

“A PRAIRIE CHILDHOOD” BY EDITH ABBOTT AN EXCERPT FROM *THE CHILDREN’S CHAMPION*, A BIOGRAPHY OF GRACE ABBOTT

JOHN SORENSEN

Grace Abbott (1878-1939) is, perhaps, the greatest champion of children’s rights in American history. She was a woman of intriguing contradictions: a life-long Republican Party member and a life-long liberal activist; a native of the Nebraska frontier who spent much of her life in the poorest immigrant quarters of urban Chicago; an unmarried woman who was nicknamed “the mother of America’s forty-three million children.”

Grace Abbott was a public figure who was both much adored and bitterly, sometimes vehemently, attacked. She was a born and bred pioneer: the first woman nominated for a Presidential cabinet post (secretary of labor for

Herbert Hoover) and the first person sent to represent the U.S. at a committee of the League of Nations.

Grace Abbott’s courageous struggles—to protect the rights of immigrants, to increase the role of women in government, and to improve the lives of all children—are filled with adventurous tales of the remarkable human ability to seek out suffering, and to do something about it. She was a bold, defiant woman who changed our country more profoundly than have many Presidents.

U.S. Representative Edward Keating summed up the feelings of innumerable Americans when he stood on the floor of the Congress in 1939 and said, quite simply: “To me there was something about Grace Abbott which always suggested Joan of Arc.”

The impressive achievements of Grace Abbott’s adult life beg on the question: how did she come to be such an extraordinary woman? The answer is, perhaps, to be found in her unusual and beautiful experiences as a child on the Great Plains.

“A Prairie Childhood”—an excerpt from the forthcoming Grace Abbott biography entitled *The Children’s Champion* — tells the story

John Sorensen compiled and edited this article. He is the Founding Director of the Abbott Sisters Project and has just completed The Children’s Champion, a radio biography of Grace Abbott, based upon the soon-to-be-published book of the same name. His next endeavor will be the production of a TV portrait of Grace Abbott.

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of Grace's childhood in the words of her beloved sister, Edith Abbott (1876-1957), who was a great pioneer of social work education. For more information on the lives and works of Grace and Edith Abbott, please contact the Abbott Sisters Research Center at the Edith Abbott Memorial Library in Grand Island, Nebraska.

1. CHILDREN OF THE WESTERN PLAINS

A child's voice was repeating, "reel lil' sister . . . reel lil' sister," as she tried to pull herself up the high steps of the black walnut stairway, one hand clutching her grandmother's and the other holding uncertainly to the banister.

"Yes, a real little sister—but very, very quiet." Grandmother led me from the chilly hallway into Mother's room, where a coal fire was burning in the little stove. There, in what had been my own wooden cradle, was the new baby, and I can hear now my excited child's voice calling Mother to come see "my lil' sister, reel lil' sister," until I was led away, back down the cold, steep stairs.

In the long years to come, Grace was to say many times, in her half-serious way, "You know, Edith really has a remarkable memory. She even recalls when I was born, and she was only two years old at that time!" But I really do remember it—to the very day and hour that I saw for the first time the little sister who would grow up and play with me.

Grace and I always agreed that our most cherished memories were those of our prairie childhood. They are long memories, going back many years. We were born in Grand Island, one of the oldest Nebraska towns, less than a mile from the Overland Trail. And even when we lived in Chicago or Washington, this western town and state were always home.

Children of the old frontier, we were brought up hearing the story of the making of a state in the prairie wilderness, and we knew the men and women who had cast in their lives and fortunes for the "winning of the

West"—facing the blizzards and droughts and other hardships of the covered-wagon days. Perhaps it was because we knew of the sacrifices made by the pioneers that we were always proud of having been born in Nebraska and always wanted to be identified with Nebraska.

Our prairie home was in a very small town in a county with a large area but with few settlers. People talked of the long future. Everyone seemed full of confidence. There was hope, vigorous planning, and profound belief in the kind of success that would be the result of hard work and rugged will.

The town site was still part of the prairie, and the town streets had the prairie look, with clumps of buffalo grass along the sides and even in the middle of the way. There were new people coming in all the time—some of whom would stay, while others pushed on farther west. No one ever seemed to go back.

In those days, the first question you asked anyone was, "Where did you come from?" And we children considered it quite a distinction to have been born in Nebraska. We were part of the town, the county, the state, and we enjoyed the sense of belonging.

To the young soldiers who, like Father, had come from President Lincoln's armies, the western plains had been the land of promise, and the westward journey a thrilling pilgrimage. Wherever they went, the historians tell us, those early settlers "made civilization"—even when there seemed little to make it with or from. And, when we were young, the spirit of the Great Adventure was still in the Nebraska air.

Trying to recover the memories of the prairie days, the pictures in my mind of my sister, Grace, and of my mother and father, are clear as I see again the old home with our two brothers, Othman and Arthur, our dear Quaker grandmother who lived with us—and the small town with its democratic way of frontier life.

Grace used to say that a small western town was the most honestly democratic place in the world. There were no people who were rich, and the poor we all knew as individuals. They



FIG. 1. *Grand Island in 1885 from the top of the Hall County Courthouse looking south.* Photograph by J. R. Moeller, 1885, *Grand Island Souvenir Book*. Courtesy of Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.

were people to whom we were expected to be especially polite and kind—people who had had one misfortune or another, people whom we should try to help.

2. FAMILY TRADITIONS

In the quiet life of an early western town, family stories and family traditions were important in the lives of children, and our parents' tales of their families seemed to belong to the history of the country and to be part of the great American traditions.

Two of Father's great-great-grandfathers had been in the Colonial Wars, and one of his grandfathers in the Revolutionary War. We knew the story of Mother's Quaker family, the Gardners—how her grandfather, John Gardner, had come to this country to be an aide-de-camp to his brother, an officer in Lord Cornwallis's army, and how, at the risk of being tried for treason, he had left the British army because he had become a “convinced Friend” and married a Quaker girl in the Genesee Valley in New York State.

When life seemed difficult, we heard stories of how much harder things had been when Father and Mother were children. Mother had been born and had spent her childhood in a log house in DeKalb County in Illinois. She

sometimes said, “How I liked our house. It was a very nice log house.” And when Grace would ask, “But how could a log house be a nice house, Mother?” she would tell us about the big open fire and about the large room just for weaving.

