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*These words are a gift from the land and from the Divine. Please feel free to share them with others as you see fit.*

## EINE KLEINE HÜHNCHENMUSIK

I have been very concerned about my chickens' mental health as they've been stuck in their small coop through so much inclement weather over the last two weeks. They do not have heat or artificial light and they've missed their afternoon free-range time on all but a few days. When they get bored in close quarters, chickens are known to become a little violent with one another. Once they draw blood, you've got a serious problem. So far this hasn't happened.

Yesterday I hit upon the idea of taking a battery-powered cassette player out to the coop. I asked Jane if she thought they'd enjoy HARP: Holly Near, Arlo Guthrie, Ronnie Gilbert and Pete Seeger, a 1985 folk music concert. "Well," said Jane, "go ahead, if you want a bunch of radical chickens."

The girls did appear to enjoy HARP, but I have to say I think they liked Fleetwood Mac's Greatest Hits even more. They sang along, I kid you not.

This morning I pulled out a few classical tapes. "I think Rachmaninoff might be a bit much for them, what do you think?" I asked Jane. "Ah, hell," she said, "two of them on one piano could probably play it."

The girls are out there right now eating their morning scratch and listening to Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, which may not be entirely appropriate, but they don't seem to mind listening to a little night music in the early morning.

Next in the line-up is Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, a little something to inspire hope. If

it weren't 5° in the coop I'd sit out there and listen with them.

As Jane likes to say, next time you're eating a nice steak or hamburger, think of the people like us who are out feeding the cattle in ice storms and cold weather. I'd just add this: next time you eat one of our eggs, think of me selecting just the right music to keep my chickens from losing their minds.

## VOICES IN THE LAND

I can no longer remember the name of the movie, but one of my favorite lines of all time is this one: *Are the noises in my head bothering you?*

In addition to having a busy, busy brain, I also have a built-in receiver that occasionally picks up voices in the land. Like many people, I seem to have a minor gift for clairvoyance, which is simply *clear seeing*, not necessarily into the future, as the word has come to connote (one of my favorite jokes perpetuates this sense of the word: *The meeting of the Clairvoyant Society has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances*). Rather, clairvoyance means *to see objects or events that cannot be perceived by the senses*. A companion gift I appear to possess is clairaudience, the ability to hear sounds that are not being made in the present, voices that reside in the ground and echo up to me from the past.

I first became aware of this phenomenon about ten years ago when I went back to the family farm in North Dakota for my grandfather's funeral. As I walked across the ground that my ancestors first homesteaded nearly a hundred years earlier, I picked up rocks and touched abandoned objects: an old

teakettle, an empty Mason jar, a rusty hinge. I heard a low murmur of voices, felt a tingle of hyperawareness and then a strong surge of emotions that had nothing to do with my present situation. It was as if I had drilled a hole in the earth and tapped into a well of energy that was deposited there by someone else in another time.

I suppose it would be more exciting if I actually heard clear messages from, say, my great great grandmother Wilhelmina, a well-respected midwife and dispenser of home remedies and advice in the early sodbusting days, but what I get is more like a multi-channel feed of voices and feelings, a series of rapid-fire heartscapes from other people's lives in another time.

This same thing has been happening to me here in the Flint Hills, too, since the first time I set foot on the land.

I believe there were layers of natural abilities, passions and experiences that needed to accumulate, to interweave and season, before my inner ear could attune to the voices in the earth. At the foundation of these layers is a profound love of the land that has been with me since I could take a wobbly step on *terra firma*.

I have always been an explorer, a lover of the fine art of cartography, and a maker of maps in my head. Once I've visited and loved a place, I can nearly always find it again, even many years later and in the dark, navigating by some form of psychic echolocation. I've had the strangely disconcerting experience of arriving in a place I've never been before and knowing my way around surprisingly well, as if I had a map of the quadrant preloaded in my head. I also have a good visual and spatial memory; I am able to wander about the house at night without bumping into things; I can reach into a disorganized drawer in the dark and go straight to what I need amongst all the detritus. I memorize, quite unconsciously,

the relationship of objects to one another. These are gifts that have always been with me, whetted to greater sharpness with long habit.

It was not until high school that the love of research swept me off my feet, although there was a preliminary courtship when I was 12 and set up my detective's office on an old enamel table down by the furnace; the extent of my detecting was solving cryptograms and writing my own codes, but all the while, curiosity and patience were emerging as virtues. I had always been, as well, a ravenous reader, but the one part thrill of the hunt to three parts discipline of tracking down answers to specific research questions was a later development, signaling a graduation from omnivore to epicure, gourmand to gourmet. My natural proclivity for cataloguing and memorizing relationships among physical objects easily transferred to charting relationships among ideas, connecting the dots between concepts, recognizing hierarchies of information, and noticing patterns and cycles.

In search of my own sense of place in time, genealogical inquiry became a later branch of research that drew me down into old pages and microfilms, scrapbooks and cemeteries, plat maps and passenger lists, ever closer to the origins of voices I would later hear. I began to imagine stories rising out of the dust of details, warm flesh for the bones of my ancestors.

These, then, turn out to be the primary tools required, at least in my case, to become a maker of deep maps: a love of the land, of exploration, of cartography; the study of details and relationships, of history and place, of data and anecdote.

I first heard the term *deep map* when I read William Least Heat Moon's epic exploration of Chase County, *PrairyErth: A Deep Map*. The author demonstrates rather than explains the

concept; for scope and clarity I like this definition:

Reflecting eighteenth century antiquarian approaches to place, which included history, folklore, natural history and hearsay, the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place....<sup>1</sup>

*Everything you might ever want to say about a place* is exactly what I want to know about these acres in the Flint Hills. The hearing of voices from the ground is evidently not contingent upon knowing all this in advance, but simply upon manifesting the desire, for I had scarcely begun my map when I started hearing the voices of the ancient Permian sea, of the early natives of this place, of later tribes, rootless and lorn, of avid travelers and hopeful homesteaders.

I now have a fine collection of maps and charts, my favorite a 1901 plat map of Matfield Township that shows the location here on the ranch of nine homesteads, two schools, a post office and general store. Roads that no longer exist are bold on the map and faint on the land these days. You can catch a ghost image of them on aerial photographs. What's truly useful is that my brain has copied the 1901 map and can superimpose it upon the land as I explore.

I memorize the names of landmarks that no longer exist except in clues like an old cistern or scattered foundation stones: Thurman, High Prairie, Lone Star. I acquaint myself with the surnames of early landowners so that

I can refer to various locations on the ranch by their older names.

I give added dimension to my flat map by adding, layer by layer, the broader contexts of national and state history to the finer detail of county historical sketches, a sociologist's perspective on the rise and fall of Thurman, Kansas, notes from a postal carrier about his rural route, and a personal memoir from the McDowell family.

At some point in my investigations I realize that I am on a first-name basis with Ezra and Emma Beedle, Jason Lee and Florence McDowell, Dan and Emma Eastman, Al and Sarah Fent, Clarence and Alice North, Arville and Stella Johnson. And how evocative and hopeful are the names of the children who were born on this land, some of whom were destined to die on this patch of prairie as well. I make a little monument here to honor all the little voices in the land, at least the forty-two I know of so far:

#### CHILDREN BORN ON THIS LAND

Angie • Arthur Ray • Austin Myron  
Barbara Elaine • Bill • Blanche Winnifred  
Carl Custer • Denzel • Dorothy Mae • Edith • Edna  
Edna E. • Eli Carl • Emma Jean • Emma Lucille  
Ezra • Ruben • Florence Ivy • Grace • Grace Castle  
Hazel • Howard • Jessie • John • Laura • Leona Fern  
Lilly Leaflet • Marjorie Beth • McDowell Twins 1-3,  
all of whom died at birth • Neva • Patricia Jo  
Phyllis June • Ralph • Ruth • Sadie • Samuel  
Victor • Von Eloise • Walter

In setting down these names I have worked some kind of magic; suddenly my map is teeming with life and a-babble with voices of every pitch and cadence. I can step into this deeper map as if through a door into a crowded house.

<sup>1</sup>Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (Routledge, 2001) p. 64-65.

