"Holding Down" a Northwest Kansas Claim,
1885-1888

Edited by KENNETH WIGGINS PORTER

I. INTRODUCTION


Catherine Wiggins was born November 5, 1873, in Page county, Iowa, near Clarinda, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James W. Wiggins, with whom in 1885 she came to northwest Kansas. She began teaching school at the age of 16, and in 1895 moved to Sterling in order to attend Cooper Memorial (now Sterling) College, from which she was graduated in 1898. She then taught in Rice county schools until her marriage to Ellis K. Porter on June 17, 1902. Mr. and Mrs. Porter made their home in Sterling for many years and reared a family of five sons. Mrs. Porter died January 7, 1952, in Glendale, Cal.

The narrative begins immediately upon the arrival of the Wiggins family at their Graham county claim. Catherine was 11 years of age and her brother, Sam, 15. Another brother, David Lincoln, 17, remained behind in Coin, Iowa, to work in a pharmacy.

II. THE REMINISCENCES

We were up early on the morning of June 26, 1885. Breakfast over, the tent was pitched, the cover removed from the wagon, and everything we had brought with us carried into our new abode. Then father was off to Lenora to bring the household articles which had been shipped by freight—tables, chairs, cupboard, cooking stove, bedsteads and bedding, tubs, clothes, etc.

That was a long hot day. The sun shone as only a Kansas sun
can shine. There was no shade save that of the tent and the tent grew unbearably hot. The water we had brought from the spring the morning before was all gone before the afternoon was half over and I, although a big girl, eleven years old, proved myself a poor sport, crying because I was thirsty. Mother finally had my brother Sam go to a pond in a draw some rods away and get water, which she strained through a cloth and used to make coffee, which, after it had been allowed to cool, we all enjoyed. There were many errands in town to take father’s time and he did not return until it was near dark. The coyotes had set up a fearful howling which sounded like humans in desperate agony, and I thought the cry was that of Indians giving a war whoop and was frightened indeed. My brother, who didn’t take kindly to being left with the women, saw that I was an easy mark to tease and assured me that it was Indians. When my mother discovered that I was really frightened and not just pretending she quieted my fears, but I was glad indeed when father came.

The next day the cook stove was placed in the tent, a side being raised so that the stove pipe could stick outside, but the stove refused to draw and smoke was added to heat to increase our discomfort. There was nothing to do but go to Lenora for lumber to make a cook shack. It was built, sides and roof, of broad boards stripped with battening, and was about six by seven feet—just large enough to hold a cook table and the stove with the stove pipe going through the roof; the floor was the sod. The shack was placed close to the tent, which became our dining room and bed room.

This arrangement proved satisfactory until the evening of July 4. We had gone to Lenora for the day, taking a lunch. We listened to patriotic speeches—I recall only a man making many gestures and talking in a loud oratorical voice—and father and mother mingled with the crowd, hearing stories of experiences in Kansas. I recall a woman telling mother of an Indian raid in Decatur County a few years before.1 I didn’t listen to the story; I didn’t want to hear it. I had heard enough to know that I was again very much afraid of the Indians.2 That night a fearful storm came up, the

1. On September 30, 1878, Dull Knife’s Cheyennes, who were attempting to escape across Kansas to their Northern homes from a reservation in the Indian territory, killed 18 men and boys in what is known as the Oberlin or Sappa creek massacre.—Paul L. Wellman, Deaths on the Prairie (New York, 1954), p. 253.

2. That an episode of seven years previous should have aroused in an 11-year-old girl such a fear of Indians may seem ridiculous to the present-day reader. Seven years, however, is a short period in human memory—Pearl Harbor, as I write, is nearly 15 years distant and yet fresh in the memories of many. Moreover, on this very Independence day of 1888 Geronimo was on the warpath in Arizona; the Ghost dance craze, the death of Sitting Bull, and the last battle with the Sioux—the Wounded Knee affair—were still five years in the future; and in the Indian territory just south of Kansas were hundreds of war-
ridge pole of our tent broke, and the rain poured in. There was
danger of the entire tent coming down on us, so we scrambled
out and into our little cook shack where we spent the night as best
we could in chairs, on the table, in all sorts of positions, and wished
for the morning. The first thing was to mend the ridge pole and
get the tent back into position, and then father was again off to
Lenora for lumber for another shack, which was ten by fourteen
feet and served as living room, dining room, and bed room; the
tent—which mother by this time had named “The White Elephant”
—was used as a sort of storage room. The two shacks provided
comfortable living quarters until fall, when we built our “soddy.”