Grandmother, with a brother and a sister, became a pioneer settler along the Kishwaukee River. In the days before bridges had been built across the larger rivers, our mother's father had drowned some months before she was born when he was trying to swim with his horse across the Kishwaukee during a season of high water, on his way to get supplies. He and his horse were both good swimmers, but the horse probably got his feet tangled in the water lilies, and they both went down. Grandmother never spoke of that tragedy, but Mother once told me the story as she had learned to know it.

The abolitionist traditions and the history of the anti-slavery movement were also a part of our life. There were endless stories about Lincoln and arguments about the campaigns of the Civil War, which Father always called the “War of the Rebellion.”

Men who came to see Father had been, nearly all of them, Union soldiers, and if they stayed to have supper, they would sit through the long evening, telling stories of the men in

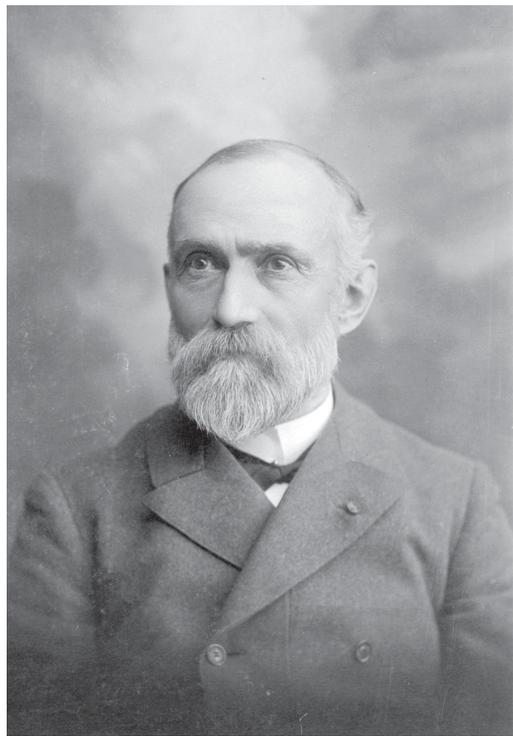


FIG. 2. O. A. Abbott, *first Lieutenant Governor of the state of Nebraska*. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

their regiments and of their officers. We children soon found that being interested in grown-up conversation meant an excuse for staying up later and sitting in the warm room downstairs a little longer.

We knew that Grandfather Abbott had been a “Black Republican” but not an abolitionist like the Gardners. He did not approve of the Underground Railroad with which Mother’s Quaker family has been connected. Grace used to ask endless questions. “I don’t understand just what this slavery was,” she would say. “I don’t see how it made a great war.”

Father would tell us that he had heard the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who had come to Illinois to speak in Belvidere, only ten miles from the Abbotts’ family farm. At that time,

Father was still a schoolboy, but he walked the long distance to attend the meeting over roads so muddy with melting winter snows as to be almost impassable—making his way into the town by the slow process of moving from one rail fence to another. He was footsore the next day from the weary walk home that lasted well into the early morning hours. But Father said that it was easy to forget how tired he had been, and impossible to forget the wonderful experience of hearing that beautiful voice defending the abolitionist faith.

Father enlisted in September 1861, while he was still eighteen, after Lincoln’s call for “three hundred thousand more” volunteers. But the war created a conflict for Mother’s Quaker abolitionist family; they believed so earnestly in freeing the slaves that they could not accept the noncombatant position of the Friends. And so it was with great seriousness that the five Gardner sons of that generation all joined the armies of “Father Abraham”—four of them to die for what was, to them, a war to free the slaves. Mother’s only brother was one of those who never came back, and his picture hung in both Mother’s and Grandmother’s rooms.

Mother often spoke about the fugitive slaves. She had gradually come to know that her mother, her aunt Lydia, and her uncle Allen Gardner were all working with the Underground Railroad. Mother had been cautioned as a child not to talk about the things that she saw at home. And even long years after the war, she still did not like to say much about the “Underground” attempts made to help the fugitive slaves escape.

For one thing, I do not believe that she knew a great deal about the things that happened. As a child she had wondered about the heavy “bakings,” about a wagon dashing into the yard and the horses being watered. Then suddenly, all the bread and food would disappear, and the wagon would dash out again, leaving her mother and all the Gardners in some excitement, but with Mother knowing only that something had happened which she didn’t understand.

She told us that, as they were taking out her mother’s horses one day, lending them to relieve another team, she was playing alone in the yard and went to pick up a ball under what she thought was a stranger’s hay wagon standing in the yard. As she crawled under the wagon, she looked up and, suddenly, through a crack, she saw two black faces looking down. She ran home frightened, saying that two Negro men were hiding under the hay. But she was told solemnly that she must never speak to anyone about what she had seen.

The Gardner and Griffen families suffered cruelly during the war. Mother’s only brother was one of those who was wounded during Sherman’s march to the sea. He was taken north on a hospital ship and died at sea, while his widowed mother was on her way to Baltimore, where she had been sent word that she would find him in a hospital.

In Father’s regiment, the Ninth Illinois Cavalry, was one of Mother’s cousins, Edwin Branch, who was killed at Pontotoc, Mississippi. Edwin Branch was one of the new men that Father had got when he was sent north to find recruits. The historian Dr. Jesse Hawes later wrote of Edwin Branch as being “ruddy and fresh from his northern home,” when his head was “literally taken off by a cannon ball.”

And then there was the story of Edwin’s brother, Henry Branch, who was furloughed home from a Southern battlefield, but when he got off the train at Belvidere found no one there to meet him, since the family had not yet got his letter. When no lift came along, he began the long twelve-mile walk home, eventually sitting down under an elm tree to rest on the old state road. And there they later found him—dead, but smiling. Father was particularly sad about that story and would say, “How sorry I felt for Squire Branch when I heard about it.” And Mother would answer, “I suppose Henry’s heart was worn out, but at least he was happy, for he had come home.”

Father’s cavalry sabre hung on the wall with his army commission, and we used to ask him about it. Father was so tall and strong and vigorous that we thought him quite beautiful



FIG. 3. Elizabeth Griffen Abbott, on the occasion of her graduation from Rockford Female Seminary in 1868. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

with his wonderful dark eyes, and we loved to watch him as he told his stories. Grace said solemnly, “Father, did you ever kill a rebel soldier with your big sabre?” Father’s reply was prompt and reassuring, “I hope not, my dear, I hope not. But the old sabre was very useful when we caught a chicken or a young pig.”

