

OLE CHATTER

BY FERN

Because we think the story will be of great interest to a great many of our readers we are printing a biography written by the late Mrs. Anna Gilbertson in this space instead of the usual line of Chatter.

Mrs. Gilbertson has written a vivid account of her early days on the North Dakota prairies and old timers especially will enjoy her account of life in those times.

My Autobiography

By Mrs. Ole Gilbertson

I was born Anne Lohn in Voss, Norway, October 8, 1855, coming with my parents to the United States in the spring of 1856, before I was a year old. After a 2-year on in Jefferson Prairie in Illinois, father decided to go on farther west to join the new colony at St. Ansgar, Iowa, where we lived until I was ten years old. I can remember very well the horrors of the Civil War and the hardships and privations the people in the new settlements had to endure also the grief at President Lincoln's assassination and death. I received my education in the common schools of that day, a year of high school in Mitchell and a year at the Cedar Valley Seminary at Osage, Iowa. I taught school several years until I was married at the age of 24.

I was married to Ole Gilbertson in 1880. He came with his people from Norway when he was 7 years old. We lived in southern Minnesota one year, moving to Polk County in northern Minnesota where we farmed three years. By this time we had about 30 head of cattle and 10 horses and as we did not like the place we had, my husband thought he would rather go into the stock raising business farther west. Having heard of the abundant hay and range on the Mouse River in North Dakota we decided to go there. The Great Northern was just completing its road into Devils Lake, then called Creel City, so we traveled in a covered wagon, hiring two men to go with us as we had another team and wagon loaded with lumber enough for a floor and ceiling in the log cabin we expected to build and live in, also one door and two small windows.

Some furniture also was packed in there, a cook stove, table, bedstead and a couple of chairs. We came to what is now Towner in 1884, having traveled from Devils Lake, 90 miles, without a sign of habitation except two settlers on Broken Bone, later called Pleasant Lake. The first thing was to get a roof over our heads. Our house was built of logs and consisted of one room with two windows and a sod roof. We were protected on all sides by heavy timber. The weather was nice, which was lucky as we had to live out doors while the cabin was being built and our bedroom was the covered wagon. We did not see many Indians; a few half breeds camped on the river but they were friendly and good neighbors. Our greatest fear was of prairie fires. The grass was heavy on the prairie and on the river bottoms it was at least three feet tall so there was no stopping a fire once it got a start.

My husband had put in a crop of wheat on the farm we left in Minnesota so he had to go back to take care of that and also to bring with him some things we could not take with us on the first trip. A 16-year old girl was to stay with me to milk the cows and help take care of the children, Carl 2½ years old and Alice not yet one. Before my husband left I put in considerable time

practicing shooting with a 16 gauge Winchester rifle, which was supposed to protect us. In an emergency I probably would have been too scared to think of it. One evening at dusk the girl went out to do the milking. I had lighted a candle and put it on the table in the house when I heard the tin pail rattle and upon looking out saw the girl come over the fence — she did not stop to come through the bars — and ran into the house screaming the "Indians are coming" and dived under the table. The Indian proved to be Tip Cornish's man who was bringing us some chickens which was a welcome change from our diet of cured meats.

One day late in the summer of the first year I decided to visit the Cornish's. My husband hitched a team to the wagon and I drove the three miles across the bottom taking the children with me. Their house was situated in the timber and could not be seen before you came close to it. Upon nearing the place I saw a bunch of horses grazing and a man standing guard over them. The horses were all saddled and ready for action. As everybody rode horseback those days, as the easiest means of getting around, I was not much disturbed. As I came in view of the house another thing greeted my eyes which was not so reassuring. There, against a big stump of a tree just outside the cabin door were stacked a dozen or fifteen rifles. Mr. Cornish came to help us out and take care of the team and told me not to be afraid as these men were out hunting horse thieves and were having dinner at his house. They were evil looking men I thought, each man carrying a gun and belt of cartridges besides the guns outside. They were the Vigilantes from out west somewhere. They took three men with them from the river, one a half breed from our neighborhood and two others from up the river. These men disappeared. Some years later three skeletons were discovered in a lake bottom when the lake dried up, which probably explains their fate.

Several settlers had come in the year before we did, locating some 20 or 25 miles south from what later became Towner and had established a postoffice named Villard with a Mrs. Nichols as postmistress, getting the mail once a week from Bismarck if the weather was favorable. We missed the newspapers, the mail was uncertain and the postoffice, Villard, six miles away. We had subscribed to the Chicago Inter Ocean, a weekly, and a neighbor was getting some St. Paul papers so we exchanged our reading matter.

We had no thought of illness or death so it came as a shock to us the second year when Mrs. Cornish died in childbirth for lack of medical

service. The few neighbors came together for the burial service. One had been so thoughtful as to bring a Bible from which he read a chapter and we sang a hymn from memory, which completed the service. She was buried near the house with the child in her arms. We were thankful for our good health, the nearest doctor being at Devils Lake, four days travel away, so whatever happened one had to just grin and forget it.

We lived in our one-room log cabin two years when through some trading we came into possession of some land on the other side of the river two miles down where we had built a story and a half house with three bedrooms downstairs and a room for several beds in the loft. It was built of logs but it had a shingle roof.

There were few social activities those first years — we were too busy. There were a few dances in the winter but we did not like to take the children out at night so did not attend those.

Reverend Aaberg came up from Devils Lake the second summer but we did not see him then. The third year Reverend Roise, a Methodist minister from Fargo, had come into the Pendroy settlement up the river.

Both he and his wife came to visit us and as they needed a milk cow, and we having several of them, let them have a fresh milk cow in trade for a new Webster Unabridged Dictionary. We entertained many Lutheran ministers later as our place was on the trail to the settlement further up the river and was about half ways between that and Towner.

As in all new settlements there were trials and hardships also losses. There was the time the cattle stampeded from the range by a blizzard in November which took them 50 and 75 miles away from the ranch. The ranchers got together and went after them but the weather was bad, the snow deep and the last bunch didn't get in until Christmas Day. Of course there were some losses. Another time, when with many other ranchers we ranged out stock near Buffalo Lodge Lake, a storm early in the fall brought our stock home so we had no loss that time as we kept them home but several of the neighbors took theirs out again and lost some as the storm drove them into the lake where they were found, being crowded from behind and into the lake where they were drowned.

My husband had a hand in organizing the county and was elected one of the first County Commissioners. In the nineties he was elected County Treasurer, which made it necessary for him to be at the County Seat, and the children coming of school age, we bought a quarter of land adjoining the town of Towner and made our home there.