The summer, so far as I was concerned, was long and tiresome—
nothing to do, no one for a playmate, no books, newspapers, or
other periodicals save the Coin Eagle and The Midland, a United
Presbyterian weekly published in Omaha. I got desperately home-
sick for Coin and pleaded to be allowed to go back and keep house
for my brother David, but of course that was out of the question.

One short-lived bit of amusement was furnished by a little jack
rabbit which my brother Sam and I caught after a hard chase—
he was just a wee thing or we could never have captured him. We
put a cord around his neck and lariated him out. We also dug a
cave for him, building a soddy over it. He became quite tame,
running to meet us and eating weeds from our hands. His mother
came to see him every day, and one morning when we went to feed
him all we found was a broken string. Evidently “mother love
had found a way.” I wondered many times if she freed him of
the blue ribbon I had tied about his neck. I was always allowed to
go with father to the spring, two and a half miles away. Indeed
that was a family occasion and we went about twice a week. We
would bring a barrel of water at a time and empty it into another.
In a short time the water would be anything but cold, but it was
wet, and after a while we became rather used to it or at least didn’t
complain. Water for the team and for laundry purposes was pro-
vided by the pond which, so far as I recall, never went dry.

Often in the evening, just before dusk, we would get into the
wagon and go rabbit hunting, always with success. At this time
of the day the rabbits—jacks and cottontails—were out in such

\*\text{\textcopyright} who had been on the warpath less than a decade before and who could easily be
imagined as attempting to emulate Dull Knife in the not distant future. In fact, in this
very summer of 1885, an Indian scare caused settlers in Comanche and Clark counties,
southwestern Kansas, to organize militia companies, appeal to the governor for troops and
arms, and in some cases stampede toward Topeka.—Angie Debo, ed., \textit{The Courser’s
Southeast, Being the Reminiscences of Oliver Nelson, Freighter, Camp Cook, Frontierman
in Kansas, Indian Territory, Texas and Oklahoma, 1877-1899} (Glendale, 1953), pp. 245-
250.
numbers that they hardly needed to be hunted. Rabbits, indeed, were our main meat supply. We had a few chickens, but they were kept as a nucleus for a future flock. Fresh meat of other kinds was scarcely ever on the table, since there was little if any refrigeration even in the stores and by the time meat had been brought seven miles through the heat its flavor would be questionable. We did, however, buy the most excellent salt whitefish, of which I have never since seen the equal—very large, eighteen inches long and an inch thick; after soaking and slow frying they were delicious. We bought a half-keg of them and the keg was of no ordinary size. . . .

In the blizzard [of January, 1886] thousands of cattle were lost and died. There were no large herds of cattle in our particular part of the country, but farther north the cattle wintering on the range “drifted” southward with the storm into the draws which were level-full with snow, couldn’t get out, and froze to death.

At last came spring, and the country was again covered with the beautiful buffalo grass. The wheat made a wonderful showing; we and our neighbors believed that we had reached the Promised Land. Father, who had been in excellent health ever since we came to Kansas, named our claim Mount Nebo. But there was one thing lacking—school, and my parents didn’t propose that my education should end with the Fourth Reader, so they made arrangements with some acquaintances from Iowa near Edmond that I should go to their country school, taught by their widowed daughter-in-law Mrs. Jennie Black, and stay at the home of the Delos Beans, another Iowa family.

It was on Monday, May 3, 1886, that father took me to school. On the way, as usual, we sang, and I had cause to remember one of the songs:

I will sing you a song of that Beautiful Land,
That far-away Home of the Soul,
Where no storms ever beat on that glittering strand
While the years of Eternity roll.

Oh that Home of the Soul, in my visions and dreams
Its bright jasper walls I can see,
Till I fancy but thinly the veil intervenes
Between that fair city and me.4

3. An account of the remainder of the summer, including breaking the sod for corn and wheat; of the fall, in which building a sod house was the great event; and of the winter through the blizzard of January, 1886, appeared under the title “Building a Kansas ‘Soddy’—1886,” in the Kansas Magazine, Manhattan, 1942. Consequently those months are omitted here. The narrative begins again with the aftermath of the blizzard.
On Thursday a neighbor came for me with the news that my father was dead. He and my brother had gone to a neighbor's to get a corn planter and were in high spirits, singing as usual on the way home. He retired early so that he might be up and at work as soon as possible the next morning. Mother had finished warping a web of carpet and had sponge to set for bread. She had just extinguished the light when father began to breathe rather hard and strangely. Before she could light the lamp and call brother, he was gone. When the doctor arrived he pronounced it apoplexy. He was 43 years old.