3. OUR PRAIRIE HOME

Mother seemed to us a very beautiful person. She did not buy many new things to wear, but those she had were always, as Grace used to say, “different.” A cream-colored silk with black plaid lines in it was trimmed with heavy black lace. I remember this dress of Mother’s through all the years. She wore it with some

kind of a small black bonnet tied with a wide-ribboned bow on one side.

Mother and her family had been well to do and Mother had had a good salary when she worked as a teacher and principal back in Illinois. She had brought some handsome dresses out west with her, and her policy was to go on wearing nice things even when they were old and worn, instead of buying new and less distinctive things of cheaper quality. To us, Mother herself was “different.”

Mother had a quiet dignity that, as Grace said, “just made you do things when you didn’t want to at all.” As we children were rather rough and tumble, and noisy and harum-scarum, Grace used to compare us with Mother and say, “But, Mother, how could you have such ‘fighty’ children? We just don’t seem to be your kind.”

How kind and friendly the old prairie home seemed with its gardens and walks and places for children to play, and with its porches at the front, the side, and the back of the house. The house had a south bay window that looked into green and growing things. We had an acre of ground for trees and shrubs and vegetable gardens and flowers.

One of the graveled walks that stretched along between the flowerbeds and the vegetable gardens was very wide, and Mother called it “the broad walk.” Our broad walk had some large willows and wonderful cottonwood trees on each side. The cottonwoods grew rapidly in our dry country, and they gave the whole place a spacious air.

Here was the children’s swing, where we had Father for a playmate in the long summer evenings when he would swing us to thrilling heights. “Hang tight now, Gracie, and away you go!” and away she went in her little pink chambray dress, higher and higher, holding fast to the ropes, with the prairie wind whispering through the rustling cottonwood leaves like a strange mysterious friend.

Even our games were in the proper tradition, and Grace would come up the broad walk, pushing her little red wagon and shouting, “Make way for the Overland Express. Make

way for the Central Overland California and Pike’s Peak Express.” Then, suddenly, she was the Pony Express, galloping along with bits of paper for letters, until our brother Arthur became an Indian in ambush to hold up the Overland Mail.

Mother thought the flat brown country of the Great Plains was a forlorn place for children. She liked to tell us stories about her old home in the beautiful Illinois country—stories of the woods and wildflowers, orchards, wild blackberries, hazelnut bushes, and butternut trees—and she used to call us “poor benighted prairie children.” Grace always liked the stories Mother told of the Illinois woods—how she watched for the early arbutus, how she loved to find a jack-in-the-pulpit, while Grace asked, “But now, just what is this jack-in-the-pulpit? Couldn’t we get just one jack-in-the-pulpit to plant so I could see one?”

Our house was a story and a half, painted a nice prairie brown. It had a hall and a stairway, beautifully curved, which, like everything else, was black walnut, with a good bannister to slide on.

The black walnut stairway in the hall led upstairs to a small hall and three bedrooms under the sloping roofs. These rooms were very hot in the summer, and Mother sometimes let us take a quilt out to sleep for a while on the roof of the front porch. There, in the quiet prairie night, we stayed to see the great stars overhead. “I can just feel the stars coming down around us,” Grace used to say. We tried to find the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper—and when Father joined us, he could help us find other constellations.

Two of our favorite plants in the garden area were small oleander trees, one white and one pink. A great deal of care was taken in the fall when early frosts came suddenly, and the oleanders were watched by everyone and wrapped up at night in newspapers for fear the frost might hurt them. The oleanders were so slow about blossoming and so perfect when they did blossom, we were all triumphant when friends and neighbors came to see them, and

even the local newspaper took notice. Those blossoms were so often sent to sick friends and neighbors that they seemed to be dedicated for this mission.

Mother felt keenly the sorrows of the families whose children were ill, and she grieved for those who died. She was quick to take the cherished oleander blossoms here and there. One time she sent some to the home of a very poor neighbor who had lost her youngest child. The child’s mother later told us that the lovely white blossoms were the only flowers she had to place in the hand of the dead child. That made a great impression on me as I stood listening while she and Mother both wept as she tried to talk.

Diphtheria and scarlet fever were dangerous epidemics in those days. A whole family of children whom we knew well were victims of a diphtheria outbreak, a tragedy that explained Grace’s name.

Mother had been trying to decide whether Grace should be named Lydia Gardner, for the most beloved of her Quaker aunts, or Lucy Gardner for an older and dearly loved cousin. But the death of these three little friends made Mother decide to use the name Grace, which had been the name of the eldest little girl in the stricken family. This seemed a way of expressing our sorrow over the loss of our friends.

When Father’s approval for the name was sought, he said gently, “Well, there was a Grace Abbott in our family in 1587 in England, so I think it is all right to have one here in 1878 in Nebraska.”

4. THE RIGHTS OF THE INDIAN

There were still a great many Indians in our part of the plains when we were children, and some of them were often seen coming and going through the town. It was part of Mother’s Quaker heritage that she sympathized with the Indians, who had been disinherited by our government. She had earnest convictions about the injustices they had suffered, and she wanted to help them and to see them as they came and went. We tried to understand

Mother’s stories, some of which had been part of her Illinois childhood, about how the Indians had followed “the sorrowful trail” and how every road they traveled had been a road of injustice.

As children we knew the Pawnee best, and Mother took a great interest in the stories about the Pawnee Tribe and the cruelties they had sometimes suffered from the Sioux Indians. The government used to allow them to leave the reservation for an annual hunting festival, and we knew the story about how the Pawnees went off on one of their old-time expeditions and came back to find the Sioux hidden everywhere in their village. The Sioux had used their time to prepare a deadly assault on the Pawnee as they returned from their festival.

It was after Mother came to Nebraska that the remnant of the Pawnee Tribe was moved from the Nance County reservation, north of our own county, to Indian Territory. Although the Pawnee submitted peaceably to the removal order, Mother thought that this moving of them from their good land—simply because of the railroads and those interested in making the state seem a little more “important”—was an injustice that took the Pawnee away from land that was rightfully theirs. For many years afterward, some of the Pawnee seemed always to be around to tell their story of the “Lost-Forever Land.”