**Mother McDowell's Indomitable Lilac.** Here stands a 120-year-old lilac bush, a tree, really, by now, so thick it nearly hides the small wrought-iron fence at its base. Beneath the gnarled lilac repose twin brothers who were born in a blizzard and lived less than a day.

*That sad day a hired hand built two tiny coffins out of pine. A kind neighbor lady, handy with a needle, braved the snows to comfort Mother. She sewed a soft white lining for the box and a soft pillow for the boys' heads.*

When spring finally arrived, the bereaved mother planted this lilac bush over the grave. Those twin boys, unnamed, were only the first of three sets of twins that Florence Wilson McDowell would lose at birth out here on the prairie.

Lilly Leaflet was taken from her, too, and little Samuel, both of whom were buried in the Matfield Green Cemetery with the greater formality accorded their marginally longer lives of 1-1/2 years and 6 months. The whole family visited the graves for a picnic once a year on Decoration Day. But the lilac was a closer comfort; each night from her porch the tender-hearted pioneer mother could see the bush illuminated in the last light of the western sky. Each spring the lilac bloomed, fragrantly and dependably, a symbol of promise.

Of what stuff was this woman made, that she could bear such losses without losing faith? These are the words I find in her daughter's memoir:

My mother was quiet and always willing to do a service for someone else. When Florence spoke out, her voice always carried weight...an iron hand in a velvet glove.

She inspired those around her to greater faith, because she, herself, lived her faith.

She was always certain God was there, everywhere, among them.

Florence McDowell was fond of pointing out to her children the distinction between prayer and meditation: *prayer is to ask, while meditation is to listen.* In times of distress she was frequently to be found alone in a quiet spot, meditating.

What are the voices from the ground in this place? All is hushed, but for the faintest melody of a breeze playing on the lilac leaves. This peaceful, expectant silence is the sound of Mother McDowell listening to God.

**Rooted.** The touch of a human hand is readily evident on the prairie wherever you see a neat row of trees. Here on the Ezra and Emma Beedle homestead, claimed by Jane's great grandparents in 1882, you will find many such evidences: hedge, cedar, mulberry and catalpa. Of these trees, the catalpa seems the most outlandish in this setting, with its giant heart-shaped leaves as long as a ruler, the equally long bean pods, and the showy white flowers that grace the tree in June.

Why were they planted? Of what possible use are catalpa trees on the tallgrass prairie? Firstly, they meet the criteria for a good homestead claim tree; they're quick to grow and relatively hardy. Secondly, the wood is useful for fence posts and railroad ties because of its natural rot-resistance. The tree's extravagant beauty is just a bonus, as is the fact that the outsized leaves and bean pods are a favorite fodder for children's imaginative play.

How many people have played or rested in the shade of these catalpa trees? What did they dream?

The Beedles were destined to wander for nearly 40 years, but they set down roots that stayed put even when they did not. Ezra and Emma started out farming in Illinois when they were married in 1876, moving to this place in 1882 with their first two children. Just 10 years later, *discouraged by years of drought and low prices*, they left Kansas with three more children in tow, bound for Aberdeen, Washington and the promise of money to be made in logging.

After trying to coax corn out of flint rock during a drought, almost anything would look like a better idea, I imagine.

Their sixth and final child, Jane's grandpa Roy, was born in Aberdeen, but the prairie wooed the Beedles back after only three years out west. *The family grew homesick for Kansas and Chase County friends and returned to the Thurman Farm in 1895.*

Back here on the same homestead in Thurman, Ezra and Emma put in 15 more years of sod-busting and rock-picking, planting and harvesting, raising stock and bringing up children. This time around, the Beedle touch was golden, indeed, it was a golden era in Chase County; the county's population reached an all-time high of 8,246 in 1900. The early part of the new century in Thurman was blessed by *abundant rains and good crops...and a general climate of optimism and contentment.*

When prosperity finally does turn out to be just around the corner for folks like the Beedles, I have a deep appreciation for the fact that they kept turning corners even when prosperity was illusive. By 1903 Ezra and Emma had done well enough to purchase a larger farm east of Bazaar, to which they moved in 1910.

Jane, whose middle name is Beedle, grew up thinking of the Bazaar farm as her family's homestead in Chase County. After buying this

ranch in 1979, she got an excited phone call from her Aunt Helen, a Beedle herself, who worked at the abstract office in Cottonwood Falls. *You're not going to believe this, Jane, but the land you just bought contains the original Beedle homestead in Chase County.* Neither one of them had known there even was an earlier homestead.

I believe there are no coincidences, only subtle leadings and leanings and mysterious synchronicities.

Roots that are set down on the earth grow in all directions and hold fast to the ground. Does a deed or title hold as firmly? We leave something of ourselves in each of the places we inhabit, and those locales in turn sink their roots into the deepest soil of our hearts.

The catalpa roots are a hidden network. They call up from deep in the ground with messages sent long ago in a voice somehow familiar; the roots in the heart tremble and give answer.

#### **Monument to the Lasting & the Ephemeral.**

Here is what remains of an extensive series of drystone corrals begun in 1885 by a recent immigrant from Germany, an itinerant stone mason whose name is lost to time. The walls themselves stand testimony to the integrity of his work; they have survived for 120 years without benefit of mortar.

Tune your ear and you will hear the *pock-pock-PINK* of the mason's hammer and the satisfying *chink* of a rock fitting perfectly into place.

\* \* \*

A bottle of carbolic acid left in a niche on one of these corral walls irrevocably altered the McDowell family in 1891. One-and-a-half-year-old Lilly Leaflet McDowell was one of the brightest lights in her serious-minded father's life. *She ran to the door to meet him at sunset...then, as soon as he had washed, she covered him with kisses and pulled up his rocking chair.*

Unfortunately, it was this beloved father who had absent-mindedly left the carbolic acid on the wall after working calves. On a hot July day, Leafie mistook the bottle for something that might ease her thirst.

Even the children born into the family after Leafie's death understood that their father's insularity and distance had its roots in this particular loss, as heavy as a stone wall upon his heart.

Listen with care at sunset: the oppressive silence of Jason Lee's stoic grief is broken by the sound of Lilly Leaflet's laughter.

**The Persistence of Water.** Here near the headwaters of Little Cedar Creek is the Fent homestead, established in 1884. The most notable of what little remains from the family's 35-year tenure here is a tumble-down, spring-fed stone cellar, a place where milk and butter were kept cool in the days before refrigeration. The spring is still cool, clear and abundant; even today it would serve well as a larder for perishables. Living water is the unmistakable sign of a well-chosen homesite.

No other clear trace of the Alfred and Sarah Fent family remains in Chase County. Now a family of vultures nests here each spring in the shelter of an old foundation.

Perhaps on a windy day you can hear 100-year-old echoes of Sarah calling her children up from the creek: *Laura! Jessie! Grace! Bill!*

**Thurman's Heart.** This was Thurman's heart, this unremarkable rise on a flint rock road that doesn't appear to go anywhere in particular. All that's left to see is an old foundation, a cluster of cedar trees and a few irises that still bloom every year.

If there are voices speaking anywhere on this land, even the deaf should be able to hear them in this spot, the location of the

Thurman post office and general store, which occupied a room in Dan and Emma Eastman's home for about 20 years.

There was a time when just about any backwater settlement with a few warm bodies (a dozen was plenty) to sign a petition and send it to Washington, D.C. could get a post office, a fourth class "star route." The "star" referred to the asterisk next to the post office's name in the official record, indicating that once the designated agent picked up the mail, it was officially out of the U.S. Postal Service's hands and could be sorted and delivered in any way whatsoever.

The Eastman place was the third and final location of the Thurman post office, from 1890 to 1909. At least one area resident found the new location and postmaster a vast improvement over the previous arrangement at Barney Houser's place, where he *sorted the mail on his bed in his bedroom, and letters sometimes ended up under his bed, and delayed for weeks until this Postmaster cleaned his room!*

Daniel Webster Eastman, a native of New Hampshire and a well-respected resident of Thurman since 1887, was the new postmaster. *He sorted all the mail on a high table, and placed the mail for the respective families in pigeonholes above his table, a very business-like approach for a fourth-class post office.* Recognizing an opportunity in the stream of postal patrons, Dan and Emma also began stocking groceries and other supplies in about 1894.

