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Lorri Malson

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THE PROMISED LAND

By Lorri Malson

Author's Note: This story was written as a tribute to all the hundreds of pioneers who traveled many long, hard roads to settle in and around my hometown, Hammon. It's a combination of many stories told to me by my grandparents and one of my teachers. Most of the details are factual, while some tend to be purely fictional. The main story, however, is centered around William Stinson, a true pioneer, who came to Hammon in 1896 on his journey to find the "Promised Land."

The day was beautiful--early spring, the sun shining high overhead. The trees had just begun to put on new growth, and little weeds were beginning to pop up everywhere. It was a glorious day for a walk, so I struck out for the adjacent field. Walking alone, out there, always seems to bring a kind of peace and solitude over me. It's almost like a high of some kind. Lately, I have felt all the pressures of life building up around me, so I walked even faster than I usually do.

Twenty minutes or more passed, and I finally began to unwind. I began to slow down and wake up to all the beauty around me. I knew all the surroundings so well that I could close my eyes and walk blindly, missing the holes left by the snakes and the old fence posts left unused for over forty years. This was my home land and I loved it. I loved it just as my grandfather had and his father before him.

My great-grandfather grew tired of Texas and decided to move his family northward, up toward the Indian and Oklahoma territories. He had heard stories about the beautiful green pastures and open lands, just waiting for a family like his to move in and settle down on. After much preparation and persuasion, he finally loaded his family up and took off for the promised land. The way was long and hard. A covered wagon loaded to the hilt was slow, and some of the trails were almost non-existent.

My great-grandfather rode in the head wagon, along with eight of his ten

children. The other two children, aged two and four, rode with my great-grandmother in a buggy, nowadays referred to as a surrey. On the way, they met up with some of Great-grandpa's relatives, who decided they would go along too.

It was now late summer, and the hot July sun was beginning to take its toll on the animals and the families. It had been over a month since they had left home, and my great-grandma was tired and frustrated. She begged my great-grandfather to go back--go back to her beloved Texas, her family, and her friends. He told her it wasn't much farther--he could feel it. Maybe by the middle of the next week, they would find the right spot for their new home.

And find it, they did. Two days had barely passed when they came upon a piece of land that had a small creek running through it. The creeks and rivers were sparse in this western area, and they felt it was a good sign to find this beautiful spot with its own water on it.

After some checking around, my great-grandfather found out that this quarter-section had been "squatted" on but hadn't been filed on. He traced the man and purchased the quarter for a huge sum of \$50 and a red mule. Remember, now, that the year was 1896, and \$50 was a huge amount of money. The mule traded for was also important to them since he had packed many belongings on his back on their trek here. Nevertheless, the trade was made, and they set about to clear out and finish the dugout the man had started.

The dugout was built into the bottom of a small hill on the west side of the creek bank, close, but not too close, to the creek. This was done so that when the spring floods came, a flash flood wouldn't destroy their home. The two-room dugout held little of their belongings, so work was started immediately on a new one, which they finally moved into about two years later.

The children loved it here. They

built swings over the creek and played along the banks. They also explored the nearby caves and visited the adjacent fields where small herds of buffalo once came to wallow. They also spent much time looking after one another and the new baby that had been born since they arrived. There were eleven children now--quite a brood for such a small place.

Great-grandpa slowly began tilling the quarter and farming. He had also brought along two cows and three pigs. They began to join area neighbors and built up a small herd of cows and hogs. Later he was able to buy two more quarter-sections of land and decided to build a real house. Supplies had to be hauled from as far away as 150 miles, and the trip wasn't easy. Not only was the distance great for those days, but they also couldn't haul much lumber at a time. The horses would get so tired coming home that they would have to stop for hours to let them rest. Once the lumber was all hauled in, the work on the new house began. It was to be a fine house, one big enough to hold his expanding family. There were two things that Great-grandmother wanted in her "real" house--windows with glass panes and a big front porch, where all the family could gather in the evenings. Great-grandpa didn't have much trouble with the porch, but finding glass for the windows was a big challenge. Glass was a luxury item and wasn't to be found within at least 250 miles. Therefore, he set out for Jack County, Texas, in search of glass. He finally found his precious glass and started back.

The new house was finally finished, and the glass panes were installed. The house had a total of fifteen rooms--quite a mansion in those days. The ground floor contained the kitchen, family room, sitting room, and four bedrooms. The upstairs contained all bedrooms, none of which, of course, had bathrooms. In those days, the great outdoors provided a hand pump and an outhouse for any baths and business. In the winter, water was carried in, heated,

and poured into a huge washtub in the kitchen. Each family member bathed in the washtub.

The times for the most part were good. The lives of these pioneers weren't easy, compared with our lives today. The men and young boys spent long hours outdoors working the land, clearing trees, and hauling water. The women and young girls didn't have easy lives either. They worked outdoors at the creek and spent long hours gardening and canning food for the winter ahead. A difficult childbirth claimed my great-grandmother's life at the early age of 39. She died giving birth to her twelfth child, my grandfather. The older children pitched in to rear the younger children, and life once again fell into place.

One by one the children began to mature. Many years passed, and all but my grandfather left for "greener pastures" as they referred to leaving home. But not Grandpa. He loved the "home place," as he so lovingly called it, and continued to carry on in the ways set forth by his father. Grandpa married and reared two children of his own, and they too learned to love the land.

Grandpa passed this love on down to me, and now as I continue on my walk, I see the old house, the house he was born in over eighty years ago. It's crumbling in places, and the chimney has fallen in. The windows no longer contain any of the glass that Great-grandmother had wanted so badly. But it's still standing, tired and old, a constant reminder of those olden days.

The creek which once provided water for the family and animals now stands dry most of the time. The buffalo wallow is still there, and my dad and brothers find that no matter how hard they try, the wheat won't grow in that spot.

Yes, this is the "promised land" that my great-grandfather was searching for. It has seen both death and new life; it has seen a small family of fourteen grow into a family of well over five hundred. But most important, I have seen it and loved this land--my love and my heritage.

The sun is beginning to set. I glance around quickly once more as I turn and begin my walk toward home feeling loved, refreshed, and full of pride. ■

LORRI MALSON is a third-year Elementary Education student at SOSU. Her hobbies include writing and reading fiction.



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