in this wilderness has come to me the very greatest and sweetest and most hopeful happiness of all my life.

The seventh of May I am to be married to Mr. W.E. Henderson. We have not known each other long for he found me here, yet we do not doubt that our whole lives have been preparing us for a new life together. Someday we may go together to fulfill my part of the prophecy up on Mount Holyoke in 1901, for that located me on a western ranch. And Mr. Henderson had been planning to go to Texas or Old Mexico this spring and get cheap land for stock raising. But I could not leave my claim now without losing it, so we shall remain here for the present and wish to raise a crop this summer which is our reason for seeming to be in such immoderate haste.

You may wonder what sort of man you will meet when you come to visit your old friend some day on a western ranch. I know he will not seem the same to you as he does to me, but I think you will know that he is plain and simple and direct, that (unless he is teasing) his "yes" means yes and his "no" means no. I believe you will see too that he is clean and gentle as any woman, though he has a strong man's energy and resourcefulness. And you could not help but realize that he is an optimist of the sincerest sort, ready to do all his part to make things come right, with a faith above and beyond his own effort. I think sometimes it will worry me because he simply won't worry over anything, but that is a pretty good failing after all. Personally he is tall and brown for he has lived on these plains for years now. He was here long ago before there were any inhabitants but great herds of cattle and the antelopes and prairie dogs. He is rather homely, I think, to most people, but you will see the kindness in his gray blue eyes and won't mind, I am sure.

So busy I have been this spring, Rose, with my chickens, for I am getting a pretty good start now, with my big garden of an acre and a quarter, and with all these extra preparations for the seventh of May. I have wanted to write to you much sooner, but the day's work has hurried me on each day. And this day I am letting everything go that should be done and writing anyway. I have no machine so the very simple and not numerous preparations have been made by hand. They are helping me at home too, by getting some things ready. Susie will come out then, as it seemed impossible for me to leave here just now to go home as they wished, and Mother and Father will come later—perhaps in watermelon time. . . .

Please remember me most kindly to your friends at home. And may life bring to them and to you all good and gracious gifts. I hope to see you some time. Till then even if sometimes life's burdens make me silent, won't you try to believe me, Ever loyally your friend,

* * *

AUG. 17, 1908

MY DEAR ROSE

I do thank you very truly for both your letters and the friendship they have meant to me. So often during these happy summer days, I have wished you might know how much I have appreciated your good wishes and the pretty gift—different altogether from anything I had—which so often reminds me of you and Susan.

You were quite right in suspecting that it has been a busy summer for me. In a short letter or even a long one I could scarcely suggest the variety of employments that have fallen to my lot. But Rose, dear little girl, I have been so happy. It has been such a revelation to me of what life may mean under the most absolutely common place conditions. For I realize that it is all commonplace enough when I imagine myself as a third party—but it hasn't seemed so. It is as new and full of blessing to me at least, as if all this had never happened before.

The day of the creation of our new world, May seventh, was one of the most perfect days I have ever seen. We had driven the thirty miles to Guymon on the preceding day going in a prairie schooner in real western style, not for the sake of the style, however, but as a protection against the wind which that day was very strong and cold. One of Mr. Henderson's five sisters (they have but one brother) had stayed to care for the chicks and look after things generally. At Guymon (our railroad town) we met my sister who had leave of absence from her office work just long enough to witness the ceremony and return by the first train. She brought the dress from home; they had made it themselves of some soft-thin white stuff, very simply but daintily with much fine hand work. I treasure it for all the loving thoughts that I know went into it.

After we had watched Susie's train out of sight, it remained for us to load our schooner and start for home. It was toward evening before we got away but I shall always be glad it was just as it was, for the memory of that perfect night of moon light and starlight when we seemed to have the world to ourselves is a treasure to carry with me through life, and I believe through all eternity.

Since then such busy days! Besides the house-keeping which seems like a new thing under these different conditions there have been for a regular thing the care of a half acre garden which I assumed for this summer, though Mr. Henderson helped whenever his regular farm work would permit and also the chickens—an unfailing source of interest, pleasure and work. We have as yet limited accommodations for chickens so are not going into the business yet on a large scale. But I have about a hundred young ones with several more "setters" yet to hatch so I hope for a fair start for another year.

For extras there have been service as chief assistant at fencing a forty acre pasture, some carpentering and building, erecting and painting a windmill, and the thousand little things not big enough to remember but which all have to do with making a home on the prairie. We have also first and last had a good deal of company. Mr. Henderson's mother was here for nine days and one of his sisters for three weeks, so altogether it has been very much as you said—scarcely time enough to sleep.

On the whole so far as farming is concerned it has been a rather discouraging season. Not foreseeing what was to befall me I had rented the old ground for this year so we had to depend on sod crops. The rains were very late and the ground too dry for breaking until after the rain came June 6. So it made the planting extremely late and we have not had as much rain as we hoped for since. However there is time yet to make a feed crop if we have rains later on and it is a constant inspiration to be with one who really believes that even if we fail of any success whatever in that way still for some reason it is all right and we may nevertheless be unworried and content.

I wish you could see our beautiful little colt and our new tiny mule. I can not call him beautiful but he is as cunning and smart as a little mule can be. Last night I went away down in the pasture to make sure that the horses were alright. The baby mule has a real mule's curiosity and though he is very wild yet, I sat down on the grass to see what he would do, pretending not to notice him. He kept approaching in smaller and smaller circles till his nose touched my shoe. The slightest movement sent him flying to his mother—head and tail high in the air and the tips of his toes barely touching the ground. He and the colt have the grandest frolics. I never tire of watching them.

All our varied occupations give us little time for reading. I have feared sometimes that I might forget how in the deepest sense. We do try, however, to keep up with one or two magazines that they send us from home. Lately I have been picking up "Romala" in odd moments of time—too short for much of anything else, inspired to another rereading of it by a card from Helen Bowerman in Florence with a picture of one of the old public buildings—"Palazzo Vecchio"—frequently referred to in "Romala."[6] How sorrowful such a story is but how true it may be! And nights we read the Bible—are going straight through. I never did it before. In Mr. Henderson's old days on the range that was often his only companion and he read it for interest and companionship as other people read story books—through and through—over and over. He has the same little Bible yet that went with him all those lonely days—a present—when he was a little boy from his old German grandfather. . . .

I hope the summer has given you the change and rest that you need before entering upon another year of your unselfish work. Please tell me about it for it will now have for me even more of the interest of a work so different from my own. May it be a happy and satisfying year for you, a year of successful effort and realized desires. Do write again as of old and in spite of the long breaks in our correspondence, please believe me still, Heartily your friend.

* * *

AUGUST 17, 1909

DEAR ROSE:

I am reminded that vacation will soon be over and that if my letter is to reach you before your return to work it must be sent soon. . . .

The thought of snow and cool spring rains and the sweet arbutus which came with your letter is refreshing now in these days of almost unendurable heat. And I must thank you for the hyacinths and their message. As I grow older I realize more and more the truth that "man cannot live by bread alone." And now when even the matter of bread seems a problem, I am thankful, indeed, that other things than material comfort do enter in to make life worth while after all.

If it were not for those "unseen verities" of which Dr. Young spoke to us in chapel one morning, such a summer as the present would have been almost too much to bear. We worked so hard, both of us, early and late, putting in the crop, gardening etc. and did it all so hopefully and so happily. And our hopes seemed to have been justified. Through June there was plenty of rain. Everything grew wonderfully. Corn, cane, broom corn, millet, maize, and kaffir corn, all promised an abundant return for our labor.[7] One of our particular pleasures at that time was the Sunday morning walk through our fields, noticing the growth of each separate planting, our hearts full of thankfulness for the hope of it and for everything.

And now there is nothing left—except the invisible blessings I spoke of. During the latter part of June, and all of July and August so far, we have had no rain. The heat has been the most intense I ever experienced and has been accompanied day after day by "hot winds," scorching withering blasts which seem to come from a furnace seven times heated.

You cannot imagine in the midst of any desert a drier more desolate spot than those fields which promised us so generous a harvest. There is literally nothing—not enough on the whole farm to feed one of our pretty pigeons for the winter. The problem is really a serious one for we are far from wealthy and truly needed something of a crop. The other day we were wondering about books for the reading we had wanted to do together this winter. Mr. H. suggested going without supper Saturday and Sunday evenings. My thoughts returned at once to the hyacinths you sent, and I thought his suggestion excellent until I reflected that judging from the ordinary state of our appetites, the Sunday and Monday breakfast would probably leave a very small cash balance to be turned over to the book fund. . . .

At present, Mr. Henderson is working at pulling broom corn about twenty miles from here, where they had more rain and fair crops. . . . We had a short but very pleasant visit from Grisell McLaren[8] in June. Her father died in the spring and on her way to visit relatives on the Pacific coast she stopped over at Guymon and come out for a few days. She is to return to Turkey this fall, though I believe she is not to enter the active missionary work at once but will be studying the Turkish language as they expect gradually to be able to extend their work among the Turks. . . .

She told me Alice Browne's[9] sad story. I have often thought of it since as one of the most pitiful things I have known. She spoke also of the very remarkable success of her work in China. . . .

I should like to tell you about the little improvements we have been able to make during the summer but must not dwell long upon them. Perhaps the greatest has been the adding of a bedroom and kitchen to our little cabin and the painting of it, also of the barn and chicken houses. Our house is a tiny place yet but such an improvement over the one room for everything.

