descriptions.

Mrs. Wilder not only pictured the vastness of the Great Plain, but she also personified the prairie. The family moved under the watchful eye of the sun that beat down as if it were marking time with its heartbeat, giving life to the scene. "Far away the sun's edge touched the rim of the earth. The sun was enormous and it was throbbing and pulsing with light." (26) Later in the novel, the prairie again assumed human behavior as summer began to fade into the fall. "The prairie had changed. Now it was a dark yellow, almost brown. The wind wailed in the tall grass, and it whispered sadly across the curly, short buffalo grass. At night the wind sounded like someone crying." (199) Earlier the sun was a more visual and distant element, but now the wind and the grass were auditory, nearer and more melancholy. For Laura Wilder, the wonder-filled prairie clearly had a life of its own. The family represented a small, but determined, life form seeking to find its place amid the vast Kansas frontier.

The Nebraska prairie, like that of Kansas, was also described in fictional accounts. Bess Streeter Aldrich's novel A Lantern in Her Hand revealed the prairie through the eyes of Abbie Deal. As she and her husband journeyed from Iowa to Nebraska, Abbie observed the grass and its motion. ". . . would [the

grass] never cease to wave? There were four rhythmic beats, like music, but music which irritated rather than soothed one: Blow. . . wave. . . ripple. . . dip. It beat upon her brain, so that she turned wearily away from the sight. . . Yes, it never ceased from those four beats. . ." (69) The rhythmic motion of the grass evoked an image of monotony, generally associated with the flatness of the Nebraska land, but the musical images were connected to Abbie's background. Before her departure to the frontier, she had been a talented singer who, with the proper training, could have become an accomplished vocalist. In addition to the rhythm of the waving prairie grass, Abbie noted the silence and vastness of the land.

There was complete silence,—save for those distant coyotes.

Silence,—save for a faint sound of shivering grass. Silence, so deep, that it roared in its vast vacuum. Silence,—grass,—stars. The group [of three pioneer families] around the fire seemed suddenly too small to be alone in the still vastness, too inadequate and helpless. (72)

The image of the three covered wagons, like "little toys in the vastness of the lonely prairie," (76) reinforced Abbie's feelings of insignificance. The paradoxical, but appropriate, image of the roaring silence conveyed the vast newness of the uninhabited, unending plain. For the contemporary reader, it is difficult to fathom such solitude and silence, because our lives are constantly bombarded with noise from all sorts and varieties of technological equipment. Television, stereos, video games and even computers provide endless audio and visual stimulation to the extent that many people feel a need for, or an addiction to, some type of sound, especially when they are alone. The modern reader can only vaguely imagine the silence experienced by Laura Wilder and

Abbie Deal. Silence has become obsolete and sound has become an substitute for conversation and companionship. The feelings of insignificance and the monotony of the prairie are seen in Aldrich's novel, just as they were in Wilder's, although both authors show a comparatively positive or neutral relationship between human beings and the prairie.

Willa Cather's Nebraska prairie shared traits with that of both Wilder and Aldrich, but showed a less positive view of the interaction of humans with the land. In My Antonia, Cather described the prairie through the eyes of a ten year old boy. "As I looked about me, I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. . . And there was much motion in it." (16) The young boy's observation of the grass as the important feature of the prairie reinforced the observations of both Laura and Abbie. The image of the "sea" of grass is an element that other authors, notably O. E. Rolvaag, have observed. The idea of the "prairie schooners" sailing on the sea of grass developed into a standard image presenting the vastness of the prairie. In O Pioneers, Cather's Nebraska "sea" was not as fair and calm as that of Wilder and Aldrich.

But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber waste. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. (15)

Here the land was personified as a recluse which resented any human intrusion upon its brooding peacefulness. The land was not friendly; it was

resentful and uncooperative. Cather described the sod houses that populated the prairie as

only the unescapable ground in another form. The roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable. The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings.

(19,20)

Cather's land looked with indifference upon the effort of humans who attempted to make a mark on it. The "feeble scratches" indicate, once again, the futility of man's effort in the face of the vast and hard prairie land. Cather reinforced the sense of human meaninglessness experienced by Abbie Deal and Laura Wilder, but added aspects of futility and conflict to her characterization of the prairie. Cather's land was definitely more negative toward the advent of human beings.

So far, the prairie has been described as vast, endless, flat and resistant, but unthreatening; however, O. E. Rolvaag's Dakota prairie was more menacing to its settlers. Beret mused, as she watched covered wagons drive past her house and press on deeper into the wilderness of the Great Plains, that the prairie swallowed those wagons. This personification suggests a greedy entity which fed on settlers whose dreams continuously lured them farther west. The vast and unoccupied land baited the victims and lured them into the mouth of the Prairie. After this observation, Beret expressed her sense of helplessness: ". . . here she sat, thousands of miles from home and kindred, lost in a limitless void." (321) She attributed her feelings of utter loneliness to being without

family and being in this new and strange land that stretched out so vast and so empty all around her. What Beret chose to ignore was that her husband and children – her family – were with her; and she had friends who lived relatively close (a mile) to her. Beret equated family with the Old World, familiar land, geography, climate, and familiar life patterns. The frontier offered no such familiar land marks or “life marks.” An illustration of the impact of frontier reality on normal life patterns was evident when a minister arrived in the small Norwegian settlement. Because they had not seen a clergyman for four years, one of the settlers, Tonseten, assumed the duties of Justice of the Peace, and had performed the rite of marriage for a young couple. When a minister finally arrived, Tonseten confessed his four year old sin: he questioned the validity of the marriage he had performed without benefit of clergy. Further doubts arose because in those four years, baptisms had also been conducted on an “emergency basis.” The minister’s humane assessment of the situation showed how far removed “normal” conditions were for pioneers. The minister indicated that under normal circumstances, performing such ceremonies would be sacrilegious. “But at the time, as you say, conditions were far from normal out here, . . .”(359) The most sacred parts of life, and those which gave order and purpose to life were not accessible to many settlers. Thus, Beret, without the familiar structure to life, found herself lost and unable to create for herself any larger source of comfort on which she could rely. Beret found the prairie too much for her to deal with, and she simply gave in to the immensity of it.

In addition to the loneliness and isolation that the prairie fostered, Rolvaag’s work also contained many images of the Prairie personified as an entity which would stop at nothing to get rid of the settlers. In Giants in the Earth

Rolvaag stated, "Monsterlike the Plain lay there – sucked in her breath one week, and the next week blew it out again. Man she scorned; his works she would not brook. . . She would know, when the time came, how to guard herself and her own against him!" (241) The unmistakable image of a large force set in direct opposition to human attempts to exist on the plain is a central conflict in Rolvaag's novels. The Plain breathed; it scorned man's efforts; and it was female. This view of the land as female supports the assessment of the contemporary historian, Annette Kolodny. Her book, The Lay of the Land, based upon an extensive examination of frontier literature, interprets the conquest of the wilderness as a basic drive of the male to subdue and to control the female. (4) From the start Per Hansa's purpose was to conquer the plain and force it into submission. The Plain resisted his efforts, but in the end, Per tamed it and made it productive so that it actually sustained life. The land became the nurturer and source of nourishment, both of which are "female" attributes. Thus, Rolvaag's Plain, personified as female, supports Kolodny's interpretation of settlement in terms of the great white conqueror, who tamed the wilderness and trained it to become the provider and sustainer of life.

Furthermore, Rolvaag gave the Plain a darker, more violent side. This excerpt showed the plain's active fight against the humans who tried to subdue it. In Giants in the Earth, the Great Prairie spent time and energy to oppose human settlement. "There was the Red Son of the Great Prairie, who hated the Palefaces with a hot hatred; stealthily he swooped down upon them, tore up and laid waste the little settlements. Great was the terror he spread; bloody the saga concerning him." (413) Indians became linked with the prairie and both joined forces to defeat the humans, but in the end, the settlers conquered the

Indian. When the Prairie could not win by direct assault, it tried psychological warfare. "But more to be dreaded than this tribulation was the strange spell of sadness which the unbroken solitude cast upon the minds of some. Many took their own lives; asylum after asylum was filled with disordered beings who had once been human." (413) Historians and first hand accounts have already mentioned the effects of isolation and the endless vast openness of the prairie. Mental disorder was a common problem for the pioneer whose mind and will were not strong enough to endure this lonely, difficult life. The perpetual conflict between the land and humans was summed up in this passage from Rolvaag:

Then, too, there were the years of pestilence—toil and travail, famine and disease. God knows how human beings could endure it all. And many did not — they lay down and died. 'There is nothing to do about that,' said they who survived. 'We are all destined to die. . .' And it was as if nothing affected people in those days. They threw themselves blindly into the Impossible and accomplished the Unbelievable. If anyone succumbed in the struggle — and that happened often — another would come and take his place. . . And so had been the Spirit since the day the first settlers landed on the eastern shores; it would rise and fall at intervals, would swell and surge on again with every new wave of settlers that rolled westward into the unbroken solitude. (413-415)

Rolvaag's summation of the ever present westward encroachment of humans upon the western lands was the constant story of the land's resistance that was always and eventually bettered by the strong will and determination of the settlers.



Rolvaag's prairie made one last attempt to subdue the pioneers. In Giants in the Earth, Per Hansa became a victim, sacrificed to the land. During the infamous winter of 1880-1, blizzard after blizzard tormented the Great Plains. Many people suffered from lack of both food and fuel, but the tiny Norwegian community still survived. However, Per's friend Hans Olsa was dying and requested a minister to see him out of this world and into the next. Per determined that, of all the settlers, he could best challenge the elements and, therefore, he decided to go out and bring a minister to his dying friend. Per's journey occurred in the last section of the book which Rolvaag entitled, "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied." (413) As Per Hansa, on skis, struck out into the harsh winter weather, one had the distinct feeling of watching a doomed man about to be sacrificed to the great God of the Plains. Half way between the town of Colton and the James River, Per lost his way in the February blizzard, sought refuge in a haystack, froze to death, and was discovered the next May. Thus, the Great Plain consumed the blood of Per Hansa, one of the "Giants" who dared to defy this brutal land. But, Per's final, and ironic, hope was realized by the fact that Per died facing West. The indomitable pioneer spirit of Per Hansa outlived his physical life and mocked the ongoing, persistent efforts of the Great Plain to stop the pioneers in their westward advancement.

In Peder Victorious, his sequel to Giants in the Earth, Rolvaag continued the saga of the Hansa family. After the death of Per, his son, symbolically named Peder Victorious, took over the mission of conquest begun by his father. Beret and her son became the prime means by which the farm would continue, but The Great Plain remained a strong adversary. "But now

other concerns had come to occupy the thoughts of the Great Plain, giving it not so much as a moment of rest.” (Peder 105) The Plain was anxious and began to actively plot ways of getting rid of the humans.

Large dwellings and huge barns sprang up all over. Summers the Great Plain tried tornadoes; in spring and autumn, prairie fires, until heaven and earth roared in one blaze; during the winters she would let loose all the deviltry she could think of. . . But all in vain; the houses reared themselves faster than she could destroy them. Even the elements were to learn that the power of man had to be respected, especially when energized by great joy. (Peder 105,106)

The Plain marshaled all its deadly forces: tornadoes, fire and cold, but the humans were able to withstand all the evil and hardship that the deadly prairie could muster. The hero of this tale, Peder Victorious clearly symbolized the ability of man to conquer the land. Once again the the superior will of the male settler was able to defeat the willful, female – the Great Plain. In the end, the great, white conqueror prevailed.

## A NEW HOME

The first concern for any newcomer to the frontier was housing. Settlers quickly assembled temporary shelter until the family was established and could afford to build a bigger, more permanent dwelling. Until better housing could be established, pioneer families lived out of their covered wagons or tents. These first shelters were most often dugouts, sod houses or log houses depending on the immediate geographic areas. The dugout was the easiest and cheapest to create because it required few tools and almost no lumber. Digging a cave into a hillside required only a determined pioneer with picks and shovels while nature provided the building materials. The advantage of the dugout, in addition to the minimal expense of materials, was its insulation factor: warm in the winter and cool in the summer. But disadvantages such as permanent dirt, dampness and darkness tended to outweigh the positive points, especially over long periods of time. A Kansas woman's personal account, from Joanna Stratton's Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier, told of her experiences.

Father made a dugout and covered it with willows and grass, . . . and when it rained, the water came through the roof and ran in the door. After the storms, we carried the water out with buckets, then waded around in the mud until it dried up. Then to keep us nerved up, sometimes the bull snakes would get in the roof and now and then one would lose his hold and fall down on the bed, then off on the floor. Mother would grab the hoe and there was something doing and after the fight was over Mr. Bull Snake was dragged outside. (52,53)

Apparently, housekeeping chores in the dugout included more than just

dusting and sweeping!

Two fictional accounts, consistent with the personal accounts, supplement our understanding of life in a dugout. When Willa Cather's Shimerda family immigrated from Bohemia and found their first home in the New World, it was a dugout. Cather described their home as "that cave . . . It's no better than a badger hole; no proper dugout at all." (23) Evidently, some dugouts were better than others, and the Shimerda's lived in one that was substandard. Later in the story, Cather provided more description of this dwelling's interior. "In the far wall was another little cave, a round hole, not much bigger than an oil barrel, scooped out in the black earth." The narrator, Jim Burden, discovered that this was where two of the children slept, on "some quilts and a pile of straw." (85) Cather's description gave an impression of very primitive, animal like conditions, and she highlighted the hardships of the early settlers as they struggled to find adequate housing. Rose Wilder Lane gave a second, more romanticized description of a dugout in her novel, Young Pioneers. Her characters, David and Molly, bought a Dakota homestead, that came with a dugout. The house was hard to see because the sod "was smooth over it and blown grass hid the top of the stovepipe." This interior sharply contrasted to the dirty hovel of the Shimerda's. Lane's characters lived in comparative luxury because their "floor was pounded smooth and hard, canvas covered the ceiling and part of the walls. . . There was even a small window hole covered with oiled paper." (12) David and Molly lived in the "Cadillac" of dugouts, not the primitive cave of the Shimerda's world. Lane's description revealed that some of these dugouts were more elaborate and less temporary than others, and the difference in the quality of housing depended upon those who lived in them. If the dugout was strictly temporary, settlers found less

motivation to “fix it up” for long term living. If, on the other hand, the dugout would serve as home for several years, pioneers spent more time and money on improvements like an interior canvas covering. In either case, living in a dugout undoubtedly provided these early settlers with sufficient motivation to build a frame house as soon as possible.

