



THE EVOLUTION OF ONE FELLOW'S SEVENTY-YEAR-LONG ROMANCE WITH THE GREAT PLAINS

by John E. Peterson

Who is the "fellow" in the title above? Why, it is me, of course. Was it actually a "seventy-year-long" romance? Probably not. More like sixty-eight or sixty-seven, I suppose, since it is unlikely that I remembered the stories I heard during my first year or two. But a "romance" it certainly was! And a romance it continues to be except that it has long since developed into a full-blown love affair. I am, indeed, a lover of the Great Plains!

The illustration above is a drawing of the sod house in which my mother, Kathryn Rose Anne Plapp, was born on the Nebraska prairie in 1891. It was located a

bit outside of Litchfield and about forty miles north of Kearney, truly a Great Plains location. I never saw a sketch of the sod house until 1987 when I was sixty-six years old, but I had a rather good picture of it in my mind. Such a picture was in my head because I had heard stories about it, and descriptions of it, for as long as I could remember.

This sod house was built on land homesteaded by my grandfather, David Plapp, in 1878. He and his wife, Mary Elizabeth (Schweitzer) Plapp, lived there until 1894, when the family returned to Malta, Illinois. Mrs. Plapp, my grandmother, her health deteriorating markedly from the

effects of those years on the prairie, wandered out from her home in Malta into a snowstorm and froze to death in 1903. Although I never knew her, I did know my grandfather, David Plapp, for my first fifteen years or so.

The Plapps had two boys, ages one and two, when they went to Nebraska to homestead. Ten more children, seven boys and three girls, were born in this sod house and one more son was born back in Illinois. This last son drowned well before I came on the scene, but the other twelve were all good, long livers. Consequently, I had many uncles and aunts and cousins as I grew up in DeKalb, Illinois, just six miles from Malta. The stories these people told about the sod house and life on the prairie--as they always called the plains--were my first introduction to the American Great Plains.

Many of the stories were told around the table in the dining room of the house in which I grew up in DeKalb. Some were told around the dining tables in the homes of my numerous aunts and uncles. Others were told at family gatherings such as the annual Fourth of July reunion at Grandpa Plapp's place--the old family house--in Malta. But most of my information about the sod house, the goings-on there, and life on the prairie came while around that dining room table in DeKalb.

Uncle Andy lived sixty-five miles to the east in Chicago. Uncle Ezra, the eldest and a minister, lived in Walnut, Illinois, some sixty to seventy miles to the west. Aunt Mary lived about fifty miles to the northwest. The other eight all lived within twenty miles around DeKalb. Consequently, there was much stopping in when they were passing through. And, though I admit to being biased, I always had the feeling that my mother was something of a favorite--the little sister--of the bunch. Therefore, they stopped in often and stayed long. That meant lots of stories around the table.

They talked about the continual noise

and closeness in that two-room sod house and about how it was especially noisy and tight when the weather kept them all inside. They talked about their daily chores and how they were expected to perform these tasks. They talked about how they often sat on the two steps leading up into the second room and, in particular, how they sat there when told to "get out of the way" or to "be quiet, now."

The ever-present Nebraska prairie wind was a common topic of conversation. Sometimes, it blew the feathers right off the chickens, they joked. Chickens and pigs were discussed. They were around the house, under the elevated second room, and involved in a good many stories about life on the prairie. Running to the cyclone cellar was vivid in all of their memories. In the winter, they ran there to bring in some of the vegetables stored therein. In the summertime, they ran there because mom and dad told them a storm was coming. Their memories of the winds and storms were vivid. And made for exciting stories for us kids listening around the dining room table.

There were stories about grasshoppers and bugs. Stories about carrying water from the creek--the "draw," as it was called--and how worrisome it became to all when the water down there began to run low. And there were stories about the drought, the dust, and the effects of the lousy climate on their crops and gardens.

