Labors of the Prairie

Hattie says that just before her mother got married, she’d left the farm to start working in a grocery in Springfield, SD, where some young men “seemed suddenly to have a greater hunger for candy and cigars.” One of those young men would become Hattie’s father, who, she says, in all candor, “had need of a girl like this.”

A century ago, when a man got to a certain age, and he came to know he’d better get somebody to help with chores—a man needed to get a wife like he needed to get a haircut.

I spent some sweet hours this week, reading old xeroxed copies of autobiographies written by a long-ago couple who lived incredible lives—Pete and Hattie.

Now Pete had been a city boy in the old country. Never lived on a farm, didn't know where to milk a cow or how to harness a horse.

Pete says he asked a former neighbor if he could just go along to America when the neighbor was taking the boat back. “It all sounded so good to me—to work in big fields with horses and machinery and to milk cows and feed hogs and gather eggs by the pail full. . . There was not much future for me in Holland, as Father and Uncle Koos were quite young yet and jobs were very scarce,” he writes in his own life story. “I promised my sisters I would come back in five years. A promise I did not keep.”

For most of their married lives, Pete and Hattie rented--first this place, then that. They married in Springfield, lived for a while on the Rosebud, then tried California, where they dearly missed the plains, and thus moved back to Springfield. When the ground dried to dust and hoppers dug onions right out of the ground, they moved east to Wisconsin, then tried Minnesota, where
they spent a winter so totally snow bound they came back to balmy Wisconsin.

I think I hit them all. What’s clear is Pete and Hattie were never particularly wealthy.

But treasures? —you bet. "In our own family, she even did her own midwiving for the last seven of our nine kids," Pete writes, and then he adds, "only with a little help from her husband."

If it would have been a one-person maneuver, it's hard to imagine Hattie would not have managed those seven births herself.

She picked up midwifery on the reservation, when, with the help of the Rosebud doctor, she helped out neighbors. Pete and Hattie were living in a chicken coop right then. "Really wasn't too bad," Hattie writes, "--it was a two-room chicken coop."

On the Rosebud, little daughter Etheleen arrived on the Sabbath, midst a blizzard. The family hadn't gone to church.

We spent the day reading Bible stories, singing hymns, and visiting together. After supper we put the children to bed at eight because they had to go to school the next day. By nine we had a new member in our family! Etheleen had arrived. She was a beautiful big baby. I am sure she weighed at least ten pounds, but we didn't have a scale to prove it.

Then she says what happened more often after her babies arrived: "Soon [Etheleen] was dressed and snuggled in my arms, so Dad and I went to bed and got a good night's rest."

Incredible.
Pete died in 1978, Hattie in 1989. They'd been together for 62 years. I had to look it up. Hattie never said exactly how many.

Sometimes I can’t help thinking it's a blessing to know we won't be around to see how people read through our lives a century from now, what grins they'll register, how they'll smile at odd memories of their quaint ancestors.

And I hope they do smile. I hope they can.

In fact, I just hope I smile as much and often as did Pete and Hattie must have snuggled up in a blizzard with a brand new baby.

Remember, it was, after all, a two-room chicken coop.