A second type of housing, regarded as a step above the dugout, was the sod house, made from the vast resource of the prairie itself. The settler cut strips of sod then chopped these into bricks, each of which weighed approximately 50 pounds each. Stacked with the grass side down, sod bricks created walls about two feet thick. The roof usually consisted of cottonwood poles topped with willow brush and finally a layer of sod strips. The completed “soddie” was usually about sixteen by twenty feet and weighed an average of 90 tons. Like the dugout, advantages of this residence included excellent insulation, a fireproof structure, and minimal cost. In addition to picks and shovels, the “soddie” also required the use of a plow and horses or oxen to pull it, but its cost was still an advantage because the building materials were, once again, furnished by nature. The disadvantages of this dwelling included poor ventilation, darkness, dampness and a tendency to disintegrate and/or to cave in during heavy rains. In spite of these nuisances, “Over these early years, the sod house became a distinctive style of folk architecture on the Great Plain, a symbol of pioneer ingenuity and perseverance.” (Stratton 54)

The Nebraska sod house of Aldrich’s novel *A Lantern in Her Hand* resembled that of Kansas personal accounts. Aldrich described Will and Abbie stacking three foot long strips of sod to create the walls of their home, which measured thirty by eighteen feet. This living area provided two rooms: the bedroom, which was eighteen by ten feet and the remaining “living” room which

was eighteen feet by twenty feet. Once the walls and roof were completed, the interior was coated with a mud plaster and a board floor was added. Abbie's finishing touches of curtains and gunnysacking tacked onto the floor made the move from their covered wagon into their first home a significant first step in their new life on the Nebraska prairie. Nebraska historian James C. Olson mentioned some modifications made to sod houses like that of the Deals. The more prosperous settlers "shingled their roofs or covered them with tar paper . . . Occasionally the inside walls were whitewashed or covered with old newspapers and a cloth was stretched across the top to provide a ceiling." (205) These improvements in the basic sod house were not necessarily made from the first day, as illustrated by the fictional characters. Like the Deals, many pioneers had to make improvements as they could afford them, and that meant putting off luxuries until the crops began to pay off. The sod house, made of "Nebraska marble. . . became the enduring symbol of the new frontier." (Olson 205)

Rolvaag's fictional character, Per Hansa, showed a slightly different perspective of the sod house. Per envisioned the new home he would build for his family to be a mansion. Compared to the standard sixteen by twenty foot soddies on the Dakota Prairie, Per Hansa's twenty eight by eighteen foot house was spectacular. This dwelling featured two rooms, one eighteen by eighteen feet and the other was eighteen by ten feet. The rooms were separated by a wall and this house had two doors, one to the South and the other facing East. The magnitude of this endeavor was observed by a fellow Norwegian settler, Tonseten, who said, "Two doors in a sod hut! My God! What folly!" (51) Measured by the standards of the time and place, Per Hansa's mansion amazed his neighbors and had many wondering if there would be enough

willow limbs to thatch such a large roof. This innovative house had two rooms, but both were not for the family; the adjoining room was actually the barn. Per's idea was to house both the family and the animals under one roof. He reasoned that this design would save both time and labor and provide greater warmth and security. Per's vision illustrated the basic qualities of economy, practicality, innovativeness and resourcefulness that were often attributed to the early pioneers. However optimistic and pleased Per was with the new home, Beret was not at all impressed.

Her disgust for life on the prairie crystallizes in the view that here men live like beasts; first they merely live like animals, burrowing into sod huts, but gradually they disregard moral law and act like animals too. She is convinced that if they remain in the wilderness, everything human in them will be blotted out. (Rugstad 118)

Beret failed to see Per's mansion in the new kingdom, but saw only primitive, animal-like conditions.

Mrs. Bergson, a fictional character from Willa Cather's novel Q Pioneers, would have agreed with Beret's point of view. Cather wrote that the Bergsons had a log house "only because Mrs. Bergson would not live in a sod house." (29) This statement not only revealed the strong, stubborn character of Mrs. Bergson, but it also indicated that the Bergsons must have been financially able to afford a log house. Mrs. Bergson's strength was further revealed by Cather's description of her role in the family.

For eleven years, she had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult. Her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family

from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways. (29) Cather suggested that the influential role played by these pioneer women was essential in maintaining the family unit amid highly unorthodox conditions. Like Mrs. Bergson, Beret Hansa felt that living on the prairie could threaten the quality of life. In Giants in the Earth Beret, like Mrs. Bergson, felt that primitive housing conditions reflected declining morality. Beret's desire for a frame house was expressed in these words: "... I know too well that human beings should not live like beasts! After they have turned into beasts, houses don't matter..." (303) Beret's assessment of the relationship between environment and behavior was very similar to that of Mrs. Bergson, but Beret's words show Rolvaag's strong sense of naturalism that is prevalent throughout the novel. The basic struggle to rise above primitive conditions and to live a more genteel and civilized life was one of the prominent themes in all of the pioneer literature. Personal accounts, as well as fiction, revealed that these early pioneers were constantly working toward a more civilized, organized way of living and that they viewed the primitive life as only a temporary stage that they had to pass through on their way to attaining the larger American Dream.

Breaking the sod was necessary not only to obtain housing materials, but also to begin the long arduous task of creating productive farmland from the prairie. The historian Herbert Schell described this phase of frontier life: "The breaking season lasted from early June until the midsummer droughts set in, usually in July. Sod broken before or after this time might make poor producing land for several years." (76) Rolvaag, in his novel Giants in the Earth also described this difficult process. "The sod, which had been slumbering there undisturbed for countless ages, was tough of fibre and would not give up its hold on the earth without a struggle. . . When Per Hansa had made a couple of



rounds, he let the oxen stand awhile to catch their breath. . ." (47) The image of the giant prairie sleeping peacefully for such a long time and then being cruelly disrupted set up a contest of wills between the rudely awakened sleeper and the one who was brave enough to challenge this monster. The physical difficulty of this task was highlighted by the description of the tired oxen having to rest frequently. Because Per was a strong man driven by the need to perform demanding physical labor, he successfully broke the sod of the Dakota prairie and awoke this sleeping land.

The Kansas sod was similarly described by personal accounts in Joanna L. Stratton's book. "Usually it took the strength of several yoke of oxen and several hardy farmhands to push the plow through the rigid soil." (59) Kansas fiction supports Stratton's comments. Laura Ingalls Wilder, in Little House on the Prairie, described the process of breaking the sod.

[The two plough horses] slowly pulled with all their might and the sharp plow slowly turned over a long unbroken strip of that sod. . . The dead grass was so tall and thick that it held up the sod. Where Pa had plowed, he did not have a plowed field. The long strips of grass-roots lay on top of the grass, and grass stuck out between them. . . In two or three years he would have nicely plowed fields. (275)

Ms. Wilder's repetition of "slowly" emphasized the difficulty of the job and the toughness of the land because the sod that was turned over did not break up or crumble, but remained attached in a long strip. The fact that it would take two or three years to have "nicely plowed fields" also emphasized the toughness of the prairie as well as the persistence of the settlers.

Women were often called upon to help with this difficult task. Assisting the men in the field meant taking time out from their household chores of

cooking, laundering, mending and tending the children. One pioneer woman, Mrs. J. H. O'Loughen recalled helping her mother with the spring planting. ". . . [We] used an ax or hatchet to make a hole in the sod, and then dropped the seed and closed the hole with our heels." (Stratton 59) Laura Ingalls Wilder's novel, Little House on the Prairie recounted not only Ma Ingalls but also the children helping with the seeding process. Ma used a hoe to dig "small holes in matted grass roots that the plow turned up" and the children, Laura and Mary then put in the seeds. "Then Ma covered them snugly with earth." (313) Like the personal accounts, fiction abounded with many references to the women helping with the planting. O. E. Rolvaag also described the aftermath of such a joint venture.

[Per] stood there with sparkling eyes, admiring his wonderful field.

Beret was tired out with the labour she had undergone; her back ached as if it would break. She too was looking at the field, but the joy he felt found no response in her. 'I'm glad that he is happy,' she thought, sadly. Perhaps in time I will learn to like it too.' (50)

Beret labored along with Per at the arduous task of preparing the fields, but without the joy of the accomplishment. This passage not only disclosed the differing attitudes toward their life on the frontier, but it also pointed out the rift between them; they lack a shared vision that brought so many settlers to this land. Beret could not share the hope that brought the sparkle to Per's eyes; she was too grounded in reality to share such visions. Beret's lack of joy in this new life had personal, psychological roots, but the more general experiences of "women's work" may have also contributed to her sense of futility. Many household jobs, long designated as "woman's work," are by nature unrewarding. Clean clothes soon become dirty; meals that require time to

prepare are consumed in a relatively short time; clothing wears out or is outgrown; mended clothing tatters; newly swept floors get dirty. On the other hand, "men's work" has more lasting and tangible results. At the end of Per's long day of plowing, the broken field and rows of freshly plowed earth was tangible evidence of his labor. Per spent a lot of time closely observing the various stages of growth of his crops, and once they were harvested, they were given to Beret who prepared them for the family to eat. Given this historical allocation of work roles, Per and Beret represent the age old problem inherent in assigning tasks based on gender. Thus, for both men and women, the tough prairie sod played a major role for the pioneers in providing immediate housing and long term crop production that would sustain their new life.

While most settlers had to rely on sod for housing, there were others who had access to materials that enabled them to build log houses. The personal accounts in Joanna Stratton's book, Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier, revealed several aspects of this type of housing. According to the author, the average log cabin was twelve by sixteen feet. Neighbors usually helped each other in "house raising" gatherings, and the veteran settlers offered valuable building experiences to the "rookie" pioneers. The most immediate need was to build the walls and a roof; then doors and windows were cut into the walls. The first floors for these log houses was dirt, and later it would be of followed by puncheon. Kansas settler Aura St. John described this flooring construction. "They would take a section of saw log about four feet long and split off slabs as thin as they could, from one to four inches thick. . ." (51) The first door was an old blanket or tanned buffalo skin, which was eventually replaced by a more solid wooden one. Windows were likely to be greased paper until glass panes could be obtained. Lydia Lyons' personal recollection

described her days in a Kansas log house. "The wind whistled through the walls in the winter and the dust blew in summer, but we papered the walls with newspapers and made rag carpets for the floor and thought we were living well, very enthusiastic over the new country we intended to conquer." (52) Mrs. Lyons reflected the pioneer attitude of dealing with hardship by looking forward to the accomplishment of a goal; in this case, the conquest of the new country.

Building a log house was not always done with the help of a community, as recounted by Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, Little House on the Prairie, set in Kansas, depicted the building of a log house like the ones described in personal accounts; however, the Ingalls family did not move into a community, but onto a claim with their nearest neighbor two miles away and across the creek. So, Pa undertook the building of the Ingalls' log cabin alone. Their foundation was "one log high" and Pa Ingalls worked until all the walls were "three logs high" before Ma Ingalls had to help. (58) The detailed description of this construction work, which involved in fitting notched logs onto each other to create stable walls, emphasized the skill and time required to build such home. As each log was cut, measured, and notched, it was then securely placed onto previously laid logs, a task that became harder as the wall grew higher. When Mrs. Ingalls helped, her job was to hold one end of the log in place while Mr. Ingalls lifted the other end. Construction moved slowly, but effectively until a log slipped, fell on Mrs. Ingalls' foot and resulted in a bad sprain that left her unable to do much work at all. Such mishaps meant that the family had three options: find a different way to raise the logs, get help from a neighbor, or postpone construction. Charles Ingalls' resourcefulness allowed him to continue building a bit longer. He split logs to make skids, flat boards, that acted as ramps upon which logs could be rolled. These "ramps" were an effective substitute for a

helper, but soon the height created such a steep incline that made this task dangerous. Eventually, Charles was able to get help a neighbor, the house was finished, and the family moved in. Laura described her impressions from inside the newly completed house. "Everything was striped there. Stripes of sunshine came through the cracks in the west wall and stripes of shadow came down from the poles overhead." (64) This visually descriptive passage not only appealed to the sense of sight, but underscored how much more fill work would be necessary to keep out the dust and snow.

Just before moving in, Mrs. Ingalls swept the prairie floor with a willow bough broom and the canvas wagon cover provided a temporary roof. Until a fireplace could be built, an outside campfire provided Caroline with a cooking area. As primitive as it sounds when compared to modern housing, the log cabin was, for the pioneers, as luxurious as "Boardwalk and Park Place" real estate when compared to life in dugouts or "soddies." Log Cabins would not disintegrate in rain, did not contain snakes and other living creatures, and were solid enough to stand the onslaught of wind and snow. It was also considerably easier to ventilate a log cabin and to keep it clean and scrubbed. Disadvantages included their vulnerability to fire and the fact that during winter more fuel was required to heat the log house than sod houses. The biggest obstacle to building a log house was the difficulty of obtaining materials because trees were not plentiful on all parts of the prairie. Thus, the prairie, by its very nature, determined what type of houses would be built upon its face.

The settlers who survived those first several years in temporary housing such as dugouts, sod houses or log cabins, while they tried to grow crops and make a living, looked forward to the day when the family would have a better, frame house. These houses required not only expensive materials, but time;

both of these elements were in very short supply during the pioneers' first years, but when the frame house was ready, it was time to celebrate. Mrs. Aldrich, in describing the new home of Abbie and Will Deal, spoke for all who had struggled through the early years to make a go of it on the prairie.

[The new frame house] represented a big move forward. They were about to see daylight. After thirteen years, they were actually beginning to witness results. Trees were commencing to give shade. Orchards were beginning to bear. Better crops were being harvested and higher prices given. To Abbie it seemed that for the first time they were really going to live. (140)

For the contemporary reader, waiting thirteen years to move into a frame house seems an inordinately long time. Our modern, instant society does not have the patience of our pioneer ancestors. The lesson that the Abbie Deals of the world can teach the reader of today is that the gift of infinite patience does have its rewards. For Abbie, the thirteen long and arduous years spent doing household chores and raising five children in a two room soddie paid large dividends in achievement of a long-term goal.

## LOCUST PLAGUES AND PRAIRIE "FAIERENS"

Once the pioneers had established housing, plowed the land, and prepared it for seed, they then nurtured their crops in the hopes of producing enough food to last through the first winter. However, summer brought a problem faced by many pioneers: grasshoppers. The year 1874 proved to be "The Year of the Grasshopper" in history, personal accounts and fiction. Accounts of this menace are seen in all types of literature that dealt with Nebraska, Kansas and South Dakota.

Bess Streeter Aldrich's novel, A Lantern in Her Hand, recounted many battles with the insects on the Nebraska prairie, home to the fictional Deal family. According to the chronology of this novel, the Deals faced their battle with grasshoppers in 1874, a particularly devastating year, which marked, for many pioneers, an unforgettable challenge. Aldrich described the advent of the flying menace as: ". . . a great black cloud roared out of the west, with a million little hissing vibrations. . . Then there was a cessation of the roaring, a soft thud of dropping things, and the cloud of a billion wings lay on the fields." Within a few hours ". . . the long rows of sweet corn had been eaten to the plowed ground." (101) The effect of this invasion on the lives of Abbie and Will Deal was devastating. They had looked for a good crop year since their arrival in 1868; this was finally going to be the crop that would allow them to get ahead. But, in only a few hours, a plague of insects consumed their dreams and hopes. Ruined crops were bad enough, but Abbie also found the grasshoppers in her well water and ". . . caught them eating the curtains of the little half windows;" laundry that hung outside collected "a dozen perforations." (103) Dealing with such complete and wanton destruction certainly tested the endurance of the

early settlers. In his History of Nebraska James C. Olson also cited the grasshopper problem as one that the state recognized as a wide range disaster. He said that the future "was made to seem hopeless by the knowledge that the soil was filled with eggs which would hatch a hundred times as many grasshoppers next spring" and "as reports of destitution began to pile up from all parts of the state it became apparent that something would have to be done . . ." (175) Both the fiction of Aldrich and the history of Olson mentioned relief measures enacted in Nebraska as a means of aiding the settlers whose farms had suffered from grasshopper raids. Government agencies distributed money, clothing, provisions and seeds to stricken farmers. General E. O. C. Ord who commanded the Department of the Platte "issued large quantities of damaged and unserviceable army clothing and equipment to destitute settlers . . ." (Olson 176) Almost \$41,000 worth of rations were distributed to nearly 50,000 people. The Grange and church groups were also cited as sources of relief. Thus, Nebraskans, like others on the Great Plain, suffered at the hands of this natural disaster, but also received support, which no doubt helped to fortify their dreams of successful farming on the frontier.