The settlement was lively and prosperous enough to be named on the Kansas map in the 1895 U.S. Atlas. Thurman's heart bustled with trade, from local residents to salesman and cattle owners just passing through. Dan Eastman took his buckboard wagon to Cottonwood Falls and Emporia several times a month and brought back a load of provisions for the store. A typical trip, according to

notations in his father-in-law's 1898 diary, might fill the buckboard with *700 pounds of flour, sugar and canned goods*. Thurman residents appreciated the convenience of dropping by the Eastman's to pick up their mail and barter eggs and butter for groceries. Dan, in turn, traded the farm-raised products for canned goods in town. Like many small mercantiles of the period, the store also offered axes, hammers, nails, hinges and other useful hardware.

Capitalizing on this nucleus of community activity, Robert Youngreen opened a blacksmith shop and second general store across the road from Eastman's in 1904. For just a brief moment in time, five more years, Thurman's heart beat as strongly as that of any embryonic town in America at the time.

Even without visitors to the post office and store, Thurman's heart rang with the voices of twelve Eastman children born between 1877 and 1899, supplying more than enough prospective students to justify opening the Thurman School in 1891. An 1899 photo taken at the school pictures a class of twelve; only three of the students have a last name other than Eastman or McDowell.

The Eastmans were much-loved and well-respected in the community. Their *Big Feeds*, a rural Methodist alternative to *dances, drinking and gambling*, were legendary. All the neighbors gathered, contributing roast beef, chicken, ham, venison, quail, goose and duck or yams, corn-on-the-cob, green beans, breads, cookies, pies and other dishes. After the meal, children ran and played while adults amused themselves with *charades and other parlor games*. The Big Feeds carried on long into the evening. *I loved these parties...if I went to sleep, Mother placed me in a host's feather bed. Before the party ended, three or four other children shared my bed.*

Although Rural Free Delivery brought an end to the Thurman post office in 1909, and the

Eastman General Store closed, too, just before Dan died in 1912, the Eastman family continued to hold down the symbolic center of the waning settlement. Even after Thurman disappeared off the maps, a second generation of Eastmans grew up in Thurman's heart. Dan Jr. married his own Emma in 1915 and together they raised five daughters on the ranch.

The last meeting of the Thurman Ladies Aid Society, at which they voted to disband, was held here in March 1931, and *Mrs. Eastman served lunch consisting of Bavarian cream, angel food cake and tea.*

The Eastmans finally left the ranch in the 1960s, long after nearly everyone else was gone from around here, and moved to Matfield Green, where Dan Jr. died in 1969. Emma, one of the last people in whose heart Thurman was still lively, carried those memories for nearly another 30 years. She was 104 when she died in 1997.

This place is now almost holy in its quietness. It is an unofficial sanctuary for the birds who persist in the shelter of these gracious cedars. Everywhere I ramble on the Eastman place I feel a mix of optimism and nostalgia, warmth and comfort. This is a welcoming spot on the earth; it carries forward into the present the hospitable spirit of the people who lived here and loved it so well and so long.

I would like to come back some balmy prairie evening and sit on the old stone steps of Eastman's post office and general store. I'll listen for the sound of conversation, laughter and singing among Thurman neighbors at one of the famous Big Feeds; I'll picture the littlest children, all tuckered out and wedged together in the feather bed, dreaming of pie.

**Tribute to Kindness.** Over here, under this big hedge tree, is what remains of the root cellar in which little Ruthie tried to reform a copperhead. She'd heard about Carrie

Nation's saloon-smashing rampages across the state, but was troubled by the incongruity of battling evil with violence. The copperhead, she knew, was doomed to die as soon as her father discovered its presence in the cellar. But surely killing was wrong as well. Suddenly the solution hit her: if, as she supposed, evil could be overcome by kindness, then the dilemma might be neatly solved by simply neutralizing the snake's venom with love. Ruthie headed purposefully for the cellar, knelt down in the dirt, summoned up all the love in her little heart, and fearlessly reached out to pet the viper.

The copperhead bit her on the hand, of course, but instead of running straight to her mother, Ruthie sought out her sister Sadie, with whom she was fond of discussing the matter of good versus evil. *By the time Ruth reached me, where I carried in wood for my evening chores, her hand had swelled to twice its normal size. She calmly told me why she had tried to pet the doomed snake. We sat on the broadstone steps, then quietly decided that kindness could still save us, so we went to Mother at once.*

Alternate applications of whiskey and mud throughout the night saved Ruthie's life. I'm betting the snake did not fare so well.

What do I hear in this place? Ruthie declaring her good intentions to the copperhead. Sadie and Ruthie philosophizing on the steps. Mother McDowell's soothing murmurs at Ruthie's bedside all through the night.

If kindness has a voice, it sounds like this.

**A Moveable Church.** This is very likely the route taken by a group of concerned and half-crazy citizens as they clandestinely executed a most unlikely task: they moved the High Prairie Methodist-Episcopal Church building from one location to another under cover of darkness, or so local legend has it.

The roads they followed that night, pushing and pulling a church, have since been abandoned and gone back to grass, but we know where the building was originally erected in 1887, high atop a ridge next to a tiny pioneer cemetery that still exists, and we know the location to which it was so unorthodoxly moved in 1909. The distance between the two points is 5 miles.

High Prairie Church in the early years was a bustling hub of religious and social activity. The most prominent members of the small Thurman settlement could be depended upon to make an appearance on Sundays and most anytime there was a special event.

*One particular Christmas, I remember our High Prairie Church decorated a large tree, and a still larger crowd of neighbors rode from North, South, East and West across our pastures and hills on horses, in wagons and surreys, to celebrate.*

Just 20 years after its founding, the church had very few attendees and had fallen into disrepair. Why? Certainly not because of ungodliness! The informal *three-mile rule* appears to be the primary culprit for the church's decline; as more of the area was settled, additional rural schools were built so that no student would have to walk more than three miles to school. The new Thurman School replaced the High Prairie Church as the social heart of the settlement, with *concerts, basket socials, and literaries and preaching every other Sunday.* Many of High Prairie's most active supporters gradually transferred their loyalties to the more conveniently located school.

Who moved the church that night? No one alive knows the answer, or at least, no one is saying. The church-movers would almost certainly have gone right past the Beedle place. Ezra and Emma were among the founding families of the church and it's a fifty-fifty wager as to whether they were in

on the scheme or slept right through it. Imagine getting up for a glass of water in the night and glancing out the window to see your church go by! Charles and Sarah Johnson, it seems certain, were party to the shenanigans, since the church's new home was on their land.

Why was the church moved? Some people evidently felt that a long debate and chronic inaction would doom the church to closure. The nameless masterminds behind the plot to save the church picked a new location that was roughly halfway between the two nearest schools, Thurman and Lone Star, hoping to bring everyone back together, a noble mission.

Is it possible to measure the success of such a venture? Well, the church stayed open in its new location for another 20 years, with many thanks to the efforts of the Thurman Ladies Aid Society. Theoretically, the length of the church's life was doubled by the derring-do. On the other hand, some residents of the High Prairie district didn't take too kindly to having the weighty decision of the church's future snatched from their hands without consensus or even warning, in the middle of the night, no less. Some of them, *incensed by this treacherous act*, never darkened the door of that little church ever again.

The times they were a-changing during the next decade. The post office closed in 1909 and general store in 1912. Thurman lost 20 of its 50 or so families to outmigration between 1905 and 1915. The church closed for good in 1931, after which, without a cause for which to fight, the Ladies Aid Society disbanded as well. So did the Thurman Rook Club, the Sewing Circle, the Thurman Community Club, and the Thurman Players. This is exactly the recipe for making a ghost town.

The last community institution to succumb was the church's challenger, Thurman School, which finally closed in 1944. Of the four rural schools in the Thurman vicinity - Thurman,

Lone Star, High Prairie, and Little Cedar Creek - Thurman endured the longest, 57 years all told. Ironically, the Thurman School building was also moved later in its life, but less than a mile, perhaps to be closer to the Eastman family, whose children made up the bulk of the school's population.

This unspoken Thurman motto, *if you need it somewhere else, move it*, is still alive and well today. My chicken house was moved here last spring from 8 miles down the road.

