

11

October 14, 1925 Willmar Tribune

OLD NORWAY LAKE REMINISCENCES

PRAIRIE FIRES, CONTINUED

Just for a change I shall introduce to the readers, Albert S. Listoe, to tell you his experiences in a fierce prairie fire, as near as I can make it, the same prairie fire which I referred to in my last previous article. A change may be of some good. It reminds me of the preacher who preached in his church without a time piece. He kept on preaching until he preached the whole audience out of the church except one. Addressing him he said; "Is it not time for you to leave too when all the rest have left?" "No! No!" said he. "No, I am the one who has the keys and am just waiting for you to quit so I can lock the doors." Hence, a little change.

Mr. Listoe was one of the very first mail clerks on the new railroad running out of St. Paul, called the St. Paul & Pacific R.R. (Now the Great Northern.) His run was between St. Paul and Morris. Morris was then the terminal, there being nothing west of there at the time of his writing. Mr. Listoe writes:

"In my youth I held for some time the position as mail clerk on the new railroad, going west from St. Paul. Some years later the road was changed to the Great Northern penetrating clear thru to the coast, but was at that time built only 150 miles west from St. Paul and with the exception of the first 100 miles west from St. Paul (now Willmar) its route lay through a stretch of prairie where but few inhabitants existed. Here and there one could see huts of wood or sod where another courageous pioneer had settled in the wilderness."

"Thrilling occurrences and adventures often took place therefore in that wild west that would naturally tempt a young man seeking the adventures it had to offer. That was one of the reasons I sought the appointment of mail clerk and I was not disappointed in my expectations. One of those early pioneer days it fell my lot to witness a prairie fire, an overwhelming sight, which stretched many miles in circumference. We were first attracted to it shortly after we left the last town which was a town of some significance and about 100 miles west of St. Paul (now the city of Willmar.) As far as the eye could see, the country was in flames. A railroad worker at a small station where we stopped, told us that the fire had raged violently all night and that many farmers (the land here was somewhat settled) had great difficulty in saving their homes from becoming the booty to the plundering element. Many stacks of hay and grain were destroyed."

"As we gradually went further and further on, we could see on the horizon huge conflagrations and dense clouds of smoke. Soon we were in the heart of the fire. We had to stop near Benson as the wooden bridge and ties of the track were burned away. Telegraph poles and fences were likewise burned everywhere. As soon as the damaged ties were replaced, the train proceeded on its journey, but until we came to Morris, which was then the train's terminal, the entire prairie was ablaze."

“It was now dark but all around us danced thousands of flames which lighted the heavens, giving the countryside a weird appearance. Rails had been laid about 20 miles further west where out headquarters were and where magazines and provisions were stored. A few of the railroad’s directors happened to be in Morris that day they were very concerned over the safety of the supplies. I was somewhat surprised when I met an old engineer by the name of Billy Ferguson, who told me that he had orders to go west immediately with an extra train to bring back possibly needed help for the workers at the terminus, and also bring back the people in case the provisions were destroyed. ‘It just isn’t any pleasant undertaking.’ Said Billy, ‘but someone has to do the dirty work, although I never thought that I would be singing this early in life.’

Billy Ferguson, the Engineer

“A few words about Billy—His youth was spent on the frontier. He had lived the life of the gold digger and cowboy in Wyoming and Arizona, and as such he took an active part in all the adventures, hazards and temptations which would befall one in that kind of life in the early days. A certain serious event which I will not touch upon here moved him in the meantime to seek a more quiet following. He was a mechanic by trade and in a short time he became an engineer on the new St. Paul & Pacific railroad which was steadily being built further into the wild unsettled west. Billy was a typical man of the frontier, courageous, adventurous, quick in emergencies, perhaps a little ignoble but good natured and as one can readily understand especially well fitted to hold the dangerous position as engineer on the frontier, where Indians and bandits made each step forward an uncertain one. Every time a new stretch of road was taken into use, Billy was self-appointed to run the first locomotive into the wilderness. Between him and the writer a friendship grew which from the very first was heartfelt and deep. This was proven at one time when I had the opportunity to show him a kindness upon which he placed a greater worth than that rendered, and said that I had saved his life. It happened while I was mail clerk on the railroad and riding through the uninhabited region. I was therefore not very busy and following a frequent custom I sought Billy stationed in his engine and begged him to tell his experiences of his gold seeking and cowboy days. Being very few inhabitants on this new prairie there was little for him to do and keep watch over, although he was very careful and conscientious.”