Meanwhile, the Kansas prairie of 1874 also promised to be a good year for crops. In a series of personal accounts collected by Joanna Stratton, the arrival, destruction and aftermath of the grasshopper raids on the Kansas lands provided insights from those who actually lived through this time of trial. These personal accounts of the grasshopper raid on the Kansas frontier have many aspects in common with both the literature and history of the Nebraska experience. Mrs. Everett Rorabaugh wrote of the "high hopes" and of "the men talking about the bumper crop they were going to have that year." Her words are strikingly similar to those of Abbie and Will Deal, fictional Nebraskans.



(102) But, as Mary Lyon remembered, "August 1, 1874 is a day that will always be remembered by the then inhabitants of Kansas . . ." (102) "But [the farmers'] anticipation turned to despair as millions upon millions of grasshoppers blanketed the sky. 'They looked like a great, white glistening cloud,' recalled one bewildered pioneer, 'for their wings caught the sunshine on them and made them look like a a cloud of white vapor.'" (102) Mary Lyon's personal recollection compared the descent of the insects to "a big snowstorm where the air was filled with enormous-size flakes." (102) Mary Roberts described a different weather image when said that "they struck the ground so hard it sounded almost like hail." (103) The settlers found themselves engaged in a strange form of combat, surrounded and attacked by millions of tiny enemy soldiers armed with crunching jaws and sharp teeth. The determination and voracious appetites of these pests were illustrated by Stratton's comments: "Having eliminated all the crops and foliage, [they] moved on into barns and houses, . . . devouring the food left in cupboard, barrel and bin, they attacked anything made of wood." (104) Since almost everything the early settlers owned was made of wood, this attack was notably destructive. Lillie Marcks recalled that even transportation was affected when she wrote that her father's hired man "came home from the near-by village with tales of trains that could not start or stop because the tracks were slick with crushed grasshoppers." (104)

Efforts to combat these insects involved several strategies. Mary Lyon told of her attempts to

save some of my garden by covering it with gunny sacks, but the hoppers regarded that as a huge joke, and enjoyed the awning thus provided, or if they could not get under, they ate their way through . .

. They had a neat way of eating onions. They devoured the tops, and then ate all of the onion from the inside, leaving the outer shell.

(103,4)

Not only were these enemies numerous and small, but creative as well. Another family opted to set fires in trenches that they dug around vegetable gardens. But the grasshoppers moved in such numbers that the onlookers “soon saw the fire covered and smothered by grasshoppers. Think of it, grasshoppers putting out a fire.” (105) Most efforts to fight the menace centered around beating off the flying insects with blankets, brooms, rakes and any implement that looked like it might serve as a “grasshopper swatter.” But there proved to be too many of these insects and such struggles were futile. Efforts to destroy these tiny enemies were unsuccessful, so the only course that the settlers could take was to try to minimize the loss and save what they could of their crops, fields, possessions, livestock and water supply.

Once the grasshoppers moved on, the immediate destruction stopped, but many offensive after effects remained. Joanna Stratton described how

. . . everything reeked with the taste and odor of the insects. The water in the ponds, streams and open wells turned brown with their excrement and became totally unfit for drinking by either the pioneers or their livestock. Bloating from consuming the locusts, the barnyard chickens, turkeys and hogs themselves tasted so strongly of grasshoppers they they were completely inedible. (105)

The fact that the grasshoppers ate the existing food supplies was enough of a setback for these Kansans, but the additional burden of contaminated water and meat supply was too much for many. One woman wrote of her experience with the grasshopper year. “How shall I describe that time? Life made

miserable in so many ways. . .wretchedly uncomfortable, we were poverty stricken, without the means to sustain life through the coming winter.” ( 106)  
This woman’s experience spoke for countless others who, at this point, gave up and left the frontier, discouraged and disheartened from their struggle in the Great Grasshopper War. But her reminiscence continued.

In those days, . . .we made the most of our circumstances. . .Life was yet before us, and it was the same danger that threatened us all: hard times. The men went to work with heavy hearts and put in cane and millet for the winter, and kind friends in the East sent us ‘aid’ such as bedding and clothes, food and shoes. We lived principally on cornbread, cornmeal, coffee, gravy, sorghum for sweetening, and the men smoked grape leaves for tobacco. Life was worthwhile, even then. (106)

This unknown woman represented all that the pioneer spirit has come to mean: a sense of determination to face hard times with courage and dignity and, even then, to find “Life was worthwhile.” Her account established not only the importance of courage in the face of difficulty, but also the support shown to settlers by families and friends back east. Mutual aid was often an important element that gave hope to those who were stricken with any natural disaster.

South Dakota did not escape the infamous grasshopper attacks of 1874. Herbert Schell related this background information:

After a respite of several years following the devastating plagues of the sixties, the migratory grassland insects, or red-legged Rocky Mountain locusts, as they were termed by entomologists, reappeared during the summers of 1873 and 1874 to leave behind them ‘a scene of desolation, broken hopes, and saddened homes.’ (119)

The fictional Per Hansa's arrival in the Dakota Territory in 1873 placed him in the middle of this devastation, and Rolvaag described the onset of the insects.

The ominous waves of cloud seemed to advance with terrific speed, breaking now and then like a huge surf, and with the deep, dull roaring sound as of a heavy undertow rolling into caverns in a mountain side. . . But they were neither breakers nor foam, these waves . . . It seemed more as if the unseen hand of a giant were shaking an immense tablecloth of iridescent colours! (331)

The imagery of Rolvaag gave an appropriately eerie quality to the oncoming swarm of insects. Rolvaag's description of the locusts as "fiendish shapes" (339) lent more of a diabolic tone to the plague of the grasshoppers. He continued to develop the contest of wills between the "Great Prairie . . . [who] laughed softly into the reddish moon . . . [and said], 'Now we will see what human might may avail against us! . . . Now we'll see!'" (339) The personification of the evil Prairie, who deliberately sent the insects to discourage and punish the settlers, increased the stature of the pioneer who found the strength and resources to remain and fight for the land.

According to Rolvaag, the insects continued to plague the Norwegian settlers for several years afterward, ". . . then it disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come." (339) The after effects of the insect raids began to be cumulative and trapped many settlers into a downward economic spiral. Without sufficient crops, profit was not possible; without profit, no plans could be made for future planting; without future crops, there was no profit. Rolvaag described these cumulative effects:

The devastation it wrought was terrible; it made beggars of some, and drove others insane; still others it sent wandering back to the forest

lands, . . . But the greater number simply hung on where they were. . . because poverty, that most supreme of masters, had deprived them of the liberty to rise up and go away. (339)

Yet, many a pioneer stayed, and somehow survived. Those men and women braved this element of nature, stood their ground, and became the the inspiration for others, who when disaster struck, looked to the experiences of the factual and fictional settlers and their struggles to survive.

Another South Dakota fictional account by Rose Wilder Lane, offered similar experiences to those of Rolvaag and also emphasized the omnipresence of the swarming insects. Molly “. . . walked through grasshoppers thick as spray around her knees. They crunched sickeningly under her feet; she could not avoid stepping on them. Grasshoppers were in her hair, in her sleeves, in her skirts.” ( 38,39) No only were they abundant physically, but their sound was also heard everywhere. “The nibbling sound came from the whole prairie. It was not so loud as the flight of grasshoppers. . . but it was continuous. It did not grow louder or softer; it did not stop.” (40) The steady, monotonous sound became irritating and knowing that this droning meant the destruction of a whole year of work, must have added to the frustration of the entire experience. Lane’s fictional account depicted damage done to crops and the land, and also told how these pests invaded other aspects of the pioneers’ lives. After three days of fighting the dreaded insects, “. . . Molly was [suddenly] aware of a new sound - a rasping, clicking, scratching sound . . . She . . . saw the top of the door jamb rippling like a snake . . . The grasshoppers were coming into the dugout.” (45) The invasion of homes by grasshoppers, already mentioned in the personal accounts of the Kansas women, confirm the experiences recounted in this South Dakota fiction. The

prevalence of these locusts was evident as David “. . .brushed them from ceiling and walls, . . .hunted them out of the hay box and the stove. He shook them out of the bedding and swept them from beneath the bunk. . .He skimmed them out of the water. . .” (46) Such complete infiltration by an enemy left many victims thoroughly frustrated in their attempts to deal with their plight. For five days, Molly and David fought grasshoppers in their fields and in their home until “As mysteriously as they had come, the grasshoppers were going.” (47) No one knew why they came or left; they simply arrived and departed.

The aftermath was described in much the same imagery as other fiction and personal accounts. Mrs. Lane wrote, “The prairie was bald earth, not a blade of grass remained. Dust blew in the evening breeze. A faint stench rose from the creek. The water was solidly filled with drowned grasshoppers, rotting.” (47) Another picture of destruction encompassed both crops and water supply. The dust that had been held in place by the grass was now free to be blown everywhere by the wind. And David and Molly looked at the ground, they saw that “. . . the naked earth was pitted by the little holes where the grasshoppers had left their eggs.” (50) The settler who survived the initial raid was now faced with the continuation of this war. The next generation of crops was threatened by this next generation of grasshoppers. The frustration of the present destruction became the frustration of the future.

Later in the novel, Molly vented her anger and feelings of injustice as she thought of how this insect invasion had changed her life. David had gone to find work in a nearby town and she and the baby were left on the homestead until David could earn enough money for next year's crop. Alone and angry, Molly railed at their misfortunes.

Her whole life seemed poor and mean. Fiercely, bitterly, she pitied

her defrauded baby. She pitied David, robbed, hurt, forced to work for other men. Her loneliness rebelled against the cruelty that took him from her. They did not deserve this suffering. They had trusted, and been betrayed. Her cry was, 'It isn't right! It isn't fair!' (52)

Molly's words of anger, injustice, and unfairness must have been uttered by many a pioneer man and woman who had faced the infamous grasshopper plagues. Such railing at the unfairness of life is a universal cry, voiced throughout history. What makes this cry significant in the frontier literature is that, in spite of the unfairness of the situation, the determination of the pioneers like Molly prevailed, and they rose above self pity to become stronger. If adversity builds character, then these pioneers have character to spare!!

In the same year, 1874, the personal account of Gro Svendsen described the grasshopper invasion 100 miles further east in Emmet County, Iowa. In a letter to relatives in Norway she wrote,

Since I know that you have already seen the newspapers that tell of the devastation by the locusts here in the West, I shall have to tell you that we also have been afflicted the past two years. Last year the pests left enough so that we had our maintenance and seed for the following year. But this summer they consumed everything except a little of the corn and the potatoes. (124)

Gro's words revealed her way of coping with this destruction. "Yet it is wonderful how our Heavenly Father has sustained us. We have all that we need for our sustenance, and I have the firm hope that He will continue to hold His protecting hand over us - if only in childlike faith we trust the dawn however dark the night." (124) Here, Gro gave another tried and true aspect of the pioneer: a faith in God. Many early settlers practiced religion and trusted God

to sustain them. In another letter dated May 30, 1877, Gro wrote of the return of the locusts and efforts to kill the eggs. She said, "We were partially successful, but there are still many eggs left so the future looks hopelessly dark. However, He who guides the sun and the stars in their courses can also manifest Himself to us." (137) Thus, several years later, and still trusting in God, Gro Svendsen found strength to endure the devastation of the Grasshopper Years.

This was not her first experience with grasshoppers. An earlier letter dated August 4, 1868 included an account of this same event. Gro described a mid June invasion of locusts that ". . . came like a blinding drift of snow. When they fly, they seem to be all white, but down on the earth they are brown. " (87) The comparison to snow and the description of their whiteness was seen earlier in accounts by Kansas women. Like these women, Gro also recounted the destruction and the aftermath.

They settled down on the wheat, many - so many of them - on each straw, and then they began their devastating feast. Fortunately they stayed here only about two days, and then they left as suddenly as they had come. The damage was not too great - not to be compared to the destruction in some places where they consumed everything. The fields in three counties to the south and west of us were totally ruined. (87,88)

History summed up the similar experiences of Per, David and Molly, and Gro with the following account from Schell's History of South Dakota.

Because of the localized character of the grasshopper raids, the full extent of the devastation cannot be measured. The appearance of the hoppers during the wheat harvest usually left a partial grain crop. . . . Garden crops and potatoes were very vulnerable; corn invariably



suffered the greatest damage. During the severe plague of 1874 , the entire corn crop within a sixty mile stretch from Yankton to Sioux City was practically destroyed, yet within the same area there was a good crop of wheat and potatoes. (120)

Not only was the destruction to crops an immediate problem, but “the insects usually left behind a multitudinous number of tiny eggs. . .” (120) which provided trouble for the future when the eggs hatched. These eggs were burned as a means of controlling future raids, but even this did not entirely eliminate this problem for the frontier settler. But some benefits did result. “The efforts to alleviate crop damage led to marked improvement in farming practices. Better preparation and earlier seeding advanced the wheat harvest sufficiently to escape the midsummer raids. The settlers began to diversify their farming operations and experimented with locust-resistant crops like flax and rye.” (121) Thus, men and women alike suffered at the hands of the infamous insect raids on the crops of the pioneers, but they also learned to adapt and thereby to survive. The settlers of the frontier had a great deal of time, energy and suffering already invested in their ventures. The arduous journey to the frontier, the establishment of shelter, breaking the sod, finding food, and planting crops were already major milestones that brought them closer to achieving the dream of the land. So dealing with grasshoppers was just another obstacle to overcome or an obstacle that would overcome them. Thus, the pioneers who endured these many problems were made stronger and more determined by their frontier experiences.

The hot, dry weather, which usually accompanied the grasshopper raids, also resulted in devastating prairie fires. These fires were caused by a number of accidents or natural events. Untended campfires or sparks from passing

trains could begin a fire. Lightning was also a common cause. Signs of fire included clouds of smoke or a red glowing sky. Kansas pioneer, J. C. Rupenthall, wrote that "The last act at night, after seeing that the children were all asleep, and all quiet among the livestock in the sheds, pens and corrals, was to sweep the entire horizon for signs of flame." She went on to say that "... the flames themselves were visible at night up to twenty or twenty-five miles away." (Stratton 84) This nightly ritual of scanning the horizon for possible fires indicated the prevalence and seriousness of prairie fires. Agnes Barry's first-hand account related the sighting and measures taken to protect homes from these advancing flames. Signs that indicated conditions were ripe for fires included "... premature drying from drought or early frost . . . A light against the sky told of a prairie fire in that direction and great anxiety was felt if the wind happened to be in your direction." (Stratton 82) Seeing such a light and knowing the wind was carrying the deadly flames in your direction must have sent many settlers into action or panic.

