On The Homestead—Story of Mrs. C. A. Carlson

Among the early pioneers of Weld county was the family of Charles A. Carlson. They were not so early as the colonists, but were early enough to do some genuine pioneering on the untamed prairies of the county. Sweden was the native land of both Charles and Louise, his wife, but all their children were American born.

Early in the 1880s this family came from Pennsylvania to Colorado, settling first in Denver, but seeing no future for their children without a foothold on the land, took up a homestead about seven miles from Erie in the southwest corner of Weld county.

But it was one thing to take up a homestead and quite another to meet the requirements necessary to proving up on it. It must be actually lived on six months in the year for five consecutive years and certain improvements made that meant the outlay of money and the performance of labor. It could not yield a living at once, so the family faced a problem; it was met by this arrangement—the father would continue to work in Denver to provide for the family and finance the new enterprise while Johnny, the eleven year old son, would hold the homestead.

Mrs. Carlson was not fully satisfied with this arrangement, but Mr. Carlson, who believed in "making men" of his boys even at an early age, insisted it was all right. So a rude shack was built, stock and sheds for their shelter placed thereon and the eager boy duly installed. This may sound like a lark to boys who have never tried it, but in truth it required qualities of courage and endurance that not many of that age possess.

The complete outfit consisted of half a dozen cattle including one milk cow, a few pigs, a small flock of chickens, a donkey —name "Jinnie"—and an old spring wagon. Stock had to be driven six miles to water and this was one of Johnny's daily tasks. Sometimes it was not easy when the wind blew and storms swept the prairie, but it was a part of the game and the young homesteader accepted it without protest.

He was provided with food but it was no easy matter to take care of it. The little shack was constantly surrounded by coyotes that made the night hideous with their howlings and that one day even contended with Johnny for his dinner of bacon that was frying on the stove; with the help of his loyal dog Johnny came off victorious, but at best it was a doubtful victory as the hungry pack stood outside ready with reinforcements. However, the boy, his dog and his cat had their dinner that day without further molestations.

Johnny had not a neighbor nearer than seven miles. He lived *alone* day and night while the slow moving days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months, with only his stock outside and his cat and dog inside the shack for companions—except when unwelcome visitors in the form of coyotes or rattlesnakes intruded. The snakes did not contend for his food, but they often came up through cracks in the floor and coiled themselves about the shack wherever it happened to suit them. One morning he found one in his wood box when he reached in for wood to start his morning fire. Again there was conflict, but again the boy and dog came off victorious.

Thus matters had gone on for almost two months when Mrs. Carlson, who had not seen the place, insisted on a visit; and not only insisted, but would not be denied. In this she was ably and enthusiastically supported by sons George and William, aged about nine and seven, and, as in all democratic organizations, the majority ruled; an early date was set for the journey and the day soon arrived. George and William were stowed away among the provisions in the back of the springwagon and Louise, with small Emma, took her place beside Charles on the seat.

The journey began. When almost thirty-five raw prairie miles had bumped under the wheels a little speck appeared on the desert landscape and Louise asked what it might be. "That's Johnny's," answered Charles. That was exciting news and young George and William, from their slab-of-bacon seat in the back of the wagon, set up a shout that did not stop until the little speck had developed into a typical homesteader's shack and its

master came bounding from the door with the astonishing announcement, "Jinnie's got a colt."

It was true. Somewhere on the prairie, some time in the night Jinnie had found a colt, and there it was in the morning when Johnny went out to feed, safe and sound beside its proud mother. After this new addition to the family had been properly appreciated the young homesteader and his visitors entered the shack; and it was within the first two minutes thereafter that Louise had reached a decision; she and the other children would remain as long as it was necessary for Johnny to remain; Dad could return to Denver, hold his job and keep the family supplied with provisions and, if he could not drive out often enough to bring them they could drive into Erie in Johnny's springwagon and get them. This decision was unalterable and Dad accepted it as any philosopher should. And now comes the story of life on the raw prairie as experienced by Mrs.Carlson and her young brood. Here is one of the first happenings:

One day about midafternoon, intending to drive to Erie for provisions, Johnny hitched the faithful Jinnie to the springwagon, but, being pursuaded by his mother that there would not be time enough to make the trip and also take the cattle to water, he unhitched, took off the harness, threw it under the wagon, mounted Jinnie and started with the cattle. It was late when he returned and in his hurry to get all the chores done before nightfall he forgot about the harness left under the wagon. Some time in the night Mrs. Carlson heard a noise outside and, peering through the little window, saw something moving under the wagon. Cautiously she called, "Johnny, Johnny, there's a man out there at the wagon stealing the harness." Johnny sprang out of bed, peered through the window and agreed: "yes, it's a man all right, and he is stealing the harness."

"What shall we do?" asked Mrs. Carlson; "we will have to scare him away somehow, won't we?" "Yes," replied Johnny, "I'll shoot," and he reached for his gun.

