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 homesteal, 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 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 of 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 north 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 farmwork", 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.
They returned re- that fieldland the way to tone of excitement when she thought of the all rent out on months,

One could county agent was coming within the next year if the county board of commissioners could agree on the idea. Some farmers weren’t sure it would be worthwhile. Others couldn’t wait. The new school of agriculture sounded good. Boys and girls had to stay there, and most of them stayed for the full six months, coming home only at Christmas time. The teachers stayed right with them at the school. There were some rumors of the boys and girls running wild, but those rumors were found to be untrue. A number of the teachers were these new agriculturalists who did research as well as teaching. Those who were worried about spiritual life were encouraged to learn that there were chapel services every Sunday evening. It all sounded like a good home away from home and a chance to get some additional schooling.

It was the spring of 1910. The oldest Nelson child, Paul, had returned from the six-month term at the school of agriculture. He had been home only at Christmas during the six months.

Olaf and Mary met Paul at the railroad station, loaded up the trunk in the buggy, bought a few supplies at the general store, and headed back to the farm. The road by this time had been improved south of Hallock so the trip could be made under most weather conditions except when there were blizzards or in the spring when the frost went out and the surface was soft.

Paul was just full of talk. He told his parents that the new superintendent of the School and Experiment Station was a real doer.

“He even comes to visit our classes and teaches a class in leadership.”

He said there was going to be a Short Course, the teachers called it, for men and women from farms, that it would go on for about three or four days, and there would be something called a Crops Show where farmers could bring in a sample of the grain they had grown. A judge would decide which was the best sample, and the grower of the championship grains would be awarded a new sile.

This Crops Show idea was almost too much for Olaf. He wondered about it all, but yet he knew Mary would want to go. Paul said he’d come home and take care of the cattle while they went to the Short Course.

“How much is it going to cost?” asked Olaf.

“I don’t know,” answered Paul.

“I’ve saved a little money so we could take a trip some day,” confessed Mary. “That could be our trip. When’s it going to be?”

“They are talking about December, after the students go home for Christmas vacation so there would be room for people to stay in the students’ rooms. And you know, Dad, Mr. Selvig said that the men had to bring their wives.”

“Sounds like we’ll be going, money or not,” said Olaf. “I’m sure glad that Mom saved a few nickels in a sock somewhere.”

The summer of 1910 was a bountiful crop year in the region. Carloads of grain were being shipped to the new markets. The bank was paid off for the new grain binder. Anne, the daughter, started at the Aggie School, as it was called, in the fall. Too, some mail came from the School and Experiment Station inviting Olaf and Mary to the Short Course and Farm Crops Show to be held in the new Kiehle building with its shiny auditorium, gymnasium, and seating space. Of all things, it had up-to-date moving picture equipment!

The Short Course and Crops Show became the talk of the neighborhood, and when the time came just before Christmas in 1910, Olaf and Mary and a few other neighbors got together with teams and sleigh and traveled to town. They left the horses in the livery barn and took the train to Crookston from Hallock. A neighbor who didn’t go looked in on Paul and Anne, for they were taking care of the livestock while Dad and Mom were away at that first Farm Crops Show and Short Course.

About 250 people showed up, including the Nelsons, from as far away as Roseau, Staples, Ada, Moorhead, and Warren. The Nelsons stayed in Paul’s room at the school. They ate the good food, listened and talked, and talked and talked. They sang songs. The staff of the Northwest School provided some instrumental music. It was really all too exciting to waste very much time sleeping. They heard some agricultural and home economics speakers from the Department of Agriculture at St. Paul. Their state senator spoke to them. The railroad agent brought them news of additional railroad land being available for farming at very attractive prices. From the research at the experiment farm, they learned some new ideas about how to drain land. Several varieties of crops had been tried, and these ideas were shared with visiting farmers.

Tired, they boarded the train for home on the Friday before Christmas, having made many new friends. They picked up more ideas than their heads could hold, and they had a lot of good wholesome fun. They returned refreshed and ready to do battle with making a living on that Kittson County farm. Not only that, Olaf was given honorable mention on his sample of wheat. The judge said all it needed to be a champion sample was to be cleaned up a bit. The quality of grain was as good as the championship sample, and Olaf learned that samples had to be prepared for show.

The writer of this book chooses to leave the saga of the pioneer Nelson family establishing themselves here in the Red River Basin and joining the enthusiastic visitors to the first Red River Valley Winter Shows, entitled then the Short Course and Farm Crops Show. The people at the first Short Course didn’t like the holiday season schedule because of the interference with family and church celebrations. The date was changed immediately, and the next Short Course was scheduled well into January. Olaf, Mary and family didn’t miss a Winter Show during their lives in the Red River Basin. Olaf served on the board of managers and on the Livestock Association for many years. Mary assisted with women’s activities. The third generation of Nelsons now join nearly 40,000 people attending the midwinter show.