For me some of the light faded out of the world with him and it has never been quite the same since. To me, my father was perfect and there was nothing else I desired when I could go about with him, my hand in his. Later we endured many privations and went through some hard times, but nothing comparable to the grief and suffering of those days. Mother was stunned; she went mechanically about with a white stricken face, and there was little in the so inadequate funeral service to give her consolation. We had seldom been able to go to church, so the minister, a Congregationalist I think, was a mere stranger. There was no one to lead the singing save a neighbor girl, who could not carry it through. The Psalm she was trying to lead was one of father's favorites, the 40th:

I waited for the Lord my God,
And patiently did bear,
At length to me he did incline
My voice and cry to hear.

He took me from a fearful pit
And from the miry clay
And set my feet upon a rock
Establishing my way.

He put a new song in my mouth
My God to magnify,
Many shall see it and shall fear
And on the Lord rely.

Only when the Grand Army men fired their salute over the grave did my mother find relief in tears. My older brother came from Iowa for the funeral but was able to remain only a few days.

Our financial problems now became acute. My brother—only sixteen—shouldered as much responsibility as he could, going on with the farm work, planting corn, planning for harvest, doing the best he knew how. Not knowing Kansas ways we built a granary for our wheat which cost more than the wheat was worth, for it was so poor that it had better have been left standing in the field.
Brother was discouraged, and no wonder. The sensible thing appeared to be to sell the team and farming implements the next spring and get a job on some farm. Mother applied for a Civil War widow’s pension, but her application was refused, since the doctor who had attended father during his illness in Iowa, and who never seemed to have any sympathy with a soldier’s rights or needs, had made affidavit that the typhoid fever contracted in the Civil War had nothing to do with his later sickness. Mother also applied for a dependent child’s pension for me, and that too was refused on the same grounds. The widow’s pension of $8 per month and the child’s of $2 would have made a tremendous difference to us.

I scarcely know how we did manage to live. Our house in Coin brought us in a little after repairs and taxes were paid. My older brother sent us what he could spare of his meager earnings in the drug store. The younger brother did his full share by working at anything he could get to do—laying sod, haying, anything—and often taking his pay in meat or other food. Sometimes it would be in wheat, from which we would pick the bad grains and grind the remainder in the coffee mill for gruel. For coffee, mother carefully browned the wheat in the oven and then ground it in the mill. Sometimes brother would help a neighbor to butcher and take for pay some backbones or spare-ribs. Mother wove an occasional web of carpet, sometimes taking part-pay in a piece of meat or two or three chickens, and sometimes in worn-out clothing which she would convert into carpet rags and weave into a carpet which she would sell for 35 or 40 cents a yard. The web might be 15 or 20 yards, which would mean real riches, and she could stretch a dollar to an unbelievable length and breadth. But a hog we had been fattening died and our rations were consequently again cut short. Jackrabbit often appeared on our menu.

Many times my brother walked to Lenora with a pound of butter to sell for ten cents and with the money buy a spool of thread, a two-cent stamp, and three cents worth of barrel-salt, or some other frugal purchase. He gathered cornstalks, made them into bundles, and brought them into the kitchen, where he chopped them into stove-lengths with a corn-knife and ricked them up for kindling for the cow-chips or “rosewood” which was our principal fuel. We gathered these cow-chips into piles on the prairie and sometimes found when we went for them in the wagon that someone had stolen them. There was a right and a wrong way to stack cow-

5. “Western Kansas Coal.”—Early Northwest Kansas History (Selden, u. d.).
chips. They had to be built up in a cone-shaped pile, in such a manner as to allow the air to circulate through them and keep them dry. On rare occasions we bought a little coal, and while we still had the team we sometimes bought one of the cottonwood or boxelder trees along the creek for about $1.50 and cut it up for firewood, carefully preserving the brush, of which there was a great deal, for kindling.

Mother sent me back in the fall for a three-months’ term to the little country school which I had been attending only two days when my father died, while she and brother remained on the farm. While at school my shoes wore completely out, as shoes will do; mother went to the Boston Store and bought me, on time, a two-dollar pair. They weren’t very pretty but they were shoes. I don’t know how they were paid for but paid for they were, probably with carpet. I came home some time in December, 1886, or January, 1887. The school really hadn’t amounted to much—a mixture of text-books, many classes, and little system. It was, however, in this school that I learned some new songs.

