
HOMESTEADER SERIES
BOOK FIVE

The
Prairie Blooms



Esther Allen Peterson

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HOMESTEADER SERIES
Volume 5

Previous volumes in the Homesteader Series:

A Long Journey to a New Home
Will Spring Come?
The House That Cared
The Reformation of Grandmother Hulda

For Paul and Dana,
and Elizabeth, Steven, Trevor, Jacob, Kyra, and Johanna

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The Dream

May 16, 1871

As Trygve walked behind the oxen pulling the harrow over the field that he had plowed the day before, he had a lot of time for thinking. It was his sixteenth birthday, and he was remembering his birthday four years earlier on *The Franklin*, the sail ship that had carried him and his family from Norway.

So much had happened since then, when he and his family were leaving drudgery. They were crofters, and they had no hope for a better life, ever. But they were on their way to America, where they would get rich. That was the dream, at least it was his dream. His pa and ma always said they just wanted to have land of their own and not be beholden to the Dahls, who owned the land that they lived on, and took more than half of everything they raised.

He had carried that dream with him from the time they received the letter from his Uncle Elmer suggesting that they come to America. In his dream he and his ma and pa, his sister Signe, little brother Rolf, and their new baby all lived together in a nice big white house with red shutters, just like the Dahl's house. And the dream had a storybook ending, *They lived happily ever after*.

But the dream got broken, one piece at a time. His ma died from childbirth fever a week after Carrie was born, and his pa sent for Rebekka to come and take her place. At first, he resented her, and made sure that everyone knew that nobody could ever take his ma's place. But slowly he realized that they were blessed by her presence.

Then there was the smallpox epidemic when his pa died, and they would have been orphans if it hadn't been for Rebekka.

Anna died, too, and the good life that their two families were experiencing was shattered. Anna was their neighbor and Nels Olson's wife. She was the mother of his friends Oskar and Elna, and their families did everything together. Somehow, when Anna died two weeks after his pa died, her death made Trygve relive his own ma's death and deep sorrow enshrouded him.

After they buried their dead, the Ytterhorn and the Olson families depended on each other for their very survival. Trygve moved over to the Olson sod house with Nels and Oskar, who was three years younger than him; and Elna, Mari, and baby Noel moved into the Ytterhorn log cabin with Rebekka, Signe, Rolf, Carrie, and baby Erik. Nels, Trygve, and Oskar did the plowing and planting and other outdoor work while Rebekka, Signe, and Elna took care of the little ones, worked the garden, did the cooking, milked the cow, helped feed the animals, washed the clothes, and preserved the bounty of the garden for their table come wintertime.

They all worked from sun up till sun down and didn't have a lot of time for grieving, but their tears soaked their pillows as they fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion at night.

Then as the second winter approached, Signe and Elna decided that it would be easier for everybody if Rebekka and Nels got married and they could all live in one house. And so they did, and they became one big family and started living and laughing again. They really were a family.

Now Rolf and Mari were eight years old, and they were able to help Rebekka with Carrie, who was four now, and the little boys. Erik was born to his pa and Rebekka, and Noel was Nels' and Anna's baby. When Anna got the smallpox, Rebekka had taken him and nursed him along with Erik.

Now at age two those two needed a lot of watching. Then there was baby Peter, who was born to Rebekka and Nels last winter. During the week Rolf and Mari helped with all of the work before and after school. That allowed Signe and Elna to go to school in McCauleyville because they had already learned everything that the schoolteacher who had come to their small settlement could teach. Both Signe and Elna were studying and learning a lot. They hoped to pass the examination and get certificates so they could become teachers when they turned sixteen.

How he missed them, especially Elna. She made him have strange new feelings. Perhaps, he would marry her in two years, when he turned eighteen and she was sixteen. Then the land would be proved up and belong to the Ytterhorn children.

As he walked behind the harrow he remembered life in Norway, and how his only inheritance was to labor for a landowner. Now, in just two years they would get the deed to the land and would be landowners with their homesteaded quarter and the tree claim. It was ten times as much as the Dahl's ever had.

McCauleyville

Signe and Elna made up the beds on the second floor of the hotel. They worked quickly, not taking time to talk. There were twenty-three beds to be made up before school started. They made beds, cleaned rooms, and helped prepare the evening meal in return for room and board so they could go to school in McCauleyville.

Signe enjoyed her time in McCauleyville with Elna. They became best friends on that first day when the Olson wagon rolled onto their land, and Nels stopped the oxen and climbed down, and said he was looking for land. Then after the tragedies they became sisters. For three years now they had done everything together. They couldn't have been closer if they had been born sisters. They liked all of the same things, and they were always finishing each other's sentences.

When Signe and Elna arrived at school, they stood waiting for Mr. McCauley or Mr. Johnson to ring the bell. They watched a girl about their age, or a little younger, come down the outside steps of the mercantile building across the street. She came across the street and went into the school. "It looks like there's a new girl," said Signe.