I had fair success with my chicken raising and have something over a hundred young ones—more than we shall be able to get feed for. However we shall use a good many of them before winter. We have nine young turkeys also which are the most [amusing] pets we have unless it is the two colts. They shake hands very prettily and never get enough petting.

I hope the summer has brought new strength and inspiration for your work. I always look forward to your letters and hope you will tell me of all that interests you. With remembrance to all the family and sincere good wishes for a happy year for yourself I am still, Your friend,

* * *

FEB. 22, 1911

MY DEAR ROSE:

You and Mabel[10] have both been so generous about writing that it is hard for me to realize that it must be nearly if not quite a year since either of you has heard anything from [here]. I presume hard luck stories are just as tiresome to read as they are to write so now I am thinking that while we are feeling unusually rich and prosperous will be a good time to write some very long-delayed letters. There are two reasons for our feeling unwonted prosperity first and principally because Baby is now quite well again and full of fun as ever after an illness which for a few days seemed pretty serious and second because the country is now buried in snow from several inches to as many feet in depth, after six months without either rain or snow. A drift nearly as high as the chicken house kept Mr. Henderson shoveling for an hour before he could open the door and there are other drifts waist high around all the buildings so we know there will be a little moisture in the ground anyway for the opening of spring.

Last year was quite a little more favorable for farming here than the two "lean years" before it. The price of broom corn, our only money crop, has been too low to do much toward a bank account but we raised plenty of feed and have been able to live more comfortably than before. We now have a fair start in the turkey business for the coming year besides having sold enough to buy material to ceil the living-room over head and at the sides. It was previously just one thin layer of boards papered over and was almost impossible to heat in really cold weather. We think the turkeys are here more profitable than chickens. Our hens have laid well this winter but with January eggs at ten cents per dozen we preferred to use them ourselves. Our cow made

With thanks and every good wish for a happy and successful year I am ever sincerely your friend.

* * *

MAY 4, 1912

“WHAT I READ LAST YEAR,” *THE PRACTICAL FARMER*

When we set out in life together, the head of the house (I like that old-fashioned expression) proceeded to lay down the law that his day's work and mine should end together; in other words, that my evening should, in general, be leisure time for reading, writing, studying or resting, as I pleased, instead of being devoted to left-overs from the day's tasks, or the inevitable mending basket. I assented, though with a mental reservation that time would prove the plan an utterly unattainable idea. To my surprise, as the years have passed, we have found this ideal more nearly attainable than I then supposed. It has required planning and real co-operation, working together, yet it has seemed worth while. As I look back over the years of struggle to transform our “claim” into a farm, our homestead into a home, in the face of every difficulty, it seems that I could never have endured the strain and stress of it all, had it not been for the relaxation of the evenings, when sometimes separately, more often together, we have striven to forget temporarily our own small affairs and enter into the larger life of the world.

Crushing physical weariness has often been forgotten as our minds traveled away from our storm-swept or drought-stricken or hail-beaten prairie into other scenes and engaged in struggles far greater than our own, or felt the inspiration of noble, conquering lives.

We soon established the custom of keeping the family birthdays by the gift of a book of permanent value. So year by year our little library grows and to me, at least, these books, for which we have sometimes sacrificed other desirable things, seem particularly precious. The birthdays of last year brought us Prescott's “Conquest of Mexico,” Parkman's “Conspiracy of Pontiac,” and an ABC book. We were deeply interested in the histories with their records of deeds of courage and self-sacrifice, as well as the civilization of the Aztecs and character of our own Indian tribes.

In the line of fiction I read “Aunt Jane of Kentucky,” whose humor and homely good sense are most refreshing; “The Shepherd of the Hills,” “The Calling of Dan Matthews,” “New Chronicles of Rebecca,” “The Mill on the Floss,” “The Magic Story,” a very little book which leaves a very big impression, and “The Days of Auld Lang Syne.”

Of miscellaneous reading, besides several farm bulletins of special interest in our work, there were Herbert Spencer's “Education,” “The Song of Our Syrian Guest”—a most helpful interpretation of the 23rd Psalm; the suggestive little essay, “What Is Worth While?” “A Little Journey to the Home of Thoreau;” some of [Charles] Lamb's essays, and “Stories in Stone from the Roman Forum.”

Poetry has been too much neglected, just a bit now and then from the authors we have, as I felt inclined. I thoroughly enjoyed a re-reading of Stevenson's “Child's Garden of Verses,” which Christmas brought to little Eleanor; also “Pictures of Memory,” a compilation of poems of childhood.[14]

Of periodicals we receive *The Practical Farmer,* the *Farm Journal* and the *Oklahoma Farmer,* besides one eastern and one western weekly newspaper, and lastly, the *Mothers' Magazine,* which well deserves the good words our editor has written in its behalf. Through the kindness of “the folks back home” we receive a second-hand reading of *Everybody's, Success,* and the *American Magazine.*[15] These periodicals have all been read more or less exhaustively, according to the interest and value, from our point of view, the articles contained in the farm papers probably receive the most careful attention. It is our custom to close the day with a reading from the Bible. Often when we have indeed seemed heavy-laden, we have found in its words new life and courage. Here on our lonely prairie we have felt a sense of nearness to Him who “giveth power to the faint,” and have realized anew that “to them that hath no might He increaseth strength.”[16] However it may be for others, I feel that no homesteaders equipment would be complete without this book of books.

Situated as we are, in a very sparsely settled community thirty miles from a railroad, and at least a hundred, probably more, from a library, my choice of reading is necessarily limited. Under different circumstances I might read more methodically, perhaps more profitably; yet I doubt whether with much greater inward refreshment than has come from the little reading of 1911.

* * *

AUG. 11, 1912

DEAR ROSE:

It was kind of you to write when you heard from Mabel of my Father's death. Though I cannot here realize his absence as keenly as Mother and Susie do there at home where there is so much to keep

With best wishes to you all for a happy Christmas time. I am Lovingly your friend.

* * *

JULY 16, 1913

WAYS AND MEANS EDITOR, *LADIES' WORLD*
DEAR MADAM:

If, out of your experience and knowledge, you can suggest any way whatever in which I may help meet the needs of the situation which I will describe, you will confer a favor which will never be forgotten.

We are homesteading a claim here in old No Man's Land, what is usually called the "semi-arid" portion of Oklahoma. So far as our experience goes, the qualifying prefix is quite superfluous. Still, in spite of droughts and hot winds, blizzards, dirt storms, hail storms, grasshoppers, and in fact almost every form of discouragement, the fascination of being so near the beginning of things, of finding ourselves not quite mastered by various calamities, has held us. We have always felt that if we could hold out a few more years we should succeed; our homestead would really become a home.

Since September of 1912, ten months now, we have had less than one inch of rain, almost no snow. In spite of having done more extensive and also more careful work of preparation than ever before, we have nothing whatever on 160 acres of land which would support one pigeon.

It is not safe for me to remain here alone with the baby so that my husband could go away somewhere to work. Of course there is no work here.

We are fifteen miles from the railroad in a thinly settled community. In our township—36 square miles—there are barely a hundred people, a large portion of them babies. These people are most of them nearly, if not quite, as hard beset as we find ourselves. I cannot expect to wash or scrub or sew for them, persuade them to buy books, or subscribe for magazines, or have their lives insured. I cannot start a "tea room:" when, on an average, less than one person a day passes the house. Gardening is out of the question without at least a little rain. I have already done my utmost with poultry and have over 200 young chickens and about 160 turkeys. But they will not bring in anything for some time and our prices are always low, five or six cents a pound for chickens and ten or twelve for turkeys is the limit. Eggs bring 8 cents a dozen.

I have a good sewing-machine and could do any kind of plain sewing. I couldn't do embroidery or crocheting, at least not fast enough to make anything at it. I do not think summer boarders would find conditions here attractive.

I cannot think of one thing that I can do to earn a cent, and yet the need is so urgent that I feel as if I must be doing something and as soon as possible. Can you suggest anything not requiring over one dollar of capital at which I might hope to earn even a very little?

I feel that this is imposing a hard task upon a defenseless person whom "The Ladies' World" has generously placed at my mercy. So do not fear to hurt or greatly disappoint me if you also fail to think of any employment that fits into the conditions I have tried to suggest.

RESPECTFULLY YOURS, H. A. C.

* * *

OCTOBER 1913

"OUR HOMESTEAD," LADIES' WORLD

Our wedding journey was made in a prairie schooner. Our destination was the "claim" which was to be and still is our home, a tiny cabin in the heart of No Man's Land, and for us ever since the center of the world. No experience of life can ever efface for me the memory of that journey through the sweet fresh air of spring. How strong we felt! How hopefully we looked forward to all that life should bring! The night of our arrival a half-grown moon stayed up to light us home. . . .

My life had been of the quiet, uneventful indoor sort; Will's just the opposite—hunting, trapping, cow-boying. And here we were, "for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, till death do us part," to live, to learn, to work, to overcome, to make a home, to do our little part toward making glad "the wilderness and the solitary place."

Work began the next day with unloading the plough, fence wire, wash boiler, iron bed, mattress, rocking chair and provisions. A cook stove, table, two chairs and a few dishes had already been brought to the little "box" house, which contained just one room, 14 x 16, without lath or plaster or ceiling overhead—just one thickness of boards roofed over and lined with red building paper. This was our castle.