Mother also sympathized at times with the Sioux. In the late 1870s, difficulties with the Indians in the northern part of our state threatened to become serious. As we children grew up, we heard many stories from the army officers who stopped in Grand Island and who sometimes came to dinner with Father.

A favorite story was that of Chief Crazy Horse, the Ogallala Sioux Indian who made such a brave but hopeless fight for the freedom of his people. Crazy Horse was a great chief who would never register or enroll at any Indian agency, and there were many legends about him. The battle with General Custer at the Little Big Horn was often talked about, and we knew that Crazy Horse had called to the men of his tribe, “Strong hearts, brave

hearts, to the front. Weak hearts and cowards to the rear.”

Because of the Indian reservations then in Nebraska, groups of Indians wrapped in blankets were seen on the streets of town from time to time. Grace and I usually walked boldly ahead, but almost instinctively each grabbed the other’s hand as we passed the strange people with the strange language. “Do not be afraid,” Mother used to say. “They will not harm you, and you should try to learn to believe in them.”

When Mother would say, “Show them that you are not afraid of them,” Grace would ask, “But, Mother, how can we do that when we know we are afraid of some of them?” This called for a long explanation and usually ended with the familiar statement that “an Indian never forgets a kindness. If you are truly kind to them, they will be kind to you and to all the other children.”

The names of some of the old Indian chiefs who had hunted buffalo, antelope, and wild geese on our part of the plains were often repeated by children. “Morning Star” was a name Grace always liked—and she even wrote a story about an Indian princess with that name. “If I were an Indian, I would like to be called ‘Morning Star,’” she often said, waving her hand high toward the clouds.

We also listened eagerly to the story of Prairie Flower, the daughter of a Sioux chief, who died after a “long and cruel winter” that had followed a period of drought and other hardships, when the wild deer were gone and the Indians were hungry. “I suppose Prairie Flower was a princess,” Grace would say, “but she was sick and hungry just the same.”

5. THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Grace used to say that she was born believing in women’s rights, and certainly, from the earliest days, women’s suffrage was part of our childhood. “I was always a suffragist, and even if you are little girls, you can be suffragists, too, because it is right and just,” was the teaching in our home.

Mother would tell us about the time when her uncle Allen Gardner came back from a visit to the old New York home in the Genesee Valley. Mother was then only a child of eight, but she remembered her joy when Uncle Allen, who had brought some precious abolitionist papers for her mother, said that he also had a present for her. And what a present for an eight-year-old! He had brought a copy of the then-recent speech made by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the Seneca Falls Convention, and this, he said, was for little Elizabeth—but she must learn the speech as soon as she was able to read it.

A child in a log house did not have many presents in those early days, and Mother told of her excitement and of how she struggled to read and then to recite that memorable address. Whether she learned it then or later, I do not know. I only know that some parts of it were learned so well that they were never forgotten.

Mother, who was a fatherless child, had been brought up by her widowed mother and an aunt, but she always said that her good Uncle Allen had done a great deal for her. All the Gardners were “birthright Quakers,” and they believed earnestly in the great crusade for women’s rights, which was still in the early stages of organization when Mother was a child in the 1840s and ’50s.

When Mother was a student at Rockford College in the 1860s—just a few years before Jane Addams attended the school—she was a sturdy advocate of women’s suffrage, and the subject of her graduating essay was “Iconoclasts.” I am sure that women’s rights was one of the subjects discussed. Certainly Mother brought with her, when she came to our part of the pioneer West, all the arguments of that day for women’s suffrage.

Grace and I both treasured the copy of John Stuart Mill’s *Subjection of Women*, which Father had given to Mother before they were married—and which had marginal notes apparently written by one to the other. It was clear from his notes that Father had been converted to a vigorous belief in the rights of

women a long time before our memories began.

Father and Mother were both helpful when the legislature of Nebraska in 1882 finally submitted to the voters an amendment to the state constitution that would give women a right to vote for state officers. Mother became one of the workers of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Society and the president of our local branch of the organization, and Father and Mother both worked hard in the local town and county campaign.

Miss Susan B. Anthony traveled out to Nebraska that year, and Father and Mother were happy that she had promised to come to our part of the state. She stayed at our house and spoke at a large public meeting in Grand Island. Apparently they had a splendid meeting for her, for we heard many times that Miss Anthony had been pleased with it.

We remembered even better Mother's story about how tired Miss Anthony was after she had shaken hands with the last person in the audience who lingered to meet her. As they walked slowly away from the old Liederkrantz hall, where the meeting had been held, Mother said that it must be hard to shake hands with so many people after so many meetings. But Miss Anthony quickly put her arm around Mother and said, very earnestly, "Oh, my dear, if you could only know how much easier it is than in the days when no one wanted to shake hands with me!"

We had no room for guests in our house since my grandmother had come to live with us, so it often fell to my lot or to Grace's to share not only a room, but a bed with one of Mother's suffragist visitors. We enjoyed having visitors and felt very important when we were told that we were helping the cause. I was proud that I shared my pillow with Miss Anthony the night she spoke at our local meeting when I was only six years old, and I never quite understood why Mother said, "Poor Miss Anthony—that was the best we could do for her."

The suffrage amendment of 1882 was defeated in spite of the hard work of the Ne-

braska women. But when the vote was over, there was a balance in campaign money that was large enough to be really useful to a small western town.

Mother thought that, instead of going on, the suffrage organization should disband until some new hope of legislative action appeared. Her argument was that the women should show that they were public-spirited even when they were defeated and start a town library. Mother was interested in reading, and she argued vigorously about the need for books for everyone. Soon her proposal was adopted and the new public library was created, while the women waited for another opportunity to begin their suffrage work.

When Grace was in high school she was a wonderful debater, and she loved to be on the affirmative of resolutions about granting suffrage to women. "Grace is such a grand fighter," our younger brother, Arthur, said with pride after one of these debates.

Many years later, when Grace and I were living at Hull House in 1912, Grace came home one day laughing about a fashionable lady who was interested in civic reforms. "Now tell me about this woman suffrage," she said to Grace. "Do you think it's going to amount to anything? Because, if it is, I'd like to be in at the beginning as one of the pioneers, you know." Grace said, "I told her that if she wanted to be one of the pioneers, she was about sixty-five years too late."