There is little left to see of the High Prairie Church, but much to hear. In the church's first location, the stones in the cemetery still speak. At night, along the abandoned section line roads, you can hear hushed and urgent voices, the creak of wagon wheels, and the huffing of horses as they strain under the unusual load, a moveable church. In both the new and the old location of the High Prairie Methodist-Episcopal Church you can hear *How Firm a Foundation* and *Blessed Assurance*, sung sweetly and hopefully, even if only by a handful of voices.

**Names in the Mother Tongue.** There is no map or book to show me some of the deepest things I want to know. This creek, for example, along which I find so many pieces of worked flint, has been referred to for more than a hundred years as Thurman Creek, but what was it called ten or twelve thousand years ago by the early inhabitants of this place?

I want to know the first words by which these places were known, in the mother tongue of the people who crossed the Bering Sea land bridge and found their way south and east between the two great glaciers at the end of the Pleistocene Epoch.

Without a clue as to destination, these intrepid explorers followed the mammoth, mastodon, muskox, bison and wild horses to the heart of what we now call America. I

scarcely know which is the greater challenge to my imagination, that Ice Age megafauna like mammoths once roamed Kansas, or that some of the voices I hear in the land are from people with the courage and savvy to hunt these huge beasts. *Mammuthus columbi*, the Columbian mammoth that most likely roamed this part of the country at that time, stood 12-14 feet at the shoulder and weighed 16,000-20,000 pounds. There is absolutely nothing in my personal experience that enables me to make a picture to go with this data. Our Zebu, a 1600-pound cow with a modest set of horns, is quite capable of intimidating me. I cannot picture confronting an animal ten times larger than she.

Tools dating to the time of these first hunter-gatherers, the Paleo-Indian period, are rare but not impossible to find. A friend of ours found a Clovis point on his land about 30 miles from here just a few weeks ago. This projectile point, about four inches long, was probably hafted to a bone shaft and attached to a wooden throwing stick, the weapon of choice for hunting mammoth.

The archaeological periods in Kansas are the closest thing I have to a framework for the civilizations that preceded our own on the prairie:

Archaeological Period	Time Period
Paleo-Indian	10,000-6000 BC
Archaic	8000 BC-1 AD
Early Ceramic	1-900 AD
Middle Ceramic	900-1500 AD
Late Ceramic	1500-1825 AD
Reservation	1825-1900 AD

American history as we know it is shallow ground compared with the unplumbed depths of the native history of this place. Traveling back through time to follow the rise and fall of Thurman, Kansas (1874-1944) is nothing to the wrinkle in time through which I need to travel to find the source of these voices I hear most faintly in the land and which therefore most deeply compel my curiosity.

As the glaciers withdrew and the mammoths and mastodons became extinct, the prairie grasses and wildflowers began to emerge in a warmer, dryer new world. The Flint Hills were a favorite location for native camps and villages. Everything necessary to survival was relatively near at hand in abundance: plenty of wild game, fish, mollusks, seeds, nuts, and berries for food; hides, feathers and pelts for clothing; medicinal plants; a ready supply of flint for tools; sheltered camps near fresh water and wood; and high bluffs for lookouts.

Ownership of the land was everyone's and no one's; stewardship of the natural resources was the sacred responsibility of each and all.

I hold in my hand a wasp-waisted axe of knapped flint, probably from the Middle Archaic Period, and wish there was a magic word or incantation I could utter that would unlock its five- or six-thousand-year-old secrets.

Each time I walk along this creek I find flint that bears the mark of an ancient, loving toolmaker. I like to cup these flint shards in my hand and listen with the ear of my heart and the instinctive wisdom of my hand. I do not understand the language, but I resonate with something the stones convey across the chasm of years, a spark of liveliness, a hint of their original purpose.

I will hear more of these older voices, of that I am certain, but no matter how diligently I search or how carefully I listen, there is much about the true natives of this place that will remain a tantalizing mystery.

*Things men have made with wakened hands,  
and put soft life into  
are awake through years with transferred touch,  
and go on glowing for long years.  
And for this reason, some old things are lovely, warm still  
with the life of forgotten men who made them.*

*-D.H. Lawrence*

**Just Suppose/Juxtapose.** Meet Alice Johnson North. With poetic license in hand, I bring her back to life, although she's been dead for 45 years. I pick Alice because I like her for having once said something like this to her nephew Ray: *In all my years in the Flint Hills, I have never lived in a more colorful district than Lone Star.*

This was actually a very positive thing to say about a somewhat marginal area, a section of particularly flinty upland from which most of the first settlers had already exited by the turn of the century, and the place to which *poor, newly arrived speculator-farmers* and other folks from *diverse social and occupational backgrounds* were moving.

The Lone Star district was indeed a showcase for diversity: residents were English, Irish, German, French, and Welsh; they were farmer, stockman, housepainter, broommaker, stonemason, preacher, and coalminer. The school, from which the district derived its name, was optimistically founded in 1887 with aspirations that Lone Star would be *a light of intellectual hope*. All in all, this sounds like my kind of neighborhood.

Uppity folk from the more prosperous area to the south, who sometimes hired Lone Star young people as ranch hands and household help, referred to them without apparent compunction as *trash*. *Trash* could evidently be identified by the fact that they *slept in their clothes in winter and kept their cats and dogs in the house*. Alice North, despite her relative financial stability and long-standing position in the local community said *colorful*, and for that reason I have chosen her to star in this story with me.

This tale travels back and forth across time, interweaving fact and imagination. I have taken many liberties; chief among them is the fact that there is no historical record of an ice storm in this area in 1898.

#### Who is Alice Johnson North?

Alice Johnson was born in Carlisle, Iowa, near Des Moines, on December 2, 1876 (the year Bell invented the telephone; it would be 30 years before phone service caught up with Alice in Thurman, Kansas). Her parents were Charles and Sarah Johnson, who would later donate the land upon which to set down the High Prairie Church after it was relocated in the middle of the night.

Alice moved with her family (including older brother Arville and younger sister Myrtle) to Kansas when she was 3 years old, first to Ness County, and then to the Thurman area when she was 8. She attended High Prairie School for two years, until Lone Star School opened only a mile north of her family's home in 1887, saving her 6 miles of travel every day.

In 1895 Alice married a local boy, Clarence Pierpont North (in the way of things back then, her younger sister Myrtle also married his older brother Vernon). Clarence was eight years her senior and became one of the county's most successful farmers, a Chase County Commissioner, and a representative to the State Legislature. The Norths lived in a number of locations in Chase County over the years, starting out on a homestead in the Lone Star district, about two miles north and a half mile east of where Alice was raised.

Alice gave birth to eight children in all, four of each gender, between the late 1890s and 1916: Edith, Edna, Victor, Walter, Ralph, Neva, Howard and Hazel. Two of the boys, Victor and Howard, died in early childhood; a third son, Walter, and one daughter, Edna, each died in young adulthood in the 1920s. Alice's father died in 1918, her mother in 1927. The North's youngest daughter Hazel was just 18 when her father died in 1934. In this short paragraph is a considerable amount of sorrow over the course of 30 or so years; seven of the eleven people Alice North loved best in all the world were dead by the time she was 57.

Alice and her daughter Hazel moved to Wichita sometime after Clarence died and were living there together as of 1940. I lose track of her after that, except to know that she died on July 10, 1960 at age 83 and is buried in the Matfield Green Cemetery next to her husband.

Now, allow me to drift slightly from pure fact toward imagination for the sake of deepening this map. Let's say it's the start of the new year in 1898 and Alice Johnson North is just a month past her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and has not yet had her first child nor confronted any of her later sorrows. Alice is young, eager and energetic. She and Clarence are living on 160 acres he bought from his father in the Lone Star district, a very respectable spread for a couple just starting out. This area is what we now call the Tower Pastures, the northern-most part of the Homestead Ranch.

I can show you the very spot where Alice lives, down between two ridges for protection from the wind. Trees have been planted for a further windbreak and for shade in the summer. The cut stone root cellar has a vaulted ceiling and is in magnificent condition over a hundred years later. There are still foundation stones to show where the house likely stood. A spring runs through the middle of the site. In short, it is rather a lovely setting in which to imagine Alice in 1898, except that there is a severe ice storm on the way.