It was now May and time that crops were planted, but as we had no ground broken, we had to depend on sod crops. It had been too dry all the spring to permit breaking sod, so we kept hoping for rain and meantime were busy every day fencing a forty-acre pasture, using cedar posts hauled by wagon from over the New Mexico line sixty-three miles away, building a house for my fourteen hens from packing boxes, and a little windbreak shelter for the horses. A real wind came along one day and picked up the last improvement and threw it down in a heap across the hog-yard fence, so we decided to postpone a stable till we could build more substantially.

The sixth of June brought a light rain, which enabled us to begin breaking sod. After that, work went on early and late until, by July 4, we had in five acres of cane and forty acres of milo maize, the principal feed crop of this southwest country. A heavy rain on June 15 soaked the soil thoroughly and gave great encouragement to my struggling garden. Though we had no other rain, our feed crop, late as it was, did fairly well, and in the fall we cut about one hundred shocks of well-headed maize. I smile to remember my efforts to help in the gathering. We had no corn harvester or money to buy one; a corn knife seemed heavy and awkward to me, and I cut down several acres of feed with the butcher knife while Will used the corn knife and did the shocking. He must have realized much sooner than I did that our crop was a slight preparation for the winter, but he said nothing to cause me anxiety and I thought we were doing pretty well. Still I knew there was no money in it and braced myself up to staying alone in the fall, while he went away well-drilling some twenty-five miles from home. We spent practically our last cent putting up a windmill, which would be a permanent improvement to the place and help me greatly about caring for the horses. The well was nearly two hundred feet deep and pumping by hand a difficult task.

By his work on this well and another nearer home, my husband earned enough to buy material for a stable, hauling the material from G[uymon], our railroad town, thirty miles away. This was built before winter, though not shingled. We thatched it temporarily with bundles of broom corn fodder, taken in part payment for one of the wells, and did not get the roof on till the next spring. . . .

Will got work on another well in the neighborhood, which made us feel quite prosperous, though much of the profit had to go into feed for the stock. During the winter we decided to use a little money, that was coming to me, for a sewing machine and an addition to the house. We built a "lean-to" divided into two rooms, a bedroom and a little 6 X 10 kitchen, which added greatly to the comfort of the house. We were full of plans for the coming year. . . .

The spring came on with frequent showers; my hens were doing well; we had purchased three turkeys, with which I hoped to make my fortune, and had fenced, chicken-proof, a large garden near the windmill, so that at least part of it could be a "watered garden." Maize, cane, Kafir corn and broom corn all came up well and grew fast. Every Sunday morning we used to walk through the crops, noting the luxuriant growth and promise of an abundant harvest. I had never dreamed of being so happy.

Late in June, when our crop was a little over knee high, we had our last rain. This was succeeded by two or three weeks of extreme heat with the "hot winds" we used to hear about in the early days of Kansas, when it seemed as if the heat must come from a nearby prairie fire, so burning and blasting was its intensity. . . . Our fields, which had looked so rank and green, were burned to a crackling brown. We knew there was no hope of any harvest whatever.

Wishing to give all his attention to our farming and feeling confident of his ultimate success, Will had sold the well drill, but for quite awhile he couldn't collect anything for it, and we didn't have a cent in the world. Even flour played out, though we still had a little meal and I could make corn bread. I couldn't get material for the little clothes I wanted to make and cut up old garments of my own and made other things from flour sacks. It seems to me now, if I hadn't had that to work for, I should have felt quite paralyzed with the disappointment, but one instinctively keeps struggling when there is something ahead.

Later in the summer we received payment for the well drill and there was a chance for Will to get work by going away, so it seemed best for me to go home for a while, as father and mother were anxious to have me do. In the fall Will drove across the State [to Ponca City] in time to welcome the little daughter, who came in November, a healthy, happy little thing who has brought us both the blessing of "forward-looking thoughts," even when the burdens of the present seemed heavy to bear.

We were not without our problems. After the doctor's bill was paid I remember we had just four dollars left and were three hundred miles from home, with winter approaching, and the necessity of being back on the claim as soon as possible to meet the requirements of the homestead law.

Will had work in an elevator for a time, but when little Eleanor was three weeks old he started on the long drive home, a lowering day which filled me with anxiety. . . . After three weeks I received the final message to meet him in G[uymon] on the day he expected to reach there. It looked like a big undertaking. I was utterly unused to the care of children and my strength was only just beginning to return, but it had to be done. . . .

At last we reached what seemed the end of the earth and alighted in the cheerless gray dawn to find the station quite deserted except for the telegraph operator. While he was vainly trying to learn whether the telegram I had sent on leaving home had been called for, according to our agreement, I saw a shadow on the frosted glass and, a moment later, we were a reunited family. I forgot my own difficulties when I saw how haggard Will looked after a journey of the utmost hardship and exposure.

Hotels were not within our means, but we went to the camp-house, where they had a good fire and I rested while Will prepared our breakfast over the camp-house stove.

About ten o'clock he had everything ready for our last start. It was cold and the roads were in terrible condition. Heavy snows had melted; the roads were cut up deeply and then frozen hard. The horses were gaunt with short feed and the exposure of their hard journey. One had slipped on the ice a day or two before and was quite lame. We could barely creep along with our heavy load, mile after mile over the frozen rutted roads.

It was the shortest day of the year by calendar, . . . and the sun set when we were still fifteen miles from home. There seemed nothing to do but to push on. The country was almost deserted after the failure in crops. At one or two places where we had thought we might stop to get warm, everything was desolate. It was moonlight again and I tried to warm myself with the thought of that other moonlight night when we had traveled the same road. The baby slept nearly all the way, waking only about the usual feeding times. . . .

The next day we tacked canvases over the walls of the bedroom and set up the "monkey" stove, a heater and cooker drum set transversely in the pipe, in which I learned after much tribulation to bake bread which would be neither raw on top nor burned black on the bottom. We were crowded in the small room, but it was better for the baby than attempting to warm the living-room, where all the heat seemed to go up among the rafters or out at the cracks between the boards. We really had a very comfortable and happy winter. . . .

In the spring we had our first experience with dirt storms. The failure of crops the preceding year had left the whole country bare and exposed to the pulverizing action of the frosts. When the March winds began in earnest, the dirt flew in clouds, so that often we could not see as far as the barn, and the dirt was almost as thick in the house as out of doors.

I remember one day in particular. I had put some pigeons on to cook, but at dinner time we couldn't think of setting the table in the sifting dirt. We sat up close by the "monkey" stove, slipped out our pieces of pigeon and disposed of them as quickly as possible. The worst day of all I covered the baby in her clothes-basket with the umbrella, and went to bed myself and covered my head to get out of the dirt. That evening when the wind went down, I shoveled up just from the small kitchen floor a large dish-pan full of pulverized soil.

However, we had had some snow, which had moistened the subsoil, and later showers stopped the dirt from blowing and gave us a favorable seed time. I now had six turkey hens and in April we bought a cow on time, paying ten percent interest. This was our first venture into debt, but Eleanor needed extra milk and the cost of milk would more than pay the interest. We called our cow "Diana," because she proved so fond of the chase, that is, of being chased, but she is still a good cow and has brought us three calves, worth considerably more than she cost.

The summer brought alternately hope and fear. We really couldn't tell until almost harvest time whether we should have anything or not, but after two long periods of drought, showers came in time to save at least part of the crop. Broom corn pulling began in September. I did what I could to help . . . . [but] just as I was getting the art well learned, I had to resign and come in to cook for five men—a much less entertaining occupation.

After the corn was pulled and stacked, we began on cane, which was a heavy crop. We couldn't see our way to buying a harvester, so Will fixed up what he called a "corn sled"—a low platform on runners, with a scythe blade bolted slantingly across the middle of the front end and a place at each front corner to which to hitch a horse. It proved impossible for him to manage the team and care for the cane at the same time, so I "hired out" again.

Next came the maize-heading, and then the great day of our first broom-corn threshing. It was now late October. We had had some snow and cold weather, but that morning was like spring, with a delicious sweet dampness in the air, and the meadow-larks had come out of the "breaks" and were singing early on the garden fence.

After dinner Will took me down to see the corn. The twenty big greenish-yellow bales lay there in the October sunshine looking as solid as the boulders on a New England hillside. They had done a good smooth job of baling, and we felt much satisfaction in our first broom-corn crop. It was well we did, for that was nearly all we got out of it. Broom-corn was plentiful that year and the price very low.

Still, we had been learning all the time to reduce expenses. A small hand-mill, in which we could grind wheat, maize or Kafir corn for flour or breakfast food, had proved a wonderful help.

The fuel question was the big problem. We had a few tubfuls of wet chips all buried under the drifts, and possibly two hundred pounds of coal. No more was to be obtained within thirty miles; the roads were practically impassable and the storms continuing. Any track that was made was obliterated by the wind and drifting snow before the next day. So we hoarded our small supply as carefully as possible until about the middle of January, when the weather seemed to become settled and people in utmost need began to try the trip to town for fuel and supplies.

Will started on a Thursday morning which promised and proved to be a fine day with little wind. I dreaded the trip for him, but we simply had to have fuel, for the supply was now down to a few small lumps of coal and an armful of wood from broken fence-posts. The day passed slowly, and Friday came with a high-drifting haze of cloud, which made me anxious, though it seemed to grow no more threatening. . . .