“One day just as we passed one of the few farms lying close to the railroad, Billy noticed a small object which appeared to us to be a mound of grass commonly seen on a new track. All of a sudden the object stirred and to our horror we saw a little boy jump up.”

PIONEER KID

(Continued)

12

October 21, 1925 Willmar Tribune

OLD NORWAY LAKE REMINISCENCES

BILLY FERGUSON, THE ENGINEER, (Continued)

"It was too late for the child to clear the track in time, and the engine passed over it. Billy stopped the train immediately, only to find the child's body crushed and mutilated. With the pallor of a corpse, Billy fell back crying, "Oh my God, I have killed a child—if it had only been myself!" After some time the conductor and myself succeeded in calming him and persuaded him to return to his engine. The crew had gathered up the body and carried it over to the farm house from where we heard the lamentations and cries of the sorrowing family. The father and three or four men came running towards the train cursing and vowing vengeance and demanding that Mr. Ferguson come forward that they might hang the murderer at once. After a great deal of persuasion on the part of the conductor and some of the passengers, the furious men were subdued, and I gave the sorrow irresponsible father my promise that the case would be carefully investigated by the authorities at Morris."

"Billy was apparently doomed to lose his life. Inasmuch as I had been in the engine with him, I was brought in for testimony, and it was only my account of the accident that freed him. Hence Billy's insistence that he owed his life to me and would give his life in return if such was ever necessary."

"When Billy told me of his orders to go westward, I made known my desire to accompany him and did not have much difficulty in gaining permission. He did however try to dissuade me by setting forth the probable dangers of the trip. A few minutes after the emergency train left Morris, I was installed as Billy's companion, and though smoke and fire surrounded us on all sides I was glad to be there. The sight of that gleaming screen of fire was worth a little risk. As we came further west the country was unsettled and uncivilized. Very few farms were to be seen but once in a while we saw a flock of cattle or deer seeking new grazing places and refuge from the fire."

"Then we saw a red light at a water station where we stopped. Here the watchman advised us that a bridge crossing the river nearby was burning. After this was repaired we proceeded and to our glad surprise we came to a stretch of prairie which the river had saved from the fire."

"We reached the terminus without any trouble and altho some of the magazines were destroyed the people were safe and they told us enough provisions were left to enable the workers to continue laying the track. Therefore there was nothing to hinder us from returning and after Billy had connected a number of empty freight cars to the locomotive, we proceeded on our journey again."

"We expected no hinderances on this trip believing all the grass was burned, but we didn't think of the stretch mentioned previously that had been saved by the river. When we reached this spot we found ourselves suddenly surrounded by a sea of fire. The grass and rushes were very tall in this low meadow and the fire raged violently. The wooden ties on the track were in flames also. On Billy's pale countenance I saw that he regarded the situation as serious. Can we make it? I asked and he answered, "There is no other course open than to put on full steam, and let the Lord and old No. 13 (the engine) take care of the rest." He accordingly put on the steam and at the rate of a mile a minute we flew thru the flames. We were nearly out of the fire when I saw the form of a woman clinging to a telegraph pole well towards the top. "Billy," I cried, "There's a woman on that telegraph pole. Stop!" But Billy shook his head and cried, "Don't dare to risk 36 cars, for if they are burned it will cost me my job." In the

meantime I sprang to the stopping apparatus, pushed Billy aside and forced the bar back to diminish the speed and cried, "Billy, stop! To the Devil with the train. You said that I saved your life once—do you want to see a helpless woman burn to death now?" "All right, you shut your mouth. You win," he roared. The train stopped and backed to where the unfortunate woman was. I ran down, leaped thru sparks and glowing coals over to her and told her to slide down. This she did and fell in a faint in my arms. I carried her into an empty car and cried to Billy, "allright, let's go pretty lively into Morris." I had seen by the light of the fire that the girl I had rescued was young and pretty. Fortunately I had in my possession a bottle of cognac which soon brot her to consciousness. Little by little the situation dawned on her and she told me how she came to be in this predicament and some of her life history.

