The Good Deeds of Bears Ear

633 words

In 1875, the year before the Battle at Little Big Horn, a 30-year-old single woman named Mary C. Collins, who’d been living in eastern Iowa, accepted an appointment as a missionary/teacher on the Great Sioux Reservation of the Dakota territories. In truth, she had felt called to go to Micronesia, but when she failed the physical exam because of what the doctor called weak lungs, she accepted a teaching position at a place the Lakota had called “Ti Tanka Ohe,” on the east bank of the Missouri River, several horse-and-buggy days’ travel north of Yankton, not far from what is, today, Pierre, South Dakota.

In her hand-written autobiography, she describes growing up in the 1840s, in Keokuk, Iowa, a Mississippi River village where everyone was a pioneer. “And I loved it,” she says. “The blood of the pioneer was in my veins.”

Had to be really, to take the job she did.

The truth is, she says, nothing could prepare her for life beyond the Missouri River at that time. One day while resting on what became nearly a week-long trip to the new Oahe mission, Miss Collins, just about overwhelmed by the gigantic openness of
the plains all around, left the wagon in which she’d been riding and took a short walk toward a telegraph line.

“I went off by myself to be near the pole,” she writes, “and I could have hugged it as it seemed to me a hand reaching back home. . .so far away.”

But she was committed. She’d come to help the helpless.

Many things she never forgot in those first years on a windblown world of grass and clouds beneath eternal skies, a place where a young teacher would get her own education.

In 1877, totally unprepared, she found herself terrifyingly alone, on horseback, in the eye of a full-fledged prairie blizzard. She was on the path to a small school for women that had just been established and no more than three miles away when that Dakota storm blew in furiously. Prairie blizzards’ overpowering winds reduce vision to nothing all too readily; and there she was, alone, on a horse in the middle of a place she wouldn’t have recognized even if the day was crystal clear.

She tried to hurry her horse along, she writes, “but facing the storm was hard work and he would not hurry.” With sideways snow cutting through what little warmth she could pull around to protect her, all direction seemed non-existent. She had no
choice except to fear the worst when suddenly a Lakota man, someone she didn’t begin to recognize, came up out of the nowhere storm behind her in his wagon, all alone.

That rescue, she an event she never forgot. He “jumped out,” she says, “and put me into his wagon, carried me to the school house, rubbed my frozen ears with snow, and built a fire for me.” What he’d clearly and selflessly done—this man named Bears Ear—was save the young teacher’s life.

By her own description, Collins explains how she had been full of enthusiasm for teaching her students and preaching the gospel of love, but the unpresuming selflessness of her rescuer astounded her because even though Bears Ear was not a Christian believer, in those hours when they waited for the snow to stop, “he cared for me most tenderly.”

In the topsy-turvy world of ours, it’s always a lesson, isn’t it?—when teachers become students.