On a different layer of the map, just 5 miles away but 107 years distant, I step into the story beside Alice at the same point on the calendar, just two days before my 46<sup>th</sup> birthday, and with the same ice storm ahead.

I want to go deep into the map with Alice, to see if we can possibly cross paths, and to contrast her experience and mine in search of how much or how little we might have in common across more than a hundred years.

But first a little word about weather, the great equalizer. In the ancient conflict between humans and nature, sometimes no amount of either backbreaking labor or sophisticated technology can make a difference in the outcome. We do the best we can to care for our families, our land, and our animals, but weather is a formidable

adversary. In this there is no difference between Alice in 1898 and Marva in 2005.

For American storm stories that bear this out, it's hard to beat the Schoolchildren's Blizzard of January 1888, in which 80% of all the cattle in Kansas were killed. Here's how the storm was described in the 1893 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica:

In one [blizzard] which visited Dakota and the States of Montana, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas and Texas in January, 1888, the mercury fell within twenty-four hours from 74° above zero to 28° below it in some places, and in Dakota went down to 40° below zero. In fine clear weather, with little or no warning, the sky darkened and the air was filled with snow, or ice-dust, as fine as flour, driven before a wind so furious and roaring that men's voices were inaudible at a distance of six feet. Men in the fields and children on their way from school died ere they could reach shelter; some of them having been not frozen, but suffocated from the impossibility of breathing the blizzard. Some 235 persons lost their lives. This was the worst storm since 1864; the Colorado River in Texas was frozen with ice a foot thick, for the first time in the memory of man.

My first thought upon reading this account was *oh, but at least nowadays we have meteorologists who could have given us a warning*. And then I remembered the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004.

Control is an illusion.

ICE STORM: January						
S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

### *Alice's Diary, New Year's Day, 1898, Saturday*

*Clear and sunny today. A lovely start to the New Year. We had a nice day with Arville and Stella at their little house on the McDowell Ranch. The horses were stepping lively on the drive home and the sky was beautiful. I can scarcely believe it's January.*

**Weather:** 64°/46° Wind 6-28 mph (SSE) Visibility 5 mi.

The distance to the tenant house in which Alice's brother and his wife live on Thurman Creek is about 6 miles, a journey that takes an hour, more or less, by horse and wagon. I can cover the same distance by truck in about 10 minutes, but some of the roads on which the Norths travel no longer exist in 2005, which makes my trip a half mile longer. The roads are all still dirt and flint rock as they are in Alice's time; the last half-mile of the way takes me across a pasture on barely-discernible tracks in the tall grass.

### *Marva's Diary, January 2, 2005, Sunday*

*No sun today. I can feel a change in the weather and the forecast confirms the feeling. Looks like ice or snow is headed our way. I think I'll make a run to Emporia to pick up a few necessities in case we can't get out for a while. Jane is going to bake me a caramel cake for my birthday tomorrow.*

**Weather:** 57°/30° Wind 10-14 mph (N) Visibility 3 mi.

My access to a car, electricity, telephone, television, computer and Internet are the most glaring contrasts to what Alice has available in 1898.

The 80-mile round trip I make to Emporia in one afternoon for two small bags of groceries is unthinkable to Alice. She undoubtedly has given much more consideration to preparing well for the winter and does not have the luxury of making a last-minute trip out for just a few things. For Alice and Clarence, a trip to Emporia and back is a two-day undertaking that requires them to make arrangements for someone to do their essential daily farm chores while they are away. I made the round trip in 2 hours. Alice, I must point out, lives much closer than I to a store, just 4 miles from Eastman's General

Store. I am 25 miles from the nearest small store in Strong City. What Alice and I have in common across 107 years is that we each personally know the proprietors of our nearest stores, can purchase items by signing a credit slip, and could rouse the shopkeeper from bed to open the store in the middle of the night if we had an emergency.

It is also worth noting that since the Norths have a milk cow, Alice would not need to leave home for three of the main items on my grocery list: milk, cream and butter.

### *Alice's Diary, January 3, 1898, Monday*

*The weather is definitely taking a turn today. There aren't many trees here, but Clarence took the wagon out this morning to see if he could lay in a little extra wood, just in case we get a bad storm. Whenever the weather changes like this, I always think back to that terrible blizzard when I was 11.*

*I hauled water and mended a few things this afternoon. It's very foggy outside with fat raindrops that turn to ice as soon as they hit the trees and grass. The branches of the cedar look like they have diamonds in them. Baked a caramel cake and stewed a hen for supper.*

**Weather:** 34°/28° Wind 7-13 mph (NNW) Visibility 4 mi.

Alice and I both use a woodstove for heating, but two things are different: (1) she also uses her woodstove for cooking, which I do not; and (2) we have many more trees available for firewood than do the Norths.

The fat raindrops that turned to ice are wet and cold. My high-tech micro-fiber outerwear and Gortex boots are definitely a big advantage over Alice's muslin and wool and her slick-soled leather shoes.

Alice and I both keep chickens, but I doubt she can afford to have the same relationship with chickens as I do. Hers is not a hobby flock; it is a necessity. Alice keeps dual-purpose birds, well suited for both laying and frying; she must regularly face the chore of killing one of her chickens for dinner. The old laying hen Alice stewed for dinner was selected pragmatically; she was no longer

sufficiently productive. I, by contrast, fuss over my pet birds and take them treats every few hours while they're confined during the storm; I bring them chopped apples, special scratch and fresh water. If they had opposable thumbs I would take them playing cards. I'm afraid I'd have to be starving to death before I could bring myself to sacrifice one of my dears for dinner.

The caramel cake Jane baked for my birthday is nearly identical to Alice's. The differences lie in the tools used to make them: Jane used an electric hand mixer and baked the cake in a gas oven; Alice mixed hers by hand and baked it in the woodstove. Both were delicious and very handy to have around during a storm.

#### *Marva's Diary, January 4, 2005, Tuesday*

*The freezing rain just keeps falling. It's getting hard to walk from the house to the chicken coop. I closed the hatch in the afternoon so the girls wouldn't go out and get turned into popsicles. We double-fed the cows to bulk them up for this weather. The wind turbine froze up in mid-morning and the sun hasn't shone since Saturday, so we have very little electricity. I filled jugs with water in case we don't have power to run the pump. We played cards by flashlight this evening and are getting ready to go to bed early. I wonder what things will look like in the morning. I am guessing I will not be able to go to Kansas City as planned.*

**Weather:** 30°/26° Wind 0 mph Visibility 2 mi.

As we begin to lose electricity, Alice and I gradually have more in common. I revert to the slower pace of writing with pen and paper instead of on the computer. I make no phone calls. The essential chores become our primary focus: taking care of the livestock and keeping the woodstove burning. The last thing on my mind is to use some of the modern-day gizmos I have that Alice does not, a vacuum cleaner, for instance. Except for cooking and washing dishes from time to time, normal household chores drop far down on the priority list. Washing dishes is now a more labor-intensive activity that requires heating kettles of hot water. Alice faces this

same challenge every day, but doesn't own nearly as many dishes.

While I have the luxury of a battery-powered flashlight by which to play cards and read in the evening, Alice's coal oil or kerosene lamp serves the same purpose; it requires more fiddling, but produces a far lovelier light.

Alice, of course, is not thinking about whether or not she'll have to cancel a monthly visit to Kansas City tomorrow. She hasn't been to Kansas City since she was 3 years old, when her family moved to Kansas from Iowa.

#### *Alice's Diary, January 5, 1898, Wednesday*

*The whole world is covered in ice. The frozen rain came down nearly all night and changed into snow in the early morning. It has been very cloudy and cold all day. I had a hard time opening the chicken house door, but I am still getting 6 or 7 eggs a day even in this weather. Clarence is glad he penned the cattle yesterday. Even so, the poor things had icicles hanging from their ears and tails. He would never have been able to get the wagon and team out to haul hay on this ice. The cow and horses in the barn are faring well. After I did the morning milking, I nearly lost all the fruits of my labors when I slipped walking back to the house.*

*More snow in the afternoon. Our little trees are cracking and groaning under the weight of the ice. Some branches have broken. The hand pump is frozen, so Clarence had to break through the ice on the spring with an ax just to get at some water. You could see the spring water clear as day, bubbling under the ice, but you couldn't get a drop. It would have seemed more beautiful if we hadn't needed it so badly or had to work so hard to get to it.*

**Weather:** 26°/8° Wind 5-24 mph (NW) Visibility 3 mi.

Ice levels the playing field, or more precisely, makes it equally challenging to stay on your feet no matter where you stand. Alice and I are closer to a common ground, with a few noteworthy exceptions.