PIONEER KID.

(Continued)

13

October 28, 1925

OLD NORWAY LAKE REMINISCENCES

A TRAGEDY AT MORRIS- (NO. 13)

She had a trace of Roman blood in her veins but was of Irish birth by the name of Anna Donovan and made her home with her brother John on a piece of land given him by the Government about 5 miles from the railroad. In order to earn extra money, John worked on the tracks and at times was away from home several days in succession. At such times Anna went to Morris to visit an aunt, a Mrs. Kennedy.

Morris as Frontier Town

Morris was always crowded with different sort of people, some honest people who came to establish a business, purchase land or look of r work on the railroad. There were, however, a great many undesirable characters who had settled on the outskirts of the town. Many tents and wooden shacks were raised where dancing, gambling and saloons were established and people who were thotless enough to visit these places were soon parted from their money. There were no police in Morris then; assault, robbery and fighting were in the day's order and every night, particularly from the gambling houses, we could hear revolver shots fired by someone who protested against spurious players.

One of the most notorious of the swindlers was a corrupt man by the name of Red Spark, called "Reddy" for short. During my conversation with Anna she told me that she had been assailed by him several times on her way to and from her aunt's house. Anna was betrothed to a young warehouse master of Morris, the new station, and had indignantly dismissed him, but he disregarded this and on several occasions laid in wait for her. His attentions finally became so insistent that he told her she would have to become more sensible. To her great fear that evening she saw Reddy coming towards the home on horseback, jump from his horse and run into the house. The rascal had evidently figured that her

brother was away, but fortunately, he was at home, down by a thicket back of the house. Hearing her scream, John came running into the house and Anna seized the opportunity to run out. In a flash John snapped his gun from the wall and Anna heard the explosion of two bullets. For a time she crouched terror-stricken behind a bush and John came out of the house, white and grave, and said: "Anna, remember you have seen nothing or heard nothing! You must go at once to our aunt in town and tell her everything, but neither of you must tell a word about it to anyone else. Tomorrow night when it has grown dark, I will come to town and you shall meet me at the coalhouse by the station. We will have to make plans for the future and I shall probably have to leave here at least for a while."

Assailant Was Shot

Then continued Anna, I gathered together some clothes and started towards the track so as to be certain of finding the way to Morris. I had gone a few miles from the house when to my horror I saw a prairie fire approaching. I threw my bundle and ran as fast as I could but the fire was close on my heels. The Lord gave me strength enough to reach the track and I climbed up the telegraph pole where you found me. I could not have held out much longer. You have saved me from a fearful death and I can never thank you enough. I have told everything even tho John forbade me to tell what happened at home but you who have risked so much to save a poor girl's life, I feel you must surely be a good person and will tell nothing that can harm us. I hope you will even be so good as to extend us still more help.

I sought to calm the girl and told her I would. I would have to accompany the train back to St. Paul the following morning. However, I promised to keep her secret and to see her at the home of her aunt when I returned to Morris in a few days to find out more about the incident.

We reached Morris finally and after escorting Miss Donovan safely to Mrs. Kennedy's home, bade her goodnight and told her not to let John follow any hasty advise, but that both should meet me the following Tuesday night in their aunt's home. After hearing their report I could determine on a solution for them to follow.

When I returned to Morris in a few days, I investigated around town and in the places of amusement if the disappearance of Reddy had caused any sensation. I found that no one seemed to miss him or care what had happened to him. It seemed as if he wasn't very popular, except among his own comrades, and those who stopped to give him a thought believed he had either been driven west of the fire or possibly had gone northward where another new railroad was under construction. I found all this was confirmed by Mrs. Kennedy when I called there later in the evening to talk with Anna and John.