The overwhelming helplessness in the face of such a fierce enemy must have been felt by anyone who beheld such an awesome event. Personal accounts from Kansas women who fought these fires first hand also mentioned the importance of barriers such as rivers or, where no natural water barrier existed, ploughed furrows in containing the fire. The accounts found in Stratton's book portrayed whole families making an all out effort to defeat the fire by using wet blankets and grain sacks to beat flames that crossed these barriers. Men, women, and children all worked together against this mighty force of nature. Agnes Barry described her home as being relatively well protected by the Saline River "which almost surrounded our place," but she also pointed out that "... sometimes the gales of wind blowing masses of loose

grass or weeds would cause the fire to 'jump' the river." (Stratton 82) When this happened, the only way to fight the fire was with water. In Bess Streeter Aldrich's, A Lantern in her Hand, the Deal family farm was saved by a natural barrier. In the fall of 1871, the Deal family was struggling to survive its third year on the Nebraska Prairie. The family watched the sky glow and then saw the fire move across the land toward them. That fire was stopped by a natural barrier, Stove Creek. The farm of Abbie and Will was saved, but "when the last of the jaws of flame ceased reaching for their prey, the land across the creek was a desolate black waste." (95)

Schell's historical account also gives some background information regarding this hazard. "When a prairie fire got under way, sometimes racing over the country at thirty miles an hour, only concerted action on the part of the settlers in throwing up firebreaks and setting a backfire could stay its destructive course." (182.) Kansas pioneer Lillian Smith recounted her memories of fighting fire. "As soon as [Mother] would see the fire getting close, away we would go with our buckets of water and rags tied to hoes, rakes and sticks, wet them and set a back fire to meet the monster. . ." (Stratton 82) Fighting fires was a job for the whole family; there was a job for everyone and the pioneers showed remarkable resourcefulness in marshaling everyday tools and converting them to firefighting equipment. J. C. Ruppenthall, another voice from the Kansas frontier, mentioned several firefighting techniques. "Father hastily turned the livestock loose. The wagon was drawn onto a patch of plowed ground near the house. Household goods were hastily carried out to the same place of refuge." (Stratton 85) The use of plowed ground as a barrier is seen many times in both personal accounts and fiction. Like the river, it provided some security, but flames could also jump ploughed furrows. Then the fire

fighting began in earnest. Wet grain sacks were the usual weapons of choice, although any wet cloth was pressed into action. Both men and women fought side by side to protect their property and their families. J. C. Ruppenthal remembers being one of five children told to stay on the plowed patch of ground while

Mother and father each seized the 'American extra heavy A seamless' white grain sacks, dipped them into water to wet them well, and then hastened toward the fire. . . In this fight with fire, fear lent power to mother and she fought without stopping, heeding nothing of the admonitions of the men fighters who assured her she need not work so hard. She wet sacks and carried sacks and smote the flames of burning grass, even as any of the men, and ventured to the thickest and hottest of the line where the fire ate steadily into the dry grass. . . For her, there was danger and she saw nothing but to exert every ounce of strength to beat out the fire. (Stratton 85)

This remarkable eye witness account is a testimony to the strength and courage of pioneer women as well as to men. Even when the men suggested that "Mother" relax a little in her efforts, she did not feel that she could do so. Clearly the heroic qualities of bravery, courage and stamina should be attributed to this pioneer heroine.

The Ingalls family, a year earlier than the Deal family, also faced a prairie fire. Little House on the Prairie, set in Kansas in 1870, gave a memorable account of not only the danger of a prairie fire, but the teamwork involved in fighting it. Immediately upon determining that a fire was approaching, preparations began. Unlike the Deal farm, the Ingalls farm had no natural barriers to protect it from the advancing fire. Action had to be taken and quickly.

First, Pa Ingalls took care of the livestock and then hitched the horses to the plow, while Ma Ingalls assembled tubs of water and the children located blankets and sacks. "Ma was pulling up buckets of water as fast as she could. . . Pa plowed a long furrow west of the house and south of the house and back again east of the house." The plan was to use the furrow as a barrier that would force the fire to go around the newly created peninsula of prairie where the farm was situated. Ideally, Charles would have added a fourth side to completely close off the farm like an island, and then added another furrow parallel to the first. This second line of defense would have made them a little more secure, but Charles had only time for the one because, "That fire's coming faster than a horse can run." (277) Certainly the fire moved faster than two horses pulling a plow in prairie sod. Once the ploughed barrier was completed, Pa started a backfire on the other side of the furrow while everyone else set to beating out any flames that skipped the barrier or were blown over it by the wind.

The prairie fire was roaring now, roaring louder and louder in the screaming wind. Great flames came roaring, flaring and twisting high. Twists of flame broke loose and came down on the wind to blaze up on the grasses far ahead of the roaring wall of fire. A red light came from the rolling black clouds of smoke overhead. (279,280)

The Ingalls family watched as the small backfire "went slowly crawling to meet the racing furious big fire. And suddenly the big fire swallowed the little one. The wind rose to a high, crackling, rushing shriek, flames climbed into the crackling air. Fire was all around the house. Then it was over. The fire went roaring past and away." (282) And at least for now, the family had successfully met disaster and survived. Imagine the courage needed to face a large and powerful enemy; these early settlers displayed resourcefulness, presence of

mind, and determination in their fight against destructive forces.

Once the fire had come and gone, it left nothing but charred reminders of this powerful force of nature. Both personal accounts and fiction agree on the devastation of prairie fires. Laura Wilder's fictional character described the immediate aftermath of the fire and its effects. "The air smelled scorched. And to the very edge of the sky, the prairie was burned naked and black. Threads of smoke rose from it. Ashes blew on the wind." (282) The immediate destruction was felt by many senses: one could visualize the blackened ground, smell the scorched grass, and feel the ashes on skin and clothing. Consequences of such destruction could also extend into the future. In a letter dated 1863, just seven years before Wilder's fictional family's experience with the prairie fire, Gro Svendsen summarized her experience with the "Faieren," as this fire was sometimes called. "Whatever it leaves behind in the fall, it consumes in the spring, so there is nothing left of the long grass on the prairies. . . It is a strange and terrible sight to see all the fields a sea of fire. Quite often the scorching flames sweep everything along in their path . . ." (Farseth 40) Both the completeness and the destruction were emphasized by Gro's reference to both the fall and spring seasons. Thus, the fire's impact had long range consequences. Experiencing this crucible certainly resulted in a stronger and more confident pioneer.

## THE COLD WHITENESS OF WINTER

Even though the early pioneers successfully combated the warm weather problems of grasshoppers and prairie fires, the winter brought still another challenge: the prairie blizzard. Kansas women recalled their struggles with winter on the Great Plains. In her first hand account, Mrs. Henry Inman remembered, "I had seen picturesque [blizzards] in New England, but never where the snow seemed to come from every direction, up as well as down." (Stratton 39) In January, 1868, Mrs. Inman spent 36 hours on a train, snowbound in central Kansas between Salina and Fort Harker. Other newcomers to the Great Plains reported similar experiences. The vast amount of information in personal accounts and fiction indicated not only the power of this force of nature, but also of its wide geographical impact. "A winter blizzard was an awesome spectacle. Without warning, dark billowing clouds roared across the skies and unleashed blinding bursts of snow. They came with a mighty blast,' recalled one witness, 'sweeping with almost the strength of a cyclone . . .'" (Stratton 91,92) The suddenness with which these storms struck furnished many stories of people detained in town, stranded at a neighbor's home, or, like Per Hansa, trapped out on the open prairie. Even if family members were together and well sheltered during a blizzard, food and fuel supplies became their chief concern if they were to survive. Once a winter storm had come and gone, residual problems still faced the settlers. Josephine Middlekauf's personal account explained of the aftermath of such a storm:

. . . with nothing on the prairies in the way of houses, barns or fences to hold the snow, it had a clean sweep in to town and piled up against woodpiles, barns and fences six and eight feet deep.

Communications with the outside world would be completely cut off for ten days to two weeks at a time. All traffic would be tied up until two or three hundred men could dig an opening . . . (Stratton 92)

Even though the snow halted long range travel and brought many aspects of normal life to a stand still, certain, basic needs had to be met amid these dangerous conditions. Just tending to farm chores became a matter of life and death. The daughter of Ary Johnson described this experience in her recollection of the 1886 blizzard in Kansas. “. . .the wind blowing a gale and the snow coming in a blinding rush. By morning nothing could be seen, and in order to care for the stock in the barns, it was necessary to draw a rope from house to barn.” (Stratton 92) Traveling much further than from the house to the barn and back was extremely hazardous because “The snow made everything look alike and it was only by the aid of familiar posts or fences that one was able to keep from getting lost.” Long after the snow stopped falling, its power to impede normal activities remained. Miss Johnson continued by citing an instance when, “A week after the storm, searchers saw steam coming from a drift and found one hundred head of cattle that were in good shape, all that was left of a bunch of 500.” (Stratton 93) Thus, these brief personal accounts, disclosed many problems related to enduring the actual onslaught of the storm and the clean up afterwards.

Fictional accounts, although set in Nebraska, prove to share many of the same problems related by the personal accounts of the Kansas women. In Bess Aldrich's novel A Lantern in Her Hand, an Easter blizzard raged for three days in 1873. The Deal family was snowbound with two small children, and Aldrich described the amazement of Abbie and Will when they finally got out of the house to check on the livestock: “. . . the horses and three cows stamped so



much snow under their feet that their backs were nearly to the top of the shed.” (99) This scene of horses and cattle standing several feet above the ground on packed snow indicated the powdery quality of the prairie snow that enabled it to seep through the cracks and crannies of buildings. Seven years later, the Deal family saw 15 inches of snow at Christmas, with crusted snow that contained ten to fifteen feet high drifts. (138) Conditions described in Aldrich’s book were also seen in another example of Nebraska fiction. In My Antonia, Willa Cather depicted a similar scene. “The snow did not fall this time, it simply spilled out of heaven, like thousands of feather-beds being emptied.” (105) This snow, is not of the finer, sandier description of Aldrich’s storm, but it still had the ability to bring normal life patterns to a halt. Cather’s narrator, Jim Burden, described the task of digging out from a storm: “Next day our men had to shovel until noon to reach the barn - and the snow was still falling.” The result of these efforts were tunnels to the various out buildings and the one to the hen house had “walls so solid that grandmother and I could walk back and forth in it.” (105,106) The idea of so much snow that tunnels were needed is almost incomprehensible to the modern reader; and yet, many other accounts also referred to snow tunnels from farm houses to outbuildings. Kansas and Nebraska literature provide many details of the struggles of pioneers with the blizzard, but the literature set in South Dakota offered the most detailed accounts of winter.

The sudden arrival of an unexpected blizzard in Rolvaag’s novel, Giants in the Earth, demonstrated the fierceness of a South Dakota winter. Four sleighs had set out from the Norwegian settlement to get supplies desperately needed to see the settlers through the winter. Rolvaag set the scene by describing a distant dark cloud and “a weird silence” that fell upon the land. “The thing in the west was possessed of baleful life . . . In a twinkling, the day

had been swallowed in gloom. . .” (259) The Norwegians were used to difficult winter weather and felt confident that they could handle such a journey. They even took the precaution of lashing the sleighs together to prevent anyone, who might stray from the group, from getting lost in the storm.

Both Per Hansa and Hans Olsa – old Lofotmen that they were – had seen plenty of storms that made up fast, but nothing like this had ever before come within the range of their experience. Like lightning a giant troll had risen up in the west, ripped open his great sack of woolly fleece and emptied the white contents of it above their heads.

(260)

Like Mrs. Inman from Kansas, Per and Hans were no strangers to harsh winters. Both New England and the Lofoten area of Norway were noted for difficult winter weather. Yet, these newcomers to the Great Plains found that nothing in their previous experience had prepared them for the force of a prairie blizzard. Rolvaag’s evocation of the trolls, those ancient enemies of Norsemen in the image of the storm, personified this destructive force of nature. Earlier in the novel, Per had felt the trolls were lurking about with malicious intentions toward him. Now, that conflict was extended as the trolls again challenged the strong Norwegian travelers.

Once caught out in the storm, they were forced to utilize all their resources to survive it. Per and his fellow Norwegians were facing

a squall of snow so thick that they could not see an arm’s length ahead of them, a sucking noise, a few angry blasts, howling in fury, then dropping away to uncertain draughts of air that wandered idly here and there, swirling the light snowfall around the sleighs. High overhead, a sharp hissing sound mingled with growls like thunder –

and then the blizzard broke in all its terror. . . (260)

In this fierce storm, Per's lash line broke and he became separated from the others. Left to the mercy of the elements, he eventually drove into the wall of the house and found his fellow travelers had arrived only a few minutes earlier. When Per entered the house, ". . .his whole face was covered with a mask of hard-caked snow which had not melted yet in the heat of the room. It was firmly fastened to his eyebrows and beard; it joined his cap to his coat collar and hung down behind over his back in a white sheet." (268) Perilous conditions that produced such remarkable effects as encasing a man in a suit of ice were nothing to treat lightly. Even the strong, giant of a man like Per Hansa was not prepared for the fury of a South Dakota blizzard. The fact that he survived this ordeal was a product of three elements. First was his physical strength and stamina, the result of a rugged life spent fishing the northern seas of Norway, and second, was his strong emotional commitment to survive in this new land. The third factor in his survival was old-fashioned luck. He just happened to drive his ox team into the side of the house where his companions had already arrived. This did seem a little unlikely, but given the fact that they were not all that far from their destination when the blizzard struck and the fact that Per only became separated from the group for a short time, the luck element was not so improbable. Rolvaag's account of Per vs. the blizzard corresponded to the many personal accounts and added the dimension of the literary conflict of man against the elements.

Traveling away from home in such storms was perilous, but one did not have to go long distances to get lost in a blizzard on the Great Plains. Historian Herbert Schell pointed out that "During a blizzard the fine particles of whirling snow would entirely obscure the landscape, making it impossible for a settler to

find his way from building to building without a guideline.” (Schell 180) Veteran residents of the Plains often put up guidelines in late fall so as to be prepared for the sudden appearance of storms. If a storm surprised the careless farmer, it could mean the loss of valuable livestock as well as the inability to bring in needed supplies from outside the house. A fictional heroine illustrated this lifeline strategy in Young Pioneers by Rose Wilder Lane. Molly, alone in a blizzard, not only had to care for her infant son, but also had livestock in the barn that she must tend. During a series of blizzards, Molly dealt with her challenge by utilizing several strategies. Because she needed hay to burn as fuel in the house, “. . . she stretched a rope from the barn to the top of the path so that she could fetch fuel, if necessary during a blizzard.” She also used rope to tie hay bundles together and drag them behind her on the snow. Not only did this save strength and energy used in carrying large bundles of hay, but this strategy also left a hand free to follow the guideline. (Lane 104) Women, as well as men, faced and successfully dealt with the perils of these devastating blizzards.

Perhaps the most detailed account of winter blizzards was The Long Winter by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This story based on her childhood experience in DeSmet, South Dakota, during the winter of 1880-81, illustrated how a family and a town became isolated and learned to work together in order to survive. Schell’s historical account provided a background for the story.

The winter of 1880-1881 often has been called ‘the hard winter.’ A blizzard occurred as early as October, and although most of this early snow disappeared, heavy precipitation throughout the winter resulted in an accumulation of more than eleven feet of snow in many communities . . . Food and fuel grew scarce as connections with the

outside world were cut off. Some of the newly settled areas along the Upper Sioux and in the James Valley were snowbound for as long as from October to March. (180-181)

The Ingalls family was not located in this area; they homesteaded in a more critical area and were snowbound from October to May. Charles and Caroline Ingalls had originally moved to the Dakota Territory where Charles worked for the railroad. After a while, the Ingalls family decided to homestead outside of the town, and early in the spring of 1880, the family moved into a claim shanty and began to work the land. Claim shanties were temporary housing until a more permanent, solid structure could be built. "A typical frame shanty measured at least nine feet by twelve and was built of pine boards; a tar-paper covering helped to make it weatherproof." (Schell 176) Although this was fine for warm weather, wintering in a claim shanty was a dangerous gamble. An unexpected, early October blizzard found the Ingalls family quite unprepared for such severe weather. "Ice crackled on the quilt where leaking rain had fallen." The stove held a fire that "was blazing furiously without warming the air at all. The window was a white blur of madly swirling snow. Snow had blown under the door and across the floor and every nail in the walls was white with frost." (37,38) With such severe conditions so early in the winter season, the family decided to move in to town for the winter. This wise decision probably saved their lives. The town provided several advantages that included a sturdier building, greater proximity to food and fuel supplies, and neighbors who provided comfort and assistance.