We still have telephone service, which Alice will not have access to for at least another 10 years, but the phone is not an instrument of which I am terribly fond or upon which I have

a great dependence. I do admittedly treasure the ability to connect to the Internet, which is impossible to do anyway now that we're low on electricity.

While we're out checking on cattle and pastures, I use my cell phone briefly to call Kansas City and cancel my appointments. I am closest geographically to Alice in this moment; I can almost see the track to her house from where I stand near an ice-covered cell tower to make my calls (great reception here). With business taken care of, I am reassured that the rest of the world is still turning, even as the prairie seems to stand still. More and more, especially as my energy is allocated almost exclusively to essential and manual tasks, I find myself dislocated in time, which serves to draw me closer to Alice in 1898.

The trees along the creeks and section lines in 2005 are much older and taller than those Alice has on her homestead. Huge tree limbs are splitting with mighty rumblings and gunshot-like reports accompanied by the sound of shattering ice. Some trees have tipped over under the weight, their roots loosened by all the rain that preceded the ice. Power poles, which of course are not to be found in Alice's world yet, are leaning or have fallen altogether; power lines snap or sag to the ground.

Because we are "off the grid" and generating our own electricity from sun and wind, we are closer to Alice than to the modern world in terms of our self-sufficiency and reliance on the earth to sustain us. The basic prototypes for our solar and wind energy systems, believe it or not, already exist in Alice's time.

The use of passive solar to heat water dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in Greece. The first solar powered motor was patented in 1861 and the earliest version of the photovoltaic cell for converting sunlight to electricity was invented the year Alice was born. Windmills were first used to automate grain-grinding

and water-pumping in 500-900 A.D., while wind was first utilized to generate electricity in 1888, when Alice was 11. Alice and Clarence may very well have a windmill to pump water.

During Alice's lifetime, refinement of wind and solar energy technology will take a back seat to developing more efficient and reliable, but non-renewable sources of energy. The myopia appears to be lifting; I believe the kind of home and systems Jane and I have are a foretaste of the future, however distant.

People who are used to having an unlimited quantity of electricity at their disposal might perceive our modest, self-sustaining way of life as distinctly Luddite, more like Alice's, but when the grid goes down and we're one of the only households in the eastern half of the United States with power, suddenly we'll look like geniuses.

#### *Marva's Diary, January 6, 2005, Thursday*

*We have only enough power to keep a few basic things running (fan on the composting toilet, deep freeze) and have not used an electric light since Tuesday. At least the sun shone for awhile this morning, but the temperature only made it up to about 19 and snow fell again in the afternoon. I'm having difficulty keeping fresh water in the chicken house; it freezes within a couple hours.*

*Mary's electricity has been out since Tuesday night, so since she's out of town we've been going over there to keep a fire in the woodstove to prevent her pipes from freezing. We've had to borrow some wood from her pile, since we used up what we had inside and our pile outside is covered in a sheet of ice.*

*Feeding cattle has been an incredible chore. Just trying to get the strings off the ice-covered big bales is an Olympian effort. I measured a single stalk of ice-coated grass and it was 3 inches in circumference. The tires on my truck are frozen to the ground. Luckily we have kept Jane's car and the feed truck cleared off enough to drive, but the roads are still incredibly slick.*

*Power came back on at Mary's in the evening and we were very grateful to be able to bathe for the first time in two days, not to mention being relieved that we no longer had to keep fires going in two separate houses.*

**Weather:** 19°/3° Wind 14-15 mph (WSW) Visibility 9 mi.

Although Alice and Clarence's stone and frame house is modern for its time and Alice almost certainly considers it more fashionable than a house built of prairie grass, ours is by far the warmer and sounder of the two homes. Straw bale construction was fairly common in the Great Plains at the turn of the century, especially in the Sandhills region of Nebraska, but despite the durability and insulative quality of the technique, it was often viewed as a temporary housing solution. As to permanence, and contrary to the story of the Three Little Pigs, the 73-year-old straw bale Pilgrim Holiness Church in Arthur, Nebraska is still standing, while Alice's house is long gone.

I also have the considered blessing of a good many more windows than Alice, which is quite helpful in this foggy, cloudy weather. Any light at all contributes to dispelling my sense of isolation on an island of ice in the middle of the prairie. I realize in a new way how much I benefit daily, especially in winter, from the convenience of turning on a light when I need it; a flashlight simply does not have the same qualities as a lamp.

Having a feed truck with hydraulic arms that allow us to lift and roll out 900-pound hay bales seems at first thought to be a huge advantage we have over Alice and Clarence, but is it really? The Norths have a small herd that was easily penned in close proximity to the barn as soon as Clarence realized a storm was coming. He has only to climb up into the loft and throw down hay with a pitchfork to his hungry cattle. In other words, the Norths have taken on exactly what they can manage with the resources they have available. Our operation is scaled up proportionately to the higher-technology resources we have available, but what if the technology fails? What if the truck gets stuck on the ice? What if the hydraulic arms are frozen to the bed of the truck? What if the truck runs out of gas and the valve on the gas barrel is frozen? What if we get a flat tire and don't

have electricity to run the air compressor? How then do we feed 75 hungry cows and their calves? All of these things did happen this week and solutions were invariably time-consuming and exhausting. There were several times I would gladly have traded places with Clarence in the chore department.

Weighed in the balance, progress is only just so progressive. In situations like this one, I more clearly see how the machines we've acquired in order to accomplish bigger and bigger things lure us into taking on a scale of responsibility that we cannot possibly carry with only our human hands when the need arises.

*Alice's Diary, January 7, 1898, Friday*

*Today it is still very cold and cloudy. Nothing seems to be melting at all. At first I thought the ice was very pretty, but it has made our work so much harder, and I am now a little tired of it. Every single blade of grass is still covered in ice and the prairie looks like a field of icy daggers. Just walking from the house to the barn is hard, which is about the only getting out that we do. I feel tired and a little blue. When will the sun come back?*

**Weather:** 27°/17° Wind 10-12 mph (S) Visibility 6 mi.

Alice has the blues and I think it might be time for a little storm story about one of my chickens, Miss Holiday. Perhaps you remember that she's my black chicken who has a gift for song and who was very hard to find in the dark when she tried to run away to the Dewdrop Inn. Well, she went out on another one of her little adventures and really ended up singing the blues.

On Thursday morning when the sun was shining and we were momentarily hopeful of a break in the icy weather, I felt strongly that I needed to figure out a way to help the girls feel a little less cooped up. The entire outdoor pen was coated in an inch-thick wall of ice and there was no way short of an industrial-size blowtorch that I could get the gate open to let them out in the usual way. There is, however, another little chicken

hatch on the south side of the coop that I have never used before. I propped it open and cobbled together a makeshift ramp so the girls could get down to ground level without breaking their necks. I kept checking all morning, but didn't see a single chicken come out to play. I hardly blamed them; the yard was still a field of ice. When the sun went behind the clouds once again and we were leaving to go feed cattle, I closed the little door. *Oh, well, I thought, at least they got a little fresh air in the coop.*

Two hours later we returned, cold and exhausted. Jane stoked up the fire while I made hot cocoa from scratch. We sat by the fire and sipped our hot drinks while our bones warmed up. After about an hour I went out to bring the chickens fresh water and more treats. I walked right past Miss Holiday and did a *what's wrong with this picture* double-take that nearly sent me into an unintended double-axel on the ice. She had evidently been the only chicken brave enough to step out for a bit and I, assuming everyone was still in, shut her out in the cold. There she was, hunkered down in a roosting position atop a three foot tall mound of frozen broomweed, snow-flecked feathers ruffling in the cold wind. Bless her little pea-picking heart, she let me scoop her up without an ounce of fuss and was holding on so hard to my gloves with her cold feet that I could hardly set her down in the chicken house. I felt absolutely terrible, of course, but she's a hardy, adventure-loving gal and seems none the worse for wear.

