

## DUST

### THE LAST DAY

It was spring 1947, and everything was new again. May on the prairie was a beautiful sight, green grass on all the pasture land, tall green wheat with mild of grain forming in the boot. Herd cows with new calves on the pasture grass, new fold colts running and frolicking around the mares, who watched with alert eyes of pride. The herd bull had shed his winter coat of dull dry hair and laid lazily on the carpet of buffalo grass with short, clean, and shining coat of new hair. The war in Europe was over. An exhausted world, enjoyed a peaceful rest.

I was in love with it all. Springtime on the prairie. Bull snakes traveled in pairs, while the Scissortail birds flew by the pair in their mating flights. There was love everywhere from the ground to the sky.

R.E. and I were walking up the hill to Union Ridge School while he was telling me something about school but I wasn't listening. Right then school was a one room prison on the hill that kept me locked in from all the miracles of the prairie spring.

"Hi Hoop." Charles Penland said, as we walked up onto the corner of the school ground.

"Charlie!" R.E. replied. "How did you beat us to school? We didn't see you walk past our house."

Dad brought us this far in the car when he had to go to town this morning.

R.E. and Charles were in the same grade and best friends. As they walked together toward the schoolhouse I walked along behind. Charles' little sister (Phyllis) walked up beside me.

"Do you want some of my sheep showers?" She ask, as I kicked a cinder rock across the ground.

"No! Those things will rot your guts!" (She's only six and thinks she's smart because she can spell "kitchen". SO WHAT! Girls are suppose to spell kitchen and that's where they should stay. Kitchen is probably written on the walls all over her house, so Phyllis couldn't keep from learning how to spell it.)

Reaching down, I picked a pretty wild daisy from its place in the hard ground of the school yard.

"Are you going to take that flower to Mrs. Waters?" Phyllis ask.

No! I was just looking at it. I think it has some snake spit on it. Here take it!

"NOooo!" She screamed, running away toward the schoolhouse.

Phyllis' older brother (James) came over to me and ask, "What did you do to Phyllis?"

Nothing. I was just trying to give her this pretty little flower, but you know how girls are.

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Mrs. Waters soon came out of the schoolhouse.

Gary! What is this about you trying to rub snake spit on Phyllis with a flower?

I was just trying to give her this daisy.

What about snake spit?

I only told her that I saw one down the road with some snake spit on it. (Spittle bug bubbles.)

"Well, let's not have any more talk about snake spit in the school yard!" She said, walking into the schoolhouse.

Yes, Mrs. Waters.

(Boy! Do I have a Phyllis repellent now! I wonder if it will work on Norma Jean?)

Mrs. Waters soon stepped back out onto the West porch of the schoolhouse, between the boys and girls cloak room entrances, ringing her prized brass school bell (which someone had bought her for graduating from Teachers College) with the signal for school to begin, everyone started running to the schoolhouse for our next to last day of school.

All the boys lined up in front of the boys cloak door on the South side, while the girls lined up in front of the North door. (Boy! I wouldn't be caught dead anywhere close to THAT DOOR! The guys wouldn't let you forget it for a week!)

Once Mrs. Waters had called the roll we all marched into the schoolhouse to take our places. When we were in our seats awaiting our assignments for the day Mrs. Waters walked up to the blackboard and began to write.

**TOMORROW THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL PICNIC AT HAROLD CROWDER'S FARM CREEK!**

Harry Edward Eyster shouted from the other side of the room, "That means this is the last day of school!"

"Hooray!" Everyone shouted and clapped.

"Yes." Mrs. Waters said, turning around with a big smile. "Now, everyone settle down so we may put this last day of classroom work behind us, because they are consolidating Union Ridge School with the big school in town starting next year. That means all of you children will be riding the bus to school in town next year and I won't be teaching anymore." Mrs. Waters suddenly had a sad look on her face and with tears began to well up in her eyes.

It will be the first time in years, that I haven't taught school and the first time in about fifty years, that there hasn't been children to teach on Union Ridge Hill.

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Everyone was real quiet as they took their assignments, some children looked around at the only classmates they had ever known, as if each of us had an ominous weight over our heads. No one knew what to expect at the big school.

Mrs. Waters stood up at four o'clock and said, "Everyone take all of your books and belongings home with you. Union Ridge School is closed."

R.E. and I walked down the hill from school with the Penland and Eyster children. Everyone was real quiet. While R.E. looked straight ahead, I turned around to see Mrs. Waters loading books into her car. She looked very tired and lonely on the hill all by herself. Then R.E. said, "Gary, don't look back!"

Why?

He didn't answer so we carried our books home from the one room school for the last time very quiet, as if we were walking on Holy Ground.

R.E. and I walked into the kitchen and laid our books on the table. Mother turned around seeing the books, she ask, "Why did you bring all of your books home? Isn't tomorrow the last day of school?"