The blizzard experience described in The Long Winter focused on two types of isolation felt by the members of the Ingalls family, and most likely by anyone else who experienced a blizzard on the Great Plains. The first type of

isolation was physical. The snow severely limited movement in and around town as well as contact with other members of the community for days at a time. Regular communication within the town was seriously reduced, but contact with the outside world was nonexistent. The lifeline to the rest of the world - the railroad - was snowbound. In addition to the physical isolation, people were emotionally affected by feelings of insignificance, hopelessness, and frustration in the midst of the paralyzing winter storms.

The Ingalls family illustrated the frustration of being unable to enjoy the company of their fellow townspeople and the difficulty of travel during the blizzard season. Physical isolation was expressed when Laura complained that being in town was not really an advantage at all because “[we] are just as much by ourselves as if there wasn’t any town.” In reply, Ma Ingalls expressed the essence of the pioneer spirit when she said, “I hope you don’t expect to depend on anybody else. . . a body can’t do that.” (122) This exchange of words passed on the sense of pioneer independence and self reliance from one generation to the next. This strong, self sufficient attitude also contributed to the successful survival of the family throughout the entire winter of 1880-81. The physical presence of so much snow not only isolated the townspeople, but it also made post blizzard travel slow and dangerous. Because there was so much snow, familiar landmarks remained hidden. As Charles went out to the homestead to bring in a load of hay, he saw “. . . nothing but snowdrifts in all directions.” (155) A related problem was that traveling over the slough grass was difficult. “The slough grass holds up that crust of snow on nothing but grass stems and air,” explained Pa. “As soon as the horses get onto it, down they go. . . down to their backs.” (155) He could go only about a 100 feet before the horses broke through the crust, and he had to unhitch them from the sled, lead

them out of the hole, and retie them to the sled. The slowness of this travel was evident when it took Pa a half day to go two miles to pick up a load of hay and return to town. (156) Thus, difficulties involved in travel were prominent in both short and long distance trips, and travel by railroad was impossible.

Being physically cut off from other people and the outside world left more time to think about one's situation. Mrs. Wilder voiced the aloneness of the situation in the following passage:

Laura thought of the lost and lonely houses, each one alone and blind and cowering in the fury of the storm. There were houses in town, but not even a light from one of them could reach another. And the town was all alone on the frozen, endless prairie, where snow drifted and winds howled and the whirling blizzard put out the stars and the sun. (224)

This passage summed up the physical isolation that a prairie blizzard inflicted upon the early settlers, but the passage also hints at a psychological isolation that results more in mental challenges that must be faced.

During one of the many blizzards that swooped down on the Dakota settlers during that winter, Laura lay in her warm bed listening to the sound of the howling wind outside. Her thoughts turned to each isolated house,

. . . alone in the whirling snow with not even a light from the next house shining through. And the little town was alone on the wide prairie. Town and prairie were lost in the wild storm which was neither earth nor sky, nothing but fierce winds and a blank whiteness . . . (123)

Here, Laura contemplated the immensity of the universe and the smallness of the community of human beings in the midst of the vast forces of nature. A

similar feeling of insignificance was reflected in her description of the prairie, discussed earlier in this study. But now, these same feelings of smallness and helplessness were intensified by the blending and blurring of all elements of creation into a white, cloudy existence that was without shape or form. Her uncertain images reflected her uncertain life in the precarious environment of the prairie blizzard. Her contemplation continued as her thoughts expressed the ability of natural forces to totally obliterate human life. "In the night, long after the sun had gone and the last daylight could possibly be there, the blizzard was whirling white. A lamp could shine out through the blackest darkness and a shout could be heard a long way, but no light and no cry could reach through a storm that had wild voices and an unnatural light of its own." (123) Wilder's blizzard, like that of Rolvaag's, had taken on its own life form and seemed to be intent upon snuffing out the efforts of human interloper's to exist on its vast prairie. It was appropriate that these philosophical musings on the insignificance of humans in the face of colossal, natural forces came when Laura was alone in her warm bed at night. Her environment provided the appropriate sense of loneliness amid the storm that gave her thoughts a broader, more universal application.

Different psychological reactions to the omnipresent, unrelenting blizzard were demonstrated by several characters and events in Mrs. Wilder's book. As supplies began to diminish, resourcefulness became an important factor in maintaining both physical and emotional health. When the flour ran out, the family took turns grinding wheat in the coffee mill in order to have bread to eat. (194) When the coal ran out, fuel became another family project. Caroline fashioned "button lamps" with buttons, fabric, and axle grease. (197) These novelty lamps fascinated the children because they were different and easy



enough for them to make. Helping to assemble the Button Lamps provided important work and a sense of contributing to the well being of the family. Fuel for heating and cooking was a more complicated task. Laura and Pa spent time twisting hay into "sticks" that could be burned in place of coal. But these hay sticks burned hotter and faster, so the family was busy in keeping up an adequate supply of this fuel.

These tasks, at first, were different and exciting, but soon grew to be monotonous and boring. The cumulative effect of performing these same tedious jobs daily for six weeks began to take a toll on the psychological stability of the characters. In addition to their deteriorating mental outlook, nutrition was also inadequate. The family's basic diet consisted of bread that was made from wheat ground into flour, potatoes and tea. Occasionally there were a few bits of fish or salt pork, but these delicacies were extremely rare. Laura complained of being ". . . tired of the winds and the cold and the dark, tired of brown bread and potatoes, tired and listless and dull." (227) Other psychological effects of isolation were feelings of being "numb and half asleep" and the sense of unreality, "Nothing seemed real but the blizzard that never stopped." (253) Laura's frustration with the entire situation was summed up in this outburst, "Oh, Ma, I don't know what's the matter with me! I can't think!" The slowdown of her mental ability could be attributed to both poor nutrition and long term effects of isolation. Ma's reply showed none of her gentle optimism that characterized her so much throughout the rest of novel; rather she acknowledged the truth of Laura's observation and added a suggested remedy. She said, "It's this storm. I believe we are all half asleep . . . we must stop listening to it." (253) In a moment shortly after this conversation, Pa shouted at the blizzard, "You can't get at us! You've tried all winter but we'll beat you yet!"

(288) Pa felt foolish that he was caught talking to a storm, as if it were a living creature, but his behavior revealed two important elements. First, his angry outburst characterized the frustration that had to be vented in order to keep a healthy mental outlook. The second element of significance was his view of the storm as a living creature. This comparison has been made by many fiction writers and intensifies the magnitude of the settlers' struggle. Although the end of the "Long Winter" was about five weeks away, the Ingalls family did not know that and their state of mind was approaching "critical list" classification.

A few weeks after the above events, Laura's words indicated a worsening state of mind. Mrs. Wilder wrote, "{Laura} ate her coarse brown bread. She took her turns at grinding wheat and twisting hay. But she did not ever feel awake. She felt beaten by the cold and the storms. She knew she was dull and stupid, but she could not wake up . . . Only the blizzard and the coffee mill's grinding, the cold and the dusk darkening into night again were real." (309 - 311) Clearly the cumulative effects of poor nutrition and isolation have begun to cause serious mental and physical deterioration. As monotonous as the family routine had become, the very fact that they performed certain regular tasks at all, kept their minds and bodies active, and those activities, may have been a factor in their ultimate survival. Of all the previous obstacles faced by settlers, the Long Winter of 1880-81 had to be the toughest test of the determination of the pioneers. It was a hard test and it was an unusually long one.

## THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

The adversities that faced the early settlers were not only physical, but also emotional and psychological. The direct results of frontier life, these emotional difficulties confronted women as they attempted to cope with loneliness and death. Historians chronicled the loneliness that women on the frontier encountered on a daily basis. Schell, in his History of South Dakota, presented the balance found between the hard life and the promise of the future. He said, "The primitive conditions of pioneer life could be endured because the settlers were confident that they were transitory, and that better times were coming." (183) This statement, though true for both men and women, still held the key to survival. Through the most difficult times, settlers held on to the long range vision of a better life. A woman's role often included more than household duties and extended to tending the sick. Schell pointed out that life was especially "unnerving for the women as they faced the monotonous solitude of the prairie, the continual dread of sickness and disease, and the poverty attending crop failures and other misfortunes." (183) For women, sickness meant relying on her own knowledge of healing and ability to deal with emergency medical situations. Furthermore, as the primary medical provider, if she were to become sick or injured, the seriousness of the illness or injury was magnified considerably unless someone else could fill the role of doctor. The isolated lives of these settlers made any contact with other humans very welcome and very precious. When people did gather, they combined business with pleasure and frequently offered assistance in building or harvesting. Because the busy frontier life did not offer much leisure time for strictly social events, settlers eagerly anticipated quilting bees, barn raisings

and crop harvesting. James Olson's History of Nebraska, commented on these aspects when he assessed the effect of isolated prairie life on women. He said,

All too often, the pioneer housewife on the sod house frontier could see nothing at all between her little soddy and the horizon – not another human habitation, not even a tree. Little wonder that she grasped eagerly at any opportunity for social intercourse – church, working bees, and all-day visits. If life was difficult for the men who pioneered the Plains, it was almost unbearable for the women. (206)

Olson's assessment that women were less able to bear loneliness, may be partially valid, but factual accounts and fictional stories reveal many women successfully coped with the effects of isolation on the frontier.

The fictional woman closest to Olson's portrait of one who found the loneliness of the frontier life "unbearable" was Beret Hansa, Rolvaag's South Dakota settler. Beret Hansa's psychological problems were rooted in her resistance to adopting American life patterns, fear of being alone, and guilt from her past. Her resistance to the Americanization process has already been noted in the earlier discussion of "Why They Came." A major focus of Rolvaag's novel was how Beret's fears prevented her from accepting a new life in America. She needed a Norwegian link – a security blanket from her past. Beret found her security in the family trunk that she brought with her. A family possession from her earliest memory, the trunk bore a partial date on it: 16—. By the time Beret and Per immigrated in 1873, the trunk had accumulated at least 200 years of family history for Beret. Because these ancestral roots grew deep into Beret's past, the trunk played several pivotal roles in the novel, but always, for Beret, this connection to her roots became an ever present source of security and protection. When Per left for more than one day, Beret hung heavy

coverings over all the windows and placed the trunk, as a Norwegian barricade, against the door, to protect her from the evil American prairie. At night, after the children were asleep, "Beret rose and hung some heavy clothes up over the windows – the thickest clothes she could find – to shut out the night. She felt that she could never go to bed, with all the eyes out there staring in upon her. . . . Last of all, she pulled the big chest in front of the door." (104) Fear of the dark, American prairie was only one aspect of Beret's psychological difficulties; she also feared being left alone. When Per had to be gone, sometimes for days at a time, Beret's reaction was ". . . not exactly fear – [it] was not the same fear that had gripped her the time before when he had left her alone. . . . This was a sense of powerlessness. . ." (258). Many women experienced this sense of vulnerability and it proved to be a recurring problem, evident in both factual accounts and fiction. Beret's strategy for coping with such feelings was to block out the world by covering the windows, and to prevent any harm from invading her secure, darkened house by placing the immigrant chest against the door. She created a fortress, powerful enough to protect her and the children from the known and unknown terrors of the prairie.

Although the feelings of loneliness and vulnerability were prominent in the character of Beret Hansa, other problems added to these psychological difficulties. Guilt also played a significant role in her inability to adjust to life on the Dakota prairie. Beret's thoughts led her to feel that "Ever since she had come out here, a grim conviction had been taking stronger and stronger hold on her. This was her retribution." (216) In Beret's mind, the hard life of the prairie was punishment for her sins in the old country. The first sin concerned the unchaste relationship between Beret and Per before their marriage. The second sinful action was Beret's willful opposition to her parents, who did not

approve of marriage to Per Hansa. Even though Beret and Per had been married for almost ten years when they immigrated to America, her past sins of fornication and disobedience still haunted her and were magnified by the austere life on the prairie. Beret felt as if the Furies, those Greek pursuers of sinners, had stalked her to the New World. Thus, in her state of mind, Beret interpreted her present life of adversity on the wild Dakota prairie as punishment for her past sins.

Later in the novel Rolvaag portrayed Beret's fears and deteriorating sanity that again involved the immigrant chest. Her second use for the trunk was a refuge – a final resting place that would enclose and protect her. As Beret labored to give birth to their fourth child, she was convinced that she would die and called Per to her side. "But promise me one thing: put me away in the big chest! . . . I have emptied it and made it ready." (227) Immersing herself in the Norwegian chest, reminiscent of a return to the security of the womb, would insure her safety from the intrusion of anything American. Later, when the grasshoppers descended upon their crops for the first time, Beret sought refuge from this disaster by hiding in this same trunk. When Per found her, "she returned [his] gaze in a fixed stare, and whispered hoarsely: 'Hasn't the devil got you yet? He has been all around here to-day. . . Put the chest back in front of the door right away! He doesn't dare to take the chest, you see . . . We must hide in it – all of us!'" ( 338) Beret now saw the chest not only as protection against anything American, but also as a shield against the Devil himself, who was undoubtedly the cause of the grasshopper plague. At this point Beret's mental disintegration was evident and her need to escape back into the familiarity of her former life and culture became desperate. Beret's actions of hiding in the past cried out a need to be absolved of sins which still

plagued her. The Devil himself had stalked her to the New World, but the Norwegian chest offered her a refuge and a chance to go back and to atone for her past sins. The seriousness of Beret's problems was highlighted in the sequel to Giants in the Earth where Rolvaag continued the story of Beret and her family in the novel, Peder Victorious. In this book, she struggled to cope with running the family farm alone after the death of Per. In a conversation with his brother, Beret's son Ole voiced fears of her returning insanity when he said, ". . . She's been crazy before, you know that as well as I; such things often come back again. You'd better get her off to the asylum!" (71) The reference to "before" alluded to the several incidents, such as wanting to hide the entire family in the Norwegian trunk when the grasshoppers came or the time when she was convinced that she was going to die and wanted to be buried in the chest. Such obsessive thought patterns had led Beret into insanity, but the next episode that involved the trunk marked the beginning of a healing process for Beret.

The immigrant chest appeared in a third pivotal incident when a visiting Lutheran minister used it as part of a communion service. In lieu of an altar, the draped chest became the central symbol in the religious service that marked beginning of a healing process for Beret. This immigrant chest, used as an altar for the first communion in the New World, linked Beret's past and her present. (Rugstad 119) Shortly after this service, Beret underwent a spiritual change and was restored to her former, more stable emotional state. Beret's Norwegian roots, once a source of protection and escape, now became an instrument of healing. When Beret's guilt and fear found an outlet in irrational behavior that culminated in a form of insanity, a minister, whose counsel and understanding helped Beret cope with her guilt and fear, provided a healing for Beret's

unstable mind. The immigrant chest represented more of a hope for the future, rather than a fetter to the past. Shortly after this communion service and subsequent talks with the minister, Beret began to feel that she could “sing again.” It had been such a long time since her singing voice was heard, that everybody commented on the pleasant change in this formerly troubled woman. Thus, the combination of the minister, her religion and the presence of the symbol of her past, the trunk, worked together to give Beret a renewed view of life in the New World. Although she never wholeheartedly accepted America as her home and American ways a sequel to those of the old Norwegian ones, Beret did come to terms with her life here and did manage to bring a more positive attitude to the frontier life.

