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From Small Wonder(s)

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From Small Wonder(s)

a series of historical vignettes about regional history for KWIT/KOIA public radio in Sioux City, Iowa. Podcasts of these and other stories from the collection, read by the author, can be found on the station's website, www.KWIT.org, by typing Prof. Schaap's name into the search engine.

James Calvin Schaap

The Blessing on Laurel Hill



The only means of getting man and woman, beast and wagon across the rain-swollen Niobrara was by rope, hand over hand. Dozens of oxen and as many as 500 horses had to get to the other side, as did 523 Ponca men, women, and children.

And the rain wouldn't stop. All those wagons were disassembled and shouldered through and over the raging Niobrara. It took a day to recover, yet another rainy day.

In May of 1877, after endless haggling and heartless bureaucratic inertia, someone in faraway Washington determined that the Ponca tribe in northeast Nebraska would be forced to leave their villages, their homes and schools and churches, their sawmill and their flour mill and just about everything they owned, and walk to Oklahoma.

Just imagine 500 people in soggy early May trudging up and out of endless muddy hills along the Missouri. Imagine rains so never-ending that on some days it was impossible to travel.

Try to imagine you and your family, your people, walking the entire state of Nebraska, north to south, and then all of Kansas, only to reach a place your elders had already determined so "stony and broken" they could never live there and would never love. Imagine endless rainy days and nights, forever cold and clammy. No rest for the weary. No shelter in the time of storm.

And you didn't want to go. You just plain hated the idea of leaving home, the place where your people had lived for generations. That last night in the village, no one had slept. There was simply too much crying.

Is it any wonder people took sick? Is it any wonder that some of the most vulnerable would die? Should we be surprised that the Ponca's Trail of Tears has countless unmarked graves?

Truth be told, the Ponca people were never troublesome. They hadn't attacked wagon trains or stolen horses, were never war-like or even belligerent. From the Ponca tribe, in all honesty, Washington had little to fear. But Washington determined for no good reason that the Ponca had to leave for Indian Territory. They were, after all, Indian.

On May 23, not far from the Elkhorn River

and near a tiny frontier town named Neligh, a little girl, the daughter of Black Elk and Moon Hawk, succumbed to pneumonia. White Buffalo Girl was all of 18 months.

Her parents, who watched her die, were frantic, beyond grief. A Neligh carpenter nailed together a wooden cross. The family was Christian.

Up on the hill in a cemetery called Laurel Hill, Black Elk, distraught, talked to the white folks of the town who, with the Ponca, had gathered around that wooden cross.

“I want the whites to respect the grave of my child just as they do the graves of their own dead,” Black Elk said. “The Indians do not like to leave the graves of their ancestors, but we had to move and hope it will be for the best.”

Imagine that setting, up on a hill above a thick strap of trees that follows the snaking river below through an endless ocean of grass.

“I leave the grave in your care,” Black Elk told

those white settlers. “I may never see it again. Care for it for me.”

And so they did. And so they do yet today, 140 years later.

You’ll find Laurel Hill cemetery way atop Neligh; and you’ll find there, just a short hike from the road, a stone that memorializes a Ponca child named White Buffalo Girl.

Won’t be hard to locate. Her grave site is the only one that stays decorated all year long. Just get out of the car and look for flowers. Look for a wooden cross and lots and lots of flowers.

Tell you what—go there. Go to Neligh some morning. I don’t care how far you have to drive, just go there, to Laurel Hill. Go up there and visit the grave of little White Buffalo Girl. It’ll bless your heart. Call it a pilgrimage, if you will. Better yet, make it one.

Call it a blessing. Because it is. A shelter in the time of storm.

Music of the Spheres



A few scrappy, three-foot cuttings, no bigger than buggy whips, are coming up from the front yards of a half-dozen houses thought itself to be a town. That’s it—the only trees for miles around. Mr. Taylor, a school board member who lived in the back of his own shop, sends his hired man around to take you to the Talbots’ sod house, about a mile out of town. You don’t know the Talbots.

It’s 1888, and you’d never been on a perfectly endless landscape like the one you’re on. It’s hot, very hot, but there’s a breeze—feel it?—the only thing keeping you from sweaty suffocation.

This place is not home. You’ve just come out of Normal School in eastern Iowa, determined to be a teacher, determined to go west like so many others. Now that you’re here, you wonder if you simply lost your mind.

But the Talbots are kind. They take you in sweetly, Mrs. Talbot offering reassurance that there is some humanity here, some love, some comfort.

The next morning after a remarkable breakfast, you take the hand of the little Talbot girl, then leave the sod house for the school, which is yet another soddie, twelve feet by fifteen feet—that’s it. But it’s the place where you’re going to be a teacher, a soddie so small it’s little bigger than mother’s summer porch.

Brush and weeds cover the ceiling so thinly you try not to look up because when you do it’s blue sky all over. You step back outside and look around at nothing but grass as far as the eye can see. You can’t help thinking no one else is coming because no one, nothing, is anywhere near. Where would the children come from?—you ask yourself.

In a half hour, you know you were wrong.

Your name is Mrs. J. J. Douglas, and you’re remembering those times, years later, as if in a

dream because it all seems so museum-like that the whole sod house story is almost embarrassing, and would be if remembering those times weren't so blessed.