"Maybe she'll be in the older group with us," said Elna.

"Maybe not," said Signe. "Two years ago when I came here to school, they put me with the younger group because my English was so poor."

"I wonder if she's Norwegian," said Elna.

“I don’t care if she isn’t. At lunch time we should ask her to sit with us, because I remember that day when I came here and nobody would sit with me.”

“Yes. We will be friends with her if she wants for us to be.”

Mr. McCauley wrote the new girl’s name on the blackboard. *Hattie Elgin*.

“That’s not a Norwegian name,” whispered Elna.

“Maybe it’s English. But it doesn’t matter. We’ll be friends with her, anyway.”

Signe listened to the new girl read from the American History Book and decided that English was her natural language, because she didn’t have to think about the words when she answered a question.

Signe noticed that Hattie’s blue dress was faded, the sleeves were frayed at the elbows, and her shoes were scuffed and badly worn. “I think she’s really poor,” she whispered to Elna

“But we’ll still be friends with her.”

“Of course, we’ll be.”

When geography class was over, it was time for lunch, and Signe and Elna turned around and walked back to where Hattie was sitting. “Would you like to eat lunch with us?” asked Signe. “You can share my desk with me.”

Hattie smiled and said, “Sure, thank you for asking me. I was afraid no one would ask me, and I’d have to eat alone.”

Signe went into the cloakroom and got the basket with her and Elna’s lunch in it. Hattie opened up a napkin. All that was in it was a single piece of bread. “It’s all I have,” said Hattie. “When I left home to come to school I thought I would have twenty-five dollars. I had been saving it for a

whole year, but my stepfather took it. He said I owed it to him because he had been feeding me for the last two years.”

“How awful,” said Elna.

“He didn’t know that the lady I had been working for hadn’t paid me for over two months. So I asked her to pay me, and she gave me ten dollars, so I left to come here before he could get it.”

“Does your mother know you are here?” asked Signe.

“Yes, I told her, but she said she wouldn’t tell him until after I was gone.”

“I rented a room for five dollars, and I have to make the other five dollars last until I get paid at the mercantile. I clean there every night after they close.”

“I think they will be looking for another girl to work at the hotel,” said Signe. “They don’t pay us anything, but we have beds to sleep in, and we eat breakfast and supper and make sandwiches to bring with us to school.”

“You could share our room with us,” offered Elna.

“I’ll have to think about it,” said Hattie. “Do you go home on the weekends?”

“Yes. My pa picks us up, and we come back on Monday morning.”

“I will be staying here in town,” said Hattie.

Signe watched Hattie slowly eat her piece of bread and she broke her pork sandwich in half and said, “I’m not hungry. Could you eat part of my sandwich?”

“Why, thank you,” said Hattie and took it from her.

Elna said, “We did eat way too much for breakfast, and I don’t think I can eat this piece of gingerbread.” She handed it to Hattie.

“Thank you,” said Hattie.

“There’s always left over food at the hotel,” said Signe “and sometimes we eat too much.”

They watched Mr. Johnson write long division problems on the blackboard with his left hand. He didn’t have a right arm, and his shirt sleeve was tied in a knot just below his stub. “What happened to his arm?” asked Hattie.

“The war,” said Signe. I heard that he was with the Minnesota Cavalry in Alabama, and a rebel soldier shot his cannon right at him.”

“I heard him tell Mr. McCauley that the war was dreadful,” said Elna. “He was horrified when he had to shoot a boy that looked just like his brother. But he had to shoot him, or else get killed himself. He said he still has nightmares about it.”

“That’s terrible,” said Signe.

“My real pa died in the war,” said Hattie. “I can’t hardly remember him, but I remember he was kind, a lot nicer than the man my ma is married to now.”

“We didn’t come over from Norway until two years after the war was over,” said Signe.

“And we came five years ago right after it was over,” said Elna. “I’m glad we weren’t here for the war.”

Mr. Johnson rang a bell, and lunch was over.

At three o’clock Mr. McCauley announced, “We will be dismissing early today. You may go now.”

Signe and Elna left the school with Hattie. “We don’t have to peel potatoes for another half hour,” said Elna.

“Do you want to come up to my room?” asked Hattie.

“We don’t have anything else we have to do right now,” said Signe, and they followed Hattie across the street and climbed the stairs that led to a hallway. They followed her to the third doorway, and Hattie took a key out of her pocket and opened her door. There wasn’t anything in the room

except a small wood stove, her small suitcase, and two crates from the store. One box stood on end and it looked like she sat on her suitcase and used the box for a desk. In the small box under the window was an old doll with a tattered piece of quilt. On the windowsill was a small picture frame.

