

*Memoirs of the homesteading era in North Dakota usually recall the period from an adult's point of view. Many of those who came to live on the prairies, however, saw things from an entirely different perspective, and here Enid Bern pays homage to the unique experience that homesteading offered to a child. For her and for many others, these were the "enchanted years on the prairies."*



# The Enchanted Years

## on the Prairies

by Enid Bern

When Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* went down the rabbit hole, she could not have been more entranced when she found herself in a strange land than we were when we boarded the train at St. Paul and rode through the tunnel of darkness to awake the next morning in the enchanted land of North Dakota. From that moment on, the Bern family was to live a new and varied life.

Homestead Fever was a strange malady that caused people, even those living well-established and comfortable lives among friends and relatives in pleasant surroundings, to pull up stakes and strike out for the West to battle the elements there on the raw prairies. The thoughts of discomforts and deprivation did not deter them. Nor did the lurid tales they had heard hold them back.

The Ellertson brothers, friends of the Bern family in River Falls, Wisconsin, had talked my father into going out to look over prospects of taking up a homestead. Perhaps he would not have gone had he not been told by his doctor to change his occupation. He was beginning to develop lead poisoning as a result of his work as painter and paperhanger—"interior decorating" it was called in those days. Our mother disapproved of the idea—she had all that she could wish for right there in River Falls, but our father's mind was made up.

The men liked what they saw and came home full of enthusiasm about the land they had filed on and the country in general. We children, of course, were excited and drank in every word we heard. Taking for granted that the large box of fruit our father brought home from St. Paul came from North Dakota, we thought that it must be a wonderful place. When he took a piece of lignite coal from his pocket to show us how clean it was compared with the coal we knew, we children took it all over the neighborhood to show playmates how one could rub it on white tablecloths and it wouldn't even show. What interested us most was to learn about the animals—the jackrabbits, gophers, prairie dogs, coyotes, wolves, and antelope. And we were thrilled to know there

**A young American family sits for that American institution, the formal family portrait. Taken in River Falls, Wisconsin, before the transition to the North Dakota prairies, the picture of the Bern family is perhaps typical of both an era and a lifestyle. Left to right are Efford, Charles A., Enid, Mrs. Charles A. (Olive I.) and Ivan Bern.**

—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

was a creek on our land near the spot where our house was to be built. We just wished we could go at once!

Our house in River Falls was soon sold, and we moved into a rented one for the winter. Papa took a horse and buggy as partial payment on the house, so for the remainder of the fall we took a buggy ride after school or in the evening every day to enjoy the sights in the beautiful countryside that we were soon to leave.

In the early spring, the men bought the horses, machinery, and equipment they would need for farming. The household goods we would need were packed for shipping, and the rest of the furniture was stored. We expected to come back in five years at the latest, and our parents decided they would commute in fourteen months if they did not like it here. With everything loaded in the cars, Efford, five years old, and I, eight, were taken out of school during the first part of April because my mother and we three children (Ivan was three years old) were to live a few days consecutively with each of our aunts and uncles.

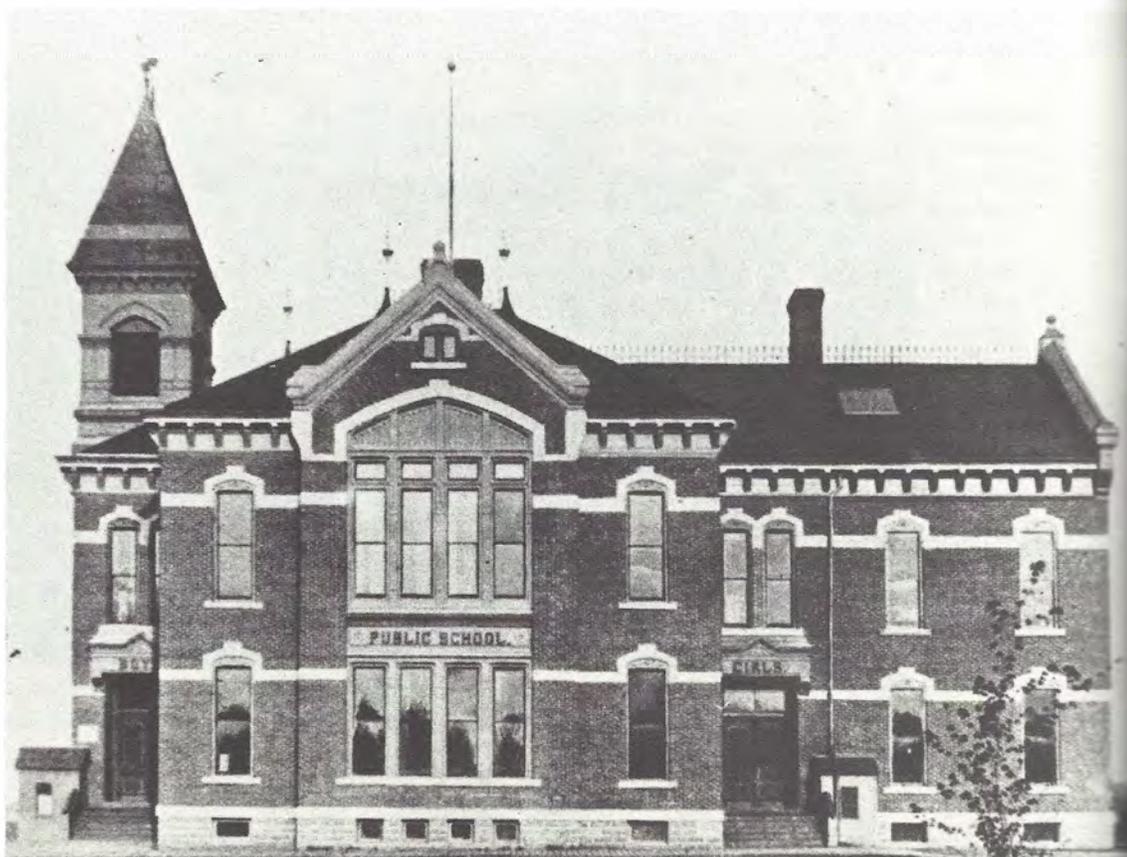
The day finally came when we were to take leave of all that meant so much to us, but it was exciting to get started on that all-important journey. When we awoke the next morning on the train and our mother told us we were in North Dakota, we were thrilled and looked out the windows expecting to see some of the wild animals. There were, of course, no animals, but the country surely did look different. The day on the train was tiring, but time wore on. Then later in the afternoon when the train made one of its stops, I saw flower beds on the station lawn that spelled out the name MANDAN. I had heard that name many times, and I hoped we would soon be getting off; but it was dark before we got to Richardton.

It was May 1, 1907, when we stepped off the train. Organized Hettinger County was fourteen days old. It was good to see our father and to go to the hotel to eat and then to sleep. I was famished, and there on the table was a huge bowl of large oranges. Yes, there was some fruit just as we had



Prairie pioneers for the most part came from well-established communities that offered all the amenities of life, among them substantial homes and schools. The Bern family, for example, left behind their River Falls, Wisconsin, home (above) and the community's school (below) in order to immigrate to the unsettled prairies of Hettinger County, North Dakota.