One, entitled “The Boston Tea Party,” began:

There was an old lady lived over the sea,
And she was an island queen;
Her daughter lived in a far countree
With an ocean of water between.6

Others were:

**THE BLUE JUNIATA**

Wild rove an Indian girl, bright Alfarata,  
Where sweep the waters of the Blue Juniata. ... 7

**SEMINOLE LOVE SONG**

O come with me and be my love,  
For thee the jungle’s depths I’ll rove,  
I’ll pierce the coco’s cup for its wine  
And haste to thee if thou’lt be mine! 8

6. The “old lady,” of course, was Britannia, and her daughter, America. I cannot recall having seen this song in any publication and should welcome further information.


8. A longer version, under the title of “The Indian Hunter,” is included in Vance Randolph, Ozark Folksongs (Columbia, Mo., 1950), v. 4, p. 297. The prefatory note, however, which identifies this song with “The Indian Hunter,” a poem by Eliza Cook with music by Henry Russell which was published in New York, 1836-1837, is inaccurate; Eliza Cook did write a poem so titled but it was of an entirely different character.—Albert Tolman and Mary G. Eddy, “Traditional Texts and Tunes,” The Journal of American Folklore, v. 33 (October-December, 1920), pp. 375, 376. The original of “Seminole Love Song” was probably a poem by Calder Campbell which appeared in Godley’s Lady’s Book, November, 1840, and which, after being set to music in 1850, was variously known as “The Burman Lover,” “The Little Canoe,” and “Ondan’s Serenade.”—John Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, 12th ed. (Boston, 1948), pp. 305, 306; Spaeth, Popular Music, p. 97.
“HOLDING DOWN” A KANSAS CLAIM

BILLY BOY

Oh where have you been, Billy Boy, Billy Boy,
Oh where have you been, charming Billy?
I've been to see my wife, she's the joy of my life,
She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

Did she bid you to come in, Billy Boy, Billy Boy,
Did she bid you to come in, charming Billy?
Yes, she bade me to come in, she has dimples in her chin,
She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

Did she set for you a chair, Billy Boy, Billy Boy,
Did she set for you a chair, charming Billy?
Yes, she set for me a chair, she has ringlets in her hair,
She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

Can she make a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy,
Can she make a cherry pie, charming Billy?
Yes, she can make a cherry pie quick as a cat can wink her eye,
She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

How old is she, Billy Boy, Billy Boy,
How old is she, charming Billy?
Twice six, twice seven, twice twenty and eleven,
She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.

Billy Haferland, the architect of our sod-house, had sold out to an old man, an ex-Californian named Kline or Cline, who lived with a nephew, Charley Dixon, and according to my brother Sam was distinguished by his possession of a racing mule and by his artistry in making biscuits and dumplings and in cooking game of all kinds. It was in his house that my brother first ate prairie dog which “tasted just like a young cottontail rabbit or squirrel and was good.” From him my brother learned a song which he sang frequently during the winter of 1886-1887.

Roll the old chariot along (3 times),
And we'll all jog along behind.
If the devil's in the road we will roll it over him (3 times),
And we'll all jog along behind.


10. Letter from S. T. Wiggins, January 24, 1940.

11. Carl Sandburg, Always the Young Strangers (New York, 1952), p. 310, says that this song was used by the Salvation Army in Galesburg, Ill., presumably in the early 1890’s. For text and music see Sandburg, The American Songbag (New York, 1927), pp. 196, 197. The refrain of the Sandburg version is: “And we won't drag on behind.” More similar to Mrs. Porter’s version is one, without music, in Evelyn Elizabeth Gardner and Geraldine Jemins Chickerin, Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan (Ann Arbor, 1939), p. 287: “And we'll all tag on behind.”
I also remember a fragment of another song which I think Sam learned from another neighbor, John Mix or Mick, though it may have been brought from Iowa by our neighbor Mr. Coleman, whose wife was mother's cousin.

We're goin' down to the parson's,
Now Liza you keep cool,
I ain't got time to kiss you now,
I'm busy with this mule.

Whoa, I tell you! Whoa, I say!
Keep your seat, Miss Liza Jane,
And hold on to the sleigh!
Watch dis mule a'gothin',
Goodness, how he can sail!
Just watch his ears a-floppin',
And see him shake his tail.

Chorus: 12

There was another song that everybody sang—perhaps whistling to keep up their spirits—"The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim."
The chorus was:

Oh the hinges are of leather
And the windows have no glass
And the board roof lets the howling blizzard in,
And I hear the hungry coyote as he sneaks up through the grass
To my little old sod shanty on the claim.