Hattie pointed to the picture and said, “That’s a picture of my ma and pa. They had it taken right before my pa went off to fight in the war.”

“You don’t have any furniture,” said Elna.

“I couldn’t find a furnished room so I had to take this one,” said Hattie as she sat down on her suitcase. Signe and Elna sat on the floor.

“How old are you?” asked Signe.

“Twelve.”

“And you’re living all on your own?” Elna asked.

“I couldn’t stay at home, anymore. My stepfather was getting to be a real problem.”

“Did he beat you?” asked Elna.

“Not much, but he did other things. Things that are too awful to talk about.”

Signe thought about Mr. Owens and then said, “You are really brave to come here all on your own.”

“Anyway, I really wanted to come to school here. I had to walk four miles to my school, and sometimes I got there, and there wasn’t any school. Then I had to turn around and walk back home. It was really cold, and sometimes I was afraid I would freeze to death.”

“That’s awful,” said Signe.

“It was and the teacher was a first year teacher, and I didn’t think I could learn enough from her to take the test when I turn sixteen. I want to be a teacher or a nurse in

a hospital. I don't ever want to depend on a man like my mother has to. If I don't go to school, then I either have to get married, clean houses, or cook. I want more out of life."

"We're going to take the test too," said Signe. "In two years we can be teachers if we can get schools."

"My ma was a teacher," said Elna.

"We better get over to the hotel," said Signe. "Do you want us to ask Mrs. Holth about you working there?"

"It would be nice to have a bed to sleep on, and some food to eat."

When they arrived at the hotel Signe asked Mrs. Holth, "Could you use another girl? There's a new girl at our school who would like to work here. She won't be going home on weekends."

"That would be good," said Mrs. Holth. "Mary is leaving next week. She can have her room and make the downstairs beds and clean on the weekends."

The next morning when Signe and Elna were packing their lunches, they packed extra for Hattie. When they got to school Elna quickly told Hattie, "You got the job at the hotel. Your room will be right next to ours."

Trouble in Jonstown

On Friday when Signe and Elna were finished peeling potatoes, Nels was waiting for them. Elna climbed into the back of the wagon and started reading a book that she had borrowed from Mr. Johnson.

Signe sat up front with Nels. “How’s everything at home?” she asked.

“The land rush is on. Twenty-five ox-carts rolled by yesterday.”

“Where are they going?”

“West.”

“Of course they’re going west, but how far?”

“It’ll take them two or three days. Maybe a week till they find land. The homestead land is disappearing fast.”

“What about the Indians?”

“I heard the government made them move again,” said Nels.

“I wonder how Brave Heart and his pa feel about that.” said Signe. “They weren’t very happy about having to leave here.”

“I know, but the men who are running the country want for the Dakota Territory to have farms and towns.”

“That’s not fair. They were here forever before the white man came.”

“But that’s the way it is,” said Nels.

They rode in silence till they passed Fort Abercrombie. Then Signe asked, “What else happened this week?”

“Somebody tried to steal Chet’s horse.”

“What?” chimed in Elna.

Nels turned around. “You heard me right. Someone tried to steal Chet’s horse. On Monday morning when Chet went out to feed his animals, one of his horses was missing.”

“Then what?” Signe asked.

“It broke away from whoever stole it and came back on Thursday, and it had saddlebags on it. In the saddlebags there were twenty-two silver dollars and a Colt pistol.”

“Lucky Chet,” said Elna.

“I don’t think so. Now Chet is worried that the thief will come back and get what he lost.”

“That would be scary,” said Signe.

“Real scary,” said Nels. “We’ve never had to deal with robbers in our community. Now everybody is tying their dogs in front of their lean-tos and hoping they will bark if strangers come around. Chet and Sven are even taking turns sleeping with their horses.”

As the wagon left the valley and the woods, Elna closed her book and put it down beside her and asked, “Is there anything good going on?”

“Trygve’s planting trees on the tree claims. The ground is so wet from the recent rains that it made for easy pulling up of the willows by the creek. He pulled trees all day yesterday, and he’s planting them today.

“Do the trees have to live to get the tree claim?” asked Signe. “Or do you just have to plant them?”

“In five years there has to be ten acres of trees growing on each claim,” said Nels.

“And if there’s not?” asked Elna.

“You can buy it,” said Nels. “Or someone else can claim it.” When they reached the lean-to on Nels’ property, Signe and Elna climbed down and started walking towards the house. When they went inside, Grandmother Hulda was taking bread out of the oven, Mari was helping Rebekka put supper on the table, and Rolf came in carrying a pail of milk. Carrie was right behind him with a basket of eggs. The two-year-olds, Erik and Noel, were playing with blocks under the table in the dining room, and baby Peter was sleeping in the cradle. Signe had an empty feeling as she realized that the family got along just fine without her and Elna.