6. A HOME OF LAW AND POLITICS

Father loved the law. He enjoyed the give and take of the trial, and he liked to tell Mother about this or that legal controversy or about how the evidence had been so well presented that a doubtful case had been won. He was always so happy when he won a hotly contested case.

He had begun to study law while he was still in the army. When his regiment was stationed at Selma, Alabama, after the South's surrender at Appomattox, he was in charge of the Freedman's Bureau there for some months.

He had bought a copy of *Blackstone* and had made up his mind to prepare for a career in the law. He “read law” for the next two years in Belvidere before he started west in 1867.

We all knew the story of how Father had built his first law office in Grand Island out of green cottonwood logs. The little one-room office had a pine floor and a roof of pine shingles, but it was not plastered and was far from weatherproof. When Grace asked, “But how could you lift those big logs and do all that just by yourself?” he would explain, “Well, I got a friend to help when I needed a little help, but I didn’t need much.” We all pointed with some pride to the plain little building, later used for a prairie family’s dwelling house, as Father’s first law office.

Father used to live and work in that office. The cot that he had brought out in the covered wagon was a kind of sofa in the daytime and a bed at night. When the wind blew the rain in from one side of the little log building as he tried to sleep, the bed was moved over to the other side until the wind changed.

Father was his own janitor, of course, and the little stove that he had in his office must have been a poor kind of protection against the icy winds that swept over the prairies in the winter. But he enjoyed everything in those days, and he used to say that his imagination had been fired by the vast expanse of the surrounding prairie country. Father often told us of the beautiful antelope that grazed nearby and the wonderful outlook over the plains when he stood at his door.

Father was the first lawyer in our part of the state and the only lawyer in our county in the early years. He drew up the first charter for the city of Grand Island, and he greatly enjoyed his work as a member of two early constitutional conventions for the new state.

From the beginning, Father enjoyed politics. Like most of the Grand Army veterans, he was a staunch Republican. He worked very hard in his law office, and he greatly enjoyed being in the State Senate and, especially, being the state’s first Lieutenant Governor, as well as the President of the Nebraska Senate.

He was quite disappointed when he later ran for the State Senate and was defeated. He had hoped that he might be on the Supreme Court bench, but that meant a political fight. He tried once for the nomination but was not successful.

And there were other disappointments. Mother would say that, of course, the fact that Father was not a church member always hurt—but she thought we should just accept this as the price we paid for holding fast to the opinions we thought were right. Father and Mother did not go to church, and Father had never joined one. “If that is necessary in order to be successful in politics, then I will not be successful.”

Father went down to his office regularly on Sunday and would sometimes enjoy the re-proving glances of the churchgoers. “I hope they got as much out of listening to Reverend So-and-So as I did out of that brief I was studying this morning,” he would say. “I believe in doing what I think is right, and not what they think is right. I let them think as they want to think, but I don’t want them to tell me what I ought to do or what I ought to think.”

Mother would say, “Perhaps it would be better if you worked here in the garden Sundays instead of offending the neighbors.”

“I’m not offending them; they are offending me. Let’s forget it and go on our way,” he said.

The practice of a prairie lawyer was largely in the field of land law and was connected with the work of the United States Land Office, which the early settlers had been successful in bringing to Grand Island in 1869. The Land Office was an important business center in those days when homestead and pre-emption rights, timber claims, and other land cases were the most important topics of conversation.

There were cases concerning the early German settlers who had claims under the old pre-emption laws, and there were always contests developing between the squatter and the homesteader. These were all tried before the register and receiver of the Land Office. I be-

lieve the register decided them, but there were frequent appeals to the U.S. Commissioner in Washington. Father would often talk about "sending a brief into Washington," and I tried hard to understand what this strange thing that was called a "brief" really looked like and why Father was working on it so often. If she couldn't see Father's brief, Grace was sure to ask about it, and, being older, I wanted to be able to explain how it looked and where it was kept.

Father's clients brought us many treasures in return for homestead rights that were threatened and then finally saved. A beautifully dressed turkey was not infrequently sent to Mother by a grateful client, but most exciting of all were the rare occasions when a good client brought a little dressed pig ready to roast.

Drought was part of life in the corn country—something inevitable, inescapable. But we learned quickly that some droughts were worse than others, and we tried to understand what was meant by "cycles." When the grim decade of the nineties came, we discovered that everyone in the land of the cornstalk shared the misfortunes of the drought-stricken farmers. Financial collapse, which carried everyone to disaster, went with the farmer's despair over the struggle he seemed to be losing.

One evening, in the midst of a very bad drought, a vigorous and desperate woman came to our home in the early twilight when we were having our supper in the old bay-windowed dining room. She had had a long and dusty journey, with lifts along the way given by farmers whose sympathy never failed when a man or woman was facing foreclosure proceedings. She had finally reached her objective—her "only hope" as she said—the lawyer who, everyone told her, knew how to save a man's land.

She began by telling of her family's hard struggle to assemble the meager farm equipment, of the long years of work that went into the turning of the prairie sod into corn and wheat fields, of the series of good crops that had encouraged her husband to mortgage the farm—against the wife's advice and judgment.

Then followed the familiar story of an autumn without rains, the dry winter with almost no snow, a spring without enough rain, the loss of the winter wheat, the long hot summer, a dust storm, the loss of the corn crop, the loss of the small garden—"Don't ask me what we eat, we just don't eat." This was a story often heard in the early prairie days.

There was courage in the weather-beaten face of this typical homestead wife. She didn't mind pinching and scraping, she didn't mind going barefoot, she didn't mind anything except the stark reality of foreclosure and the fearful disaster of homelessness.

Her defiant challenge was the tradition of the country. "I don't mind working and getting nothing, but I'll never give up, and I'm not going to be druv out!" That expression we children appropriated as one of the slogans of our play: "I won't give up and I won't be druv out!" Grace, in later years, used to say that the relief administrators in Washington who talked so lightly about moving people from what the relief people called "submarginal lands" would find it very hard to deal with this tradition—and impossible to change it.