While I was preparing Eleanor for her crib, all at once the doors and windows began to rattle savagely, and before I could get her to bed the snow was blowing in. I made haste to get out to gather up the little remaining fuel and, if possible, to give the stock more feed, lest the storm should be so bad that I couldn't get out in the morning. But it was already too bad. I could scarcely stand or get my breath or see the barn at all in the whirling drift, and didn't dare venture for fear of not getting back at all.

It had turned desperately cold; the wind was furious, and I knew that no living thing could follow a trail five minutes in such a storm. . . .

I didn't dare to sit up or keep a fire, for there was no knowing how long the storm would last and no way of getting help, whatever I might need. After tacking up blankets over the doors and windows and setting the lamp in the window toward the road, I went to bed and shivered all night with cold and anxiety. We had no thermometer,

but a pan of hot water put into the hot oven at midnight was a solid block of ice before daylight.

The morning dawned clear, but I could find no comfort in it, thinking of all that might have happened during the night. . . . At dusk . . . I had given up hope. . . . And in almost utter exhaustion I fell asleep. A few minutes later I was wakened by Will's voice at the door.

He had had to abandon the wagon miles back on the road and tramp on through the drifts leading the team. He was pretty thoroughly chilled by his long tramp in the snow, but his supper was still warm in the oven, and after a night's rest he seemed none the worse for his trip, and I think does not understand yet why the thought of anyone's being out in a blizzard is to me absolute torture. But the fact that four other men, leaving G[uymon] in different directions about the same time, were found frozen to death, proved that my fears were not so groundless.

. . . We then moved the little stove into the kitchen, and there we lived till spring. In February the weather improved, and Will got work, running a well-drill for its owner, but it was near, so he could be home nights. He finished the well just the evening before the worst storm of the winter, on February 25th. After it was over, we took twenty bushels of packed snow out of the house and loads and loads from barn and chicken-house.

The unusual amount of snow had put the ground into better condition than ever before. Grass came early, which was fortunate for us, as the hard winter had taken all our feed. Thanks to the . . . snow . . . this was our best year.

We had a good garden and the crops were good. I dried peas and canned beans, put up sod peaches with lemon to make them sour, and pieplant with raisins to make it sweet, and made quantities of pie-melon butter with dried apricots to give flavor.[21] My chickens had done well, and we had raised one hundred and twenty-three turkeys. We now had two cows, and the young stock were doing nicely.

As it happened, Thanksgiving and our maize threshing came together. Nearly everything for our dinner was home grown, and I know our hearts were indeed thankful for the encouragement of a fair return for our hard work. During the winter a new railroad was built to our State line, with promise of continuation later. This cut down our distance from a railway to fifteen miles and held out the prospect of a nearer and possibly better market.

The comparatively few who had struggled on through these trying years, as we had done, and remained on their homesteads, began to look forward to better times and more comfortable conditions of life. A new spirit of hope and courage was in evidence everywhere. How fortunate that we could not look far into the future!

* * *

OCT. 5, 1913

MY DEAR MRS. ALDEN:

I have just been reading again your last letter and wondering why I have been so slow to answer, when it brought me so much cheer and inspiration. To tell the truth the year has been so difficult and disappointing that I have hated to write about it. We had very little snow last winter and practically no spring rain, just the lightest of local showers which never wet down more than an inch or two. Then we had a regular Egyptian experience with grasshoppers and blister beetles which destroyed things faster than they could be replanted. Extreme heat with "hot winds" through July and part of August destroyed all hope of even a late feed crop, which we tried to believe in as long as possible, so the sum total of our years farming operations amounts to just nothing at all. For a time I felt very rebellious and very unwilling to waste any more time or strength in trying to make this particular part of the desert rejoice.

At the same time I realize that we should have to sacrifice the little we have got together in order to make a change now and start over empty handed. So whether wisely or not I do not know, but we have decided to try our fortunes here one more year, hoping that by that time we shall feel more sure what is best. Even a garden failed us this year though I worked very hard in the early spring planting and watering and it has hardly seemed like home.

My 36 hens and the two cows, Diana and Mary Jane, have really provided the greater part of our living. Next year we should have three more cows, Topsy, Minnehaha, and Psyche, and I plan to keep 100 hens and pullets so . . . next year things may not look quite so doubtful as they do at present. We have been following the Sunday school lessons lately and I have felt a new sympathy with the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness. "Lord, for to-morrow and its needs I do not pray"[22] is easier to say than to feel altogether sincerely.

I had pretty good success with my chickens this year, raising some few over 200 besides 150 turkeys. My April pullets are now as large as the old hens and I am hoping they may begin laying yet this fall. My turkeys are lighter than usual as we have to be so saving of feed and I am afraid we have scrimped them a little too much.

Eleanor is my great helper in the poultry business. She simply never tires of doing anything she can for either chickens or turkeys. They are very tame with her and she usually has one or often two, carrying them around under her arm for company. She was greatly pleased with your letter to her and the picture of the pretty sheep. . . . In just a month more she will be four years old and it is hard to believe that the time is passing by so swiftly.

Mother has been so very anxious to see her before she loses her baby ways and I had hoped to go this fall but don't know whether it is going to be possible or not. I wanted the place "proved up" first so that there could be no possible chance for trouble in that respect, and we arranged for it in June, but when the notice was advertised, according to the requirements, the paper which was a new venture, failed after one publication, while five are required. So . . . it cannot be completed finally, until they get ready to have the notices published again, and there is no telling when that may be, for they usually take their own time for such proceedings.[23]

Mother and Susie have just recently returned from quite a trip to Mother's old home in New England with quite a bit of sight-seeing by the way in Washington, New York, Boston and Niagara, with visits on the way back at our old Iowa homes in Plymouth Co. and Des Moines. . . . Mother said she saw almost everyone of the old friends still living in that part of the country and I know it has been a wonderful satisfaction to her. Things are so very different here. The population is shifting all the time, and there is so little of common interests or neighborly feeling. Perhaps it is not strange when people are so scattered and so much engaged in getting on at all. Yesterday I was thinking about our neighborhood. In the nine sections or square miles of which this is the center there are just twenty-four people! Thirteen of those are in two families, so you see there is a good deal of vacant space. That is just about the way it is all over this country. And yet all we need is rain to make it productive and prosperous. . . .

I intended to write while Rose was having her vacation but let the time slip away. I wonder whether I cannot let this do for her too this time, if you can give or send it to her. I feel as if I ought not to stop without confessing that in one respect you are quite mistaken. I really am not brave at all and never expect to reach the place where I shall be able to "glory in tribulations"[24] which make me very wretched and

I have a friend who sends me no Christmas gift, but I can depend on a long letter from her every year at Christmas time, full of her dear, funny ways of looking at things, bright little sayings of the babies, glimpses of their happy home life. If all my other friends knew how much I love her for not sending me anything but that dear letter, I should probably never have another Christmas present as long as I live.

Then there are all those letters that we do *not* write. We are so busy. So many impulses toward special words or deeds of kindness we feel ourselves physically unable to carry out. And yet it is sad that buds should wither before they bloom. So much happiness has come into my life with those surprise letters, I am wishing it might be multiplied in the lives of others—that more often we might find time to send to some burdened heart an unlooked-for thought of cheer. . . .

* * *

CA. SPRING, 1914

“RELAXATION,” *LADIES’ WORLD*

Last winter I read an old book, Dana’s “Two Years Before the Mast.” I enjoyed it all, as stories of the sea have always had a fascination for me, perhaps because of the entire unfamiliarity of their setting. Moreover, the vivid pictures of the California coast, eighty years ago, when California was a foreign land, suggested the hope that our own desolate region might make, in four-score years to come, some small fraction of the progress made by that once forbidding coast. But what impressed me most was a word-picture of a scene in the far south Atlantic:

“There being no breeze, the surface of the water was unbroken, but a long, heavy swell was rolling. And we saw the fellow, all white, directly ahead of us, asleep upon the waves, with his head under his wing; now rising on the top of one of the big billows, and then falling slowly until he was lost in the hollow between. He was undisturbed for some time, until the noise of our bows, gradually approaching, roused him; when, lifting his head, he stared upon us for a moment and then spread his wide wings and took his flight.”[3]

The thought of the great bird there in all the tumult of the heaving waters, peacefully sleeping, unafraid, has become a beautiful memory to me. Over and over I had wondered what our lives might become, if only we in our hurried, striving days could at times attain the attitude toward life which came without effort to the albatross—surrendering ourselves freely, without fear, to the great forces of life, truly resting, even amid circumstances quite beyond our present understanding. . . .

To prepare the ground as well as we may, to sow our seeds, to cultivate and care for, that is our part. Yet how difficult it is for some of us to learn that the results we must leave to the great silent unseen forces of Nature, whether the crop be corn or character. How impatiently we often do our waiting! Having planted and watered, we are still eager to add the weight of our own efforts toward securing the increase. Many a time I have found myself tired out from having tried unconsciously and without success to bring the distant rain-clouds nearer, to water our thirsty fields. Often I have felt as if the responsibility for averting a blizzard or a hail-storm rested upon me, and I seemed actually to be struggling against some great overpowering weight. I am beginning to see how worse than useless is this exaggerated feeling of one’s own responsibility; to understand a little the thought of someone who wrote long ago, “He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.”[4]

To me one of the most beautiful portions of Doctor Montessori’s book is the incident in which she brings before her pupils a sleeping baby. She had just been giving the children a lesson of silence, in which their little bodies were relaxed, their little minds refreshed through the mystic influence of the quiet, darkened room. Leaving the school-room, she met a mother with a tiny baby asleep in her arms. Taking the child, Doctor Montessori returned and told the children she had brought them a new teacher. All interest and eagerness, they crowded about, and as she called upon them for a new silence, she showed them how the sleeping baby surpassed their most earnest efforts to be quiet. The little group became hushed and seemed to feel, as so many of us have felt, the wonder of the sleeping child—so sweet, so warm, so full of life, yet so perfectly passive, a little quiet fountain of life, filled from the inexhaustible sources of the infinite life. To feel confidence in those invisible forces . . . is a difficult matter nowadays. So much there is to learn, so much to do and such a hurry about it all. . . .

