

## WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE A LITTLE PIONEER GIRL BEFORE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Written by Sena Thompson  
Contributed by Darrel Johnson

The following is an account of early life in North Dakota. It is written by Sena, the daughter of Thomas and Burget Thompson. Thomas, born on January 7, 1850, in Dane County Wisconsin, set out to seek his way in the world at age 16. He was a son of Kittel Tovsen (Thomson) and Gunhild Andersdtr, immigrants from Seljord. I mentioned them in my May 2020 Telesoga Genealogy Column.

Thomas was a business man in North Dakota. His business partner had bought a cattle ranch in Cuba after



*Thomas and Burget married January 1880*

the Spanish – American War. Before that purchase, the business partner had bought a banana plantation. Thomas, however, would have nothing to do with that venture telling his partner, "We don't know anything

about bananas!" Thomas sent his partner back to Cuba.

In the early 1880's, Thomas worked for a different businessman. He was assigned the job of bringing \$1,800 in cash from Sweden, North Dakota to purchase land in Action, North Dakota. The money belonged to the people filing for tree claims. Thomas, driving a team of horses, braved a blizzard so fierce that the people in the near-by town believed no one could survive in such conditions. Thomas not only survived, he delivered the money to the land office as directed.

Darrel Johnson

### **Excerpts from Thompson Treasures Past and Present a private family history!**

I remember the place where I was born. It was a little log house that my father, with the help of a neighbor, had built. Tom Knudson helped Father build this house before he and my Mother were married. The logs were just rolled up end to end. A door to the east and one to the south, Near the south door was a small stove with four holes on top and a small oven on the side. There was a shelf where Dad used to sit up to and put his feet on. There was a huge woodbox always filled with small pieces of oak and other woods. In the east corner was a small open stairway going to the loft.

One of the few things I remember in the log house was people coming in groups in the evening. Many of them had small children. The room was small, so the children were all put up in the loft. The ceiling boards had big cracks in them so we could lie on our stomachs and watch the young folks dance. They would clap their hands and laugh while the violin played. The men stomped their feet. As a child I often hoped when I grew up I would be as happy as these grownups" seemed to be.

We would sleep and wake up and they would still be dancing. It was warm up there because the stove pipe ran through the loft. In the dark the bright lights from the lamps shone all the more brightly through the cracks. There were no windows, This loft was so small that even a child had a hard time to stand up straight.

Lying in the trundle bed, I could hear the wolves howl. But, I was not afraid — Mother and Dad were

close by and all was well with the world. The little trundle bed had a straw mattress. Ropes tied to the ends of the bed kept the tick off the floor. After the threshing was over in the fall, all the ticks were filled with clean straw.

Four children — Chester and I, George and Emil were born in this little log cabin. In the 'old country,' the style was that the eldest daughter was given the name of her grandmother. My grandmother's name was Signe. My full baptized name was Signe Gustava Thompson. There were too many Signes, so I was soon nicknamed Sena.

There were no churches at that time, but a pastor used to come at intervals and then he took care of the marriages and baptisms. On Grandfather Israel Anderson's farm under a big oak tree, I was baptized.

We loved our little log house. When spring came we forgot the wind and snow. The springtime was so beautiful! All the fruit-bearing trees started to bloom —

the plums first, then the chokecherries, juneberries, pin cherries, and highbush cranberries. Soon the meadows would be red with strawberries.

We carried our water for at least a quarter of a mile. I only remember Mother carrying water. She had two pails, and sometimes we children would carry water in smaller pails. Mother bathed the girls in one water and the boys in another tub of water back of the stove. When we washed clothes, Mother would wash the floors with the soapy water. When you carry it so far, you make the best use of every drop.

My mother was a brave pioneer woman, if there ever was one! I don't think she ever had any fear of being alone. One of my first recollections of a Dakota winter concerns the "stone boats." This was a flat sleigh — only a few inches from the ground. The land raft was used to haul stones off the fields. Only one horse was needed to pull it. When provisions were needed in the winter, friends would go together — one horse and a



*Thomas and Burget pictured with nine of their eleven children. Chester, Sena, George, and Emil were born in the log cabin. Later, a seven room residence was built and here seven more children were born to them - Selma, Elmer, Aimer, Joseph, Helga, Andrew and Lloyd. Andrew and Elmer died while they were children. Selma lived to be 104 years old.*





*A Stone Boat was a heavy duty toboggan like drag pulled by horse or oxen. They were used to move heavy loads and were a common piece of farm equipment. Surviving examples of stone boats are rare. The photo is from circa 1890-1920 and is in the collection of the Windsor Historical Society (Maine).*

stone boat would “break trail” and the rest would follow in the path. We had to go to Grand Forks on the Minnesota border for flour, coffee, sugar, beans, etc., and always kerosene for the lamps.

In church, the men used to sit on one side of the church and the woman and children on the other side. The singing was sung in a ‘sing-song’ voice. The leader first thumped the pulpit to get the beat.

