Good Samaritans on the Prairie

Okay, at least the man in the ditch in the famous New Testament parable, put upon by robbers, says the gospel of Luke, wasn't alone. What passed along the road above as he lay there was hardly a freeway, but at least there were passers-by, even if neither of the first two paid him the time of day in his suffering.

But the third one helped the guy out and up. What I'm saying is, at least the poor guy in the ditch wasn't alone.

Now when it came to homesteading, “the neighborhood” was hardly suburbia. Some people, all alone in a world of long grass, would have greatly appreciated a few rubber-necking neighbors. In isolated sod houses, loneliness swept in like contagion. Some early settlers, way out here in the middle of nowhere, could go a week or more without seeing another human face, red or white.

Take a young man named Peter Jansen, who claims to have traveled Minnesota, Dakota, and Kansas before settling outside of Beatrice, Nebraska, on the banks of the Big Blue River. Jansen set up a claim twenty miles southeast of town; when he'd drive his team in across the open prairie, on his way home he claimed he’d pass only one house.

Jansen was just a kid, and he and his brother were alone in all that open space. The truth is, they'd been warned that the land near the river was usable, but the upland stuff, where they’d laid claim, was a big, bad risk.

But Peter Jansen and his people had come from Russia, where working the prairie had become a way of life. The Jansen brothers took upland sections, and like a thousand other German-speaking Mennonites, they simply told themselves that the common wisdom was uncommonly wrong. He could make a go of a farm all right. They’d done it in Russia, after all.

He and his brother, both of them young and single, were nothing if not determined; but their oxen were rookies too, and their plow was sticky-new. Truth be told, neither knew the first thing about breaking unbroken ground or running a team. Headstrong maybe, sure, but experienced? —heavens, no.

It was, Peter Jansen says in his memoir, a very hot day on the plains, and the work was not going well. Soon enough the oxen broke contract and simply took off on him, hauling that brand-new plow along all the way to a nearby slough, where they waded in belly deep, the whole kit-and-caboodle with them.

"When I reached the slough," Jansen, a very pious young man, claims he was "thoroughly disgusted." He sat down and almost started bawling, he says, wishing that for all the world he was back in Russia.
As you might have guessed, there is a Good Samaritan in this parable from the Plains, a man named Babcock, who just happened by, serendipitous, you might say, a man who lived four whole miles away.

"Trouble?" Babcock asked, when he came upon that new plow and a team of oxen going nowhere, cooling in the slough.

Peter Jansen claims he had more trouble with the English language than he did explaining to neighbor Babcock that he was more than ready to throw in the towel on the whole, ugly business of farming out there in the middle of nowhere.

"Take off your trousers," the old man directed. "Get in there and plow yourself out." And then came the magic words: "I'll help you lay off the land and get your plow a’going."

Jansen ends his tale without much fanfare, nothing but the abiding truth about his own good Samaritan: ". . . which he did, and so started me farming." Right neighborly.

Jansen kept on farming, his operation growing until, some years down the road, he was feeding as many as 30,000 sheep. Much later, he served in the Nebraska legislature and might well have been governor if he hadn’t turned down the nomination because his faith wouldn’t allow for capital punishment.

And farmer Babcock? —we know barely anything about him. But then, when Good Samaritans ride off, Long Ranger-like, into the promising sunsets of our parables, it just makes a better story.