Last summer, while the disappointment of a barren year seemed so hard to bear, I would often take my mending or a sack of carpet-rags and a book, and we would go to spend the afternoon under a little group of cottonwoods a mile from home. They were set out there by one of the earliest settlers in this section, around a little pool kept full of water by a windmill. The tiny box-house and the sod-barn are gone, the dug-out is nearly filled in, the settlers have drifted on, but the trees remain and, growing more deeply-rooted year by year, are a landmark for the country round. Baby would throw bits of wood into the little pool and squeal with joy as her dog splashed in after them; the meadowlarks and snowbirds would come to drink or bathe, and the bullbats would skim over the water quite near us, dipping to drink as they flew. The leaves of the cottonwoods never ceased their satiny rustling. And in some way the actual physical contact with the "brown old earth" would always seem to bring refreshment. I could forget for the time the anxieties of the present. I could feel once more the lure of this great, lonely land, waiting with its stores of fertility all untouched for those who shall one day learn to meet its demands, to give to it their patient thought and labor.

There are few who could not find as favorable a place for a vacation. From our own gardens, the whiteness of our Monday's washing against the green of trees or the blue of the summer sky, the drifting of cloud-shadows over a field of ripening wheat or the roofs of some great city, the hush of early morning broken by the first bird's song; the sympathy of friends, companionship of books; most universal of all, the heavens which do "declare the glory of God"—from these things and many more may we gather restful thoughts, may we learn the lesson: "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."[5]

SEPTEMBER 1914

"BACKGROUNDS: ANOTHER LETTER FROM OUR HOMESTEAD LADY," *LADIES' WORLD*

. . . One of the best ways to cultivate a large-minded attitude toward life is through the habit of general reading. There are times when nothing brings quite so much mental refreshment as a well-written story, and much of the world's greatest literature is in the form of fiction. But to form standards of living, I feel that there is a special value in those things which are true in fact as well as in spirit.

In history we find portrayed the slow but ever onward development of nations, great groups of people like ourselves with their own hopes and upward strivings.

Biography gives us more personal knowledge of those who have lived victoriously. Carlyle tells us that "the great man is the living light-fountain which it is good and pleasant to be near."[6] A little "hero-worship" does us no harm. It is rather a sign that the spirit of youth remains with us and that some nobility in ourselves responds to that which we admire. Such books as "The Making of an American," "Up from Slavery" and "The Promised Land," while not formal biographies, belong to our own time and country. They are also self-revelations of a most inspiring character.[7]

Books of travel broaden our interests and prepare us for world citizenship, which is a larger patriotism. Stories of exploration and missionary enterprise record many deeds of great unselfish heroism. We all know how the heart of the world has been quickened by the courage and chivalry of those members of the Scott expedition who met death so bravely in the fierce Antarctic storms.

A little boy I once knew divided all stories into three groups, "true stories, made-up stories and Bible stories." And it would hardly be fair to leave the subject of reading with reference to forming standards for life without mentioning the Bible: "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which satisfieth not?"[8] No book is a more eloquent protest against such failure to see things in proportion, such waste of energy upon the purely transitory. . . .

JANUARY 1915

"OUR HOMESTEAD LADY," *LADIES' WORLD*

In the early fall, at the end of a long, hot day spent in the broomcorn field, there came to us an envelope bearing the stamp of the U. S. land-office. The document within proclaimed that, as we had fulfilled the required conditions, a certain designated portion of the United States had become our own, in the words of the patent, "to have and to hold forever." Since then I have thought many times not only of what this means to us, but what it has meant in times past to many who have gone forth to make homes in new and lonely places. I feel that we personally owe tribute to all who have ventured and toiled and endured, and in so doing have made the homestead way plainer to all who have followed them.

It seems true that the original settlers rarely become permanent. In our own township, after eight years of settlement, out of one hundred

Let us keep it so, remembering that, confusing as it may seem we are fighting for peace, for a world "made safe for democracy." So may our minds and hearts be equal to the greatness of our task. So may we also be prepared for the patient work and sacrifices that must follow the war if the world is truly to be set free; if all peoples are to be united by bonds of sympathy and mutual service; if the nations are to be prepared to become at last "the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ."

. . . Doubtless many of us will find our most direct service in preventing waste in our own homes. As a nation, we have had spendthrift ways. . . . I believe we shall prove our patriotism and our adaptability by learning the value of things and by adopting in practice the new slogan of the Department of Agriculture: Let saving, not spending, be your social standard. . . .

* * *

SEPTEMBER 1917

"THE HOMESTEAD LADY'S SCRIBBLING PAD," *LADIES' WORLD*

There is a friendly picture in these words from an old prophecy: "They helped everyone his neighbor; and everyone said to his brother, 'Be of good courage.'" So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil."[13]

What an ideal of unity in national life! It suggests occupations as varied as human talents, yet all contributing to a common purpose; each worker valuing his own task, yet regarding also the worth of his neighbors' toil.

. . . I cannot help hoping that when the dark shadows of this terrible storm of war have passed by, we shall have come here in this world, even through sorrow and sacrifice, to a fuller knowledge of human worth and aspirations, human capacity for heroism and "patient endurance," to a more abundant sympathy, a more forgiving love. . . .

I rejoice to think that already our American Red Cross has organized work for reconstruction in the desolated regions of France. They welcome every gift, however small, and use it with the utmost economy for this or any indicated purpose.

In these days of high-cost sugar there is real economy in the use of those fruits which contain their own sweetening. . . .

In the far-away spring after the great war began, we had a violent wind storm. Soon after we walked to the little group of trees about the pool where the water flowers grow. The ground was strewn with the fragments of broken nests and poor, little dead birds. Well, I cried over the pity of it. Then, as I thought of the infinitely greater sorrow of the broken homes and battle-fields of Europe, I questioned how human hearts could ever endure such pain.

Now, as the birds are rearing their young again, it seems incredible that I, who cried over the ruined nests, should have given even silent assent to the thought of war for our own country. Yet I realize that I am not alone; that many who hate the thought of war as bitterly as I do, must also have looked upon it now as the one possible means of redeeming and establishing more firmly the liberties of mankind, painfully attained through centuries of struggle. Therefore, with pride I salute the boys who are honored by the nation's choice to guard the precious treasures of civilization. With honor and heart-aching sympathy, I salute the fathers and mothers who give their sons for this service.

* * *

NOVEMBER 1917

"THE HOMESTEAD LADY'S SCRIBBLING PAD," *LADIES' WORLD*

Few things in every-day experience are harder than just to keep pegging away at a task which seems doomed to failure, yet which we cannot in conscience abandon. Practically, I have to admit the possibility of outward failure. I have never attained to the kind of optimism which assures one that he can do anything he sets out for. He might set out for the wrong thing. But in the long, long run, a lifetime or two, if one's task is something that ought to be done, and he has in one way or another become clearly responsible for it, then if he will give that work, irksome though it may be, his most persistent and thoughtful effort, he may not attain exactly his desired goal, but he will gain something well worth while.

Many a man has died—many another will die—not knowing whether the battle in which he fell proved a step toward final victory for the cause he fought for. In a sense, we are all "under orders." The fact that we cannot see the end does not relieve us of our obligation to press forward, to gain every inch we can in humanity's forward march. . . .

If one grows hopeless and impatient over the slow progress of our struggling world, let him read some book on geology and take courage. . . . The mind stops at the thought of the vast reaches of time required for these processes. Surely we need not feel too greatly downcast that human hearts, in some respects more unmanageable than rocks and stones, have not yet risen to their perfect statures. . . .