*—Bern Collection. State Historical Society of North Dakota.*



expected, remembering that which Papa had brought home when he returned the first time. How nice it was going to be to live in North Dakota. Only apples grew on our trees in Wisconsin! Little did we know we wouldn't see any more fresh fruit until Christmas. Stores in Mott stocked only dried fruit, at least when we happened to be in town.

The next morning our party was ready for its trek across country as far as the Ellertson homesteads. There were several livery rigs for the women and children, and the men hauled loads with their teams at a slower pace. We stopped at the Bernt Olson place at noon and then journeyed on. The high point of the trip was the moment we stopped at the top of the hill on the north side of the present highway two miles west of Burt. The driver announced that our destination was at the foot of the hill. It was then that we children first experienced North Dakota prairie under our feet; we got off the rig and ran down the hill, picking up such momentum as to tumble head first, one after another.

The Ellertson brothers had twin houses close together on adjacent quarters. The men slept that first night in one house and the women and children in the other. The Ed Ellertsons had a grown daughter with them; the Matt Ellertsons had two grown daughters and a boy; the Conradsons, brother of Mrs. Matt Ellertson, had a grown daughter and son and a girl about my age. Two other young men and our family of five completed the party.

Finally, the next day our family set off alone for our homestead five miles to the southeast, our parents and Ivan on the seat of the wagon and Efford and I on the small load of lumber. My father's best horse had died in the freight car on the way out, necessitating the purchase of a new one. It trailed behind, tied to the wagon. I was puzzled at the rattling sound I frequently heard in the grass and wondered if it came from rattlesnakes, but I said nothing. My opinion now is that the sound came from the dried seed pods of the locoweed when the horses brushed against them with their feet.

Papa was anxious to see our reaction when he took us into the house. We all stood taking in the appearance of our new home, too absorbed to say anything. It was three year old Ivan who broke the silence when he said, "Pretty nice home!" In gratitude for those words, Papa tossed his youngest son over his head.

The house consisted of two rooms, each 12' x 14', with a half story over one room. The walls were of drop siding nailed to studdings over Klondike building paper. The inside walls were finished with the same kind of paper fastened to the 2 by 4's similar to the way wall board is now used. We had to be careful not to punch holes in the walls because the paper was not as heavy as the wall board of today. It wasn't very long before our mother had the house looking very attractive and "homey."

After arriving at our new home, Efford and I were sent on our first errand. Papa sent us down to the creek for a pail of drinking water. We hunted for a good place to get some, but weren't very satisfied with what we saw. After several attempts, we came up with some that was quite clear, but was full of wigglers. Papa had sent us to get water and that

is what we found, so that is what we brought. We weren't surprised when Papa laughed and were glad to follow him down to see how he would solve the problem. He dipped below the surface and came up with clear water. This was our first lesson in pioneering.

It was the fourth day after leaving Wisconsin that life in North Dakota began, or so it seemed. When we children came down stairs that first morning, our mother was busy about the house; Papa was breaking sod at the far end of the farm, about a half mile away. After we had eaten breakfast, we were given the pleasure of taking lunch out to him. Ivan



**An accomplished dressmaker and seamstress, Mrs. Charles A. Bern made most of the family's clothes and supplemented the family income by custom sewing. Pictured here in an outfit that she manufactured, Mrs. Bern had little difficulty adjusting the children's wardrobes to meet the demands of their new prairie environment.**

*—Bern Collection. State Historical Society of North Dakota.*

very emphatically declared he was going to stay home to help Mamma with the housework.

It was a bright, calm day, typical of North Dakota weather in May. We felt the enchantment of the prairie that we never lost as long as there was a bit of unturned sod. The

many birds, especially the meadow larks and the horned larks, were as joyous as we. Suddenly we saw a gopher, something new to us. Naturally, we gave chase, only to have it duck into a hole. Forgetting the purpose of the water we carried, we poured it down after him, turned the pail over the hole and drummed on it. It hadn't taken the prairies long to turn us into little savages!

Not a moment of that first day was wasted. We had learned in Wisconsin that we were going to a "new" country. To me, it meant that the land had been newly created. Now conditions confirmed this! It even smelled fresh and new, there were places on the creek banks where grass had not yet started to grow, water did not taste right, there were no trees yet, animals were still wild, and people were just moving in. Now that we had so much to investigate, the Swiss Family Robinson had nothing on us!

From that day forward, the out-of-doors held much for us. We were great would-be explorers, ever alert for new discoveries. The sunlit hours were never long enough for us. Of course, there was that time of day generally, when our mother would summon us to come in to study our Norwegian catachism and Bible history. I was also called in frequently to do some needlework because my mother thought I should learn to "sew a fine seam." She had been a professional dress-maker, but I am afraid I didn't give her very encouraging hopes.

The wardrobes we had brought with us were not particularly in keeping with our surroundings. The boys' clothing, which consisted of Buster Brown suits, sailor suits, white linen suits, Tam O'Shanters and Roosevelt caps, all looked pretty silly on the prairies; similarly, my frilly dresses and the bonnet faced with silk chiffon and trimmed with forget-me-nots weren't very appropriate either. Mother got busy with her sewing machine to make sunbonnets for all three of us. She couldn't bear to think of our playing outside in all that open sunshine without protection. The boys were soon outfitted with overalls and Mother Hubbard aprons were made for me. Thus we were properly dressed for prairie life.

But, in spite of being captivated by this new life, there were times when I, even at the tender age of eight, experienced nostalgia for our old home in Wisconsin. There returned haunting memories of the scent of lilacs, peonies, sweet peas, and roses, each in its own season, hanging heavy on the humid air of summer, the soft, velvety lawns, the sidewalks, our playmates and cousins. However, those moments were fleeting and short-lived. The prairies had no competition.

There was, however, one evil creature in our little paradise—the mosquito. We were forced inside by the hordes when they were at their worst. It was then, as well as on rainy days, that we'd turn to the indoor toys with which we were well supplied. The Flannigan children however, whose home was southeast of Burt near the Cannonball River, not only had as many toys as we, but had some others that we admired greatly. For example, they had a phonograph of their own, a magic lantern, an air gun, a tricycle, roller and ice skates, but best of all, a pony. Needless to say, we were always happy when our family visited at their home.

A tragedy was later to occur on a May day in 1911 at the Flannigan home. Horace, age 10, fell from his pony as it climbed a bank after fording the Cannonball. He struck his head on a rock and was carried downstream; his body was discovered after he had been missed at home. Some time later, we purchased the pony he had ridden, but happy as we were to have Tony, we could not, for some time, disassociate him from the event that resulted in the death of a playmate. Our prairies were not without some tragedies.

Horses and ponies were pretty much a part of a pioneer child's life and his knowledge of them extended beyond those of his own farm home. Dan Patch, the great pacer, had won the world's championship harness race in 1905. Many a homesteader's home had a picture of him on the wall, and almost every child could tell you that he ran, "a mile in a minute and fifty-five seconds and a fourth." This record was not broken until 1938 when Billy Direct ran the distance in 1:55.

