CHAPTER I

The Nelsons - Pioneer Sodbusters

A hardy, Scandinavian family, the Olaf Nelsons, homesteaded shortly after 1900 on a site of land six miles southeast of Hallock along the south branch of the Two Rivers waterway. The earliest settlers at that time had learned to select the near-river locations for water supply and a source of wood for building and heat. Previously, Olaf had made a trip to this great prairie where the grass grew waist-high. He saw a few farms with big wheat fields, many men and horses, and found only a few families. Roads were nothing but trails. He made contact with a federal land agent and staked out a claim which had a river running across one corner. He couldn’t wait to get back to St. Paul to tell Mary about the homesite, what it looked like, and where they could build a home and raise a family. There were no roads, yet, but the steamboat on the Red River was helping bring supplies, and there was a rumor that the railroad would be pushing further into the Valley.

Olaf and Mary Nelson worked in the sawmills at St. Paul to earn and save money. Then, with lots of faith in the future, they loaded tools, supplies, two children and household items into a canvas-covered prairie schooner, hitched up the horses and joined a wagon train headed for the big prairie country of northwestern Minnesota. After about two months of hard travel, they arrived, sunburned and mosquito-bitten, but in good spirits. Though not an easy task, with the help of neighbors, two temporary sod buildings were built to shelter the horses and people until more permanent log buildings could be constructed. Two milking shorthorn heifers came to Fargo by train and up the river on a flatboat the next spring.

Olaf was a jack-of-all-trades. He could work iron, build with wood, lay up rock walls. Mary carded wool for spinning yarn, milked the shorthorns, picked wild berries, launched a gardening project, sewed their clothing, made sauerkraut, canned vegetables, wiped the runny noses of children, and found time to be a loving wife. Books were hard to come by. The preacher came through from time to time for church services, which were held in Nelson’s home. With the preacher’s help, some books, and once in a while a magazine, showed up in the household. Both Olaf and Mary couldn’t wait to read these books, especially those which had stories about farming and homemaking in other places.

The children were seven and eight years old when the country school was built. A cute little school-mom came part way by train, part by steamboat, and Olaf met her on the Red River with horse and wagon. A flurry of activity had been going on at the Nelson’s home during that summer before the school opened. They built another room on the house so that the teacher would have a place to stay. This was more work for Mary, but she had a way of dividing all the jobs among the family; thus the household somehow kept operating. Of course there were times when she blew her stack, and Olaf knew for sure then that he’d been spending too much time working and not enough being a husband.

The school of eleven children was an immediate success and became the center of community life. Christmas programs, basket socials, school picnics, and annual meetings were the center of neighborhood life, building friendships and community spirit. A county superintendent of schools was a popular visitor at the country school. He brought news from the outside. He’d always tell a story to the children each time he visited.

Olaf and Mary learned that a rich man named Jim Hill had given land to the University of Minnesota to set up an experiment farm located near Crookston.

“Maybe we’ll learn how to handle this wet sod better” said Mary.

“Ya, and I read in one of those magazines the preacher brought that new kinds of wheat are being made by wheat breeders. Ever heard of a wheat breeder, Mary? I wonder how that works”, mused Olaf.

“Why don’t you ask that railroad agent? He seems to know a lot about the University and about what he calls new ideas in farming,” suggested Mary.

Time moved along. The children were “easy-to-learn”, as the phrase went in those pioneer neighborhoods. The school-mom married one of the Spence boys and a new teacher had to be found. It was against the rules to hire a married teacher. Mary didn’t quite see why such a rule made any sense.

The experiment farm was in business but was having trouble with water like anyone who was working on the flat farm land. This they learned one evening when the railroad agent had supper with the Nelsons.

“I doubt whether those professors will ever find a way to handle this wet land,” said Olaf.

“Well, I don’t know. They just might. They got a guy by the name of Stewart to find out how to drain the water off the land, so you can get on earlier in the spring and sooner after it rains in the summer,” replied the railroad agent. “And you know that piece of land that Jim Hill gave to the University isn’t really too good a piece of land. It is kind of swampy. I suppose Mr. Hill figures if the professors can make that produce, the rest of the Valley ought to be able to manage water once we learn how.

Olaf, have you ever heard of a county agent?” inquired the agent. “I hear you might get one in your county sometime soon.”

“Ya, I read about the idea. We sure could use help, but who’s going to pay for it?” questioned Olaf.

“I heard that the University pays part of the cost, the federal government pays some, and that we pay some. I like that idea because I think that maybe then we’ll have something to say about what the county agent does,” said Mary. “Too, I heard a school of agriculture is being built right now and that our kids could go there six months a year for learning about farming, homemaking, and also they can take general subjects like arithmetic, writing, public speaking, music and history,” continued Mary.

“There goes my help with farm-work”, wailed Olaf.

“Yes, but I’ve been thinking about it too, Olaf. The kids could go to school during the six months of winter and be here for the crop season,” interrupted Mary.