~~lovely month of October was a succession of tempests which blew flat even the fodder we had hoped to cut. We had managed to cut and bind the late planted broom corn and are still not quite through the laborious task of pulling the brush from the bundle, but hope to complete that work this week. The blowing down of the fodder made imperative the fencing of the farm, so as to pasture out the feed in the field. That extra and unplanned for labor and expense with the broom-corn pulling and the rigors of the winter have again upset all my plans for a rather restful winter. . . .~~

~~My garden suffered with other things from the bad season, but I raised beans, carrots, parsnips, beets, and pumpkins enough for the winter, and we have made use of everything. I think there will be sufficient fodder from Kafir and broom corn and millet hay to carry the cattle through, and that is the most important thing. We have five new babies since the new year, which brings our little herd up to 47, which means a whole lot of work for two people caring for them.~~

~~One improvement during the year was the putting in of a telephone line which connects us with a great many of our neighbors and our market town of Elkhart . . . .~~

~~It is very quiet here—only the wind, which rarely rests, and the fire make any sound. . . .~~

* * *

~~APRIL 13, 1919~~

~~RECEIVED AND EXCERPTED BY ROSE ALDEN~~

~~Some train of thought which I could not retrace brought me to you as I walked home from the pasture across the road with my pail of milk. So when I reached the house it was a pleasant surprise to find your letter on the table as if I had unexpectedly met someone whom I supposed to be far away.~~

~~. . . You have heard something of the earlier part of the winter. The latter part has been so much worse, with its almost continuous storms of snow, rain, sleet, and violent wind, losses among the stock, and general weariness and disheartenment that I will spare you the details. Though perhaps it would surprise you to know that in Oklahoma, supposed to be a southern state, after a winter begun in November we have just this week had another dreadful blizzard, directly responsible for the loss of over a hundred cattle in its smothering drifts, just right around within a few miles of here. We lost none in the storm, but a few which were already weakened by this unprecedented season were naturally not~~

~~helped, and I fear may yet have to go. . . . Try as we would, and we have almost worn ourselves out with hard work and exposure, yet we, their only providence, must so fail them in their time of need. . . . Please tell your people when you write that we have received and enjoyed both Outlooks and picture papers, which we always pass on so that some one else may enjoy them too. They sent the pictures of the great welcome to New York soldiers, and it was all very interesting and appealing, especially the thin line of soldiers of the Civil War saluting the flag of the marching boys of the twenty-seventh. . . .~~

* * *

NOVEMBER 15, 1927

“THE WOMAN WHO RAISED HER HAND,” *CHRISTIAN REGISTER*

TO THE EDITOR:

Through the kindness of Unitarian friends we frequently receive copies of *The Christian Register.* I am so impressed by the fair-minded intelligence and spiritual sympathy of your editorial writing that I am appealing to you for help in solving a problem in Christian ethics. It has seemed that in your wide experience you may have known of some one in a similar situation who found peace of mind and inspiration for service through a right decision. I will condense the story as much as seems consistent with clearness.

For almost twenty years we have lived here on our “homestead” in the heart of old “No Man’s Land.” . . . There is only one religious organization within reach (as we are fifteen miles from town and any other church). . . . About twelve or thirteen years ago we joined this [United Brethren] church, more because we wished to be associated with Christian people in worship and work for community welfare than because we had given close attention to the theology of the church.

With more of the discipline of living, more reading and thinking, and more listening to the preachers sent to this community, we have realized the impossibility of believing much that is presented as God’s truth. I kept trying to persuade myself that the unity of a common purpose is more important than the unity of a common belief, or method of interpretation. Still, we felt dissatisfied. One night in the early spring, at prayer- meeting, I told the people of our difficulty and left it with them as to whether they still wished to retain in membership people with ideas so different from their own.

I spoke especially of four points.

I told them that we could believe in the Bible as *one* revelation of God's truth, but not a final or even a perfect revelation. I believe we should look for truth everywhere, in nature, in history, in human life and character.

I told them that we could not believe in everlasting purposeless torture for all who failed in this so brief human experience to accept a certain formula of salvation. To me the life of the spirit is continuous, and everywhere and always within the care and influence of Infinite Love.

I told them that salvation seemed to us a matter of *life*, showing forth day by day the spirit of Jesus, rather than claiming purification by "blood atonement."

Lastly, and I think most shockingly, I spoke of our acceptance of Jesus as the great teacher and leader and example for our lives and for *all* who have come to know the great compelling principles of his life and teachings. But it had become impossible for us to think of Jesus as Almighty God.

Though this all seemed entirely contrary to their own beliefs, at a later meeting the official board of the church unanimously voted that our membership in the church should be continued. Doubtless we should have gone on in that way, expecting no more than bare tolerance, yet striving by our lives to show forth the faith that is in us, had not a later occurrence seemed to make that all but an impossible course.

In April the church held a revival meeting conducted by the state evangelist. . . . If you have ever chanced to read Carl Sandburg's address, "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," you can visualize the type of man perfectly. It is all there, even to the kicking over of chairs and the throwing around of furniture. . . . One night he pictured dramatically the scene on the *Lusitania* (the mistake is his!), when the vessel rammed the iceberg and everybody in the wild confusion was dashing about shouting, "What shall I do to be saved?"[16] . . . I do not mean to be irreverent by saying that Christianity was altogether presented not as a way of life, but as a cheap form of fire insurance for the world to come.

. . . The last night came. The subject was announced: "Hell, What It Is. Where It Is. Who Goes There."

Even if I could write every word, I could scarcely suggest the unloving tone and manner of presentation, the vulgarity and crude materialism of the whole thing. The geological location, the names of people now there (in his opinion, stated without reservation), the vile denunciation of others, the stickiness of melted brimstone, the *red* (?) flames of burning sulphur—it was all but intolerable. Presently he thought of something else, and asked a man on the platform for matches. My mind flew to "The Bonnie Brier Bush," and the story of the evangelist who terrified the little children by burning the paper. I thought he would try something of the sort to impress the boys and girls, of whom many were present. But instead he asked in a loud challenging voice whether there was anyone before him who did not believe in hell. I raised my hand, just as a matter of common honesty and of standing by my belief in God as the Spirit of Love pervading the universe.

This apparently infuriated the speaker. He came charging down from the platform and asked me to hold out my hand. He struck his match, held it below my hand, and asked if it would burn. Of course I said it would. He then applied the flame to my finger and kept asking, "Does it burn?" "Is it hurting?" And finally, "Do you believe now that you can burn?" I told him that one's body can be burned, and he returned to the platform apparently satisfied that he had proved something. "Yes," he said, "one can burn all right. That finger may be blistered now for all I know" (as of course it was).

He went on with increased violence and said that some people thought they were too smart to believe the Bible, but that the *only* people who did not believe in hell were living sinful lives, and were already far on their way to that destination. He warned the people that such persons were a menace to the community, and especially that they should teach their children to scorn and avoid them as those doing the works of the Devil. With passionate vehemence and violent gesticulations, he declared that if he became convinced that there is no hell, he would "*damn God*" and abandon all restraints. He said he didn't *want* to go to Heaven, if the scum of the earth were to be admitted. And so on and on.

Finally, the invitation hymn was given out—"There's Power in the Blood." But sermon, hymn, and the almost frenzied pleadings of both evangelist and pastor were without effect. At last, when all hope of response seemed gone, he asked that all who believed he had preached the truth would march around and shake hands with him as a sign of their approval. Not all, but nearly all of the congregation responded to this request with apparent enthusiasm. . . .

That was May 1, 1927. Since then I have never been to church nor anywhere in the neighborhood except a few minutes once at the parsonage, and to one other home by special invitation. Yet our names are still on the book of the church, and there comes the question of our future course.

Ought we as a matter of Christian duty to relieve this church of the fear of our possible influence and seek even a distant fellowship with some Unitarian church? Or ought we to go on and disregard the action of the church in approving the evangelist's denunciation, and hope to live long enough to show by good will and upright living that "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty?" At fifty years of age, that looks like a faint hope.

The problem is complicated by several things. . . . In four months, neither the pastor nor any member of the church has expressed to us any doubt as to our dangerous character, and the pastor had the same evangelist out here for a meeting at a different preaching appointment. Yet we carried through by correspondence a project planned last winter for the boys and girls—giving Bibles to all who completed a certain study course. On August 29, we invited these boys and girls and all the people of the community to come to our home for the presentation. Nearly all the church people of the immediate neighborhood came, and all was friendliness and appreciation. . . .

One other consideration is perhaps the result of my Scotch and Connecticut Yankee ancestry. I can't help wondering about the financial part of it. We have so little to give, rarely over a hundred dollars in a year, that we can spare from the plainest living and the ever-present necessities of building up and improving the farm and its operation. Are we wrong in giving the greater part of this to a church which sends out the type of man I have described to represent the Christian religion? Or ought we to go on supporting it on the ground that it is the only organized religious effort within reach, that the people in it are good people and working with good intentions, even if from our point of view they are misled?

There must be some clear way through, but we are perhaps too close to discover the principle that would make it all plain. . . . And if you could help us to a soul-satisfying decision, I could not express my gratitude. . . .

* * *

DEC. 19, 1928

DEAR ROSE:

It has been a long time since I have written to you. I do not feel sure whether I ever thanked you for the beautiful copy of "The Haunted Bookshop,"[17] so delightful both inside and out. If not let me do so now most sincerely, for we are more and more alone and books—even when we cannot consult them are our friends. Here, too, I will mention the parcel received recently and put away for the great day. Later I shall try to thank you for it more especially.

1928 has been another year of trying our wits against the weather and on the whole being quite definitely but not disgracefully outplayed. No two seasons here are alike. There seems no limit to the number of combinations. This year for variety an unprecedented amount of rain and snow with severely cold weather through the fall and early winter has prevented us thus far from gathering in and saving such crops as did survive earlier misfortunes. But the unusual moisture lures us on to hope for a wheat crop in 1929. I have not seen "Giants of the Earth" and on the whole should judge our own ventures to be more like those of pygmies. But perhaps I can guess at the thought through some quotations Eleanor sent me from Hamsun's "Growth of the Soil" which she read recently.[18]

Yes, "The Prairie Years"[19]—received from the Oklahoma Traveling Library—had seemed wonderful to us too. I wondered how a man could know and write the chapter about Nancy Hanks and the wild apple blossoms. I hope it will not be shocking to you to know that quite independently, without outside pressure, we have become more and more Unitarian in our way of thinking. . . .