My brothers enjoyed riding, but they took it as a matter of course; as for myself, ponies and riding were little short of an obsession. From the first week in our new home when Clifford Ellertson rode his new pony over to show us, it seemed I could think or talk of nothing else besides owning a pony of our own. Wishes were not easily fulfilled those days, but that didn't stop us from dreaming. Horse trading was common at that time and we hadn't been here long before we picked up some of the strategy employed. In our imaginations, we made trips to the Indian reservation beyond the horizon to the southeast to bargain for ponies.

I was not content just to ride horses; calves also came into the picture. A time comes to mind when I tried to get the boys to help me ride one. Since they weren't interested, I caught a young steer, took him into the barn and climbed on. Around and around we went, more violently than I had anticipated. I managed to keep on for a while by touching a wall or some object to regain my balance, but a catastrophe happened when I reached for a support beam and missed. Down I went under the calf and he over me. The barn was far from being clean, and I was sight to behold. Now I was in a predicament—how could I explain this to my mother? Finally I hit upon the idea of going down to the dam to wash my dress. The dress would still be wet, but my appearance wouldn't be quite so startling. And that is what I did. It saved an embarrassing situation.

My other escapades with a horse or pony were no more unusual than those common to most children. But although my childhood was closely associated with riding, there came a time later when another incident put an end to any further desires even to mount a horse. I had been sent to the far end of the mile-long pasture to bring home the horses. I rounded them up, enjoying the ride as much as ever. However, as we were homeward bound, the dogs spooked the horses. The pony I was riding had occasionally been ridden in picnic and celebration races; consequently, when the horses started running wildly, Fly accepted the challenge and soon passed them. On she ran, completely out of control for a full half mile over creek banks and rough land, I stayed with her, but

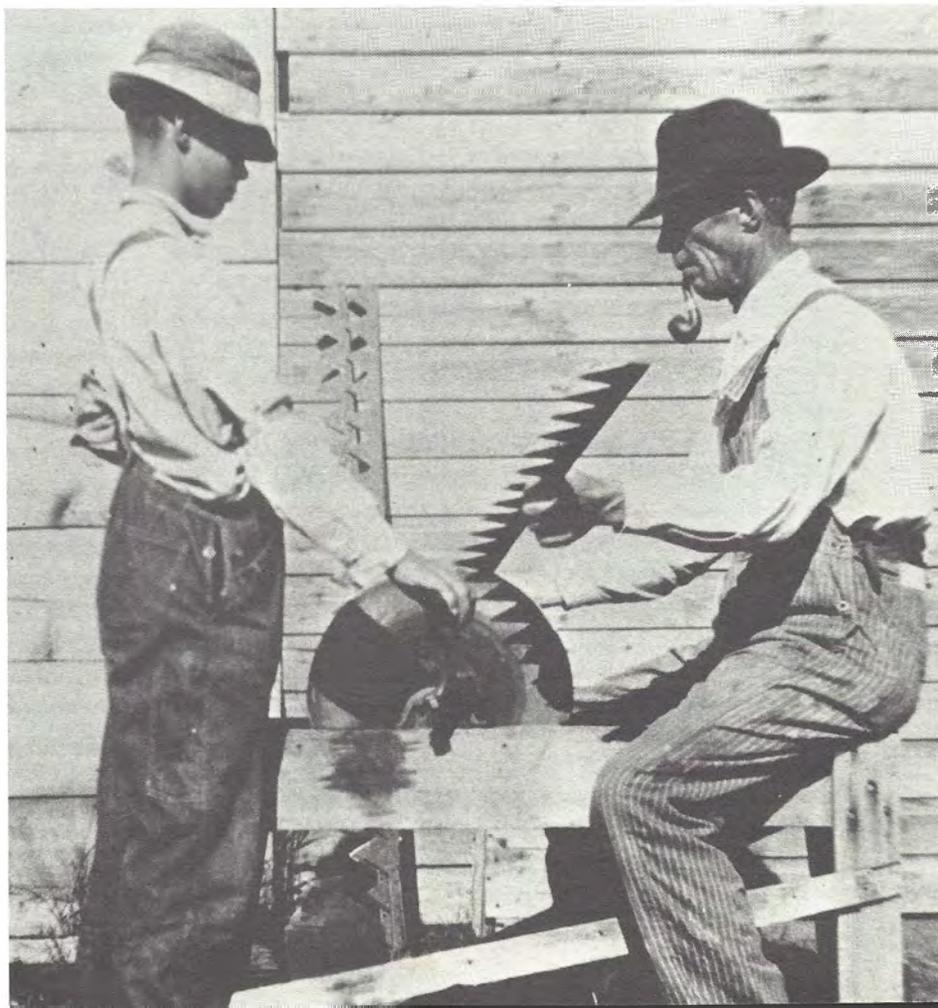


Horses occupied a large part of a homestead child's life. Ivan Bern raised and trained the orphaned colt that he so proudly holds for this picture.

—Bern Collection.  
State Historical Society of North Dakota.

Farm boys learned quickly about the tools of the farmer's trade. Efford Bern turns the grindstone, a simple device that was a necessity on prairie homesteads, while his father holds the cutting blade for the hay mower.

—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota.



was so badly shaken that I was cured from riding once and for all.

From the day of our arrival when we dipped up a pail of wigglers, water continued to be a problem. In the first place, alkali water was very distasteful and annoying. Even the soup that we children liked so well in Wisconsin tasted like medicine when made from this new water. The creeks were not polluted to the extent that they are at present, but we could not continue to use the water from them for any length of time. Our father went to work with pick and shovel to dig a well and succeeded in striking a vein of water. Intermittently, however, the well ran dry. It was then that we began hauling water from a neighbor's well that was less than a half mile away. A stoneboat\* carrying a hardwood rain barrel was used for transporting the water to be used for drinking and general household purposes.

In the wintertime, the barrel was set just inside the kitchen door and kept filled with clean snow when it was available. Water in the barrel soon melted the new supply of snow as it was brought in. With the required attention, the water level remained quite constant.

After several attempts at digging wells, we finally acquired a fairly satisfactory one, and although it was some little distance from the house, the well with the old oaken bucket, ironbound and moss covered, supplied us with good cold water. It was still alkali water, but by this time we had grown accustomed to its taste.

There were no schools when we first came to Hettinger County. Some were opened in the county the following fall, but there is no way to determine how many because no permanent school records were kept until the term of 1908-1909. I have no memory of whether ours opened in the fall of 1907, or in 1908.

Our schoolhouse was built on the southeast corner of section 16, and we lived on the west side of the southwest quarter of section 20, a distance of two and three quarters miles following the section line. We shortened the distance somewhat by cutting across one quarter. To my brother and me, the distance seemed quite long, especially in the wintertime. We usually walked because our father was busy in good weather, and when there was deep and drifted snow the horses could not get through with a buggy. Frequently, our father came walking to meet us. This was reassuring to all of us, including our mother who worried about our being out on the open prairies on darkening, stormy winter afternoons.