John now told me that he killed his sister's pursuer when Red Spark drew a revolver from his pocket when John entered the house, "But I was too quick for him," he said, "and his bullet only grazed my arm while I poured a volley of bullets into his heart."

Shooting Never Discovered

After Anna had left home, John carried the corpse far out on the prairie and threw it on a hay stack which burned in the fire. The next morning only the charred bones were left. He removed the bridle

from Reddy's horse and chased it westward ahead of the approaching fire. Naturally the horse would not think of returning, and John as well as the rest of us felt tolerably certain that his part in Reddy's disappearance would never be discovered. In spite of this he was in a separate repentant frame of mind and told us he would never again be able to live on his homestead. He had decided to go southward to Indiana or Arizona where he could disappear among the motley classes this territory was mainly composed of. He insisted that Anna should marry as soon as possible and he would transfer the farm to her husband for little or nothing.

To make a long story, as Americans say, this arrangement was followed. Anna and the warehouse master were married shortly afterwards and moved out to the farm where they lived for many years and possibly still live there. John disappeared and Reddy's death remains as secret till this day.

I would possibly have had more scruples in telling about a murder like this above in this age. But in those days when one saw and heard of murders and infamies committed by bandits almost every day, one involuntarily came to the conclusion that the world was better off without such monsters.

When John Donovan killed Reddy to protect his sister's honor as well as for self-defense, my conscience did not bother me in keeping quiet. A year ago I heard that John had finally gone to Mexico to rest and had died there so now I can tell the story of the girl in the prairie fire of the early pioneer days. (Originally Norwegian in Minneapolis Tidende, Translated by the Swift County Monitor.)

Such was the life and struggles of the early pioneer days. Heard a remark that such horrible tales should not be told. I differ on the subject. I think the growing generation of today, riding in enclosed glass houses, carrying vanity bags, pocket mirrors, snuff and cigarettes, would not fare any worse to read about what the young people and old pioneers really had to endure and what ordeals they had to go through. In summer we were driven from our work by mosquitoes and horse-flies. Some even left the country on that account. In the fall when all grass was dead and dry we took chances to burn out or burn to death. In the fierce blinding winter storms lasting as much as 3 nights and 3 days without any letup, when a person could not venture one rod without guidance of a clothesline, people, horses and cattle sometimes froze to death. The great change in the winters then and now is a puzzle hard to solve.

PIONEER KID.

(Continued)

14

November 4, 1925 Willmar Tribune

OLD NORWAY LAKE REMINISCENCES

A TRIP TO ST. CLOUD—(No. 14)

The Kandiyohi County History is a valuable book and good authority on pioneer day, but in spite of the most scrupulous search, all is not told. I have in a previous article introduced Kristian Bjornstad, an early