It has been a year of many changes and much effort. In the spring we consented to Eleanor's trying for a Watkins' Hall scholarship which would give her all the privileges of a very fine cooperative residence hall under the control of the University of Kansas. She was successful in gaining the scholarship, so the summer was full of unaccustomed plans and preparations. . . .

. . . We made a tremendous effort and took our first vacation in September taking Eleanor to Lawrence by way of the old Ford truck. It is a very pretty place built in the hills and among forests of trees so that from the high window of [university] buildings one can scarcely and autumn had been so extremely dry that our fall-sown wheat had not even sprouted.

Well, if we are to have breakfast in time for Mr. Henderson to get this to the morning mail, I must stop. Take things as lightly as you can. I think of you a great deal even though I do not write and am so glad to have known you and Mr. Alden and all the family. Our best wishes to each and all.

* * *

AUGUST 1933

"LETTERS OF TWO WOMEN FARMERS I," *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*

MAY 2, 1932

MY DEAR EVELYN,

Last week I caught a glimpse of what must have been the real bluebird of happiness—a flash of deepest azure brightening the misty morning on which he appeared among the branches of our locust trees. We were more than glad to welcome this messenger of spring, for the "winter of our discontent"[12] has been long and stormy and persistent. Even this past week, when we should have been making May baskets, the lilac blossoms, which had survived the March blizzards and the April gales, and the rosebuds, just beginning to show their color, were coated with ice and tinkled like glass in the shifting winds. One day of the week before, four freight cars on our new railway went hurtling along the track for about forty miles, set in motion and carried forward solely by the violence of the wind and their own momentum.

High winds

These days of furious wind, which we must expect in the early spring, have a nervously exciting effect on both man and beast. On one of the worst days recently, our little Leghorns fought like fiends from dawn till roosting time, and when I went out in the night, as usual, to see about the brooder fire, they got up and promptly went at it again.

You ask about farming prospects out here. Well, we are going ahead with our spring work, but in a rather hesitating way. Unfavorable weather, lack of moisture, and wretched business conditions have slowed up everything. We cannot afford expensive mistakes, and are trying to proceed cautiously, with the least possible outlay. Our stored wheat from last year's crop is all we have to depend on to keep things going, except the small returns from dairy and poultry products. It would require a lot of close accounting to prove which involves the greatest loss—wheat at 31 cents a bushel, eggs at 7 cents a dozen (in trade), hens at 8 cents a pound, calves at 3 cents, steers at 2 cents, or milo, maize and Kafir corn at around 30 cents a hundredweight.

All prices/payment very low

In nothing that we can produce here is there at present the slightest chance of any return on our labor. Yet we keep on working—really harder than ever. I wonder sometimes whether we are any wiser than the ants that William Beebe writes about in one of his books.[13] He joined the ends of a marching column, and the ants went milling around in that circle without sense to stop or break from the line until they died of complete exhaustion. I'll have to confess that at times the endless round of our daily duties seems quite as meaningless and unprofitable. Just now, all by our two selves, besides trying to plant the garden and truck patch and prepare for feed crops and summer fallowing on 240 acres, Will and I are milking 9 cows, caring for 41 head of cattle, about 100 hens and 240 young chicks, grinding and mixing our own feeds, and struggling to make a few improvements about the place.

Discourage (sometimes)

Windbreak trees

This spring we have set out about 300 small trees—Chinese elms, mulberries, and arbor vitae. Our State Forestry Department is generous with seedlings for hedge and windbreak planting, and my own feeling is like the parting advice of Sir Walter Scott's wicked old laird of Dumbiedikes in *The Heart of Midlothian*: "Jock, when ye hae naething else to do, ye may be aye sticking in a tree; it will be growing, Jock, when ye're sleeping."[14]

Through this most lonely and disheartening of all winters, I have found my greatest inspiration and encouragement in the blossoming plants in our windows. . . . Insignificant little things these are, I realize; yet they have seemed to reassure me that sunshine and rain, the laws of life and growth, seedtime and harvest, are in a general way dependable; that our earthly heritage is still rich in possibilities; and that most of our troubles are caused by human faults and follies, and are therefore capable of correction—if only we care enough, and are brave enough, to demand and to work personally for justice and mercy.

Human's fault?

During the winter we have had several letters from a young friend engaged in social work in Chicago.[15] Trying as our situation here often seems, I feel ashamed of my own bitterness when we read of conditions there. She writes of homes "where only oatmeal has been eaten for days, where a loaf of bread must serve six children for a meal until relief comes," and of schools where "children sit in men's clothing and overshoes. . . . They have gone without food until they do not feel hunger pangs any longer."

Granting that much of this misery is brought on by personal inefficiency and mismanagement, are not such conditions a challenge to us all? Some of my friends are uneasy about my interest in the Russian experiment[16]—as if Americans had never tried daring adventures! The Russians may fail, but I see no reason why we should nationally assume a self-righteous attitude and pour contempt upon them for having dreamed of a new order under which men should work for the joy of the working and for the common good. Someone—I think it was Professor Carver of Harvard—has recently said that the Russians have equality without liberty, and we have liberty without equality, but that we might, by the application of intelligence to our own problems, have a fair measure of both.[17] I believe that.

Wants to try Russian example

I judge that hardening of the heart is about as common among bankers in the East as in the West. They say that they are making no new loans here except occasionally, in very small sums and for a short time. The State Banking Commission has been taking care of a part of our small resources since October, and we cannot even get a reply to our inquiry as to whether the depositors of the closed bank may expect any return whatever.

Our own programme contains nothing new or original, but is largely an intensification of effort along the lines we have previously followed. We try to spend money only when the loss from doing without the needed supplies would be greater than the loss on the wheat that must be sold to purchase them. Some things, like coal for the brooder at $20 a ton, seem necessary regardless of the loss. We are trying, so far as possible, to keep things in reasonable repair. We have bought fencing to protect the yard and garden, and have even squandered a load of wheat on paint. So you see we are not among the much-berated hoarders—though I wish we had something to hoard for taxes and emergencies. Our own personal "use-what-you-have" movement had been going on for a long time before anyone thought up the hateful phrase, "anti-hoarding."[18] It is surprising how many things temporarily out of use we have been able to fix up and turn to some account for ourselves or for other people.

Justification for spending $ $

And we mean to help where we can—especially to help young people who might grow disheartened under the stress of existing conditions. I hope your boys and girls are all doing well in whatever interests them, and that somehow we shall all find courage for the tasks ahead. I often think of Christina Rossetti's little poem, "Uphill," and begin to realize its truth: —Does the road wind up-hill all the way? Yes, to the very end. Will the day's journey take the whole long day? From morn to night, my friend.—[19]

Our best wishes to you for all of the journey.

JUNE 10, 1932

MY DEAR EVELYN,

You must have been writing to me on the very evening when I was thinking especially of you, and wondering whether farming in Maryland is as different as it is here on the great plains. We had had no rain for weeks. The wind, which had raged all through April, seemed to have blown itself out, and for several days the breeze had been too light to stir the windmill upon which we depend for water. The tanks were all empty, and my lettuce bed was drying up. So after dark one night we put a cream can in the back of the old Model T and drove to a shallow pool in the south pasture to dip up water for the thirsty plants.

Lack of wind

The pool is supplied by a deep well, one of the earliest in all the neighborhood. The people who drilled it "on the lone prairie" have moved on long ago, but that much of their work remains. The cottonwoods which they planted about the little pool rustled silkily. A pair of killdeers, disturbed by our adventuring, filled the air with their answering cries. A young moon, with Venus and Jupiter blazing in the west, gave light for our undertaking. The lettuce revived, and with later watering have provided a welcome addition to our "iron ration." . . .

Out here we thought the depths of the depression had been fathomed some time ago when the sheriff subtracted from the very personal possessions of one of our neighbors a set of false teeth that he had been unable to pay for. But we were too sanguine. While we were again distracted by lack of wind to pump our water and by apparently futile but finally successful efforts to recondition a small gasoline engine for that work, we received in the mail a lengthy document explaining why our only intangible possession—a real estate bond for $1000—had become valuable principally as a souvenir and a warning. It appeared that the only hope of any ultimate recovery lay in turning over the bond to a committee whose autocratic powers would make Mussolini ashamed of himself. The committee seemed to have in mind some plan of reorganization incapable of completion until long after we shall have ceased to care about bonds or anything else.

The same week another disaster overtook us. One day when the men were busy in the fields, a terrifying cloud came rolling up from the south. Though I tried hard to get the small chicks into their shelter, they turned away, not realizing their danger, and were almost instantly beaten to earth by the vicious pelting of hail which burst from the angry-looking cloud. I stayed out through all of it—and how those hailstones did sting!—picking up the helpless chicks. Most of them I was able to revive by wrapping them up in warm cloths, but several were beyond help.

I was so occupied with trying to save the chickens that the storm was nearly over before I realized that garden, truck-patch, and wheat fields were all involved in one common ruin. Although stubs and stems remained almost everything above the ground except the screened-over lettuce and tomato plants was either destroyed or so seriously damaged as to give little hope of recovery. What to do? We hardly know, but, as the saying goes, we have the bear by the tail and it looks like a poor time to let go. I have replanted some of the quicker-growing seeds and hoed the entire garden to give all possible encouragement to the scattered, broken plants that remain. Fortunately, our cantaloupes and Mississippi peanuts were just coming up, and most of them escaped injury. Will is going on with his field work, and expects to finish his milo and maize planting and to replant the Mexican and Tepary beans to-day.