It was a tedious walk during the coldest part of the winter, but I can never remember being really cold except for my face, hands, and feet. These we froze frequently, and it was an accepted fact that we were to be plagued by chilblains all winter long. I recall one time when my brothers, Efford and Ivan, froze their faces quite badly. Efford's ear swelled almost unbelievably, measuring about four or five inches vertically. My mother made a hood for him to wear at night while he slept in order to keep him from breaking it off. He didn't go to school the next day, and I was nauseated and unable to keep my mind on my lessons the whole time from worrying about him.

I remember vividly when our father took Efford and me to school on the first day. It was interesting to become acquainted with all my new schoolmates and the teacher. Miss Corta Hiers, the teacher, was replaced soon after by Mr. Morton Little, because her age was below the required 18 years.

When I was asked what grade I was in, I replied that I was in the third because I had been taken out of our River Falls school before the term was over to come out here. Saying that there were no third grade books, the teacher gave me second grade text books to tide me over until books could be ordered. Instead of applying myself to these uninteresting books, I spent my time just listening to the fourth grade recitations and instruction. I was astonished to learn that the seventh and eighth grades were studying diacritical markings in their orthography classes; I had already learned them quite completely in River Falls.

We had been fortunate in River Falls to attend an excellent, up-to-date school. Teachers were excellent and pupils received well-rounded cultural instruction. The imaginations of the children were stimulated and their outlooks greatly broadened due to the various approaches to the subject matter taken by the teachers. We learned to read by the phonics method, which was quite new at that time. I lost considerable respect for the country school because the children learned to read by the ABC method and from charts. I felt sorry for the beginners who had nothing to do when not receiving dull instruction. They spent their time looking at a primer until they were sent out early to play. Remembering my own exciting first and second grades, I yearned to be in the teacher's place to teach those beginners.

The three R's were pretty much the type of subject matter throughout the grades, although there was cut and dried book work in physiology, geography, history, and language. A great deal of instruction was given in arithmetic, and I developed a great respect for the school in that area.

We had a fine group of pupils: the Hopwoods, Claggetts, Littles, Kleinjans, Yates, Wehsners, Harveys, and Heiers (former teacher), besides ourselves. There was practically never a discipline problem or trouble of any kind, and the children were always friendly and congenial. The games played at noon and recess were different from those we had played before, but we enjoyed them. "Anti Over" was a favorite; "Wolf" was another in which the porch was the goal and anyone venturing off base was tagged, if possible, and became another "wolf." Baseball was the most popular when weather permitted it. When it was stormy outside, the teacher must have been driven to distraction. Pupils shot erasers back and forth on the chalk trays, and games played at the blackboards filled the room with dust. Sometimes the seats were

\* A stoneboat was a contraption consisting of two stout posts spaced parallel to each other which served as skids, or runners. Boards were nailed across the top to form a platform, and a strong chain was fastened in front of the runners in such a manner that a horse could be hitched to the crude sled. Such an outfit proved invaluable for numerous jobs around the farm and in a pinch could be used as a means of transportation. Ours was mostly put to use for hauling water.

shoved aside, and "tenpins" was played, using pencil boxes set on end to serve as pins.

Much as I liked these games, I missed the ones we had played in River Falls: jacks, hopscotch, rope jumping, to name a few. The boys walked on stilts, played marbles and football, flew kites, had sling-shots and rolled hoops. Children on the prairies had no interest in those types of play. One form of amusement that did catch on for awhile in the country school consisted of rolling a small wheel mounted on an axle attached to a stick, but this was soon dropped and forgotten.

I should not fail to mention another popular game, one much rougher than rolling a wheel. "Shinny" was a game in which each youngster was armed with a heavy stick or club. Players stood, spaced slightly apart, in a circle; in front of each was a hollowed out spot in the ground. No one could steal his spot as long as the end of his club remained in it. A hollowed out spot was also made in the center of the circle. The object of the one who was "it" was to try to knock a tin can into the hollowed out spot in the center while the others tried to keep it out. "It" could steal a spot; then the loser became "it." The game became lively when people tried stealing spots. Swinging clubs and a flying can knocked full of sharp corners during the progress of the game frequently landed on shins or in faces. It was a dangerous game, to say the least, but that did not deter us from playing.

We were fortunate in having come to North Dakota in the company of three other families. It was difficult enough to adjust to the new surroundings and life style without being plagued by the loneliness that must have been the lot of those who came by themselves. The Ellertsons lived five miles away, but not many days at a time passed without an exchange of visits that frequently lasted all day. Having been good friends in Wisconsin, attending the same church and being of the same nationality, our families had much in common. The sons and daughters of the two Ellertson households were mostly adults, but we Bern children always looked forward to visits with these fine people. It was good not to be alone in this new country.

Neighborhoods differed in character during homestead days. Some consisted of people of such contrasting personalities and temperaments that the community was constantly a scene of contention, bickering and rivalry. In direct contrast, a group of people from a foreign country had enough in common to form a congenial community. Similarly, a group of acquaintances from an eastern area who settled together were quick to establish a harmonious neighborhood. Our community differed in that it consisted of people of many nationalities or national backgrounds and of many walks of life. Occupying a quarter section of land in our section were an Irishman, a Holland-born father and his son, and a native born Swede (our father). Other neighbors of ours represented several other countries of Western Europe, as well as Americans of mixed nationalities. These neighbors had skills in some trade, occupation, or profession; our neighborhood had former carpenters, masons, painters and blacksmiths, among

others, and threshing time, in particular, called for exchange of work amongst all farmers.

Minor disagreements did occasionally arise in our neighborhood, usually over school matters such as the location of a school building. Parents wanted it located as close as possible to their homes for the benefit of their own children, and those without children wanted it nearby to enhance the value of their land. These differences were resolved without undue difficulty.

Numbered among the homesteaders were unmarried young men and women who came to file on homesteads. I can readily recall at least thirty bachelors, but only about five young women who had claims in our area. Many of these single people were to marry later because there were many grown young folks who had accompanied their parents to the family homestead. In the meantime, they formed an interesting segment of the population. Their presence added zest to community life, perhaps because of their youthfulness and varied personalities.

One of these bachelors, a Southerner, was a fastidious young man known for his neat housekeeping, abilities as a cook, and expertise in gardening. He did not marry while living here, but once remarked, "What I'll have won't have me, and what'll have me I won't have." Then there was the handsome young Irishman who lived nearby. He stood in good favor with all the girls who were much attracted to him. Written on the Blue Klondike paper covering of his shanty were the words:

This house is much too large for one  
But just the size for two;  
Suppose you fix it up real cute  
And I'll keep house for you.

Another one of the men remained a bachelor for several years. Eventually, a middleaged woman, a stranger to the community, became his wife. It was bandied about that Jake had sent to Sears & Roebuck for this mail-order bride because she had come from Chicago. When the Model T Ford appeared upon the scene, the couple was frequently seen riding about with the top down, he in the driver's seat and she in the back. This idiosyncrasy later resulted in her life being saved when his was lost. Had she been sitting with him, she also would have been killed when he drove into a moving train.