It began:

I'm getting rather lonesome now, while holding down my claim,
And my victuals are not always served the best,

but the singer has faith in the country and so writes a proposal to a girl back east, which she turns down because she doesn't want to live in "a little old sod shanty." Then, in his mind's eye, he prospers and builds a "brownstone front," which "she" would be glad to share, but he will have found some more worthy girl. 13

We merely existed during that winter of 1886-1887—no money, no place to go either with or without money. Yes, there was a wedding,


13. Mrs. Porter's memory telescopes into a single song the original "Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim," which has been so often printed, as in Sandburg, The American Songbag, pp. 89-91, and found, op. cit., p. 163, that to include it here is hardly necessary, and two sequels: "The Answer to "The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,"" in which the homesteader's Eastern girl "gives him the mittin'" and suggests that he marry an Indian girl, and "Answer to the Answer of Sod Shanty on the Claim," in which "the dreams of glory" emphasized in Mrs. Porter's recollections of the song or songs. The more interesting of the two sequels—and the only one which I have at hand—is "The Answer to the Answer," which I include in an appendix. My copy was printed on the back of a photograph of a sod shanty, and was issued by A. A. Forbes, photographer, McCracken, who also issued copies of the other "sod shanty" songs in similar form.
to which I was invited, but I didn’t go because I had nothing fit to wear.

Another family from Coin, the Pattersons, settled about a mile from us in the fall of 1856, so we now had three neighbors within a mile, the others being the Coleman’s and the Shorts.

Finally spring came, and the team, good old Sam and Fan, together with the farming implements, were sold for two cows, a calf, and $113 in cash. The money was used to finish paying father’s funeral expenses and to put down a well—an absolute necessity, since now we had no team or wagon for hauling water. The well was bored with a six-inch bit and was 119% feet deep.\(^\text{14}\) The water was brought up in a long narrow galvanized-iron bucket, four inches in diameter, which had a valve in the bottom through which the water came into the bucket. The bucket was brought up either by a pulley and rope or by a large windlass turned by hand. It was hard work, but the water was very cold and delicious. Our neighbors made about as much use of the well as we did, and teamsters would often stop for water for themselves and their teams.

As soon as the well was down, brother started looking for a job of a more permanent nature than those he had previously had. In the fall and winter of 1856-1857 he had driven a four-horse team and freighted coal for a Mr. Cochran from Lenora to the new town of Hoxie which was then being moved from the site of old Kenneth.\(^\text{15}\) His work had not been steady and so he was on the claim for greater or lesser periods. In the fall of 1856 he had a big fight with a prairie fire which had been started by some careless campers. Neighbors were busy protecting their own homes, hastily plowing fire-guards, so that he was all alone in his fight. Mother brought buckets of water from the pond as fast as she could and he dipped gunny sacks into the water and with them finally pounded out the fire, though it got part of the stalks in the corn-field and only lacked a few rods of reaching the granary.\(^\text{16}\) While I was at the little country-school and Sam was freighting coal, our neighbor and cousin Nerva Coleman stayed at night with mother. Now in the spring of 1887 Sam went to work for Hi Bernard on a farm 14 or

\(^{14}\) Everett Dick, *The sod-house frontier* (Lincoln, Neb., 1954), pp. 265, 266, discusses various types of wells on the High Plains, including the bored well which in the 1870’s cost $1.00 a foot. The Dick volume is the best single work describing social life in the region and during the period of Mrs. Porter’s narrative.

\(^{15}\) Hoxie in central Sheridan county, had its beginnings in a village named Kenneth situated three miles north. When in 1886 the Missouri Pacific railroad made plans to come through the county (but it never did) the settlement was moved to the route of the projected railroad and renamed for a railroad vice-president—Kansas: *A guide to the Sunflower State* (New York, 1939), p. 384.

\(^{16}\) See Dick, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-220, for descriptions of prairie fires.
15 miles northwest of Lenora and five miles south of Clayton. He worked nine-and-a-half hours per day at $15 per month. When this work was over his employer was unable to pay cash, and brother had to take an iron-grey three-year-old broncho at $75 as part-pay, selling him the next spring for $25. In the winter of 1887-1888 he worked for a dairyman named Green, three or four miles southeast of Lenora, milking cows night and morning, beginning at 4 A.M. Then in the spring of 1888 he went to Jennings, Kan., and got work as a laborer at $1.50 for a 10-hour day with the firm of Grace & Hyde of Chicago, who had the contract for building all the Rock Island depots from Norton, Kan., to Colorado Springs, Colo.