She was happy that she was going to school, but she missed Rebekka counting on her for help. She had been such a vital part of the family, and now she and Elna just came home for weekends, and Grandma Hulda kind of took their place.

On Sunday morning the community met at the schoolhouse for their regular worship service. As usual, Nels went to the schoolhouse early. With the warmer weather, and when there was no threat of rain, they met outside because there were now so many homesteaders that they could hardly all crowd into the schoolhouse, even with the children up in the loft.

Nels played the violin every Sunday morning. The strains of the hymns wafted over the prairie, calling the settlers to worship. Signe wondered how many of them came just to hear him play. She walked with Rebekka, Carrie, the little boys and carried baby Peter.

They listened to Nels play *Holy, Holy, Holy*. He played a lot of extra notes, and his body moved with the music. The first time Signe ever heard him play, she knew that he wasn’t just a fiddler. He was a real violin player.

As usual, Chet Eglan led the service, and Mrs. Klemstad had a reading. Signe never listened to anything Mrs.

Klemstad read or said. She didn't know how she could always act so pious and at the same time be so mean. She was always ready to condemn someone to hell.

When the service was over, Chet said, "While the women are preparing our meal, we need to have a meeting. We need to get Pastor Solheim to come once a month and have a service, and we need to start to plan on building a church."

Signe resented the fact that only men talked about and voted on things that affected everyone. Why couldn't women have a voice in things that were important to them?

During the meeting Signe noticed that none of the men said, "When the crop comes in." After last year when hail destroyed the wheat and ruined everybody's plans for a house or a barn made out of boards, they knew not to plan too far ahead.

Chet closed the meeting saying, "It is agreed that whenever you sell your barley or your wheat, you will contribute to buy lumber to build a church."

"It is agreed," said Nels. One by one each of the men said that they agreed. The only one who didn't say that he agreed was Severt Klemstad. Everybody looked at him sitting on the front bench with his legs crossed and his arms folded over his chest, not saying a word.

Finally, Severt said, "Agreed," but he didn't look like he meant it.

While they were eating, Harlan Magnason, a bachelor homesteader, who lived eight miles west of Jonstown came riding his brown quarter horse up to the schoolhouse.

All eyes were on him as he got off of his horse, hitched it to a post, and hurried towards them. He said, "David Englestad was murdered early this morning."

"What?" asked Sven Eglund.

“We were late getting back from McCauleyville. It must have been sometime between two and three o’clock. He got off of my horse and went to his house. Then I heard him banging on the door because he couldn’t get it open. And then I heard a man say, ‘Get going. This is my place now. It was abandoned, and now I’m claiming it.’ Then David swore at him and threatened him, and the next thing I heard was a shot and the door slammed shut.”

“Then?” asked Sven.

“Then I went to see if David was hurt, and I could tell right away that he was dead. So I looked in the window. The man had a candle lit, and I could see him standing there, so I shot him. Right now he’s on the floor in David’s house.”

“Have a bite to eat,” said Nels. “Then we’ll go with you and do some burying.”

“I didn’t know what to do,” said Harlan. “I was going to come right away, but I figured everybody would be sleeping so I went home and went to bed.”

After Nels, Chet, Sven, and Gib Aune left with Harlan Magnusen, Mrs. Klemstad said, “That David Englestad should have been at his house long before midnight and protecting his place from claim jumpers. He shouldn’t have been out drinking and carousing. It serves him right.” The Klemstad’s gathered their three girls and left for home.

“That woman!” said Katrina Aune. “She has no heart inside of her bosom.”

“I wonder if she would rather have David Englestad or a murderer living so close to us?” asked Laura Hanson.

“What is our community coming to?” asked Rita Egland. “First the horse thieves, and now claim jumping and murder.”

“We’re going to have to get some law and order out here,” said Laura’s husband, Olaf.

“I hear there’s WANTED posters for the horse thief up in McCauleyville, and at Rita’s store, and at Chet’s livery,” said Laura’s sister, Astrid.

“Yes,” said Rita. “Chet reported it to the lawman in McCauleyville. According to the letter Chet found in the saddlebag, he’s also wanted for murder back in Wisconsin. The letter said they were hunting for him.”

“Up until last week our community was so safe,” said Inga Green. “Now I feel afraid like I did back in Chicago.”

“We are still in a safe community,” said Rebekka. “We just have to be more careful about helping each other out.”

“Like watching out for strangers,” said Astrid’s husband, Gudman. “And if anyone needs to be gone overnight, we have to have a neighbor protect our places from claim jumpers.”

Signe thought, *Claim jumpers really aren’t much of a problem for families here because no one ever goes anywhere.*

Trygve said, “Two more years, and we’ll be proved up and won’t have to worry about claim jumpers.”

“We will celebrate when we receive the deeds for our land,” said Rebekka. “Maybe we’ll take the train and go visit Uncle Elmer.”