The feelings of loneliness and vulnerability can be seen not only in fiction, but also in personal accounts from Joanna Stratton’s book Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. Anne Bingham eloquently described the feelings of a woman alone, waiting for her husband to return. “A woman sits alone. . . she looks anxiously at the time to see if the hour has not arrived when her loved one will be at home, for she has been alone all day with just a little child to bear her company.” (87). These lines could have been written by Beret Hansa as she awaited Per’s return from town. Anne Bingham and Beret. shared the feelings of anxiety and concern for the child. Mrs. Bingham’s reminiscence further commented on how work helped her to cope with loneliness and fear, but when she sat down to rest, the lack of activity allowed her thoughts to return to her concern for her husband and her loneliness. “She rests her straining eyes, shading them with her hands from the rays of the setting sun.” (87) Eyes were strained from searching the horizon for a sign of her husband’s return and the day had come to an end, bringing



darkness and a new set of fears. Soon worry took over as she thought, "Oh, what if something may have happened and she would never look into those dear eyes again." (88) At these thoughts, tears formed in her eyes. Worry took its toll and coping had clearly become more difficult. Mrs. Bingham also described a child's efforts to comfort her mother by saying, "Don't worry, Mama, Papa'll come soon." (88) The family dog also provided companionship and protection to women left alone, and Mrs. Bingham mentioned the important role played by her faithful pet as he "crouches low, and finally springing up, pricks up his ears and barking joyously, bounds away to meet the moving object just coming into view. . ." (88) The dog's friendly reaction to the approaching man undoubtedly gave much relief and comfort to Anne Bingham. This time, everyone was safe and the ending was a happy one, but the waiting and feelings of loneliness and vulnerability were as evident in this personal account as they were in Rolvaag's fiction.

Many pioneer women experienced loneliness. Men often had to make journeys to town for supplies, and these supply runs often involved one or two days travel each way and an additional day in town to take care of the business. All told, these buying trips left women alone for days, a week or several weeks at a time. Distances had to be covered as quickly as possible, so the women and children remained on the homestead to care for the farm. Being busy, as Anne Bingham mentioned, was a common way of coping with the worry resulting from being left alone, and the increased work load also gave women a stronger sense of independence. Clara Hildebrand, another Kansas pioneer woman, commented on this aspect of self reliance.

Kansas women . . . learned at an early age to depend upon themselves – to do whatever work there was to be done, and to face

danger when it must be faced, as calmly as they were able. And there was the compensation of contact with the great new West – a new world – theirs to develop from wild prairie to comfortable homes. (58)

Mrs. Hildebrand's observations offered insight into the strength of character of these early pioneer women. Ironically, their strength derived from being left alone to be both father and mother to the children, and from being responsible not only for household duties, but also the fields and barns as well. The ability to rise to the occasion has always been a pioneer trait, and that trait is seen very clearly in the strength of these women as they faced the difficult task of caring for both farm and family. Mrs. Hildebrand also mentioned the pride of the women as they worked, just as hard as the men, to build a new life from the wilderness of the prairies. The women, as much as the men, felt the adventure of frontier life and the sense of accomplishment that came with transforming a wilderness into a comfortable home. One Kansas woman offered this tribute:

Much has been said and written of the life of the Kansas pioneer, but woman in her unfading laurels has stood the acid test. Theirs were the lonely days spent in the little cabins working and striving to advance their cause for humanity's sake. Lonesome and homesick, the little Kansas mother stood at her post of duty, wife, mother, neighbor and friend to all in those early days. (76)

These words more than adequately sum up the experiences of the Kansas women – and of all pioneer women – and offer a well deserved tribute to her strength and adaptability.

Women searched for many ways to cope with the loneliness on the prairie, "But the worst agony of all, recorded in diaries and journals, was the silence." (Welsch 72) Many of these settlers had come from a part of the country

where trees provided sounds of rustling leaves, chirping birds and chattering squirrels. Even the common sounds of water falling over rocks in streams and rivers was extremely rare in this silent and empty land. Roger Welsch's article recounted an experience that shed light on the loneliness, the silence and how pioneers coped with these difficulties. Mr. Welsch had studied many photographs of the prairie settlers and was at a loss to explain why so many had caged canaries. He concluded that the canaries provided musical sounds and bright colors in an unusually silent and dull world. Perhaps these birds also helped women cope with loneliness and provided companionship. Mr. Welsch's theory was confirmed when, after lecturing on this topic, an elderly lady approached him with tears in her eyes. "Her Czech grandparents had been sodbusters in Nebraska." (74) As the years passed, and they moved to a smaller house and finally a nursing home, they weeded out their possessions and discarded unnecessary items. After the grandparents had died, this woman had inherited the task of disposing of their possessions, which now were reduced to "a grocery sack" where she found "a small wooden box, which [she] had never seen before. . . Inside she found the small, dry, weightless body of a canary – a canary that had been dead for a long, long time." (75) The granddaughter had been shocked and amazed that the head of the family should keep a dead bird for so long a time and wondered what significance it had. "Now she knew, because she also had photographs of the family's first sod house, standing in the middle of nowhere, desolate, storm-swept, shadeless, comfortless soulless. And there, hanging under a pathetic shelter porch, could be seen the faint outlines of a fragile cage and the shadow of an even more fragile canary on its perch." (75) This woman now knew the significance of this bird: "It had probably been that pioneer woman's salvation,

an anchor of sanity for the Bohemian girl stranded in America's wilderness. Its trill had been her only music, its feathers the only color in her life." (75) No wonder the grandmother never discarded her dead canary. Sometimes, the smallest comforts mean the most.

Being alone created many uncertain moments for these women, but other dangers threatened them and therefore increased an already stressful situation. In Stratton's book, one woman told of her experience as she and her mother befriended a neighbor. Mrs. Johnson, whose husband had gone to a distant town to find work, would be alone for two or three months. However, this act of support in helping this woman cope with her many weeks of loneliness proved to be more of a challenge than was originally expected. S. N. Hoisington recounted this incident that took place near Salina, Kansas in the summer 1873. Her mother, being the local "doctor" went to stay with Mrs. Johnson because the wolves has been a serious problem. Desperate to find food, they had begun to scratch at the door and on the window of the Johnson's sod house. As Mrs. Hoisington said, "I would bring my revolver and ammunition and axe, and some good-sized clubs." (81) These independent Kansas women had obviously faced loneliness and wolves before and knew just what was needed. During one of these visits Mrs. Johnson became ill, and the smell of sickness enticed the wolves to bolder action. Eventually, the woman died and "After that the wolves were more determined than ever to get in. One got his head in between the door casing and as he was trying to wriggle through, mother struck him in the head with an axe and killed him. I shot one coming through the window. . . Their howling was awful. We fought these wolves five nights in succession, during which time we killed and wounded four gray wolves and two coyotes." (81) Thus, Kansas women were doctors, mothers,

and wolf fighters when they had to be. This dramatic anecdote shows both the physical danger and the ability of women to remain mentally strong in facing such danger. Stories like this one surely traveled to many other settlers and must have remained firmly implanted in the back of many a woman's mind. Such tales of horror heightened fears brought on by the loneliness of frontier life or by the sense of powerlessness felt by many women who left alone, felt. And what of Mr. Johnson? How did he cope? When he "arrived home and found his wife dead and his house badly torn down by wolves, he fainted away. . . . After the funeral he sold out and moved away." (81)

Other fictional accounts related how women who were alone found the strength and determination to protect their families. Rose Lane's young mother, Molly, had to move into town when her husband had to find work in a distant town after the grasshoppers had eaten their crop. Unable to find adequate living quarters for herself and her baby, and unable to locate work to pay for lodging and food, Molly decided to return to their isolated homestead and dugout. Shortly after David's departure, a snow storm arrived and the "Air and sun and snow were the whole, visible world - a world neither alive nor dead. . . . In that instant she knew the infinite smallness, weakness, of life in the lifeless universe. She felt the vast, insensate forces against which life itself is a rebellion. Infinitely small and weak was the spark of warmth in a living heart. Yet valiantly the tiny heart continued to beat." (94) This passage illustrated both the feelings of insignificance amid the vastness of the prairie, and the spark which kindled the fire of determination in the heart of the settler. This fire kept alive the dreams and visions of a new and better future and served to bolster the fading strength of many women. Molly's experience reflected many similar experiences by others who found in their hearts, the warmth from which to

kindle a fire of determination and strength. Her resolution to survive the coming winter and to keep their claim protected was revealed in Molly's conviction that "David had made a home for her and she would stay in it. If she had to face loneliness, cold, wolves, outlaws, she'd face them." (88) This strong-willed determination gave her strength to cope with the many difficulties she would later encounter. One incident in this novel was similar to the Kansas personal account of Mrs. Hoisington. During a severe South Dakota blizzard, Molly managed to get the carcass of a frozen steer home to her dugout where she brought some of the meat inside and left the rest outside for future use. Wolves soon found her cache of meat and began to prowl around the dugout in search of more. Reminiscent of the Hoisingtons, Molly sat armed with a gun, ready to protect her family from these dreaded predators. Lane described the picture: "She heard shuffling along the threshold, a scratch of claws on the door. She kept the lamp lighted and sat all night watching the paper pane . . . If paw or head appeared, she was ready to shoot." (111) Thus, Molly, like Mrs. Hoisington, faced the terror of being alone and being besieged by wolves. Both women, armed with weapons and a fierce will to survive had endured and prevailed. Molly's motivation to survive was strengthened because she also had a baby to protect. The mother's desire to protect the young served to provide additional strength for Molly in coping with loneliness and danger.

Another fictional frontier woman, Caroline Ingalls, also protected her family. In Little House on the Prairie, the Kansas plain became a lonely and frightening place for the Ingalls children and for Caroline when Charles had to go to town for supplies. Like Beret, Caroline did not want to be left alone, but unlike Beret, Caroline accepted the challenge and acted with determination and resolution. Her enemy was not a pack of wolves, but the threat of an Indian

uprising. Osage Indians had been gathering in the bluffs of the creek near the Ingalls homestead. Nightly activity at the camp included their howling and shouting. The constant chanting brought chills of fear to the children who were trying unsuccessfully to sleep. Their dog Jack paced the floor and laid across the door in actions of protection and warning.

Then Ma began to sway gently in the comfortable rocking-chair.

Firelight ran up and down, up and down the barrel of Pa's pistol in her lap. And Ma sang softly and sweetly, 'There is a happy land/ Far, far away/ Where saints in glory stand/ Bright, bright as the day.' Oh to hear the angels sing, 'Glory to the Lord our King. . . ' (219, 220)

Ma's way of coping aloneness and immediate danger was not only to arm herself with a loaded pistol, but also to arm her spirit with a hymn of faith. Many pioneers found that a strong belief in the power of God was a very important source of comfort in times of trouble. Caroline Ingalls represented that method of coping which worked for many pioneer women. Mrs. Hoisington, Molly and Mrs. Ingalls verified another important quality of those who had to face dangers that threatened their lives and those of their families. They acted with deliberate calm and a sense of purpose that allowed them to use weapons to protect themselves. Such armed protection was usually the domain of the men, but when the men were not present to be the protectors, women had to assume that duty. Women were not trained to shoot as men were; it was not part of their education, so when these women traded in their brooms for pistols, they demonstrated that they were more than equal to the challenges posed by a rugged life on the frontier. Pioneer women, in many ways, had to be more versatile in survival skills than the men and they had to be stronger and more self sufficient than women living in less primitive settings.

The role of religious faith was not just evident in Wilder's fiction, but was also evident in the personal account of Gro Svendsen. Just before her immigration from Norway to Emmet County, Iowa, Gro expressed her fears of leaving the familiar and going into the unknown. She anticipated the loneliness that awaited her in America and found strength to deal with her fears in her religious background. The religious training received in her homeland sustained her not only on her journey to America, but also during her life in the New World. In a letter dated April 27, 1863, Gro wrote "Today my last glimpse of Norway. I shall never again see my beloved homeland. O God of Mercy, my fatherland! O forgive me for causing my dear ones this anguish! O God, do not forsake us! Be our comforter and give us patience and strengthen our faith." (14) Like the Psalmist who frequently sought God's presence as he found himself surrounded by desolate country and enemies of all kinds, Gro prayed for strength. To these pioneers, the power of the vast land overwhelmed them, but they could take comfort in the knowledge that their tiny lives were guided and directed by a God who was mightier than the Great Plains and all the forces of nature that emanated from that land. Thus, pioneer women armed their minds with a combination of strength, will, determination and religious faith as they faced the challenges of frontier life and then prevailed against the loneliness and powerlessness that arose from living on the vast prairies.

But one more challenge must be faced. The men and women of the Great Plains, on many occasions, had to face the death of a loved one and then find the strength to continue living the difficult pioneer life. Two fictional women lost husbands to prairie accidents, faced their uncertain futures, and carried on with their lives of, raising the children and working the farm.

Beret Hansa lost her husband, Per, in the "long winter" of 1880-81



during a February blizzard. At first, no word of him came; his fate remained unknown. In this state of uncertainty, Beret's "anguish was working havoc with her." (Peder 7) Many family members and friends expressed concern for her mental state because she had just recently recovered from a probable mental breakdown, and now the uncertainty of Per's fate might be enough to create another, and even more serious, breakdown. Rolvaag described Beret's "lack of faith" and "the mother's inconsolable grief" as the immediate reactions to the disappearance of Per. (Peder 7,8) Beret's lack of faith was notable because, prior to the disappearance of Per, she had undergone a rebirth of faith and had become devout in her religious beliefs. Apparently her newly rekindled faith was not yet strong enough to sustain the major blow of the loss of her husband. The grief was expected and understandable, but again, given the recent mental history of Beret, many friends watched her closely for signs of returning insanity.

Surprisingly, Beret persevered and managed to go on with her life by devoting her time and energy to raising her children, running the farm and continuing to practice her religious faith. The turning point for Beret came when she helped her friend Sorine after her husband, Hans Olsa died. The significance of Beret's actions here lie in the fact that Per had gone out in the blizzard to bring a minister to the dying Hans Olsa. Neither Beret nor Sorine had their husbands; one was missing because he tried to bring comfort to the other. When Beret heard that Hans had died, she put on skis and struggled through the many snow drifts to do what she could to help Sorine. Beret probably found strength in the thought that, as much as she grieved for her missing husband, she still had hope that he might be alive, but for Sorine, there was no such hope. When Beret arrived at the Olsa's house, she found it in complete disarray and she "saw it all, and the ache within her gave way to a

feeling of pity for her neighbor. Instinctively, she did what first needed to be done." (Peder 162) Beret began to clean, cook, care for Sorine's children, and organize the house. Beret coped with the uncertainty of her future and of Per's fate by working for Sorine, who was too grief stricken to help herself. Once Sorine was able to resume her household duties, Beret then turned her energy to her own farm. Blizzards kept on raging, but Beret worked tirelessly. "Every morning Beret put men's clothes on and went out with the boys to help with the work." (Peder 165) The idea of using work to cope with loss was commonly mentioned in many of the literature of the frontier; it was mentioned earlier as a means of coping with loneliness too. Beret's work was different because the fact that she wore men's clothing as her way of keeping Per alive as long as possible. She also began to identify with his work and his vision of life in America. After his body was discovered the following spring, Beret slowly began to deal with the reality of the death of Per.