It was always a happy time when the threshing machine would be running in the fall. The first threshing machine I remember was my Dad's. He threshed for everybody for miles around. Those first years, we were always last and by that time it was cold. The grain had been cut and made into shocks. That first one was horse-drawn. Each team had been out and was hitched to a long

stick that came out from the center of the machine. A long iron rod lay along the ground from this machine to the separator, I always got a thrill when I saw the horsepower. Well, you just have to have had the experience as a child to know. They hitched eight horses up — two and two together. The horses made the long tumbling rod go. A man sat on top of the horsepower. When everything was ready, he called to the horses to start, They walked around in a circle — each team pulling on the long stick to which they were hitched. This pulling made the tumbling rod keep rolling over. This made the machinery of the separator work. This machine stood beside the stacks of wheat. All this made a terrible noise. I remember holding my hands over my ears. Two men would get on top of the stacks and pitch bundles down a board to a man (sometimes women would do the work) who cut the twine on the bundles. Another man would crowd the bundles into a hole at the end of the separator. At the other end of the separator, streamed the wheat into a sack. All the time the horses walked around. They had to work as fast as they could and the wheat streamed golden out of the spout. Now I understand why they called it golden grain. But, I never did like the dust and chaff that blew all over. Dad said the horsepower machine was a great invention. He knew what it was to thresh with a cradle.

My Uncle Ole was in the Cavalry with Grant on Sherman's March from the Atlanta to the Sea. He was right at home in the saddle. He had a favorite horse that he brought from Iowa. He was so straight in the saddle, although he was twelve years older than my father was, he looked younger. He loved that horse. Once coming home from Grafton he got lost. He knew he would never make it by himself, so he let the horse have a free rein, Every once in a while, the horse would stop and he would dig the ice from his eyes and thaw out his nose. He always said that horse saved his life.

To keep our feet warm in the winter, we used lanterns, hot bricks, and bags of oats. No one thought 20 degrees below zero was cold! Once my father was lost coming home from town and it was so cold that the breath would freeze on the horses' noses. They would stop and he would put his mitten over their nose and thaw them out. Then, they would go on. -

The men used to have ice-sickles at the end of their mustaches. These were seldom clear crystal icicles — usually they were black, brown or tan, This was because they often chewed snuff and tobacco. We laugh now at the mustache cup, but in those days it was very necessary.

I can hear them yet when the men with mustaches would drink their coffee and break the ice from those mustaches.

Father liked to tell about his lumber-jack days. This was long before he married Mother. He also worked for Jim Hill on the railroad.

My first Christmas in the log house was so long ago — but I remember every detail. Mother made a good supper. Yes, you guessed it —rice mush with cinnamon and sugar and baked spareribs. But, we were too excited to eat much. Mother took down the Bible from the shelf and read the beautiful Christmas story including how the angels sang. As soon as Mother was reading, I left the room and went outside. There Mother found me. I had forgotten the cold. I wanted to hear the angels sing. I asked Mother, “Why don’t I hear them, Mother?” Mother said I didn’t hear them because they only sang that one night — the night the Son of God was born. On that night so long ago we hung the stockings. Everybody got something. In my stocking was a dress for my rag doll, a big red apple, and some hard candy.

I often think of the many beautiful flowers that grow wild in the woods. There were buttercups, purple violets, small white thimble flowers (sometimes holding water), and colored lady slippers. So many tiger lilies! Both tiger lilies and blue bells grew in abundance on the prairie and open places between the trees. In June, the countryside would be pink with wild roses. Sometimes along the road in the shade, they would be deeper shades.

I remember how I loved to walk back of Dad when he was plowing. The first plow was called a walking plow and it was fun to see the sod turn over,

The slough was full of water in the spring. How the frogs would sing! They sang so loud that it was hard to sleep.

In the autumn, we had gooseberries and

raspberries. The fall brought purple wild grapes. Blackhorse berries and thorn-apples tasted best after the first frost. These were never used for canning.

In the virgin woods, hazelnuts grew in bunches. When they were ripe, we dried them and put them into cloth bags. We gathered many bushels. In the evenings, we and our friends used to sit around on the floor and crack them. This was one way we had of entertaining our young friends. At the same time we sang and told stories. The evening usually ended up with making taffy.

We saw a band of Indians go by. I guess they were on their way to visit some Indian friends. The squaws and children were in a light wagon and the men were all on horseback. We stopped work to watch them, but they never stopped or looked our way.

The first well I watched Dad and a neighbor dig was exciting. They took the dirt out in buckets with long ropes. Every day before they started working in the well, Dad put a candle in the bucket and sent it down to the bottom of the well. If the candle didn’t go out it was okay to go down in. Dad said there is always danger of gas in the bottom of a well. That first well we pulled the water up in buckets.

We always got five cents to spend and sometimes ten cents. Most of the time we bought candy because we



*Demonstration of a walking plow turning sod. It is being pulled by a team of horse and guided by the farmer*

got so much for our money. We liked the mixed hard candy. When we bought our groceries, there was always a package of candy for the children. There would have been many a disappointed child if the grocery man had even once forgotten to include that little brown sack.

My mother and I would go in the sleigh or a light wagon to neighbors who had a new baby. Mother always made something good to eat —usually either sweet soup or cream mush and with a smile, she would hand me a small package saying, “You give this to the baby.” The package contained a yard of calico. We repeated this

small routine for years.

Mother was busy from early morning until late at night. She raised chickens, sold eggs, and butter for pin-money. The pin-money always seemed to go for calico which was five cents a yard. I remember waking up at night and hearing Mother sewing. But both Mother and Dad always seemed to have time to visit with passers-by. And they were always to stop for coffee.

I am glad my Father and Mother were really pioneers. They were so happy and thankful. Their joy was found in their family.