From the spring of 1887, then, mother and I were alone on the claim and there wasn’t much to relieve the monotony. We had our chickens, some hogs, and the calf and two cows to care for. The white cow was named Lily, and the other, a long-horned creature, mixed red, white, and a bit of black, I named Nellie, because she looked like a girl of that name in Coin. Since we had no fence, the cows had to be staked or lariated out where they had a good range of grass, and they had to be watered from that 11½-foot well. We would fill two or more tubs and all our buckets, then bring the cows to the well, and draw water as fast as we could in an attempt to keep up with their thirst. Then they had to be taken back to grass and re-staked. By the time we had accomplished this little chore we would both be almost exhausted. When they were put into the barn for the winter the work became easier.

We made considerable butter, during the warm weather keeping it and the milk cool in a trough in the sod milk-house, and this, together with eggs, helped buy groceries and the material for our scanty wardrobes. We often went to town with our neighbors, but it was sometimes necessary to get our produce to town while it was still fresh and when no neighbor was going. By this time the main-traveled road ran near our house instead of on the ridge a quarter of a mile west as previously, and there would be several teams passing during the day. Mother and I—usually both went—would get ourselves ready, take whatever we had to sell down to the road, wait for some farmer or teamster to come along, and ask for a ride—or would be offered one. We were the “hitchhikers” of 1887-1888. It never occurred to us to be afraid and never by the slightest word or deed was one of these men other than a gentleman. In later years mother would say: “Surely the Lord took fear out of our hearts.” On reaching Lenora we would arrange a meet-
ing-place for the return-trip, usually at Barbeau's or The Boston Store, and arrive home safe and sound.

Chickens and eggs had to be saved to buy sugar, salt, beans, soda, molasses, coal oil, feed for chickens, hogs, and cows, etc., but we always had enough to eat—bread and butter, and lots of "thickened milk," which was prepared by heating the desired amount of milk nearly to the boiling point and stirring into it flour which had been mixed smoothly with a little cold milk, boiling the mixture from three to five minutes while stirring constantly, and salting and pepperling to taste. Prepared in this way it was used for gravy. By omitting the pepper and adding a little sugar—or, still better, a little nutmeg or vanilla—it became a dessert. We must have had other things to eat during that period, but somehow almost the only thing I can remember is the thickened milk. We walked two and a half miles to gather chokecherries, wild grapes, and plums. The cherries were 99 percent skin and seeds, but they made a spread. The plums and grapes were very good when we could sweeten them with sugar rather than sorghum. We made these trips in the early morning or in the evening, thus putting half the journey in the cool of the day. We tried to raise a garden, but a few hot days made an end of it, as there was no water except from that 119½-foot well.

Our diet now seems monotonous if not inadequate, but we knew that we were well off compared to other people in earlier years. The Yokums, who lived on Spring creek where we used to get our drinking water before we sold the team, had been so near starvation some years before our arrival that Mrs. Yokum went out into the cornfield, gathered the nubbins which remained after harvest, ground the kernels in a coffee mill, and with the bread made from this meal ate stewed wild plums without sweetening! It makes my spine prickle even now just to think of it.

In the spring or early summer of 1887 the neighbors, led by mother, decided to have a three-months' school, since there were about ten children of school age within a mile or two. There was no school-house, so mother offered our "sitting room" and we obtained a teacher, Maud Hargrave. She boarded with us, going home Friday evening and returning early Monday morning. We had only such books as had been brought from Coin, and while the time spent may have kept us somewhat "school minded" we didn't

17. I can remember being told—whether by my mother or someone else—about a Kansas pioneer in this general period who for a time lived on "sand rats and cane-seed biscuits."—K. W. P.
learn very much. There were, of course, no desks, and one of our doors was the "black board." 18

Since mother and I were alone on the claim I have greater reason to remember the blizzard of 1887-1888 than the more important storm of the winter of 1885-1886. A cloud came up suddenly out of the northwest, resembling an immense windrow of tumbleweeds of unbelievable size and extent, rolling over and over with tremendous rapidity. As the cloud rolled the colors changed—white, blue, green, black. The cows and calf were safe enough in the sod-barn, but the half-grown hogs had little protection—only a pen of four-inch unplained boards with a shelter of weeds, long grass, fodder, and such material over one corner. Mother hit on the plan of pulling our tent over the pen and fastening it under the corners so that it couldn’t blow away. Anyone who has ever tried to control that much muslin in the gale of a blizzard knows we had a real job on our hands. We finally succeeded, but not before it had once gotten away from us and had engulfed both mother and the pigs. After the feat had been accomplished this episode was pretty funny, but had the hogs been full-grown it might have been tragic.