The county courthouse was, I guess you might say, our substitute for the modern movie. When we were quite young, we hung over the balcony in the courtroom during the political conventions and felt very important when we were able to contribute some genuine political stories to the dinner table conversation. "I stayed to hear William Jennings Bryan," Grace would report, "and you may not like what he says, Father, but I can tell you that he is a wonderful orator. Everyone in the convention stood and cheered him after his speech, and I wanted to cheer him, too," she would add defiantly.

"Stuff and nonsense, Gracie," Father would say. "You have too much sense to be taken in by a windbag." But Grace would stand her ground and argue, even when she was little and even when it annoyed Father.

Occasionally we enjoyed the tense excitement of some of the important cases that were tried in the district court. We knew how happy

Father was when he was winning a case, and we watched him with admiration and waited for his triumphant, challenging questions. Father used to encourage us to come when there was some part of a case he thought we might understand, especially a part with grand oratorical flourishes. "You can hear Henry D. Estabrook today," he would say of a great lawyer whom we admired and who came out from Omaha and sometimes stayed in our home. "Come in about eleven," Father would say, "and he'll be telling the jury what he thinks of your father."

Father was never too busy to look up and wave to us in the courtroom gallery, and some of the other lawyers would wave, too, or even come up to speak to the little Abbott girls. It was an exciting world, and Grace was sure she wanted to be a lawyer.

Ours was a "Republican town" in a Republican state, and one of the few Democrats we knew was a man of whom Father used to say, "Of course he's a Democrat." It sounded heinous, and yet he seemed such a nice, harmless man.

But that was Father—independent and outspoken. Once, some of the sons of the German immigrants in town were notified by the old imperial German government to report back to Germany for military service. I remember Father patiently explaining to the families that they were American citizens now, subject in no way to the old empire. But the families were frightened all the same. Father reassured them by swearing quite picturesquely about the German army and ended by saying, "Don't worry about the boy. Just bring me any notices you get from Germany, and I'll take care of them." Father seemed to have the final word about any injustice, and as children we thought he knew what ought to be done about everything—even the German Empire.

7. RESTLESS GRACE

We had none of the gadgets of modern childhood in our prairie home. Playthings—toys of any kind—were scarce. But we had a

cherished family horse called "Old Kit" and a low, wide phaeton, which was always called "the carriage" and which held a great many of us when necessary.

There was always variety with Grace as a companion. Her resources were endless—and always unexpected. Although she was not able to run faster or farther than my brothers, still she often challenged them so vigorously that she made us all expect to see her come out first. She knew how to find the thickest cattails and the longest bulrushes in the old prairie slough. She knew where the violets were earliest and largest in the spring, where the prairie flowers could be found among the endless monotony of the buffalo grass in the summer, and where the wild grapes grew in a hidden thicket near the river.

She was more amusing than the rest of us, full of undreamed-of possibilities and wonderful stories. She could ride or drive the fastest horse, could think of the strangest places to go, could meet with the most unforeseen adventures, and then come home safe with a completely disarming account of her wandering beyond bounds.

In Grand Island there was a two-story brick school building with a wonderful little tower where the janitor's bell rang for each school session, morning and afternoon. Children were supposed to go to school when they were five, but Grace was eager for the adventure of going to school, and she was full of reasons why she should go before she was five. One day, when the new term was beginning, my teacher said "little Grace" was to come on her special invitation. Grace was not quite four when she first appeared in school, but she was eager to do everything and was trying to be very proper about it all.

That day the children went to the blackboards to write the alphabet, letter by letter. But Grace knew only the letter "A," so she covered the board in her vicinity with all kinds of A's until the teacher came by and erased them and put down a "B." "There, Gracie," she said, "now you can make B's." Grace, however, knew her limitations, and making a new



FIG. 4. Edith Abbott, about age 5 or 6. Courtesy of Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.



FIG. 5. Grace Abbott, about age 3 or 4. Courtesy of Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.

letter suddenly and in public on a strange blackboard was too much for her. So she just went on with a new series of A's until the teacher returned with new instructions about making B's.

Grace only said, "But I can't make B's. I can't make B's." The other children by that time were interested, and Grace dashed from the room to come home and tell Mother her story. "I can't make B's and I can't make B's."

When I came home, I was eager to show my wisdom by teaching Grace to make B's, but she didn't want to hear anything more about it. I was so determined and persistent that Grace raised one hand and struck me as she pushed me out of the way. Then Mother came in and asked, "Grace, did you strike your sister?"

Her only reply was, "I can't make B's and I don't want her to teach me."

Mother took Grace's offending hand and said, "Now, Gracie, you can never say, 'This little hand never struck my sister.'"

Grace was not impressed. She quickly held up the other hand, saying, "No. But I can say this little hand didn't strike my sister." And Mother said no more.

By suppertime everyone wanted to show Grace how to make B's. Even the German maid whispered, "Gracie, you come to the kitchen. I show you how to make B." All that week Grace refused to learn, but by the next Monday she considered her situation seriously.

Our older brother, Ottie, warned her, "If you can't make B's you will never, never be able to read or write."

Grace had been given a new slate bound in red felt not long before. And so she took it with her to the supper table that night. Later, while the rest of us were out playing croquet,

Grace sat alone at the table, struggling over her slate. Finally, she came out to the yard with a large and varied collection of B's and the story that now she could learn to read and write. For long years afterward, all of Grace's difficulties were called "learning to make B's."

From the start, the children at the school followed Grace as a leader—whether it was playing a new "Jew's harp," or using a lariat like a cowboy, or telling them about a new song, like the "Animal Fair":

I went to the Animal Fair.
The birds and the beasts were there,
And the old raccoon
By the light of the moon
Was combing his auburn hair.

Other children seemed to be just naturally interested in what Grace was going to do next. She was always unexpected, and could think of new and amusing games, and always had things to do. She was different, and her teachers were a little bewildered by her sudden remarks that led to excitement.

Our report cards were carefully considered at home as to only one thing: deportment. I do not remember discussions about our grades, but Father had a standing offer of a silver dollar for any child who got 100 in deportment. Grace was forever in trouble at school because of her talking during class or other indiscretions, and she used to say, "Well, I guess I'll never get that silver dollar, Father, and I might as well grin and bear it."