Occasionally, a reference was made to their father's going off to Broken Bow or Kearney for supplies and returning, sometimes still under the influence of alcohol, days later than anticipated. Usually, stories about their father's drinking were not told in detail when we kids were around the table. Sometimes, however, we heard the aunts and uncles talk about it when we were in the next room or out on the porch. Or when they thought we were asleep in the corner. As a kid, I knew my grandpa as a nice, old man who made dried apples,

pickled pigs feet, souse and other goodies. As I grew older, however, I learned that he was not always nice in his earlier days. Much later, my mother told me, "Today we would call him an alcoholic. Then, he was just called a drunk."

The aunts and uncles did talk a bit more about the development of their mother's poor mental health in that sod house on the prairie. Though they did not discuss it openly in front of us when we were little kids, it did not seem to have the same feeling of shame that their father's drinking did. As we got older, it was discussed much more openly, including the events leading to her death back in Illinois. And, as we got older, we began to get better understanding of the effects that prairie, the loneliness, the winds and cyclones, grandpa's drinking, and all of those kids had on grandma's short life.

Though it certainly started there, most of my understanding of life on the Nebraska prairie did not come from the early years of my listening to those stories around the dining room table. It came a bit here and a bit there. It came as I got older and, hence, got answers to my questions instead of gentle evasions. Though I had much empathy for my grandmother, what the Nebraska prairie had done to her did not detract from my romance with the plains. In fact, I suppose it gave me some of the feeling of being a part of the Great Plains. Somehow, far back there, the plains were a part of my heritage. That probably had something to do with my ultimate love affair with the Great Plains.

That boy who listened to the stories of his aunts and uncles grew up a bit. He spent less time sitting at the table with his chin resting on his hands while he listened to what went on. He was off doing his own things more of the time. He went to high school and to college and saw less and less of his aunts and uncles though they still stopped in often. Then, he saw the Great

Plains for the first time with his own eyes.

Though I had considerable feeling--mostly romantic--about the sod house and that bit of Nebraska prairie on which it sat, I still knew little of the actual Great Plains. Nor did I have any appreciation of their importance and magnificence. My next experience with the plains did little to rectify this shortcoming, however.

In the spring of 1943, I was a brand-new U.S. Navy Ensign--a ninety-day wonder. About a dozen of us left Chicago on the Santa Fe Super Chief enroute to the San Diego Naval Base for our first assignment. We had ridden through parts of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri and arrived in Kansas City, one of the gateways to the Great Plains. We first became conscious of the region when the barman in the lounge car informed us that we should order any desired drinks while still in Kansas City, Missouri. The 450 miles or so of crossing the Kansas plains would be without the usual liquid refreshment, he said; Kansas was dry. And, he informed us, Oklahoma and most of these plains states were not much better.

Well! What a first impression of the actual plains! We survived rather nicely, however, without beer or bourbon before us for those many hours of travel. I greatly enjoyed seeing the vast expanses of the plains--they were quite different from the miles of cornfields in which I had grown up. Though I gained little actual knowledge or appreciation of the Great Plains from that trip--or from the other three trips I made back and forth through the region in the next three war-time years--I did come to have a bit better idea of the setting for the experiences of my mother and her brothers and sisters in their sod house.

It was three years of war, four years of teaching and coaching in Michigan, and another three years of graduate school in Michigan before the Great Plains again came into my life. We moved to Columbia,

Missouri, in 1953 where I had taken a position teaching and researching in the Department of Botany at the University of Missouri. Although I never even thought about it at the time, we were now much closer to those plains about which I first had heard around that dining room table. But the proximity had little effect on my actually getting to know them better.

During the eighteen years in Missouri, there were flights from Kansas City to Denver and beyond when I marveled at all the farm ponds down below. And at those big reservoirs--lakes, as far as I was concerned--scattered across the landscape. And I shall never forget some of those displays of clouds and lightning and rain down below us as we flew across those plains.