The storm lasted the remainder of the afternoon, all night, and until evening of the next day, when we were able to get out and tend the stock—milking, drawing and carrying water to the cows and hogs, cutting hay from the stack and bringing in shocks of fodder for the cows, feeding the pigs and chickens. We frosted our fingers, but considered that of little consequence. 19

One of our neighbor girls, Janet Coleman, was married in the winter of 1887-1888 to John Vawter. The Coleman house, always neatly kept, was made as attractive as possible and a very nice wedding supper was served to about two dozen guests; I distinctly remember the delicious watermelon preserves. The couple settled on a claim near Oakley and by hard work, keen management, and good luck made quite a financial success. The minister who performed the ceremony had been brought a distance of 20 or 25 miles, probably from Fremont. 20 He and his wife stayed all night with us.

18. See Dick, op. cit., ch. 23, for a detailed description of school on the Great Plains in this period.
19. Ibid., pp. 228-230, describes the blizzard of January 12, 1888, although, rather curiously, no mention is made of the historically far more important blizzards of 1886 and 1887 which virtually destroyed the Plains cattle industry.
20. Fremont, in west central Graham county, is now Morland. It was organized in 1886 and named for the famous explorer, general, and first Republican presidential candidate, but when the railroad came several years later it was renamed for a railroad official. — Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State, pp. 332, 333.
and I was fascinated by his method of conducting family worship, which we never omitted. He stood in front of the stove and repeated from memory the 22nd chapter of Revelation, beginning “And he showed me a pure river of water of life clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb,” clear through the 21 verses without hesitating, concluding with a uniquely worded prayer. This preacher was the widely known Uncle Jack Langley, for many years a circuit rider in western Kansas, whom we were to meet in his own congregation in Fremont in the summer of 1889.

From the summer of 1885 to 1888 several new families had moved into our section of the country but of the Coin folk only one family, the Colemans, remained, and their children are living on that same farm today. During those hard years many people “proved up, mortgaged, and got a loan,” which was never paid, and “went east to their wife’s folks.” The reasons may be put in one word—Drought; they simply couldn’t raise enough to live on. Some, who struggled through, became, on the other hand, pretty “well off” from the increase in the price of land, for crops eventually began to be raised and the cattle industry became important, since stock could winter on the buffalo grass except when it was covered too deeply by snow. This grass, when it hadn’t been grazed too closely, was often cut and stacked for the winter, and many more stacks were provided by the longer variety growing in the “draws.”

But only those who could get hold of some cattle were able to benefit from these circumstances.

Looking back from a distance of over half a century I think our greatest hardship was not the monotony, inconveniences, hard work, lack of money, and things of that sort, but rather the utter futility of it all. We were getting nowhere—merely existing—and it was this state of things which caused mother many an anxious hour. But sometimes misfortunes become blessings, and this was the case when our house in Coin burned to the ground early in 1888. It was insured for $450, all which was collected, and again mother determined to have me in school. So she decided to build a house in Lenora and rent the claim, which we had “proved up on” that spring.

21 In the early 1890’s, as a result of a succession of wet years, farmers crowded into the semi-arid Great Plains region in numbers greater than it could normally support. During subsequent years drought caused a recession of the Great Plains frontier line. The greatest decline in population took place in the early 1890’s. In 1885 Sherman county had a population of only one person to ten square miles; in 1888, three persons to one square mile; in 1889, nearly six per square mile; during the next four years there was little increase and by 1896 the population was down to four per square mile—a little more than it had been ten years earlier.—Walter F. Webb, The Great Plains (Boston, 1951), pp. 341-345, quoting the 21st annual report of the U.S. Geological Survey, pp. 681-683; Frederic L. Paxton, History of the American Frontier, 1763-1893 (Boston, 1924), p. 555; Dick, op. cit., p. 120.
at the Oberlin land-office. We used all the lumber from the granary and that, together with the $450 insurance, was enough for a one-story house, 24 feet square, hip roofed, and with a full basement. The sitting room was 14 feet square, the kitchen-diningroom 10 by 14, a bedroom 10 by 10, and two small bedrooms each 7 by 10. The house faced the south. The basement was not plastered but had well-built stone walls and a floor of wide boards. The foundation was high enough to permit windows in the basement, which contained a coal bin and storage space for fruit as well as furnishing an outlet for things not needed upstairs. Mr. Gatlin of Coin, who had come out to Kansas in 1885 at about the same time as father, was the carpenter.