For nearly five days this ice has been bedeviling us. It's enough to make anybody sing the blues. Here's Miss Holiday's song:

#### ADIÓS FROZEN TOES BLUES

By Miss Holliday

I'm just a little bitty, black and pretty chicken girl,  
Lord, ain't it a pity, never been to the city, chicken girl.

I've been abandoned, good for nothin', ain't that right?  
I'm a motherless child plumb busted here in all this white,  
Lord, all this white, this frozen dad-blamed white,

this dirty rotten, thick as cotton, been forgotten white.

Feel like I musta been out here all through the night,  
yeah, half my life,  
I ain't gonna live to ever make some  
handsome struttin' ain't he somethin' rooster man  
a pretty little law-abiding wife.

Oh, I got the blues, you'd have 'em too,  
I tell you, baby, it ain't good for you.  
I got the fall-down busted iced-up trussed-up  
so low adiós frozen toes blues.

#### *Marva's Diary, January 8, 2005, Saturday*

*Each day seems very like the one preceding it in terms of both weather and chores. So far the ice has not melted one iota. Tomorrow will mark a full week since I was off the ranch, which is not altogether unusual. I don't so much feel the need to go to "civilization" as I simply crave a change in the unrelenting gray on white and the cold that goes with it.*

*Even the dogs seem to have a case of cabin fever. For a change of pace we're going to take them and go over to Mary's house for the night (since she's still out of town) and enjoy the blessing of plenty of electric lights, a leisurely meal where we can clearly see what we're cooking and eating, and hot water for a nice long soak. I can also take the time to transcribe some of my handwritten pages to computer. I've had new insight into how the computer affects the process. When I write on paper, I miss being able to see the shape it will take in its final version on the printed page. And the keyboard does a much better job of keeping up with my brain!*

**Weather:** 30°/23° Wind 4-18 mph (SE) Visibility 4 mi.

Relocating to Mary's house brings us abruptly back into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although I sat working at the computer for several hours in the afternoon gloom before reawakening to the fact that I could turn on an overhead light. A hot bath and washing my hair are high on my personal priority list and easily accomplished here where there's plenty of electricity. It is safe to say that my hygiene practices and Alice's are a world apart.

Alice most likely has a portable metal slipper bath or "tin tub" she uses in the kitchen once a week at best, probably less frequently, but almost certainly on a Saturday night. Bathing is no small chore. Water must be heated on the stove and brought to the bath in pails.

Alice and Clarence take turns with the same bathwater (Clarence usually goes first) and wash with a rough soap that Alice crafts from lard and lye. Afterwards the dirty water is hauled out of the house, pail by pail, courtesy of Alice. With ice hindering access to the supply, the water allocation priorities are watering the stock and drinking, cooking, and washing dishes. A bath is low on the list and probably not even possible until after a thaw.

Perhaps Alice can afford a commercial brand of charcoal tooth powder; in the alternative, she may make her own tooth powder from a "receipt" like this one from the Farmer's Almanac:

1 oz. myrrh (fine powder)  
2 spoonfuls of your best honey  
A pinch of green sage

It is impossible to say how often Alice brushes (and I use the term loosely; she may apply the powder with a scrap of sponge or just her fingertip), but it is almost certainly not twice a day.

I wash, dry and fold several loads of clothes in the space of a few hours. Alice would be shocked. She washes clothes as infrequently as possible, and maybe not at all in the winter months. Washing is a laborious all-day process that involves hauling large quantities of water, then scrubbing, boiling, rinsing and bluing the clothes in large outdoor vats. She dries her clothes by hanging them on lines, over fences, or on bushes.

We are probably closer than most Americans in 2005 to having similar toilet facilities to Alice's in 1898. Hers is an outhouse and ours is an indoor outhouse, a composting toilet. In this weather, having the outhouse in the house is much more comfortable, although the Norths also have a crockery or enamel chamber pot in the house to use at night or in cold weather. This reminds me of a joke I learned as a child: *How can you tell the difference between rich people and poor*

*people? Rich people have the canopy over the bed and poor people have the can o' pee under the bed.*

### *Alice's Diary, January 9, 1898, Sunday*

*It seems so long ago that we went to church, but it was just a week ago today. That was the last time I spoke to anyone other than Clarence. Even if the weather were better, we are not on the minister's circuit for today. We will just have our own worship time here, as we have in the past.*

*Even though it is the Lord's Day, Clarence shot two prairie chickens that had come out up on the ridge to feed this morning, so I must get out to the barn and dress them so that we can have some fresh meat for dinner.*

*Thank the Lord the ice is finally starting to melt this afternoon. Clarence must have thought I was crazy when I told him I intended to kiss the first patch of bare ground I laid eyes on.*

*By nightfall most of the trees and grasses have lost their coating of ice, but the ground is still very icy. Walking back and forth to the barn is still quite treacherous.*

**Weather:** 48°/30° Wind 15-23 mph (SSW) Visibility 5 mi.

With this partial thaw, our wind turbine breaks free and begins to produce electricity once again. The solar panels clear off by afternoon and are beginning to harvest energy from solar rays. We have plenty of power at the house to do everything but run the microwave or hot water heater, our biggest electrical drains. I set to work boiling water to wash dishes so that Jane can bake for a meeting she has tomorrow evening.

Alice, who has not allowed her dirty dishes to stack up, is mulling over preparations for a festive Sunday dinner. As the oldest Johnson daughter and her mother's right hand for many years, Alice has known how to cook since she was 8 or 10. Most dishes in her repertoire are relatively simple, but reliably delicious. For dinner she is preparing boiled potatoes and canned beans from last summer's garden, a pie from the preserved fruit of her mother's own peach trees, and fresh prairie chicken prepared as follows:

#### Prairie Chicken Receipt

After preparing, boil in hot water until quite tender in all the joints except the breast; take out and rub all over with butter; salt, and pepper, and boil briskly with the breast; then take out again and with a lump of butter on each piece set in the oven for a very short time.

Refrigeration is not as big an issue for Alice in winter as it is at other times of year, but its lack during at least half the year influences how she manages food. Leftovers from dinner tonight can be kept cool in the kitchen window, but that would be impossible in summer. The root cellar keeps potatoes, cabbages, turnips and apples for the better part of the winter. Home canning provides the only other way of preserving fruit and vegetables. Beef and wild game can also be canned, but spoilage is a serious hazard. Meat, especially pork, is more often salted or smoked to preserve it. The spring keeps milk, cream and butter cool during the warmer months, but even this becomes a problem during times of drought.

Jane and I prepare a meal similar to Alice's: roast chicken, mixed vegetables, and rice, with lemon squares for dessert (both families have obviously finished off the caramel cakes they baked on the 3<sup>rd</sup>). The difference worth remarking upon is that Jane and I did not have to garden and can last summer or go hunting this morning to bring this meal to the table; we simply reached into the freezer for the chicken and the vegetables, a luxury that is still 40 or more years beyond Alice's reach.

#### *Marva's Diary, January 10, 2005, Monday*

*We had a ranch team meeting in Cottonwood Falls this morning and were able to make it to town. Unfortunately, we once again have freezing fog that is making the roads icy. Jane's meeting for this evening has been cancelled.*

*The wind turbine is beginning to freeze up again this afternoon and the gloom descends. With a sigh we pack up the dogs and move back over to Mary's house. I am very grateful for the use of her electricity and computer. I think this writing project just might be saving my sanity!*

**Weather:** 30°/24° Wind 9-14 mph (NNE) Visibility 2 mi.

Alice, I'm certain, is just as disconcerted by this new round of ice as I. While I am thumbing through books, researching on the Internet, making notes and typing these pages, what is Alice doing when she's not busy with her household chores?

The shelves in Alice's house probably do not include many books beyond the Bible, the Methodist Psalter and perhaps Dickens, Cooper, Shakespeare or Milton.