Trips through those Great Plains--sometimes by train, but usually by car--began to bring glimmers of what they were really like. They were not just flat expanses of nothingness. There were hills--and different kinds of hills. There were rivers and streams and gullies and ups-and-downs. There was considerable agriculture. There were charming, interesting towns. And there was an immense amount of history and folklore scattered over those plains.

Though such realizations began to soak through, crossing the plains enroute to the mountains was not one of the high points of our trips. My little family was like that of most of the uninitiated plains-crossers: Let's get across here so we can get into the mountains! Let's try Nebraska this time--or South Dakota or Oklahoma; maybe that will be more exciting! And the return trip was apt to be worse: Aren't we there yet, Dad? Gee, there is nothing to see! If we don't hurry and get home, I'll be late for the start of school!

Those years in Missouri, though augmenting the understanding of the Great Plains a bit, did not really turn me into a lover of the plains. The romance of the sod house up on the Nebraska prairie was still

there. But it was still a boyhood romance. The maturation of the love affair would wait until the next phase.

In 1971, I accepted a position as dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at what is now Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas. It, then, was still Kansas State Teachers College. Now, I was really getting onto the plains. And the romance immediately began to blossom into the full-blown love affair it is today.

My work soon took me around Kansas for meetings, speaking engagements, and other affairs. Sometimes, we made it a point to wander through Nebraska and the Dakotas. Or Oklahoma and Texas and New Mexico. And we stuck our noses into towns, museums, and historical spots. We looked, photographed, talked, botanized, and read about. I soon became enamored with the Great Plains.

It certainly helped when the Regents approved our Center for Great Plains Studies and the National Endowment for the Humanities and supported it handsomely. Now, I began to give talks about our Center, its work, and the plains in general to all sorts of groups. And I made radio programs about the plains. We made TV programs about the plains. I became a nut about the plains.

Somewhere in the mid-1970s, my mother--now in her eighties--finally set to paper the stories about life in the sod house that had been told around the dining room table, the stories which had started my romance with the plains. I was fascinated with what she had written but, of course, I was a biased reader. Naturally, I brought a copy of her story back to Emporia after visiting with her in DeKalb. With some reluctance, since I was the dean, I showed it to a couple of our English faculty members. They were genuinely excited about it and suggested publishing it in our *Heritage of Kansas (A Journal of the Great Plains)*.

Today, of course, that title has been changed to *Heritage of the Great Plains*.

I still had some reluctance about it all, but they convinced me it was worthy. My being the dean had nothing to do with it, they said. Their words, and my love affair with the plains and plains stories, overcame all other considerations. Accordingly, my mother's story--with editing and an Introduction by Professor June Underwood who was studying women and families on the plains anyway--appeared in the Fall 1979 number of *Heritage of Kansas*. It was entitled "The First Twelve."

My mother had selected that title because her story covered the first twelve years of her life. It started in that sod house out on the Nebraska prairie where she was born. It told of the life in that sod house. It spoke of the loneliness, the wild prairie winds, the being continually pregnant, the twelve children with which her mother--my grandmother--had to contend out on the prairie, and of what this did to her mental health. It told of the family's move back to Illinois, of her mother's continually deteriorating health due to those experiences on the plains, and of her wandering out into a northern Illinois snowstorm and freezing to death. It ended with the coroner's inquest in the house in Malta. That was two days before my mother's twelfth birthday. Hence, "The First Twelve."

Needless to say, that *Heritage of Kansas* number sold a good many copies. Those hundreds of progeny of my many aunts and uncles bought copies as soon as they heard about it.

My love affair with the Great Plains still continues and it still expands each day. The last event of that personal romance, which began with the boy listening to stories around the dining room table, however, occurred in 1987.