"I found in that little, obscure school house some of the brightest and best boys and girls it was ever my good fortune to meet," Mrs. Douglas says in a memoir she titled "Reminiscences of Custer County." And then this: "There soon sprang up between us a bond of sympathy."

Sympathy?

"I sympathized with them in their almost total isolation from the world," she says, as if each of the kids in that 12x15 foot schoolhouse were suffering.

She may have assumed that, but somehow I doubt that they were.

And then this: ". . .and they sympathized with me in my loneliness and homelessness."

I don't think sympathy moved equally in both directions. I'm guessing the kids didn't think they were suffering, but their barely-older-than-a-child teacher did.

The kids were sweethearts, and that's what she remembers. They were singers, she writes, "so many sweet voices," especially two little girls who seemed "remarkable," she says, "for children of their age."

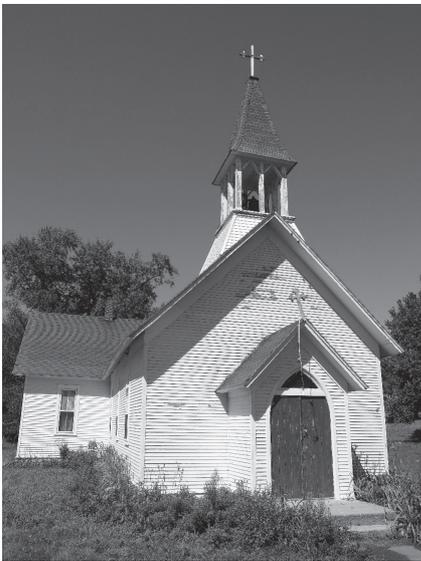
Mrs. Douglas's reminiscence ends with a perfectly heavenly image. One bright day, having dismissed her scholars, she stood outside that sodhouse door and watched the kids walk out into the horizon by way of a path that led into a stretch of big blue stem so tall it hid the them completely.

But what that grass didn't hide was their beatific singing. "I could hear those sweet tones long after the children were out of sight in the tall grass," that teacher says, a moment she claims she often recalls because "I shall never forget how charming that music seemed to me." A blessing.

She doesn't say it, but I will. I wonder whether those girls' music wasn't created just for their teacher, music of the spheres for her "loneliness and homelessness," music sung by the angels.

I think that's how she remembers it.

St. Mary's Chapel, Flandreau, South Dakota



The day lilies planted around the little frame church are mostly a weed patch. The dried-up front door begs paint; the cross at the peak just above it is bent slightly in fashion that's sad for a

cross, akimbo. An electrical cord from somewhere inside dangles over the peak, suggesting that if you want juice inside you set up a generator on the badlypitched front step.

A young woman from the Flandreau Indian School just across the street smiled strangely at me when I asked her if there was any possibility I could go in. You know the look—"why on earth would you want to?" St. Mary's Chapel looks like a place so long ago left behind that what's inside could be nightmarish. Its best years are memories. If that.

"It belongs to the tribe," she told me, meaning not the school. The two are separate in the small town of Flandreau, South Dakota, not all that far away. Oddly enough, the tribe, the Santees, aren't so much a part of the school, so the two are separate in the way things can be separate in small towns, as in, well, walled off.

The namesake of St. Mary's Chapel is a woman named Mary Hinman, whose story—what can be known of it—may well be remembered best by her tombstone in a tiny cemetery about 160

miles south in Santee, Nebraska. Mary Hinman was the dutiful wife of the Rev. Samuel Hinman, dreamer, prophet, mover-and-shaker, and tireless Episcopalian priest who suffered all the tribulations the Santees did, with them, after the Dakota War, when most of them were run out of Minnesota.

Samuel Hinman, her husband, buried 300 of the people he served on a bloody path from the Lower Sioux Reservation to Ft. Snelling, Minnesota, to Ft. McClellan, Iowa, to Crow Creek, South Dakota, and finally to a kindly strip of reservation land along the Missouri in northeast Nebraska.

Whether Hinman had time for a marriage will forever be a good question. For years, he and Mary were miles and cultures apart. He was building a mission dedicated to the suffering Santees, a school and a church on the brand new reservation, along with a home for his wife and children, all of it with funds from donors back east.

Then a tornado destroyed everything, flattened the house he'd built for his wife and sons. Mary Hinman died, sometime later, of injuries from which she never recovered.

The stone in the cemetery at the Santee Reservation testifies to her love for the people she and her husband served in the Church of the Most Merciful Savior, the church her husband founded.

That stone bears a glorious legacy: "A token of the affectionate remembrance of the Santee Women for Mary Hinman," all of it in caps.

It's worth a trip just to read it.

Some Santees left their Nebraska reservation for the big bend of the Sioux River in what would become Flandreau, South Dakota. And when the Episcopalians built their first church in 1867, they came without their pastor/dreamer, who was embroiled in scandals, sexual and financial, a recital of sins that, even though unproved, still make you weep.

What little can be known of Mary—what's there on the cemetery stone and here in an old almost forgotten chapel—is almost enough to make me pull weeds from the day lilies, maybe scrape and paint that patchy front door, get rid of that noose-like electrical cord, and, on a ladder, straighten the akimbo cross above the door.

I wish the world would know more about Mary Hinman's love, but that's not about to happen. Truth is, I'd settle for making sure the good folks of Flandreau, South Dakota, know what kind of treasure stands right there among 'em. That's not likely to happen either.

Sometimes the very best we can do is something akin to that akimbo cross.