Of the thirty or so bachelors, the one we knew best was Dick Danielson, a young Swede. He was a frequent and welcome visitor at our home and a good neighbor who could always be called upon when an extra man was needed for some task. We children were always amused by his manner of expressing himself about taking leave to go some place. He was always going to "SKIDDOO." He was not happy with the role he was playing as a North Dakota homesteader and wasn't slow in giving vent to the frustrations that seemed to be aggravated by the hardships of pioneer life. While still living on his claim, this bachelor married a pretty girl and brought her down to meet us. During the course of the conversation, he informed us of their plans to "Skiddoo out of here." The time had come when he could make good his intentions.

At one time while Dick still lived on his claim, his sister came to visit him for a few weeks. She was a very lovely and refined young lady who would sometimes walk the two miles to spend an afternoon with us and would bring along her sewing. She was making her entire trousseau by hand—beautiful material sewn with fine, dainty stitches. A short time later, she became the bride of a prominent businessman in Mott.

Two miles to the south of us, at the foot of the Dog Town Buttes, lived one of the very early sheep ranchers and his wife. Fourteen days previous to our coming to our new



**Corta Heirs served as the first schoolteacher in the country school that the Bern children attended. She was, however, not old enough to meet the minimum state requirements for teachers and was therefore replaced several months into the school term.**

*—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota.*

home, Henry Barry had been appointed by Governor John Burke to be the first sheriff of our newly formed Hettinger County. Mr. Barry rode past our home frequently and often stopped to chat. He cut a dashing figure on his splendid horse and dressed in resplendent western attire. He was as glamorous to us children as western law enforcement men of present TV fame. At times when he happened upon us youngsters when we were out herding cows, he would pull up his horse to greet us. We were thrilled beyond words as we took note of the spurs, chaps, wide leather riding cuffs, neck-piece and broad-brimmed hat. We stood in awe and admiration as we gazed at his spirited horse chomping at the bit and prancing nervously.

Sheriff Barry had a wonderful bass singing voice. At wedding dances, parties, and celebrations he was enthusiastically called upon to sing. Encore upon encore always followed. Then, too, he was an expert baseball player. And who was most suited to lead colorful parades? It always was Henry Barry, our early neighbor.

There had been a prairie fire near our homestead before our arrival in the spring; consequently, the buttes two miles away loomed black and mysterious against the southern sky. They had captured our attention because they contrasted with the rest of the landscape, especially that of our homestead which was flat and level. Furthermore, the buttes seemed to be the headquarters of packs of coyotes that gave nightly, spine-tingling concerts. The name "Dog Town Buttes" gave the indication that prairie dogs lived there, too.

Our father imbued the buttes with a kind of fascination and glamour through his storytelling. After work, he frequently took three-year-old Ivan on his lap to visit with him. This often led to a story which was woven around a fictitious little boy living "up in the buttes." Efford and I became absorbed in the episodes, and to Ivan, the little boy became a legend. Whenever he sensed that the time was favorable, he took our father's hand, led him to the rocker and said, "Let's talk about my little boy up in the buttes."

We took a trip to the buttes the Thanksgiving afternoon of our first year in North Dakota. That day had perhaps been the most lonely one since our arrival. The Ellertsons had just left for Wisconsin where the women were to spend the winter, and we felt more alone than usual. Our mother, especially, thought of our yearly Thanksgiving gatherings with her three sisters, two brothers and their families. This year we would not be numbered among them.

The day was an example of Indian summer at its very best, and with nothing better to do, we drove to the buttes. We children enjoyed the climb to the top as we scrambled ahead of our parents. From the topmost point, we gazed at the spectacular view of endless prairie with the only signs of habitation a few shanties scattered here and there. I doubt that our mother's loneliness was lessened by the sight of our little buildings in that grassy sea of prairie.

The thought did not occur to us then, I am sure, as to what changes would soon take place as a result of progress. Little did we realize that three years later, seven towns could be sighted from that spot. We were too absorbed in the

awesomeness of the view with no barriers visible but the fence surrounding the area of buttes on which we were standing.

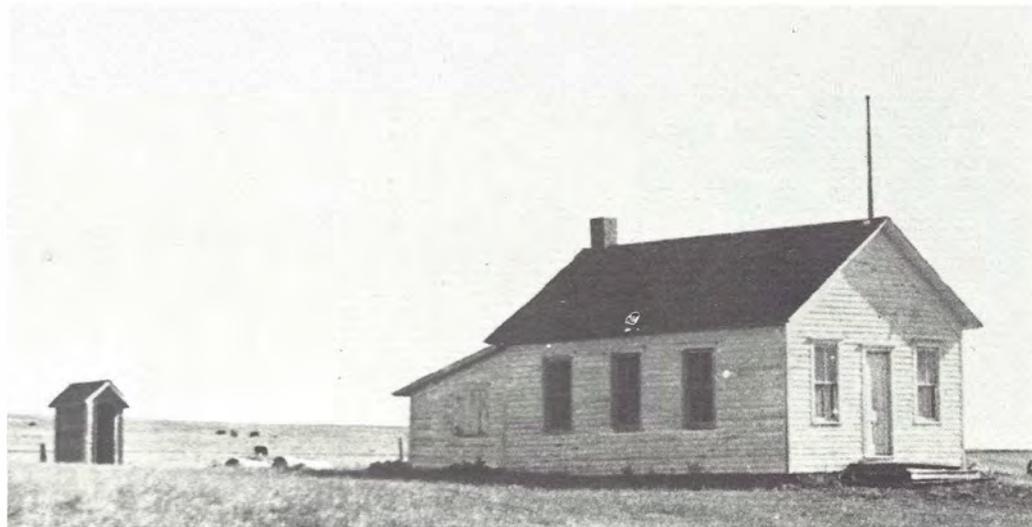
Children could sense, to a certain extent, the difficulty pioneer parents encountered, but I am sure we did not realize how distraught our mother was and the agony of mind that she must have experienced one fall day of our first year in North Dakota.

We watched our father as he set out across the prairie in a wagon early in the day, carrying with him some lunch and several sticks of dynamite, caps, and fuses. He headed in the general direction of the closest coal mine, about eleven or twelve miles away. There, he would blast out the coal and load it himself, for the mine was unattended.

During the day, our widower uncle, who lived in Wisconsin, surprised us by putting in an appearance. He had been thinking about his youngest sister and family living out in the wilds of North Dakota and came to see what conditions were really like. This surprise visit shortened the day for our mother, but when it became dusk and then dark she grew increasingly worried. She would have been uneasy under any circumstances, but the knowledge that our father had dynamite with him gave her real cause for concern. That was the

**The school that served the rural community south of Bentley, North Dakota, and which the Berns attended.**

*—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota.*



situation when we children went to bed. When we awakened at sunrise our uncle had started out on foot to look for our father. He was still in sight when we spied a wagon coming in the distance. It was our father.