In those days, our teachers were hard put to find ways to keep an active child busy. The child who got his work done first used to be given the task of watering the plants, cleaning the erasers, or cleaning the blackboards. A teacher's inquiry, "Now, children, do you all understand this?" would bring a reply from Grace, "No, I'm sorry, but I don't really understand it, and I asked Father, and I don't think he understands it either." And then it seemed as if none of the children understood.

One of her teachers was Mrs. Caldwell, the wife of a law partner of Father's. Mrs. Caldwell's

"Now, Grace . . ." was known through the town. Grace was perhaps seven years old at that time. "She has so much energy," Mrs. Caldwell complained to Mother. "I can't find enough things for her to do. I've had her water the plants until they've drowned."

"Grace, I don't know what to do with you. I'll have to talk to your mother," one teacher said after Grace's remarks had got the children laughing.

"But Mother doesn't know what to do with me either," was Grace's reply. "And sometimes I don't know what to do with myself."

8. GRACE AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

In the days when we were children, everyone wore homespun clothing except Father, who was properly tailored in the long "Prince Alberts" that he liked to wear. Mother's dresses always seemed to us very elegant when she wore them, but they were made over for me and then made over again for Grace, who forever longed for "something really new—because I'm so tired of Mother's or Edith's old things."

Grace wanted bright dresses, and Mother's were usually dark brown or gray, and mine were blue. "Why can't I have one, just one red dress?" was the defiant question that inevitably led to an annual debate, for Mother did not approve of red. It was "too conspicuous, not nice and ladylike." But Grace's loud and frequent protests—and her wish for something bright and nice and new—meant that she usually got a pink chambray or a plum-colored wool dress. "But never, never the nice bright red dress I want," she would mourn.

A disheveled sewing lady used to make our dresses and our too-elaborate undergarments. She was an amusing woman, and when Mother pointed out something that was not right, she would say, "Oh, yes, Mrs. Abbott, that can be easily remedied." Grace enjoyed the idea that things could be easily remedied and was always quoting this remark when Mother didn't like something.

"Yes, Mother dear," Grace would say when she was late for school, "but that can be easily remedied." And off she went on a run.

Through the long winters we wore heavy, old-fashioned flannel underwear, and Grace was usually rebellious about it. Later, with summer, came the days of white dresses—very much starched—and little starched sunbonnets, and multitudinous varieties of starched underwear for little girls. How vehemently Grace disliked the starched sunbonnets! "Grandmother," she would say belligerently, "you want me to wear flannels in winter and sunbonnets in summer, and I don't like any of them."

Grandmother would say, "Grace, thee is a little rebel," when Grace pushed back the sunbonnet, neatly tied in a bow under her chin, and pulled at the knot until it was loosened. Grandmother's prophecy, "Thee will be as brown as a little Indian," held no terror for Grace.

"I'd like to be as brown as a little Indian, and I don't like to wear a sunbonnet," was her vigorous reply. Her dislike of sunbonnets was only equaled by her dislike of starched dresses.

"Oh, Grace, if thee would only take care of this clean dress!" was Grandmother's plaintive wish.

"But, Grandmother, if I do anything, my dress won't stay clean. I don't like dresses that are stiff, and you want me to wear what I like, don't you?"

"I want thee to look like a proper child."

"But, Grandmother, I don't want to be a proper child; I want to do things!"

In later years, when she became such a vigorous champion of the rights of children, I used to say, "Grace, you always resisted the iniquities visited upon children. I can still hear you talking to Grandmother about the red flannels and saying, 'I won't, I won't!'" Grace replied thoughtfully that her resistance had not been very successful at any time in her life.

My older brother, Ottie, who was quite handsome and clever, was sometimes extremely bossy with us younger children, so we had a way of ganging up, partly in self-defense,

and Grace was the most articulate defender. "Grace is the only one that has any 'spunk,'" my indignant grandmother would say. When I wept because my elder brother had taken one of my few treasures, Grandmother was scornful. "Grace doesn't let him do that to her. What is thee afraid of? Little Grace knows how to fight for her rights."

Grandmother would counsel Grace, "Now, that's right, Gracie. Never give up when thee know thee's right. Don't let anyone tell thee what thee must do. Do what thee thinks is right."

"But, Grandmother, how can thee tell what is right?" And this often proved to be a baffling question. "Yes, Grandmother," Grace would say. "I know what I want to do, but I don't know what is right to do always." Grace liked her independence, even when it was a child's independence, but she had misgivings when she was told she was the one who was right.

9. THE TREELESS PLAINS

When Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of the vast prairie country of early Nebraska, he described it as "an empty sky" with but one railroad stretching across it, "like a cue across a billiard table." But it was not an empty earth to those of us who were children there and loved both earth and sky—"Dust of the stars was under our feet / Glitter of stars above. . . ."

The old geographies that Mother and Father brought west—and the early maps that we poured over with such interest—marked the state in which we were born as part of the "Great American Desert." And this much-resented term was often spoken of by our elders to show that the impossible was, after all, possible, and that if a man had the westerner's capacity for hard work, he could turn an American desert into a good farming state.

The farmer needed courage to face the long, dry heat that destroyed his crops, the winter blizzards that killed his cattle, and the prairie fires that threatened his home. The courage to work together and wrestle with the

mysterious forces of nature was a cardinal virtue, and we children were taught to believe not so much in rugged individualism as in a kind of rugged cooperation.

Life was a struggle with invisible forces, and the specter of drought was an ever-present fear. In the summer there was also the fear of a tornado or a hailstorm that stripped the waving corn as it was ripening for harvest. I remember being taken in the old family carriage with my father when he went out after a bad hailstorm to see some great cornfields now cut to ribbons—fields that belonged to clients who would not be able to pay the interest on the mortgage. Father's gravity as he walked around to look at the scars of the hailstorm told of other disasters to come.

Father wanted us children to understand that we were not far away from pioneer days, perhaps because he wanted us to have the pioneer spirit that made light of difficulties. And we liked to think of our vast prairie country as it had been just before Father came there—without railroads or towns or farms, with Indians in tents and the herds of buffalo and other wild animals still present. The pioneers were new, but the prairies had been there forever. The first settlers had come to our part of the plains fewer than fifty years before we were born, and Father had been there for half that time. But even in this short time, we knew the old trails were already marked by the graves of the men and women who had died on the long journey.