Her immediate reaction was to go back home to Norway, a desire that had been hers since their arrival eight years earlier. Now there was nothing to prevent her: Per was the one who had wanted to immigrate, and now he was dead. Nothing, it seemed, stood in her way to return, and lately, her thoughts had increasingly turned to her childhood in Norway. Two factors influenced Beret's decision to stay on in America, in spite of her desire to return to her native land. The first influence came from her friend Sorine who pointed out that although Beret would be returning to her native land, her children would not. Her youngest had been born here in America and in the eight years they had been here, the children had learned to speak English and to farm. In Norway neither of these acquired skills would make them feel at home. The second influence was guilt over leaving Per. In contemplating the return to

Norway, Beret thought,

It would not be easy for her . . . Over in the churchyard yonder lay Per Hansa watching every move she made. Ought she leave him to lie here alone in this alien land? . . . Whenever these thoughts came she would feel like a traitor. He had had such great dreams about how things were to be in the New Kingdom . . . Were she to get up and leave it all, how would she account to him if they ever met again?  
(Peder 170,171)

Her guilt has two aspects to it. The first, mentioned in this quote, was that she started to feel responsible for fulfilling the dreams that Per never had the opportunity to complete. The second aspect of her guilt stemmed from the fact that she felt responsible for Per's death. The reason he went out into that February blizzard was to bring a minister to his dying friend, but the request came from Beret. Part of Beret's concern was for Hans Olsa's eternal soul and the need for confession and absolution before death. Per's reason dictated that in the midst of an extremely severe blizzard, such religious rites should be foregone: "No one can journey that far and come out alive. As for Hans Olsa, the Lord will find him good enough . . . that I truly believe." (Giants 442) Finally, in desperation, Per asked of Beret, "Do you want to drive me out into the jaws of death?" (Giants 443) But Beret's faith would not accept any compromise and she offered the suggestion that one could always return if the weather proved too difficult. Besides, she continued, "The Lord would forgive us then for what we couldn't possibly do – if we had tried!" (Giants 443) Per's reason could not overcome Beret's zealousness. This guilt over "forcing" Per out into the blizzard had weighed heavily on Beret's conscience and had become a factor that influenced her decision to stay in America.

Thus, in coping with Per's death, she not only utilized hard work, but also the idea that she had a debt to pay to her late husband. Guilt can be a powerful motivator, and Beret's actions clearly illustrated this. As Beret made more decisions about the farm, it was "as if some of Per's spirit has found housing in Beret as well. She always thinks of what he would have said when she is making a decision." (*Gvale* xiv) The fact that Beret believed Per's spirit was still with her can be attributed to both the fact that she missed him and to the guilt she felt for sending him out into the blizzard and ultimately to his death. It is important to note that she never felt "haunted" by the ghost of Per, but rather she felt a sense of his dream or vision for the land becoming a part of her. One critic, Paul Rugstad, said,

But this frail woman born to follow rather than to lead, whose potentialities remained unfulfilled in the presence of Per Hansa's dynamism, catches a glimpse of the vision which impelled him and finds strength in the thought of the work she must complete on the prairie. Out of the seeming futility of his death comes her restoration to health and her warm response to loyalty and love, as neighbors band together to help with the planting and harvesting that first lonely year. (128)

This commentary offered two notable observations. First is the idea that Beret caught a glimpse of Per's vision. Beret viewed Per in the role of the family leader, and therefore, she believed it her duty to follow his lead, even though he had died. Beret's commitment was not so much to a shared vision of the land as it was to Per himself. The second important point to note was the mention of the help of neighbors. Just as Beret helped Sorine after the death of Hans Olsa, her neighbors offered similar help and support after the death of her husband.

The frontier experience often mentioned the important role played by neighbors as support in coping with both external catastrophes and internal crises.

Neighbors mobilized for prairie fires, grasshopper plagues, and blizzards. They also helped raise barns, build houses and dig wells. It was natural for them to also offer comfort in times of loneliness, sickness and death.

For Beret, coping with Per's death meant dealing with her guilt. In one long and significant conversation with the same minister that helped her overcome her earlier guilt, she began to successfully understand her guilt that was related to Per's death. The minister told her that her worst sin did ". . . not consist in what you did to you husband that day; rather it lies in your discontent with God's special creatures, with your fellow men. For that reason you can experience no real happiness. . ." (Peder 169) With this conversation, Beret began to turn her thoughts from the past to the future. Again, the wise counsel of a faithful minister helped her regain purpose and happiness in her life. More than any of the other fictional characters in this study, Beret Hansa was the most complex. Many twists and turns provided layers of mental insecurities that became intertwined as Beret learned to deal with both life and death on the Dakota frontier.

Beret's struggle to cope with the death of her husband was a very complex chapter in the story of women on the frontier. Abbie Deal, Bess Streeter Aldrich's fictional pioneer, had to cope with the death of a child and also with the death of her husband. In 1875, after seven years on their Nebraska homestead, the fourth child of Abbie and Will Deal was stillborn. Abbie's reacted by falling into a deep depression. Physical exhaustion and mental depression took their toll. She still had three children to care for and a house to run, but Abbie performed these tasks mechanically. Finally, one day

she found herself thinking, "I'm glum and sad and discouraged. And I'm not going to be anymore. There are only two things that can help us, – and that's our courage and our love . . ." (125) Unlike Beret, Abbie corrected her own depressed mental state; no outside counselor arrived. But Abbie's mind was not as complex and guilt ridden either. Abbie had a vision of the land that Beret lacked, and Abbie knew that that vision required courage. The other element that helped Abbie cope with the baby's death was the deep and abiding love shared by Abbie and Will Deal. Shortly after this realization, Abbie put the grief behind her and went on to continue her life work of caring for her family.

The loss of her husband came 15 years later in an accident when he fell from a windmill. For some time after the accident, Abbie lived two lives ". . . one within herself, wracked and tortured, – the other, an outward one which met all the old duties and trivial obligations with composure. . ." (176). Abbie, like Beret, went about her normal jobs and focused on the routine matters and used work to cope with her loss. The importance of continuing with the everyday aspects of life was further mentioned: "Only the children kept her going. Only her motherhood, whose first characteristic was love and whose second was duty, had kept her hands busy and her head unbowed." (176) Aldrich later stated the importance of work when she wrote, "The greatest antidote in the world for grief is work, and the necessity of work. And Abbie had more to do than she had ever done in her busy life." (178) Aldrich hinted that Abbie needed work so much that she found something to keep her busy, even if it meant manufacturing chores. Another important point was the fact that Abbie focused outward and used her children as a kind of anchor during those troubled days. Until her mind could accept the reality of Will's death, it focused on work and children. But there was one other factor in the way Abbie reacted

to the loss of her husband. In addition to work and her children, there was “one other thing which she could not explain: the unseen presence of Will himself.” (176) Like Beret Hansa, Abbie Deal also felt the presence of her husband. Both women continued to imagine what their spouses would have thought or said about various decisions and about various events that impacted the family. If work and family provided an escape or outlet for the stronger feelings of anger and grief, then the presence of Will or Per must have provided a sense of comfort that helped counter the loneliness.

In addition to fiction, personal accounts also offered a glimpse into how pioneer women coped with death. Gro Svendsen’s letters to her family in Norway revealed her sense of loss when her infant daughter died. In her letter dated February 11, 1877, Gro wrote, “My little girl was a very lovable child, mild-mannered, patient and considerate. Therefore my bereavement is great; but God, who in his wisdom does all things well, relieved her of all pain and took her home. So even in the midst of the grief and agony of parting, we thank God for giving her relief.” (130) The depth of Mrs. Svendsen’s belief in the ultimate goodness of God was her principal means of coping with death. Gro mentioned her “bereavement” so we know that she grieved, just as Abbie did for her child. Unlike Abbie, Gro turned to her faith in God to comfort her. Gro represented many others whose unshakable faith in God provided endless strength and comfort. Gro, like Abbie and Beret, mentioned the pleasant memories of the one who died. Holding on to the positive remembrances also gave these women a sense of comfort and strength to continue on with their lives. Regardless of the circumstances of death, all the survivors used work, memories and religious beliefs to help them cope with their emotional difficulties.

## THE REWARDS

From 1868 to 1890, millions of pioneers journeyed westward to the Great Plains. Many endured the various adversities that greeted them and many built homes, ploughed the tough sod, and created successful farms from that wilderness just West of the Mississippi River. These settlers endured loneliness and isolation, and they also coped with a variety of mental pressures. Most not only survived; they prevailed. A major factor in their survival was the dream cherished by these determined people. The vision of a better life kept them fighting prairie fires, battling grasshoppers, and striving against the winter blizzards, always hoping that "things would be better next year." This universal faith in new beginnings, rooted in these pioneers, enabled them to overcome many obstacles, and also helped them forge a new relationship with the land. Living so close to the land and becoming so dependent upon it for survival produced a new viewpoint in these pioneers. Because the men worked the land, they usually assumed a compatibility with the land, but several women also developed a working relationship with the land. Four fictional women developed varying degrees of attachment to the land that they had lived on for their lives.

Beret Hansa's attachment to the land was the weakest because she did not value the land for her own sense of accomplishment, but because she was fulfilling the dreams of her late husband. One analyst exaggerated Beret's love of the land. He said, "But Beret, who lives on long after Per Hansa's death, herself becomes a daughter of the prairie, experiencing at times satisfaction — even joy — in accepting the challenge of the frontier." (Rugstad 125) Calling Beret a "daughter of the prairie" attributed to her too much of a fondness for the



land. It must be remembered that Beret never wanted to come to America, that she fought the process of Americanization for herself and for all of her children, and the real reason that she took over the job of farming the land was to carry out her late husband's dream. Beret never shared Per's vision of the frontier. Instead of the "daughter of the prairie" image, Rolvaag gave Beret the image of a reluctant pioneer. Several examples illustrate this point. First, Beret feels unqualified for the role of pioneer. After the death of Per, Beret "knew that she was not equal to the tasks life now had set her. . . Oh no, the founding of kingdoms was not for her!" (Peder 159) When Per first settled on the Dakota plain, he talked of the kingdom he would establish here and of the mansion he would build for Beret. Thus, when he died, Beret felt inadequate to carry on his work. The primary reason was that she never shared his vision of a new and better kingdom in the New World. The second point to consider is that Beret only took up the farm work because she saw it as a duty to her husband. After Per's death, a minister helped Beret to see that her sin and guilt were rooted in her basic discontent. In counseling her, the minister says, "It is you who must carry on the great work which your husband has begun out here – it is yours to do with as you will." (Peder 169) Beret chose to continue the farm, not because she believed in it, but because her husband had. Gudrun Gvale, in the introduction to Peder Victorious, described Beret as one who "has to carry on. . . [to] try to bring his work to fruition, even though she does not feel up to it. Beret picked up her burden and bears it honorably." (xiii) Beret and her sons continued Per's dream and made their farm one of the most progressive in the territory. But, Gvale also said that "Faithfulness to all that Per stood for becomes the constructive force in Beret's life." (xiv) So Beret forged ahead, not because she finds satisfaction in the land, but because her accomplishments created a

monument to her late husband. It is appropriate to note that Paul Rugstad gave Beret an appropriate epitaph. He said, "As bravely as she lived, Beret dies, asking to be buried at the left of Per Hansa, her accustomed place beside him in life.." (147) Thus, Beret Hansa went to her final resting place after living a life under the shadow of her husband's dreams.

Another fictional character, Abbie Deal, was portrayed as more of a daughter of the prairie than Beret Hansa. When Abbie and her husband Will migrated to the Nebraska plain in 1868, Abbie shared Beret's reluctance to leave home and family. Abbie, however, grew to share her husband's dream and actively worked to fulfill her own dreams. Soon after Abbie and Will moved into their soddie, making a success of their farm dominated her life. Aldrich wrote, "To Abbie, the future gleamed with bright prospects. . . so Abbie Deal went happily about her work, one baby in her arms and the other at her skirts, courage her lodestar and love her guide, – a song upon her lips and a lantern in her hand." (84) Abbie showed both the optimism so characteristic of the pioneer spirit and a belief in the goodness of her life in this new land. Abbie always possessed the capacity to dream. She said, "You have to dream things out. It keeps a kind of an ideal before you." (87) Abbie's simple philosophy of life enabled her to remain open to the future dreams and the land that was to make those dreams come true. Although Abbie loved Will and her life on the Nebraska prairie, she frequently missed family in Iowa. For many years, Will promised her a trip back home, but some unforeseen problem always prevented her from making that journey back. Finally, after the death of her husband, Abbie made that trip back to Iowa. When she returned home, she found that many changes had taken place, but the biggest change she realized had taken place within herself. "She did not like the old places as well as she

had always dreamed. Houses were too thick. Trees were too close and shady. The air was too humid. She felt hemmed in. 'I would want to see out more,' she thought to herself, 'to far horizons. I belong to the prairie. That's home now.'” (180) Abbie realized that she had become attached to the land that had become a part of her identity – that rugged, open prairie that she had helped to settle. As Abbie's children left the farm for jobs in the city, she always chose to remain on the original homestead. Even when her family attempted to convince her to move in with one of them, she decided that her house and her land was too much a part of her to give up. So Abbie Deal, at age 80 died in the house that she had built 60 years earlier with her husband. That house was also the completion of her dream of a better life. In her 6 decades on the Nebraska prairie, Abbie had come to identify with the land and could be called one of its true daughters.

Author Willa Cather created characters who identified the strongest with the prairie. Not only did they develop an appreciation for it, but they actively worked it. One of her characters, Antonia Shimerda, developed a feeling for the land at an early age. Shortly after Mr. Shimerda died, the family had to continue to farm if they were to survive on their Nebraska homestead. Antonia, dressed in her father's boots and his old fur cap, began the spring plowing. She devoted her energy to the land to the extent that she rejected school. “Nowadays Tony [Antonia] could talk of nothing but the prices of things or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength..” (144) Antonia's connection to the land was formed because she worked it. Her relationship with the land involved plowing and tending to it in the way that most men did. But , economic necessity changed life for Antonia and she was forced to leave the land for work in the city. This chapter of her life was a disaster, and

after many years of struggle and mistakes, Antonia returned to the land. After this return, a neighbor described her efforts on the farm : “. . . she did the work of a man on the farm.” Cather related how on a December night, she drove the cattle home amid falling snow, “turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen and shut the door. There without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child.” (358) Childbearing did not stand in the way of Antonia’s strong sense of devotion to the land and to the duties of running the farm. She successfully blended the roles of feminine and masculine traits her life. In the two years that followed that event, Antonia prospered on the farm. Jim Burden, a life long friend of Antonia, visited her and observed that “there was a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave her that look of deep-seated health and ardor.” (361) Cather made it clear that Antonia and the land belonged together and that working with the land was a factor that contributed to her good health and optimism. Antonia never found any real satisfaction in life apart from the land. Jim observed this kinship between Antonia and the land when he said, “She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crabtree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.” (398) Thus, Antonia identified with the land by actually working it and found a sense of accomplishment through that work.