It had been a long drive in the lumber wagon over untraveled prairie, and it had taken a long time to blast and load the coal. Darkness overtook him on the way home and the clouds obscured the stars that otherwise would have given him his bearings. When he saw a light in the distance, he drove towards it and stopped to inquire as to his whereabouts. It was the Fred Knaus home. He then drove for miles before he saw another light, but when he stopped he was astounded to find himself again at the Knaus home. Realizing the futility of setting out again with the horses as worn out as they were, he accepted the hospitality of the Knauses and stayed over until it began to grow light.

Personal experiences were frequently related when friends gathered socially, particularly by the men folks. This

might be during an all day visit with friends or neighbors, Sunday afternoon visits, or chance meetings on mainstreet benches or loafing places. Perhaps a person on some errand at the home of his neighbor in looking for an excuse to linger awhile baited his neighbor for a story. This was still during the period when story-telling was an art. A chance remark might trigger a memory that gave rise to a story, and the teller was given the floor. Everyone sat at relaxed attention until the story had been completed. With no interruptions forthcoming, the story teller was free to proceed in a leisurely fashion. Bringing in all the details and using considerable finesse in building up suspense, he entertained the listeners to the end. The story generally suggested another to someone else and the story telling continued.

Children, who in those days were supposed to be seen and not heard, sat quietly causing no disturbance, and vanished to the out-of-doors to amuse themselves when they grew tired of listening.

Mott staged a 4th of July celebration in 1910. For the first time in two months, we dressed in our very best to attend the event. It had been perhaps close to five months

since we had seen our father dressed in his best suit, white stiff collar and black Derby hat. It seemed strange to be wearing clothes like that again, although we dressed in good, but less elegant, clothing when we visited friends and neighbors.

We children were not sure just what the celebration would be like. Our parents had not discussed it to any extent; therefore, there was no enthusiasm on our part. We went because our parents were going. Upon our arrival, the horse was unhitched from the buggy, was tied and given some oats brought from home. We spent the rest of the day walking about, listening to our parents visit with other people. Ice cream bought at a tent and served in a saucer was not very tasty and was mostly all melted. Lemonade made with alkali water was sour and tepid. The weather was hot, especially out under the open sky, dust was blowing about and the day was tiresome. But this was all from my own personal point of view. No doubt, it was a great day for many. As the years passed, we began to look forward to 4th of July

celebrations and Old Settlers' picnics with more and more anticipation. Furthermore, preparations for the affairs became increasingly elaborate and were truly festive occasions that broke the monotony of the summer and added a little zest to routine living.

At times in the early years, I was given the task of watching the cattle to keep them from straying or getting on other people's property. The section to the west and the one to the south of our homestead was unbroken prairie (railroad land) where the cows could graze at will. It wasn't necessary that I stay with them constantly, but it often involved less walking if I did. Besides, I loved the prairies as they were without fences, telegraph or telephone lines, graded roads or fields, and I enjoyed being out on them. The broad expanse of grassy plains, bounded only by buttes and hills in the distance, had a special charm that gradually vanished as the sod was turned by the plow. It seemed a desecration to change the landscape and to break the spell of magic it seemed to hold.

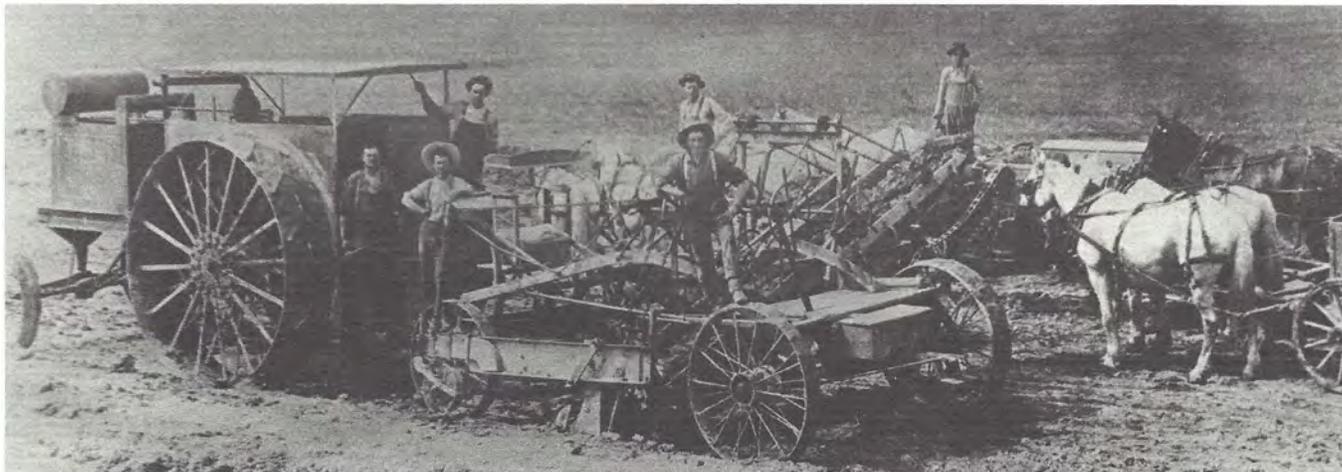
Mine was not a lonely task. The singing of the meadow larks and the whistling of the gophers set the mood for the

demand much attention from me, but the dog found them intriguing and could never resist giving chase, although he seldom caught one.

One such chase resulted in a rather unusual turn of events. When I noticed that the dog had flushed out a jackrabbit nearly a quarter of a mile from me, I began yelling, Indian fashion, to divert the rabbit's attention. To my surprise, he immediately headed towards me. I kept up my noisemaking and grew increasingly excited as he unswervingly came nearer and nearer with tremendous speed. Then, to my astonishment, he leaped into my outstretched arms, striking my chest so violently that I was almost knocked over.

The rabbit was too excited to stay in my arms. He was off and away, leaving me standing there somewhat dazed and gazing at some of the fur in my hand.

An incident happened while herding, on a beautiful, early summer day. I was sitting idly on the ground near the cattle, enjoying the warmth of the day and watching the numerous gophers playing around and about. One spied me, sat up and looked, came a little closer, then looked me over



**Farming the North Dakota prairies required both manpower and machines. This scene dates approximately from 1910.**

*—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota.*

day, and countless discoveries in nature filled me with untold pleasure—the birds' nests, each with its own particular kind of eggs, the various flowers, pretty stones, turtle eggs found in the walls of a cutbank, and even the snakes that startled me so. I learned to know where all these things could be found, and every foot of these nearby prairies became familiar to me. I have memories of sitting on a stone, gazing out over a view that was so beautiful as to be painful, trying to fix the scene in my mind so firmly that I would never forget it.

Sometimes I took a book or some magazine along to read or even a catalogue with its pages of people that were to become my make-believe acquaintances. Each would be given a name which was put in writing beside the individual for identification.