Still, there was something beautiful about the prairie country in August, when the stubble fields made everything golden under the bright sun, and the smell of bonfires and burning prairie told us that autumn was on the way. The great treeless areas were broken here and there by "a blessed line of trees" that marked some prairie creek or one of the branches of the great Platte River—or perhaps only represented some homesteader's brave attempt to get a little shade near his house.

One of my earliest recollections is the fearful and wonderful spectacle of a great prairie fire. In our old home we often crawled out on

the roof of the front porch, where we sat in the long twilight, watching the straggling lines of fire on the prairie creeping along the distant horizon—first on one side and then on the other.

The roof of the front porch was a place of refuge in the hot summer evenings when everything was quiet and breathless, but there was one drawback to the porch roof—we were afraid that Grace would fall off in her excitement. She always wanted to see a hummingbird moth, and she knew that one was supposed to appear at dusk around the honeysuckle vines on the porch. So arguments went on: "But, Grandmother, I'm not near the edge, and I'm only leaning over a little to see that hummingbird moth."

"And what good will it do thee to see the hummingbird moth and fall off the porch?" was the reply.

The worst prairie fires came in the early fall. August is a very hot and dry month in Nebraska. As the days of intense heat turned the buffalo grass to brown crisp—and the plains turned into a vast stretch of dry grassland—a prairie fire, once started, was driven by the fierce winds and soon became a line of high, dangerous, and ever-spreading flames. People were always afraid that our little town would be caught in one of these wild conflagrations. We had seen the fire guards or fire breaks around the prairie homes—the narrow, ploughed strips forming the boundary of a great square with the house and barn in the center—given the protection of a belt of earth with no grass on it to burn. These fireguards reminded us that the danger was always present.

Watching the fires was a common evening occupation when we could get up and look out over the prairie. That fire, burning along the horizon to the southwest—how did it start? Or that high line of flames straight ahead to the west—where would it end? Was the railroad responsible for spreading flames that destroyed the homes and the hard-won success of the pioneers? Would the fire destroy our town and our home—and what would become



FIG. 6. Edith Abbott, 14 years old, 1891. Courtesy of Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.



FIG. 7. Grace Abbott, 17 years old, 1896. Courtesy of Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer.

of us all? And old Kit, our horse? And the cow and the dog and the cat?

Father had told us of the great fire that had burned all the western prairie and a large part of the original town down to within a short distance of our home in that mythical period before he had persuaded Mother to come to Nebraska, and before there were any children in the home. We had heard the stories of the wild struggle to save the early settlement and we wondered, Was such a calamity coming again?

10. THE END OF THE BEGINNING

New responsibilities and heavy anxieties came in the early part of the 1890s and generally brought our carefree childhood days to an end. The first shadows fell after I had gone to boarding school. Mother thought that Grace and I should have more educational opportunities than the schools in our small town of-

fered. She considered sending us to her old school, Rockford College, which still had a preparatory department, but Rockford, Illinois, was too far from the central Nebraska of those days.

Grandmother's death, after a long illness, left us without her wisdom and counsel, but Mother finally decided that I was to go alone to Brownell Hall, an Episcopal diocesan school in Omaha, and that Grace was to go two years later.

In September of 1889, when I was nearly thirteen, I was sent away—a sharp breaking of home ties for Mother, for Grace, and for my brothers, as well as for me. I should not like to relive any period as completely unhappy as the first lonely months at boarding school.

Because of hard times at home, it soon became difficult for Father to pay the school bills—even for only one daughter—and Grace never joined me as Mother had planned. Furthermore, Father and Mother had taken on

additional responsibilities when they brought into the family two young cousins after the death of Father's younger sister in California. It was more difficult to provide for six children than it had been to care for four, and the hard times soon became a hard reality, as the cruel decade of the 1890s brought despair to Nebraska.

I was graduated from boarding school in the summer of 1893. In spite of the troubles at home, Mother carefully worked out an inexpensive plan for Grace and me to visit the great World's Fair in Chicago. As a Burlington attorney, Father was able to get us a railroad pass without fee to Chicago, and Mother arranged for us to board with people she knew there, and so Grace and I embarked on our slender resources for Chicago. Whether the trip was worth what it cost Mother in saving and planning in those hard times, I do not know, but it was almost our last carefree outing for a long period of years to come.

After I came back from our trip to Chicago, I wanted to teach, since that seemed to be the only way for me to earn money that the family desperately needed. Although I was not quite seventeen, I got a position as a substitute teacher in the Grand Island city schools at a salary of \$15 a month. On the first day of school, it happened that they needed a substitute in the high school, and so I was sent there unexpectedly. There I stayed as a full-time teacher with an assortment of classes in algebra, geometry, English, history, and Latin. It was hard work, but I knew that any income was important, and I was determined not to give up.

Grace was then in the high school and in my classes, and she was wonderful about helping me. We went to school together each morning and came home together each night—and although a good many of the boys and girls in my classes were older than I was, I think they knew that the Abbotts had had a

bad time financially, and they were patient with me. And, perhaps, having Grace there to defend me helped to keep their attention, too.

The hot summer of 1894 meant that the drought was not broken, and the hard times got harder. Many homesteaders lost their farms under mortgage foreclosures, and they could be seen driving east in covered wagons full of furniture and children. They took their defeat with grim humor. Some of them had signs painted on the wagon saying, "Back East to visit the wife's relations," or "Next year back to begin again."

After her high school graduation, Grace took a degree from a local Baptist college and then went to teach in a high school in Broken Bow, Nebraska, when she was still only eighteen. In the winter of her first year there, she became ill with a bad case of typhoid fever. Father and Mother went to visit her and were shocked to find Grace in a ramshackle improvised hospital in Broken Bow. They brought her back home in spite of the great risk of moving her.

By fall Grace seemed well enough to work again, but we all agreed that she should not leave home so soon. Finally, I used my very small savings and borrowed some money from a local bank so that I might go to the state university in Lincoln, and Grace took over my place teaching in the Grand Island high school.

Grace immediately became enthusiastic about her work there, and she was quick to organize and coach debating teams and basketball teams. For the next ten years she would stay on in these positions, enjoying her work in our little hometown but also, I believe, trying to understand what she must do next. There was too much of the pioneer in Grace's blood for her to be able to stay at home forever.

— End of Part I —