"All right,' said his mother, "do; but be careful; open the door just a little bit and shoot straight up into the air." Johnny did just that, and as his sudden "BANG" rang out in

the silent night it certainly gave proof to the thief that he had been discovered, and may have convinced him that the shack was full of armed and desperate defenders. There was a quick commotion under the wagon and while Johnny reloaded his gun his mother grabbed the ax and started for the miscreant. She reached the scene ahead of Johnny and just as her uplifted ax was about to come down on the head of the thief something shot out from under the wagon in great panic and struck her in the middle with terrific force; she went down under the unexpected blow in an inert heap, unable either to speak or move. In an instant Johnny was at her side trying to lift her up, while the miscreant that had dealt the blow, with a frightened "BAW" scampered off in great haste to find shelter beside his mother, the family cow.

Johnny was, of course, now convinced that the harness was not being stolen, but he was face to face with a problem a thousand times greater. Here was his mother, stricken and helpless, unconscious, probably dying, and not a human being within seven miles except the other children sleeping in the shack. It was a situation requiring straight and rapid thinking and prompt action. He took his mother's hands and pulled her to her feet. She was not unconscious, but unable to speak. He half led, half carried her into the shack, then, as unerringly and confidently as his medical skill of later years could have directed, he placed his patient on the bed, kindled a quick fire in the stove, sparing not the morning's kindling, and in a few minutes had a kettle of water boiling. He poured out a cupful, stirred into it a spoonful of ginger and dropped it, spoonful by spoonful down the quivering throat of his patient. Then he raised her to a sitting position, slipped her feet into a tub of water into which he had sprinkled a generous supply of mustard, then, (as his mother declared years later) almost rubbed the skin off, so vigorous was his treatment. But it was effective; she quickly recovered and after a while slept, while the child-man kept vigil until the break of day.

Another time Emma, the littlest one, was found by her mother intently gazing at a large coiled snake and so fascinated

that she could hardly obey the call to come away. Slowly and reluctantly she finally did move away, still looking back at the shining beautiful thing and saying in a disappointed tone, "Mama, I was going to b'ing you somefing pitty." The mother was horrified when she saw what the "pitty thing" was.

But Louise Carlson faced other troubles much harder to meet than those of calves and rattlesnakes. Somewhere there were men who resented the presence of the mother and her children on the prairie and who started in to terrorize them into leaving the premises. In the darkness of the night they would ride up to within a few feet of the little shack, make noise enough so that their presence would be known, then ride away, and after a time return; and this performance they would repeat many times within a night. Finally one afternoon a man rode up, stopped and, wholly unbidden, entered the shack. "It is too bad," he said, "for a young woman like you to be living here all alone with nobody but kids to keep you company."

"I am not alone," promptly and stoutly declared Mrs. Carlson.

"Oh, yes you are," contradicted the man; "don't you suppose I know?"

"But I tell you I am not," she again emphatically declared.

"Well, if you ain't, where's your man?" he demanded.

"He's out hunting rabbits with the boys," she said; "Listen, I think I hear them coming now." Then, as Emma took on a wise look as though about to make the damaging revelation that "papa was in Denver," she grabbed up the child, fully intending —or so she afterwards declared—to choke the words back if she did begin the fateful story. But this heroic treatment was not necessary, for in that same instant with a whoop and a yell that filled the desert air three small boys came into view rushing across the prairie *presumably* followed by their father. These whooping youngsters that saved the situation that day were the future governor, doctor and county commissioner. And the unwelcome but now thoroughly convinced visitor took sudden leave, not waiting for what might be the slower footsteps of the father.

These are but a few of the pioneer stories that might be told of this family; but with so many pioneer stories of remarkable families that should be recorded in the annals of Weld space is at a premium. However, not to leave this story wholly unfinished it should be stated: That Mrs. Carlson and her children sturdily held their ground, remaining in the little shack the full time required for proving up on their homestead. Later that homestead was sold and other land bought seven miles southwest of Greeley in the Ashton school district, which farm remains the family home to this day. The children of the prairie homestead have all been intimately connected with the life of the state and community. One son, George, was elected Governor of Colorado in 1914; Johnny, the hero of the homestead, true to boyhood's promise, became a physician with a practice as wide as Weld county and every patient a personal friend. The other son, William A., has twice represented his district in the state legislature and served eight years as county commissioner. Emma and her husband, Charles Swink, are ideal "leading citizens" in their community, the Ashton neighborhood, and Charles is an official in the First National Bank of Greeley.

The third generation is also notable, but as this is a pioneer story and not a family tree the temptation to follow the family further must be resisted. However, reference to one more little incident may be pardoned.

It is illustrative of the far cry from "Jinnie" and the spring-wagon of the old homestead days to the method of going places that belongs to the third generation—and the fourth: One summer day in 1937 Elaine, daughter of George, said to her small daughter of two years. "Listen; I think I hear Daddy coming;" and the little girl ran swiftly out from the vine sheltered porch in Tulsa, Oklahoma, lifted her chubby arms and blue eyes to the *sky* and waved a welcome to a bright red monoplane that instantly dipped her an answer.