The baby rabbits never ceased to enthrall me. I was wholly responsive to the charms of the springtime prairies and the little rabbits were a part of its many mysteries and surprises. The older rabbits were too commonplace to

with more daring. Finally, his curiosity brought him up to me as I sat perfectly still. He became bold enough to edge up close, and nibbled at the rubbers I wore. As he moved away, he still kept an eye on me. When he was fully ten or twelve feet away, I idly picked up a small stone and flipped it at him, hitting him squarely on the head. He dropped over dead! Shocked at what I had done, I ran over and picked him up, crying remorsefully and sorrowfully at having killed the innocent little gopher who had been so cunning and friendly! Upon reaching home at suppertime I told the family what I had done. My father laughed at me unbelievably for telling such a likely tale. I could not persuade him to believe me. Thinking back now, I realize it was only his way of bringing me out of the mood I was in.

There are many memories of my days out with the cattle. Coyotes entered into some of them, as they did the time I was mounted on my pony's back at some distance from home. We and the dog were surrounded by a pack of yelping,



Charles A. Bern worked occasionally for William H. Brown, a land speculator who sold lands to settlers in southwestern North Dakota. This sign, which decorated Brown's offices in Mott, was one of his products.

—Bern Collection. State Historical Society of North Dakota.

snarling coyotes. Strangely, I was not afraid for myself, but I was fearful for the dog. They had focused their attention on him and were giving him a bad time. The encounter amounted to no more than an exciting experience.

I have recollections of trying to find the cattle during an oncoming storm. This time it was dark and I had to depend entirely on the lightning to guide my way. One flash revealed a coyote running not far from me, apparently running from the storm, but it added to my terror. The cattle were eventually found after my father came, and we reached home before the deluge.

One incident some years later also involved a storm. I had not followed the cattle, and the rapidly approaching storm brought me face to face with the realization that I had

to act with great haste to bring the cattle home. I had our pure white collie along to assist me, but the cattle reacted to the furious oncoming storm and could not be turned towards home. Laddie worked desperately to head them in the proper direction without success, but did not give up. Finally, I saw him hunch over convulsively; then immediately, he came running to me and fell prostrate at my feet, completely exhausted and panting laboriously. Ivan came soon after, picked up the dog, and we drove home. Laddie revived somewhat later, but never recovered and died soon after. He had given his all in helping me and exerted every effort to come to lie at my feet when he thought he was dying.

Illness without access to a doctor was one of the hazards of pioneering. Ivan, at the age of three, was stricken

Pictured here is the first jury in Hettinger County, North Dakota. Called to hear the case of the State of North Dakota vs. Bert E. Thompson, the citizens found Thompson "Not Guilty" of the charge of Petit Larceny. Charles A. Bern, a juror, is standing, fifth from the left. The other men shown are (standing, left to right) Charles Robinson, H. T. Risty, George Klein, Charles Rumph, Bern, P. F. Ray, and Sheriff Henry Barry; seated are (left to right) John Hallorn, Oscar Covert, Martin Van Veghel, George Yhoman, Martin Ulberg, George Peterson, Attorney George H. Stone, Judge J. B. Slossen and Attorney H. P. Jacobson.

—Bern Collection. State Historical Society of North Dakota.





**Mr. and Mrs. Bern in the house the family built after the prairie fire which devastated their original home.**

*—Bern Collection. State Historical Society of North Dakota.*

and bedridden throughout the summer months of 1907. A doctor that my father contacted called it “summer complaint,” and gave information as to his care. Ivan recovered nicely, but had to learn to walk again.

During the years 1907 and 1908, we were slowly becoming established. The sod was being gradually turned by the plow and put into crops that yielded quite well. By degrees, we acquired a start in livestock, cattle, hogs, horses and chickens. Then, too, we had good gardens each year which were much more elaborate than the average gardens of today as far as variety is concerned. Huckelberries and wonderberries made delicious pies and jam. Garden lemon, ground cherries, and citron were used in making preserves. Parsnips were planted for spring use. Rutabaga and turnips had their place in the garden along with the usual vegetables.

Our mother had caught cold while visiting at the homes of relatives for several weeks prior to coming to North Dakota, and she developed a persistent cough. In mid-summer, she made a daily trip to the garden. Using a knife, she peeled and ate carrots and turnips that she seemed to crave. Before long the cough disappeared completely.

I recall the planting of potatoes that first spring. They were planted in the furrow made by turning the sod with the

plow. They were then covered by plowing another furrow. After the patch had been planted in this manner, it was left untouched all summer. Cultivation was not necessary since no weeds grew on the newly turned sod. In late summer, one could turn back the sod under which the potatoes had been planted, and there would be a clean nest of new potatoes without any loose dirt covering them.

Potatoes and other vegetables were kept at least until late fall by putting them in a fairly deep pit. They were then covered with straw and heaped over with dirt. They kept better that way than by storing them in the cellar. The cache could be robbed of some of its supply late in the fall and re-covered. From then on, though, it had to be left undisturbed until spring.

Mr. William H. Brown, who learned that our father had been a painter, succeeded in getting him to paint for the land company in Mott. Signs, especially, were in demand. Mr. Brown said facetiously one time, “Do you believe in signs, Charlie?” Papa had come out to get away from painting, but extra money would come in handy in the homestead venture. Therefore, from the time we first arrived in North Dakota, he did painting when he could take time off from farming.

The year 1909 was a model one. Everything seemed quite promising. By that time, we had much of the land on our homestead broken. Ideal weather conditions resulted in a bumper crop that fall. Railroad grades were being built past out land, assuring closer market places. With that in mind a grainery was built to hold the new crop until the coming of the railroad. We had much to be thankful for that Thanksgiving, and the Christmas season was more like the ones we used to know. The folks also brought up the subject of building a new house in a year or so and made other plans for the future. Our mother sewed through the winter months, replenishing our wardrobes. Our father found more time to make playthings for us. We were proud of the sleds, skis, crossbows and other small items. We spent a happy winter.

It had been a rather open winter, and spring came early. Papa had taken on a large job for the Brown Company. On Wednesday morning, March 23, that spring of 1910, he went to work, hoping to finish that day. That was to be the last of the painting that he would take from then on. Efford and I went to school, and Mamma intended to wash clothes. It became so windy that she decided to finish some sewing instead and worked until about noon when she stopped for a break. We had come home from a visit at the Ellertsons after dark on the evening before, and Mamma discovered she had lost a brooch her mother had brought with her from Norway as a young girl. Now, this Wednesday noon, thinking she might have lost it as she got out of the buggy, our mother went out to look. To her amazement and horror, a raging prairie fire was almost upon our place. A high wall of leaping flames fed by tall grass from the network of dry creek beds to the west of us was fanned by a sixty mile per hour wind.

Mother got Ivan, who had not yet started school, and the two of them went around the bend of the creek bank and down to the water's edge, thinking they could wade into the water, if necessary. There they stood, witnessing the destruction of all our buildings. Burning haystacks to the west of the buildings were being torn to pieces by the terrific wind, and the flaming torches of loose hay swirling around the buildings had set everything ablaze at once. The fire burned thirty miles beyond our place in thirty minutes.