I received a letter from my nephew, Douglas Alden Peterson, a professional

artist headquartered in Brighton, Michigan. He also included a pen-and-ink sketch of the sod house seen on the first page of this account. Doug told me that he had been visiting his grandmother--my mother--in DeKalb in her ninety-fifth year. The conversation turned to her early memories and soon Doug found himself sketching what she was describing on the back of an envelope. She had him change this, enlarge that, put this in here until she was satisfied with his rendition.

Douglas went home to Michigan, rendered the sketch into ink, enlarged it, and sent it back to his grandmother for approval. She made a couple of minor criticisms, Doug incorporated them, and she approved it. Now, Doug wanted to know, would I write a one-page explanation of what it was and how it came about. He, then, would have both appropriately printed. The word was already circulating among the cousins, second cousins, and other relatives that the picture of the sod house existed. Since there were literally hundreds of progeny of those twelve brothers and sisters of the sod house days, there would be many requests. Doug did not wish to make any money from it all, but neither did he wish to go into debt to produce it. Hence, he was systematizing the process and putting a small stipend on it for this huge family.

I wrote the explanation. My mother critiqued it and made a correction or two. Douglas had it all beautifully printed in soft brown on buff stock. The relatives ordered them by the dozens. We were all very proud of it. Mother, in particular, was pleased because now her memories of the Nebraska prairie were as fully recorded as she could make them. She died a couple of years later at the age of ninety-eight. I am confident that she long knew the important role she and her memories played in my romance with the Great Plains.

There are some pluses with the developing and recording of a bit of history of life on the Great Plains in the fashion I have attempted to describe. But there are a good many minuses, too. For example, I continue to be at a loss in correlating times and dates with the information available in printed words and in memories.

References were always made, as I recall, to my mother being "about three or four" when the family left the sod house to return to Illinois. It is rather clear that the family was there from 1878 to 1894. My mother was born in the sod house on December 5, 1891. She, then, certainly celebrated her first birthday and her second birthday in the sod house on the prairie. It seems unlikely that the movement back would be made in December; the weather would be most inappropriate. Yet, unless that was the case, my mother would be gone from the Nebraska sod house somewhere before her third birthday.

That, of course, raises the question of how much does a two-year-old remember of life on the prairie? My mother has always made a point to make it very clear--both in her writing and in her conversation--that she has never been sure how many of her memories were actually hers or how many had come from the stories of her older brothers and sisters. But if the bulk of it came from the stories and memories of others, how much is lost, how much is changed, as the interpretation of what happened is passed from person to person? Where does accuracy end and fabrication begin? Or does it make any difference? I long have asked myself the same questions about my memories of when I sat listening at that dining room table. How much of what I heard--or think I heard--is as it actually happened?

There is another, very human, aspect to all of this which I find myself contemplating from time-to-time. That has to do with the remembering and recording of the unsavory portions of the experience, of those parts with which a bit of shame is associated. Those aunts and uncles around the dining room table did not generally speak of the drunken binges of their father when the kids were around. They did not even like to discuss it when we got older. My mother writes little about it. Yet, we all seemed to understand that that was why all except one of the brothers and sisters were adamant, avowed teetotalers.

It is deeply imbedded in my memory that the family was literally forced back to Illinois by my mother's maternal grandfather. He was a minister, the Rev. Schweitzer. My story is that the Rev. Schweitzer had had enough of his daughter going bananas in the prairie winds with twelve kids and a drunken husband. Therefore, he and his two oldest sons came out, literally bundled the family onto the train, and took them home. I got my story by bits here and pieces there. Sometimes my mother--or an aunt or uncle--would answer my questions; sometimes they would not. How did the husband and father, my grandfather, react to this? Did he go along with it or did he fight it? So what, actually, was the case? Or does it make any difference?

What are the pluses of developing such a bit of history of life on the Great Plains in the above unscholarly fashion? Well! At least, we have some insight into what went on. And it makes a pretty good story. And it is all a part of my personal, very real romance with the Great Plains. That must mean, at least to me, that it is better than nothing.