

Music of the Spheres

650 words

A few scrappy, three-foot cuttings, no bigger than buggy whips, are coming up from the front yards of a half-dozen houses thought itself to be a town. That's it--the only trees for miles around. Mr. Taylor, a school board member who lived in the back of his own shop, sends his hired man around to take you to the Talbot's sod house, about a mile out of town. You don't know the Talbot's.

It's 1888, and you'd never been on a perfectly endless landscape like the one you're on. It's hot, very hot, but there's a breeze--feel it?--the only thing keeping you from sweaty suffocation.

This place is not home. You've just come out of Normal School in eastern Iowa, determined to be a teacher, determined to go west like so many others. Now that you're here, you wonder if you simply lost your mind.

But the Talbot's are kind. They take you in sweetly, Mrs. Talbot offering reassurance that there is some humanity here, some love, some comfort.

The next morning after a remarkable breakfast, you take the hand of the little Talbot girl, then leave the sod house for the school which is yet another soddie, twelve feet by fifteen feet--that's it. But it's the place where you're going to be a teacher, a soddie so small it's little bigger than mother's summer porch.

Brush and weeds cover the ceiling so thinly you try not to look up because when you do it's blue sky all over. You step back outside and look around at nothing but grass as far as the eye can see. You can't help thinking no one else is coming because no one, nothing, is anywhere near. Where would the children come from?--you ask yourself.

In a half hour, you know you were wrong.

Your name is Mrs. J. J. Douglas, and you're remembering those times, years later, as if in a dream because it all seems so museum-like that the whole sod house story is almost embarrassing, and would be if remembering those times weren't so blessed.

"I found in that little, obscure school house some of the brightest and best boys and girls it was ever my good fortune to meet," Mrs. Douglas says in a memoir she titled "Reminiscences of Custer County." And then this: "There soon sprang up between us a bond of sympathy."

Sympathy?

"I sympathized with them in their almost total isolation from the world," she says, as if each of the kids in that 12x15 foot schoolhouse were suffering.

She may have assumed that, but somehow I doubt that they were.

And then this: ". . .and they sympathized with me in my loneliness and homelessness."

I don't think sympathy moved equally in both directions. I'm guessing the kids didn't think they were suffering, but their barely-older-than-a-child teacher did.

The kids were sweethearts, and that's what she remembers. They were singers, she writes, "so many sweet voices," especially two little girls who seemed "remarkable," she says, "for children of their age."

Mrs. Douglas's reminiscence ends with a perfectly heavenly image. One bright day, having dismissed her scholars, she stood outside that sodhouse door and watched the kids walk out into the horizon by way of a path that led into a stretch of big blue stem so tall it hid the them completely.

But what that grass didn't hide was their beatific singing. "I could hear those sweet tones long after the children were out of sight in the tall grass," that teacher says, a moment she claims she often recalls because "I shall never forget how charmingly that music seemed to me." A blessing.

She doesn't say it, but I will. I wonder whether those girls' music wasn't created just for their teacher, music of the spheres for her "loneliness and homelessness," music sung by the angels.

I think that's how she remembers it.