We rented the claim, which we now called the "homestead," to Mr. Cameron. We also sold some of our chickens and all our turkeys to a man known as "Speckled" Johnson, living a few miles away, who was credited with at least one notch on his gun and had a reputation as a "bad man." One cannot well catch chickens or turkeys on a limitless range during the day, so the purchasers came after they were settled on the roost. Mother lit the lantern, we went out to the chicken house, caught the birds, he paid the bill, and the transaction was completed—another time when it seems we might have been afraid, but weren't. The Camerons had to move in with us before our house in Lenora was finished. They bought some guineas, and it was a source of great amusement to see them following mother about as closely as chicks the hen, the reason being that she was wearing a dress which in color and figures closely resembled the feathers of a guinea.

Brother was still working for Grace & Hyde, so our neighbors "moved" us to Lenora well in time for school, which opened in September. We felt pretty "grand" in our new house.

22. How Mrs. Wiggins was able to "prove up" on the claim in the spring of 1888, after a residence of three years or less, is perplexing; in fact, that she actually did so is doubtful. According to the amended homestead act of 1873, the homesteader was able to obtain full title to his claim only after five years residence and demonstrating that he had made certain improvements, such as a house, cultivation, etc. Since James W. Wiggins filed on his claim in April, 1883, his widow's period of "legal residence" in the spring of 1888 would have been only three years. However, as a Union veteran who had been invalided out of the service, he could subtract from his residence requirements the entire nine months for which he had enlisted.—Roy M. Robins, Our Landed Heritage: the Public Domain, 1776-1830 (Princeton, 1942), p. 216; Dick, op. cit., p. 119; Iowa Journal of History, v. 51, p. 132; letter, Robert W. Richmond, state archivist, Kansas State Historical Society, September 10, 1953, to K. W. F. But even with this allowance the Wiggins would not have fulfilled their residence requirement until July, 1880. Probably Mrs. Porter's memory erred and, although they left the claim in 1888, they did not actually prove up on it until the following year. Residence requirements were liberally construed; homesteaders were permitted to be absent from their claims for as long as six months at a time and sleeping on the claim for a single night was sufficient to re-establish residence. Furthermore, according to a circular of March 1, 1884 (letter from Prof. Thomas LeDuc, department of history, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, September 23, 1953, to K. W. F.), cultivation of a lease or agent would fulfill the residence requirements: "If the land is cultivated in good faith, the law will be regarded as substantially complied with, although the widow and children may not actually reside on the land."
“Holding Down” a Kansas Claim

Appendix

Answer to the Answer of Sod Shanty on the Claim

I'm not looking half so seedy since I made my final proof
And my bill of fare is now not quite so tame,
And though Sal gave me the “mitten,” I'm more than satisfied,
With my little old sod shanty and my claim.
I read her letter o'er and o'er, it made me feel quite sad,
For I never thought she was up to such a game;
But I'm happy now as ever as I lay me down to rest,
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

O, I've made my final proof, I'm as happy as a clam,
And I'm on the road to wealth if not to fame.
And I wonder if Miss Sally doesn't wish she'd stuck to Sam,
And his little old sod shanty on the claim.

The other day a railroad man came looking 'round this way,
And in private shyly took me by the arm.
"We are going to run a line across the country here," said he,
"And we want to build a town upon your farm."
The bargain is completed and lots are selling fast,
And the place is not now looking just the same.
I've lots of tin, and soon will build a splendid brown stone front,
Just beside my little old sod shanty on the claim.

No doubt she would be happy now to make the sacrifice,
Since she finds these wealthy men do not propose,
And the buggy rides grow scarcer as she's growing up in years,
And her cheeks their wonted tint begins to lose.
But since I've commuted I'm happy and I'm gay,
And of course I've sought me out another flame,
And she's not afraid of coming down to burning twisted hay,
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

Although my new found treasure may spend my ready cash,
And make me toe the mark when she gets mad,
Yet an Indian Miss would hardly suit my elevated views,
And I'd hate to have a half-breed call me "dad."
Now if Sall don't want to be the mother of my heir,
She will have no one but herself to blame,
For the prairies are prolific and she'd better stay away,
And leave Sam in his shanty on the claim.