pioneer. Just another episode: A trip to St. Cloud, not over the busline, the railroad, or an enclosed sedan, but by the old style pioneer motor. One Monday afternoon in returning from school 25, I was approached by Bjornstad, who asked me how old I was. I said 13. He said, "I know you are a good hand at driving oxen. I have a yoke of oxen which must be delivered to N.P. Clark, St. Cloud, this week. I will give you a five dollar bill if you bring them down this week." Oh! Gee whiz. Just think of a \$5.00 bill. It looked as big to me as grandmother's quilt and it was soon settled in my mind as far as I was concerned, but of course I had to consult higher authority first. Will let you know in the morning, I said. Getting home, I approached father and said, Bjornstad will give me a five dollar bill for to bring his oxen to St. Cloud! Can I go? He hesitated with his consent, but I was determined, so he finally said; "You suit yourself about that, but I tell you beforehand, you will find it a tough trip." Just what I want, I said, something tough. Bright and early next morning I reported at his pioneer dug-out. I knew he was a lover of his morning sleep, so I made a racket at his door and shouted: "Get out of bed, Krest, I am on my way to St. Cloud." He soon appeared and rigged me out with an outfit which would take first premium at any state fair now days, a yoke of oxen hitched to the truck part of a wagon, no wagon box, not even a piece of board to sit on. I had to hang on the reach pole, front bolster or walk to suit myself. A little provision grip was tied on behind. So "Buck and Bright" and myself stood ready for the St. Cloud trip. He said: "Have you got a knife?" I said no. He said: "It might come in handy to have one along. I have one, the only relic after my brother, Theodore, who died in St. Cloud last summer. Take that but don't want you to lose it for anything in the world." I took the knife (Norsk Taale kniv og slir.) Now I was off. In those days there were two things especially which were a plague and a menace to us—mosquitoes and horse flies (Kleg.) Mosquitoes were found everywhere, but the horse flies, as a rule, had their headquarters in the brushy land and when they attacked the cattle they (the cattle) stuck their tails up and ran so you might think they would run themselves to death. Getting to the inlet of Lake Andrew (Como Beach) I stopped the oxen so as to drink in the stream, and there they were attacked by the horse flies. The oxen stuck up their tails and made for the brush at a high speed, struck a stump with such a force I went head first to the ground just in time to save both my legs from being crushed between the stump and hind axle. I had been sitting on the reach pole. After I had reorganized and stood on the right end, I found I was stuck like a mouse in a tar bucket. One stump was in front so I could not drive ahead, and one stump behind so I could not back up. The chain was so tight I could not unhook it. I pulled out the yoke pins, dropped bows, yoke and tongue to ground and tied the oxen to a tree. The next thing was an exploration to find out if there was anybody living in the vicinity. I spied and found a trail leading to the home of Nordstrom, now a noted place. It is the Cedar Hill in Sibley park. He was very accommodating and willing to give me what aid I needed. We had to take the wagon all to pieces to get it out. That done, I hitched up my oxen again. Mr. Nordstrom was very talkative and very much of an adventurer. Had been on Indian chases from fort to fort, told about massacres, killing and bloodsheds, till I could feel like my heart was working down to the stomach. Came very near turning and going home. But giving the problem a second thot, I said to myself, No siree! They shall not have that laugh on me after I got started. I would get to ST. Cloud or bust. I crossed the prairie and passed what was called the Burbank Liberty pole where I stopped for dinner. It was near a stream with an abundant patch of grass, and there I unhitched and relieved the oxen of their yoke. While watching them eating, a kid my size came down from a house and we had a good conversation. When he was called in for dinner I went to untie my provision kit, when he came out and shouted, "Mother wants you to come in and have dinner with us."

Had an excellent good meal now for my afternoon run. Towards evening I began to look for night quarters. I had got by Paynesville into a German settlement, where I asked to stop. They pointed and said, "Go to next neighbor." This was repeated at half a dozen places. I found I could not trust next neighbor any more. Had to devise another method. I finally reached a little schoolhouse, found I could lift up one window sash. Says I, Kid, here will be your night quarters. I unhitched, relieved the oxen of their yokes and let them eat till late. Made a mosquito smudge and tied the oxen to an old style rail fence. With good smoke for their protection, I went into the schoolhouse and laid down on a long bench behind the door, but could not sleep. Three different things accounted for it. First, the mosquitoes, so extremely bad, they could make a minister swear. Second, intruding in a schoolhouse, a dangerous proposition, but the worst was the responsibility of the oxen left in my care. Someone might untie them and get away with them. No siree! I could not stand that any longer. I got out, stirred the smoke, and said to myself, Kid, you should have stayed at home. Father said something about a tough trip. After stirring the fire for a good smoke, I looked at the oxen who had laid down close together facing each other, and nearly begrudged them their fine time and conceived the cute idea to walk in between them, lay down, put my arm around the forearm of one of the oxen, and said, Now, Mr. Buck, if anyone tries to remove you, I go with on the bargain. So we three bunked together all night. The star spangled heavens were our overarch and the smoke our protector. Towards morning, however, the wind and the smoke had taken another direction, but not the mosquitoes. I got up early to let the oxen eat and prepare for the next day's run.

PIONEER KID.