Like Antonia Shimerda, Alexandra Bergson found a similar relationship to the land in Willa Cather’s O Pioneers. Alexandra Bergson inherited the Nebraska farm when her father died, but her brothers never accepted that decision. Early in the story Alexandra wrestled with a major decision: to sell or to try to save the farm from difficult economic times. Alexandra had decided to

stay and had also formulated a ten year plan to become independent land owners in the territory. Her brothers questioned the wisdom of her decision and wanted to know what made her so sure of her plans for the farm. She said, "I can't explain that, Lou. You'll have to take my work for it. I know, that's all. When you drive about over the country you can feel it coming." Clearly Alexandra possessed an instinct about the land that her brothers lacked. Later that night, ". . . she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. . . She had never known before how much the country meant to her." (71) Alexandra's closeness to the land compared to that of Per Hansa's. Alexandra had that same vision or dream of the possibilities that the land offered. As the story continued, Alexandra worked hard to make the farm successful and fought against the jealousy of her brothers. One argument in particular focused on the rivalry between Alexandra and her jealous brothers. They felt that "The property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work." (169) Alexandra pointed out that even though she didn't do all the actual farming chores, she understood the land and made decisions that enabled the farm to produce the best crops and get the best prices. Her wisdom and sound business dealings brought prosperity to the family farm. Cather clarified the point that even though the law may not accept a woman as a land owner, Alexandra clearly understood the land better than any of her brothers. So, again, a woman found that men were not the only ones who could form a productive relationship with the land.

The Cather heroines reflect the theory of the historian Annette Kolodny who saw the basic differences in the approach of men and women to the frontier. Men sought to conquer it while the women were more inclined to make

it productive and to nurture growth. When her viewpoint is applied to the literature, the characters of Antonia and Alexandra demonstrate the quality of domesticating the land. Per Hansa always focused beyond the immediate, crop producing aspects of the prairie and concentrated on how his land would be a kingdom and how he would build a mansion for his "princess" Beret. Per's visions and dreams reflected the military imagery associated with the process involved in nation building, while Antonia and Alexandra worked more along the process of domesticating and nurturing the land.

Thus, Kolodny's principles of history are also seen in the fictional accounts of frontier life.

With so many hardships to endure, the pioneer life was impossibly difficult and devoid of reward other than the hard work itself. What benefits existed for these early settlers? When they looked back on their life on the prairie, what did they see as the product of their labor? Was it all worth it? Questions such as these originally formed the basis for this study. The previous sections offered both the hardships and the rewards of life on the Great Plains. History, personal accounts and fiction have presented both the struggles and the optimism of prairie life. But to put the accomplishments of such a life into perspective, fiction and personal accounts offer the clearest answers to the questions of the value of pioneer life.

Young Pioneers by Rose Wilder Lane revealed the sense of accomplishment one felt from working hard on the South Dakota prairie. Alone in the dugout, Molly wrote to her absent husband, who had gone to find work in a distant town. Her letter addressed the sense of accomplishment she felt as she struggled to maintain the claim that she and David had staked and worked. Molly wrote,

We are having hard times now, but we should not dwell upon them but think of the future. It has never been easy to build up a country, but how much easier it is for us, with such great comforts and conveniences, kerosene, cookstoves, and even railroads and fast posts, than it was for our forefathers. I trust that, like our own parents, we may live to see times more prosperous than they have ever been in the past, and we will then reflect with satisfaction that these hard times were not in vain. (93,94)

Molly reflected upon both the past and the future in this letter. She put her own difficulties in perspective by contrasting her “easy” life to the less technologically advanced experiences of her parents and ancestors. The pioneers of the late nineteenth century certainly could take comfort in the fact that their problems were not so adverse as ones faced by those who had come before. Molly further puts her own difficulties in perspective when she mentioned the future and the more prosperous times that were sure to be ahead for her and for David. Another facet of the sense of accomplishment alluded to the process of building a country. The fact that the efforts of one person could contribute to a better society also made the pioneer life worthwhile. Not only did Molly see herself as a continuation of the past and as a stepping stone to the future, but she also saw herself as a part of a process much larger than herself, the process of nation building. Such feelings of purpose, worth and faith in the result of hard work gave pioneers the satisfaction of knowing that all their efforts worth it.

Abbie Deal looked back over her eighty years of life, sixty of which were spent on the Nebraska prairie, and saw an immense satisfaction in the end result of her labors. Abbie tried to explain the sum total of her life to her

granddaughter Grace, who thought that her grandmother's life was so provincial and narrow. Abbie said,

How can I explain it to you, so you would understand? I've seen everything . . . and I've hardly been away from this yard. I've seen cathedrals in the snow on the Lombardy poplars, I've seen the sun set behind the Alps over there when the clouds have been piled up on the edge of the prairie. I've seen the ocean billows in the rise and the fall of the prairie grass. (241)

Abbie's view of the natural wonders created by the prairie geography revealed her sense of wonder and feelings of awe in the environment that surrounded her for so many years. It took many years of loving care to get the Lombardy poplars to grow on the barren prairie, and sometimes the clouds that resembled the Alps dumped tons of snow on the settlers, but those difficulties are not what Abbie first remembered. Her immediate thoughts were of the beauty and majesty of the land that she had come to know as her home. Abbie's words also show another sense of fulfillment in her awareness of history. She said,

I've seen history in the making . . . three ugly wars flare up and die down. I've sent a lover and two brothers to one, a son and son-in-law to another, and two grandsons to the other. I've seen the feeble beginnings of a raw state and the civilization that developed there and I've been part of the beginning and part of the growth. (241)

Being a part of history, Abbie spoke for all women who came to the frontier, stayed, and witnesses the country around her grow into towns and cities. Being there and being a part of that development was a feeling of fulfillment that many others have also written about in both personal accounts and fiction. Abbie went on to explain the other parts of her life that have given her a perspective



on the rest of the world.

I've married . . . and borne children and looked into the face of death. . . . When you've experienced all those things, Grace, the spirit has traveled although the body has been confined . . . I think if you can understand humanity . . . can sympathize with every creature . . . can put yourself into the personality of everyone . . . you're not narrow . . . you're broad. (241,242)

Although life on the prairie may have been geographically limited, Abbie never felt confined or constricted by her existence there. Her expansive view of human life and history was a direct result of frontier life and Abbie Deal's reminiscence definitely revealed a satisfaction with her life on the frontier.

The life of Abbie Deal showed a sense of history and fulfillment as it reflected the macrocosm of society, but there were also personal ambitions. Before Abbie had come west to Nebraska, she had dreams of her own and plans for her life, and none of those plans included the amount of hard work and adversity that she actually faced. As Abbie talked with a different granddaughter, Laura, she remembered those dreams. She said,

It's queer what ambitious dreams a girl has when she is young. I thought I would sing before big audiences or paint lovely pictures or write a splendid book. I always had the feeling in me of wanting to do something worth while. And just think, Laura . . . now I am eighty and I have not painted nor written nor sung. (279)

Abbie's personal ambitions had always taken second place to the more important needs of survival. Singing, painting, and writing were frills on the frontier. Each of these pursuits required time and time for leisure activities was almost nonexistent on the prairie. So Abbie worked, but she also noted,

I've dreamed dreams, Laura. All the time I was cooking and patching and washing, I dreamed dreams. And I think I dreamed them into the children . . . and the children are carrying them out . . . doing all the things I wanted to and couldn't. Margaret has pointed for me and Isabelle has sung for me. Grace has taught for me . . . and you, Laura . . . you'll write my book for me I think. (279)

Abbie and Will were motivated to go West, in part, by the promise of a better life for their children, and that dream had now been realized for Abbie. Although Abbie herself never accomplished her personal ambitions, a different one of her children or grandchildren would carry on her dreams in their lives. It is important to note that as Abbie reminisced about her unfulfilled dreams, she did not take on the attitude of a martyr, but she did assume the attitude of acceptance without regret. Abbie looked beyond her own life to the life on her children and that is where she saw the sense of fulfillment that so many others have seen. Life on the Nebraska prairie may have prevented Abbie from realizing her own ambitions, but it also gave her the opportunity to pass it on to the next generation. Like Molly, Abbie saw her own life as a part of the past and as a part of the future; it was a small piece in the larger puzzle of the future and of society.

Abbie's dreams for herself and the future were symbolized by the family pearls, an heirloom that had belonged to Abbie's grandmother. As she gave them to her granddaughter on her wedding day, Abbie summed up both the significance of the pearls to the family and also the ordeal of putting dreams aside. These pearls represented

everything that was fine and artistic and lovely. You [her great granddaughter] probably don't understand, but the work on the land in

our early days was so hard that it took all of our time and strength to keep body and soul together. There was neither time nor opportunity for the things that many of us wanted, with all our hearts, to do. But we kept our eyes on a sort of gleam ahead, a hope that our boys and girls could have all the things we could not have. (290)

The gleam and the hope that kept Abbie and Will Deal working hard on the Nebraska prairie was the same hope that kept Molly and David working hard on the South Dakota prairie. Both of these fictional couples shared the American dream of new beginnings and economic opportunity in the frontier life. That gleam motivated them to move westward and both couples saw the fulfillment of that dream.

As Abbie looked back over her long life, she realized that she had accomplished her dreams and that the adversities she had endured were worth the price she had paid.

Eighty years of living were behind her, — most of them spent in fighting, — fighting the droughts, the snows, the hot winds, the prairie fires, the blizzards, — fighting for the children's physical and mental and spiritual development, fighting to make a civilization on the raw prairie. Bending her back to the toil, hiding her heart's disappointments, giving her all in service, she was like an old mother partridge who had plucked all the feathers from her breast for the nest of her young. (298)

Bess Streeter Aldrich's words here described Abbie as a loving mother who had endured many hardships so that her young could have a comfortable and secure beginning. But the significance of Abbie's life of service goes beyond her own family. There were many Abbie Deals who worked as hard to insure

the survival of the next generation. Many pioneer women led lives that were filled with the same hardships and hopes as that of Abbie. Thus, Mrs. Aldrich's passage that paid tribute to Abbie, also pays tribute to the accomplishments of other pioneer women whose lives were spent in sacrifice building a future. Like Abbie, those other women could look back on their efforts and feel the same satisfaction of jobs well done.

While the fictional women accomplished dreams for themselves and the future generations, the personal accounts offer additional accomplishments that were also direct results of pioneer life. Joanna Stratton, in her book Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier, commented that the pioneer woman handled "work loads that were heavier than ever." She also mentioned the pride of the pioneer family's "ability to provide for itself and persevere in the face of hardship." These elements of independence and self sufficiency composed the basic American values that had been handed down to this pioneer generation from the first settlers in the New World. Stratton continued to explore another legacy of this life. "Men and women worked together as partners, combining their strengths and talents to provide food and clothing for themselves and their children. As a result, women found themselves on a far more equal footing with their spouses." (57) The new sense of equality experienced by these pioneer women also made their efforts worthwhile. Because women on the frontier worked beside the men in the fields and shared the survival tasks, they also received more credit for their contributions. Being treated as an equal rather than as a subordinate always gives one a feeling of self worth and importance. One pioneer bride expressed her feelings of independence when she commented that

I was a woman now and capable of being the other half of the head

of the family. His word and my word would have equal strength. God had endowed me with reason to understanding and a sense of responsibility. I was going west to try out as a wife and homemaker. How well I have succeeded I leave to those who know me best to tell.  
(58)

This “modern” bride had clearly stated the new, and equal, status that was to be shared by many other women on the frontier. Thus, the pioneer women’s efforts were worthwhile not only for the share in the American Dream, but they also gave her a new sense of value as a contributing member of society.

Joanna Stratton best summed up the significant impact of the pioneer experience on these women. She said, “Yet ultimately their determination in the face of hardship emanated from their won persevering faith in God and in the future. ‘We were able to laugh together over the deprivations we suffered,’ wrote Mary Darrah, ‘with always a vision for the future. The pioneers as a rule were that kind of people.’” (90) Thus, economic opportunity, new beginnings, natural beauty of the land and a faith that God and the future brought countless pioneers to the Great Plains where all these dreams were realized. It was “that kind of people” that provided role models for future generations who made decisions to strike out on their own. The pioneer legacy is one of belief that enduring hardships will bring both material and spiritual rewards. The history of the United States, in a large part, is based on the pioneering characteristics that have been presented in this paper, and without a doubt, these basic elements of the American character will continue to play a pivotal part in the future history of the United States.

## Works Cited

- Aldrich, Bess Streeter. A Lantern in Her Hand. New York: Appleton - Century - Crofts, 1956.
- Billington, Ray. Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949.
- Cather, Willa. My Antonia. New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1918.
- . O Pioneers! Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913.
- Farseth, Pauline and Theodore C. Blegen, translators and editors. Frontier Mother: The Letters of Gro Svendsen. Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian - American Historical Association, 1950.
- Gvale, Gudrun Hovde. Introduction. Peder Victorious. By O.E. Rolvaag. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1929.
- Haugen, Einar. Ole Edvart Rolvaag. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.
- Kolodny, Annette. The Lay of the Land. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
- Kraenzel, Carl Frederick. The Great Plains in Transition. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955.
- Lane, Rose Wilder. Young Pioneers. New York: McGraw - Hill Book Company, 1933.
- Olson, James. History of Nebraska. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955.
- Rolvaag, O.E. Peder Victorious (A Tale of the Pioneers Twenty Years Later). Trans. Nora O. Solum and the author. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1929.
- . Giants in the Earth. Trans. Lincoln Coleord and the author. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1927.

- Rugstad, Paul. Bolvaag - His Life and Art. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972.
- Schell, Herbert. History of South Dakota. 3rd ed., rev. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975.
- Stratton, Joanna L. Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
- Welsch, Roger. "Song For A Pioneer." condensed from Audubon. Reader's Digest March 1993: 73 - 75.
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls. Little House on the Prairie. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1935.
- . The Long Winter. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1940.

## Works Consulted

- Creigh, Dorothy Weyer. Nebraska - A Bicentennial History. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1977.
- Jeffrey, Julie Roy. Frontier Women: The Trans - Mississippi West, 1840-1880. New York: Hill and Wang, 1979.
- Karolides, Nicholas. The Pioneer in the American Novel, 1900 - 1950. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967.
- Kolodny, Annette. The Land Before Her. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Limerick, Patricia Nelson. The Legacy of Conquest. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987.
- Luchetti, Cathy in collaboration with Carol Olwell. Women of the West. St. George, Utah: Antelope Island Press, 1982.
- Meldrum, Barbara Howard. Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature. Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Co., 1985.
- Mogen, David, Mark Busby, and Paul Bryant, eds. The Frontier Experience and the American Dream. Texas A & M University Press, 1989.
- Moynihan, Ruth B., Susan Armitage and Christiana Fischer Dichamp, eds. So Much to be Done. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.



- Myres, Sandra L. Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800 - 1915.  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.
- Pascoe, Peggy. Relations of Rescue. New York: Oxford University  
Press, 1990.
- Reiter, Joan and editors of Time - Life Books. The Old West: The Women.  
Time - Life Books, 1978.
- Scott, Anne Fior. The American Woman - Who Was She? Englewood Cliffs,  
New Jersey: Prentice - Hall, Inc., 1971.
- Thacker, Robert. The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination. Albuquerque:  
University of New Mexico Press, 1989.