The smoke from the prairie fire had been pointed out to Papa in Mott just as he was finishing his job. Immediately, he struck out for home with the horse and buggy, almost frantic for fear of our lives. As he approached home, he stood up in the buggy, searching for sight of our mother and Ivan. Suddenly, he saw them standing down by the water, black with soot and harrowed by the experience, but safe. He threw up his arms in thankfulness and cried out, "Let it all go; they're safe!" He took them to Harveys, a mile away, then went back to see if anything could be done.

In the meantime, Efford and I were safe at school since the fire did not spread across the new railroad grade. We saw the fire beyond the tracks not far from school, but did not realize what had happened at home. Mr. Dortland called for Dolly Ferguson, Efford and me, and left us at Kleinjans. It was there we learned that our buildings were gone. We were terror-stricken about the fate of our mother

and Ivan. Henry Kleinjan then came from our place and told us they were at Harveys and that we should go there too. We ran against the wind, crying and lamenting the loss of our home, our toys and possessions, naming them off as we thought of them.

Our father came from the ruins black with soot. He had singed his hair and eyebrows while trying to save something, and a gas can exploded quite close to him. The intense smoke from the burning wheat made it impossible for him to get near. It was all too far gone to do anything about it.

The grainery with its 1909 crop was burned, as was the house with all its furnishings, the calves in the barn, the chickens in the coop, the setting hens in their nests and the cat in the house. The cattle were all badly burned and they died later. The horses were found in a fence corner at the end of our farm, also badly burned. Shooting them was a heart-breaking task for our father. Our sole possessions were the horse and buggy that Papa had with him in Mott. The dog's life was saved, also, since he had followed our mother and Ivan.

It took much courage to start from scratch. Plans had to be made to carry on. The day after the fire, the Ellertsons came to take me home with them for a week. Our mother and the boys were invited into the Arnold Bannon home. I don't remember where our father stayed, but he went to work at the necessary tasks before him. Ethel Rumph, a young homesteader a mile from our place, graciously offered to let us live in her shack until we could get our bearings. Not a more convenient arrangement could have been made, and we were grateful to her for her generosity.

Our father thought about some of the temporary shacks in the railroad camp which was breaking up. This was along the Northern Pacific tracks on the old Dobson ranch site. He made arrangements to buy one and have it moved home. It consisted of only one room, but it was quite large. Getting it ready for occupancy took quite a while. In the meantime a kitchen range and a sewing machine were ordered from Montgomery Ward and Company. A folding bed, bed springs, table, and chairs were purchased in Lemmon, and we were almost set for moving in.

Before long, our mother had the new house looking quite cozy. The springs on hinges folded against the wall when not in use, and the folding bed served as a couch in the daytime. Handy shelves and cupboards were built into convenient places. Mother covered a large wooden box with chintz. This, with its padded cover, not only served as a seat, but as a storage place for clothing. Dainty curtains at the windows put on the finishing touches, and we were ready to move in.

The year 1910 was a trying one in many ways. Before I had gotten over the shock of the fire, I learned of something at school that struck dumb terror into my heart that was to last for about six weeks. During the noon hour, I heard the older pupils talking about something that made me curious. After we went out to play, I asked a girl slightly older than I what they had been talking about. It was then that the information she gave struck me as forcefully as a

bomb shell. She told of the Halley's Comet that was approaching the earth and said that if the two should collide it would be the end of the world. When the school bell rang and we marched inside, I was still numb with terror. The tune of the opening exercise song, "Kind Words Can Never Die," seemed to have an ominous presentiment about it, in keeping with the mood I was in.

May 17, 1910, was the date the comet was due to come its nearest to the earth. As the time approached, a head with a fiery tail could be seen in the heavens on clear nights. I begged that we might be permitted to stay home from school when the fateful day arrived. Since that was the day we were to move into our new abode, our parents relented. May 17 arrived. I was apprehensive all day, but happy to awake the next morning in our new home to see that the world was still here in all its splendor and was relieved to know it would be seventy five years before its return, (actually 76.0 years). It will be back in thirteen years, but I doubt if it will receive the attention it did those many years ago. There was much speculation about the comet, but I do not suppose as many were as frightened by it as I was. It was thought at times to have influenced weather conditions. I remember the unusually beautiful, warm spring days, fierce thunderstorms, terrific winds and wind storms, hot scorching days and drought that all led to a crop failure that year.

I was eleven years old by this time and nearing the end of childhood days. As I look back over these early times, countless memories come to mind. Above all, I remember the courage and fortitude with which my parents met the whole gamut of experiences that were the lot of pioneers while at all times providing a happy family atmosphere. Frustrations were always met calmly and without complaint. They made the best of unfortunate circumstances and always found some way to meet adverse situations.

Then, I recall the dramatic change of seasons, the responses to surroundings characteristic of children whose delicate senses are in tune with the wonders of nature and of God, and the blood-curdling howling of coyotes almost every night that sounded different with the varying seasons or types of weather, the peculiar whirring sound of the night hawk as it dove from heights toward the ground, the shimmering heat waves during hot summer days, the stories told by our parents of their childhood while we sat around the coal-burning heater during the winter evenings, our walks to the blacksmith shop just east of Liberty carrying plow shares to

have sharpened, and the excitement of seeing the railroad in the process of construction past our place. The hopes of people gradually became a reality. Spirits were lifted as homesteaders thought of the far-reaching impact of the coming of the railroad. We youngsters of the neighborhood kept close watch on its progress. The work was done with men and horses supplying the power for the plows, scrapers and dump wagons. Even in driving the piles for the bridges, horses were used to pull the weight to the top of a tower. It was then tripped, enabling it to strike the pile with great force.

The railroad crew had a camp a short distance from our house. A man and wife by the name of Riley were fine, interesting people hired to cook for the crew. They frequently came to our house to buy produce, such as vegetables, milk, butter, and eggs. One of the workers boarded at our place and slept in a room fitted out in an empty grainery.

The climax of the advent of the railroad into Hettinger County was a big barbecue celebration in Mott, featuring as one event a balloon ascension (with an accidental descent in which the rider broke a leg). There were entertainments by road shows, and a succession of events to make the occasion one never to be forgotten.

Three years of homestead life had now elapsed. Two years remained before the five year proof of entry could be made. These two years proved to be infinitely more difficult due to circumstances resulting from the fire and the severe drought of both years. Final proof on the Bern homestead was made in 1912.

It is now sixty-six years since we first set foot on North Dakota soil. These are no longer the prairies I knew as a child; although I still love them, I no longer see them through the rose-colored glasses that I did. But they have taken on a deeper meaning. The buttes to the north and to the south of us are landmarks that have not changed with the march of time and progress. They impart a feeling of solidarity that seems to serve as an anchor which enables us to keep our bearings and gives a sense of security and repose.

Those of us who grew up in Hettinger County and those who are living here today are, consciously or unconsciously, the benefactors of a rich heritage left by the early settlers. We count it a privilege to be living on the old homestead with its many precious memories of days gone by.



Efford, Enid and Ivan Bern. The picture was taken shortly after the 1910 prairie fire.

*—Bern Collection, State Historical Society of North Dakota*