Yes, but tomorrow we're having a last day picnic.

That will be nice. So why are you looking so long faced?

Why are they closing our school?

With Bill Southwell and Thurman Stubbs graduating from the eighth grade, and no children for the first grade, there will only be twelve students for all eight grades, that isn't enough student to hire a teacher.

Maybe someone will move into Union Ridge School District this summer.

We'll see.

It was going to be a long summer full of apprehension about the big school, new children, strange teachers, long school bus rides, and thousands of uncertain things. (Maybe, just maybe it will be OK.) Some days are hills. Some days are valleys. And some days are hills and valleys. This was just such a day, but tomorrow will be a hill all day, it's the school picnic and all my school mates will be there just to play. (I have an idea, we could leave the girls at the school to sweep the floors. NO! Lucille Southwell would beat my head in if I suggested that, and she is the only person in school that I can't outrun.)

It was a fresh spring morning, not a cloud in the bright blue sky, and just a hint of prairie blossom scent in the clean morning air.

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Mother was holding me back by the suspenders of my overalls asking, "Do you have your lunch?"

Yes! Let me go, it's picnic day.

Did you wash your ears?

Yes. Let me go!

When?

Yesterday.

Gary, what will the girls think of you?

I don't care. Let me go! Breaking free I ran out the door.

R.E. take this handkerchief and bail some water out of the cistern at school to wash his ears.

"Mother! I'm not going to wash his ears. He can just go deaf for all I care." R.E. replied, as he ran out the door behind me for the big day at the school picnic.

Gary, I'm not going to take care of you. I don't care what Mother said.

Who cares!

Mother cares! And that means you better.

She isn't going to be there so leave me alone and walk on the other side of the road. When we reached the schoolhouse for the last time I started to run.

"Gary, don't shake the lunch pail! You'll smash the sandwiches." I ran even faster shaking the pail as hard as I could while I ran. Later R.E. was very upset about the smashed sandwiches, peanut butter coated apples, and the soggy bread, because of the milk that had leaked out of the fruit jar.

Tension was in the air like particles of dust dancing in sunlight everyone was ready to go on the creek picnic over where Harold Crowder's family lived on the Walter Cagg farm. Mrs. Waters loaded all of us into her station wagon and Mr. Waters' pickup truck for the two mile ride to the creek.

When we passed Harry Eyster's farm house, Harry Edward said, "There is my sister, Mary Bell."

I looked toward the house. Standing on the porch was a very pretty young lady of about nineteen waving at us as we passed by. (About five years later she would become my Aunt Mary Bell.)

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[she married J.E. Hooper, Jr.] but for now, she was Harry Edward's older sister, that strange and wonderful person that he had always talked about with respect that I just didn't understand yet. Looking back at him I thought (a sister must be a strange thing, but she didn't look like the princess in an ivory palace that he had caused me to think she was by the way he always talked about her).

At the Crowder farm home the pickup stopped so we could all unload for that final day of fun and sun, it was a good time, with everyone in harmony, almost.

I stopped to pick some sheep showers from the pasture then walked along eating them as we went down the hill to the creek.

"Gary, you told me that those things would rot your guts!" Phyllis said, with a look of horror on her face.

They will! I'm just eating some of them so you don't eat all of them and die.

Mrs. Waters, Gary said, Sheep showers will rot my guts and I will die.

Phyllis, you stay with me and don't pay any attention to what Gary says about plants or anything else.

(Well that was easy enough. I wonder what would happen if I rubbed snake spit on Norma Jean's pigtails? No, she's too close to Harry Edward, and that older cousin of hers would probably enjoy beating me up.)

With the wooden water keg and all the lunch pails (a collection of everything from lard cans to wooden cheese boxes with binder twine handles) placed under a large American Elm tree, the fun began. Tag, dearbase, three legged races, wheelbarrow races, hide and seek, climbing trees, jumping the creek, shells, rocks, honeysuckles, wild daises, cow pasture tulips, dandelion seeds scattered in the wind, and a thousand wonderful things you can see when your eyes are only three foot from the ground.

Darrell Luderman and I were standing by the creek's stream watching the water wash over a snail as it crawled on a rock when we heard the last school bell ring. Mrs. Waters was calling all of us to come in for the trip back.

After she called the roll for the last time, we all started walking up a dusty cow trail toward the Crowder home. I lagged behind not wanting such a wonderful day to end.

"Gary, come on, it's time to leave." Mrs. Waters said.

I looked up the hill. Everyone was walking into the afternoon sun and in its brightness they all disappeared. Looking down I could see all the tracks they had left in the dusty cow trail. Tracks that are still, a memory in the dust.

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Thank you Mrs. Waters.

Thank you all. Bill, Thurman, Harry Edward, James, Rachel, R.E., Charles, Frances, Lucille, Harold, Darrell, Norma Jean ... OK, and Phyllis.