If she's lucky, she also has a back issue or two of any of the popular women's magazines of the day, such as *The Delineator: A Journal of Fashion, Culture, and Fine Arts*, or *Godey's Lady's Book*, both of which feature fashion plates, fashion novelties, patterns for crochet, needlework and knitting projects, how-to articles like *The Practical Dress Instructor*, sheet music, fiction and editorials. Alice might also read *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Ladies' Home Journal* or *McCall's*.

Alice has a number of projects underway that give her pleasure and keep her distracted during the long days of gloom and ice; among her options are new kitchen curtains, a needlepoint sampler, or a quilt she's piecing in cooperation with her mother Sarah and sister-in-law Stella. She may also have on hand the yard goods and pattern to begin sewing a new Sunday dress. Inevitably there is mending to be done.

The Sears, Roebuck & Company mail-order catalog is still quite a novelty. The first full-length edition in 1894 was marketed as the *Book of Bargains: A Money Saver for Everyone from the Cheapest Supply House on Earth*. The *Wish Book*, as the catalog became known in many households, was a popular source of entertainment in rural areas, especially in winter. After an issue became obsolete, it continued to provide value in the outhouse; the catalog was both handy to look at and a stand-in for toilet paper, which was

not introduced until 1880 and not widely available on a roll until about 1907.

*Alice's Diary, January 11, 1898, Tuesday*

*My marks on the calendar show we have now had this weather for more than a week. If I did not make these marks, I'm not certain I would know what day of the week it is. Our routines have all been disrupted.*

*It is foggy and dark again today. It may be only my imagination, but I think the ice is even more slippery. Although it is hard to see beauty in something that has caused so much difficulty, I notice that the fog has caused delicate needles of hoarfrost to form on the pump handle and the fence. Clarence is of the opinion that the weather is about to change, some sign or other that he sees, but who knows what the future holds?*

**Weather:** 28°/24° Wind 9-12 mph (NNW) Visibility 2 mi.

The wind turbine is still frozen up, so we continue to be low on electricity and therefore remain headquartered at Mary's with regular slippery jaunts to the house to stoke the woodstove and care for the cats and chickens. Feeding the cows today was another adventure as Jane lost control of the feed truck and had to ram it into a big bale to get stopped. Two of the Penzey Sisters escaped out the back door of the coop when I was bringing the chickens water this evening. I have never been a skater, but I had to learn a few techniques in a hurry to capture and transport them one at a time across the ice rink without falling. Dorothy Hamill's name has come up more than once. Our arthritic old dog Traveller likes to use the wheelchair ramp at Mary's to get up and down from the yard; today she just slides all the way down it.

The longer I am out here in the ice and the deeper I dive into this project, the more I begin to believe that Alice really is living just 5 miles up the hill. As we haul a load of dry wood from the shed to our house, I think how neighborly it would be to drop by the North place with a goodly pile of hedge logs to tide Alice and Clarence over. There is so little wood around here in 1898.

The door back and forth across time stays open and boundaries begin to fade. My map has just gotten deeper.

Alice is not really our neighbor, of course, and in fact she has considerably more neighbors than we do. There are about 15 families in the Lone Star District and another 35 or so in the remainder of the Thurman settlement; at least six live a mile or less from the Norths. Alice's parents live only a mile and a half away. In less than 50 years this will all have changed dramatically. By 1944 Thurman will be a *ghost settlement on the prairie*.

What suffices today as a "neighborhood" consists of only three other people who live within two miles of us. Fewer people own more land these days, and only a handful actually live on their property. Two of our neighbors are frequently away for long stretches of time. Our third neighbor lives in a cabin down by Little Cedar Creek and, like Alice, does not have a telephone, electricity or a car. In other words, there are often times when help in an emergency would be hard to come by. Coincidentally, all three neighbors are out of the state during this storm, which means that we'd have to drive, walk or skate about five miles to reach the nearest live human being if we needed to. Five miles on ice would be a very long hike; exactly how long it would take I have no idea.

Alice has a good sense of how long it takes to get to each of her nearby neighbors' houses either on foot or on horseback in good weather. She also knows with some precision how much social capital she has available at each of those households. Alice understands that in this kind of weather, her parents might as well live in Kansas City instead of only one-and-a-half miles away; getting to them would be too treacherous to even attempt.

I live in a time in which cars, telephones, email, and television give the illusion of

shrinking distances. The ice storm shatters that illusion. The prairie is still a wide and wild world in which I am comparatively small and fragile. Alice and I share this awareness.

*Marva's Diary, January 12, 2005, Wednesday*

*Despite the fog and low visibility this morning, I am ready to shout for joy; the meteorologists are predicting a thaw today. I have no problem going into deep denial about the rest of the forecast, which predicts ice or snow later tonight and plunging temperatures through the weekend. If we can just get these base layers of ice off of everything, life will be so much easier.*

**Weather:** 34°/28° Wind 4-15 mph (NNE) Visibility .9 mi.

As our time together across time draws to a close, I reflect on how very real and three-dimensional Alice has become to me. I, of course, have invented the entire relationship, so I have not become real for Alice. I wonder how she'd react if it were possible for me to travel through time to visit her and tell her of my life just 5 miles and 107 years down the road.

I expect Alice would be most confounded by my computer, especially by the fact that I can transfer this writing file onto a flat disk no bigger around than a tin of stove black and carry it back and forth between our house and Mary's, or send and receive messages, pictures and documents in a matter of seconds from one side of the globe to the other. Sometimes even I am staggered by the apparent magic of this technology.

In terms of change, the next 60 years of Alice's life will be a rip-roaring ride. She will not live long enough to use a computer, but she will nevertheless see many remarkable advances in technology: electricity (and the marvelous appliances it makes possible), telephone, gas-powered automobiles and tractors, motion pictures, television, Kodak and Polaroid cameras, commercial airline travel, and early space explorations, to name but a few.

Alice's life will draw to a close just as my life is beginning. For a brief time, just a year and a half in 1959 and 1960, we will both be alive at the same time.

Thanks to the power of imagination, we are both alive again on this deep map for ten long days in an ice storm. The experience has altered me in ways that I have yet to fully appreciate. The most visible and immediate impact is that more than a week of tedious clouds, fog and ice did not oppress me; instead of being enervated, I was elevated to new heights of passion and avidity in my research and writing.

One particularly remarkable thing happened during my journey back and forth across time. At first I believed I was speaking for Alice; now I wonder if she was not speaking for herself and is yet another voice I hear in the land. I picked Alice because she called her district *colorful* and I picked the year 1898 because of where I could find Alice at a particular point in her life. I might just as well have picked 1897 or 1899. Not until today did I bother to check a perpetual calendar to see how the days corresponded to the dates in 1898; they are exactly the same as 2005.

Thanks, Alice.

*You're welcome, Marva.*

**VOICES IN THE LAND: A POSTSCRIPT**

I have tried, without success thus far, to find someone still living who could say, *Ah, yes, Alice North! She was a wonderful person... loved to cook and was fond of a practical joke...had more friends than you can shake a stick at...or anything directly personal that would have taken me one step closer to the real Alice.*

I have not given up on this idea, because there's nothing I find more thrilling than tracking down a primary source in person. On the other hand, I am already pleased beyond

all reason by how absolutely real Alice has become for me. Perhaps I'll adopt her as my prairie persona for telling stories to ranch guests. She may become the critic who sits on my shoulder while I write and reminds me to stay honest and real, to see things as *colorful* instead of as *trash*. She will always be alive on my map of the ranch.

I have never been satisfied with surfaces. A flat map of my life is simply not enough for me. I want to know what's above and below, behind and beside me. I want to poke under the skin of things until I find the life-giving juice.

I believe that significance, like success, is self-made rather than bestowed, the result of an endless series of creative acts. A sense of deeper meaning and hidden connections rarely arrives in my life unbidden, it comes in answer to questions: *Who lived here before me? Who built this place? How did these rocks get here? How long ago? Of what are they made?*

The answers to questions like these create layer upon layer of richer meaning. Formerly flat facts acquire heft and dimension; they interlock and are set into motion in dynamic relationship to one another. The sediment of significance accumulates, the doors into a deeper map of the world open, the voices begin to speak from the ground. And so I go, always deeper, until I stand knee-deep in the ooze of these rocks when they were mud on the shores of the Permian Sea.

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