Hail storm does lots of damage

As for our wheat, it was poor at best, but we hoped for a little feed for the cattle and poultry from what the cutworms had left. No farmer can feel any enthusiasm over ploughing out a third of his cotton or seeing a hailstorm harvest a large share of his wheat, particularly when he knows that people are ragged and hungry through no fault of their own.

But of all our losses in recent years the most distressing is the loss of our self-respect. How can we feel that our work here has any dignity or importance when the world places so low a value on the products of our toil? We are humiliated every time we have to dole out another load of wheat at a price below production costs, but we must do it to meet our current expenses. We did stop selling cream and dairy products when prices fell, but we may yet look back to the good old days when butter fat was worth 9 cents a pound.

Loss of self-respect

By sacrificing the small reserves we had held against the days of drought or disaster, we have succeeded so far in keeping on a cash basis. We have disconnected the telephone, our only insurance in case of accident or emergency;[20] stopped the daily paper; postponed our annual gift to the Grenfell Mission until wheat reaches 50 cents, if it ever does again; made hand towels out of the cement sacks which are no longer returnable; substituted cheap lye for washing powder, so that my hands are rough and uncomfortable from week to week; abandoned regretfully our emergency shelf in the cupboard. If the President were to drop in for dinner some day, he would have to eat wheat porridge or beans or potatoes or cheese or eggs along with the rest of us, unless there were time to prepare a worthless chicken.

No telephone

quote

I am sure you are quite right about the seriousness of the transportation problem. It affects to our disadvantage the price of everything we buy or sell. In the April number of the *Nation's Business* a staff writer refers to the price of wheat as "around 70 cents." At that time the price here was hovering around 30 cents. The difference of 40 cents a bushel must have gone into transportation and handling costs, with possibly a margin for gamblers' gains.

Lack on transportation affects prices

You ask about government appropriations for fighting grasshoppers.[21] We have heard nothing about it here. As yet, insects have been less troublesome than usual, perhaps because of the severe winter. But if our crops *were* threatened by grasshoppers, I feel reasonably sure that we should have to provide our own poison, together with bran, lemons, and molasses, mix the loathsome mess, and scatter it broadcast over the fields at nightfall just as we did during the early summer of 1918. Government action in such emergencies ought to be the most economical and effective way to meet the situation. . . . I don't know of anything more destructive of confidence, the lack of which is so frequently deplored by our leaders, than the knowledge that government, whose chief aim should be to "promote the general welfare," is being used for selfish, personal ends.

* Loss of confidence

But confidence may be sacrificed in other ways, too. Last November we received an appeal signed by our county agent and the chairman of our county advisory committee. It was headed, "Wheat Donation for Red Cross," and went on to explain that the American Red Cross had asked our state "to donate 25 carloads of wheat for relief work in the Northern states where crop failures had been all but complete." The letter stated that railroads and mills had agreed to transport and make this wheat into flour free of any charge. The farmers of our county were urged to give whatever wheat they felt they could spare for this purpose—"to aid farmers who, because of drought and grasshoppers, must have help."

The day before Thanksgiving was appointed for collection. It was a bitter day, and we had a desperate time getting the old truck started. At last, however, we got the wheat loaded, hauled it to the elevator, and were given a pink receipt marked "Wheat for Red Cross." We warmed ourselves with the thought that a little of our concentrated Southwestern sunshine would be going North where it was needed for the cold winter.

We heard nothing more of the project until late in February. The county agent was here one day, and we asked him about the success of the appeal. He seemed chagrined to have to tell us that we had all been let down together. After the wheat was collected—there were something like 1,200 bushels—the railroads refused to move it, and the nearest general division of the Red Cross could furnish no funds for transportation. There was nothing to do but sell the wheat, and either to turn the proceeds into the general treasury of the Red Cross without assurance that it would ever reach the people for whom it was intended, or to hold the money—about $400—until somebody could decide which community stood in the greatest need of it. The second course was chosen, and in February, with the winter nearly over, the money was still on deposit in a bank at the county seat. Though it was later turned over to Red Cross officials in South Dakota, the plan proposed in the original appeal was not carried out, and the intrinsic value of the donated wheat would have been far greater in flour and feed than the small sum received for it at the low market price. . . .

The sun is getting low. It's chicken time and cow time and supper time and time for the tractor man to come home from his hot, dusty work. Would you like to know what has been running in my mind today? Two lines from Shelley, the lover of all beauty: "Ay, many flowering islands lie In the waters of wide Agony."[22] Perhaps you wonder whether, amid all our futile efforts and disappointments, we do find any flowering islands, any place of rest and refreshment for continuing the struggle. Yes, we do.

I wish you could have been with us one day when we had to make a trip to town to see about repairing the tractor. You would have noticed the blue lakes of the mirage as they appeared and faded in the road ahead, and you might have thought that our hopes for the future were quite as insubstantial. But you would have taken pleasure, as we did, in the fields of golden coreopsis, in the banks of salmon-colored mallow, in the mats of vivid purple verbena, in scattered plants here and there of white and lilac beard tongue, and in several varieties of evening primrose—lemon yellow, pink, and white. . . .

Yes, we find respite in many simple things like these. Of those green and flowering islands, each of us must, I think, be his own discoverer.

* * *

Sept. 1933

"Letters of Two Women Farmers II," *Atlantic Monthly*

June 21, 1932

My Dear Evelyn,

Will and I were both interested in what you wrote about farm relief. We, fortunately, have managed to keep out of debt, but otherwise the shoe pinches us in the same place it pinches you. We do not need credit so much as we need some reasonable ratio of exchange between our farm products and the things we must buy. At present, the proportions are all against us: sixteen dozen eggs for a pair of overalls, more than a bushel of wheat for a wick for the oil stove, two pounds of butter for a small felt washer for the tractor, and so on indefinitely.

Not in debt

I do not know how or when a fairer system of exchange can be brought about. A professor of sociology at one of our Western state universities says that it will take ten thousand years to secure any general acceptance of the idea that the good of each is dependent on the good of all. It's a long time to wait. . . .

Out here on the plains we are hedged about with such difficulties as we have never before known. We cannot see our way ahead, but still we hope. Doubtless you remember the artist's conception of Hope—blindfolded, with a broken lyre. That is a symbol of our state of mind. Our hopes may prove to be what your neighbor, Mr. Cabell, would call "dynamic illusions," yet they serve to spur us on to continued endeavor.

Hope (quote)

A few specific things have tended, of late, to make us more cheerful. We have once more paid our taxes, and were grateful to find, instead of the expected increase, a decrease of about 40 per cent. There has been wide-spread indignation throughout the West over governmental waste and official laziness, and apparently it has had some effect. In our county a citizens' petition recently brought about a saving of $12,000 in the allowance for deputies, and some of the candidates for office are promising, if elected, to do their work themselves. Taxpayers' leagues have sprung up all over the state, and they seem to be getting results.

*

Even more cheering than our tax receipt was the life-restoring rain. The growing season here has been unusually late because of the dry spring. On this, the longest day of the year, many of the planted fields are still bare and brown. For days two lines of Masefield had been in my mind: "Let me have wisdom, Beauty, wisdom and passion, Bread to the soul, rain when the summers parch."[23] And then the rain came at last, gently and graciously, and it seemed as if the earth breathed a great sigh of relief. The buffalo grass has now started in the pastures; the yard is gay with wild flowers, starred all over with brilliant, rose-colored cactus blossoms; the trumpet vine is trumpeting, and even the garden, so badly damaged by hail, has recovered more than at first seemed possible.

* Rain (quote)

Our daughter Eleanor has just come home from the University where she has been combining the work of a student with that of a laboratory assistant. She tells of a plan that was carried out at Commencement time. On the south slope of the campus, overlooking a broad valley, lies a plot of ground never yet disturbed by plough or spade, green and flowering with the coming of each new spring. It was beautiful again this year with spiderwort and poppy, wild roses and geraniums, dotted about among the tall grasses. A group of the older alumnae arranged for the dedication of this spot as "The Prairie Acre," and marked it with a tablet set in a block of native limestone. Through the years to come that acre will retain its untouched natural beauty—a reminder of pioneer days, whose difficult problems called for resolute action like those of our own time. . . .

JULY 19, 1932

MY DEAR EVELYN,

I am sure you know enough about the uncertainties of farming not to have been unduly elated over my last more hopeful letter. It had hardly been mailed before trouble began.

One of our neighbors was trying to cut down tractor expenses by using horses to cultivate his crop. He lacked one team, so we let him have Ned and Star. Since we bought our tractor they have not had much to do, but Will has always said that the horses made for us the little we have, and that they were welcome to live out their old age in peace, helping us now and then in the lighter tasks. They worked well enough for a week, and our friend said they seemed all right when he turned them into the pasture Sunday evening. Monday morning Star lay there dead.

Horses instead of tractors

Horse dead

Some people say that animals do not suffer keenly and have no dread of death. I hope it is so, and certainly I am glad for gentle, faithful Star that there can be for her no more sweat and dust and tugging at loads the importance of which she could not understand. But horses hate to leave their homes; they know their friends; and I suppose it will always hurt me to think that perhaps Star wondered why we didn't come in her hour of need. I am afraid she will always seem a sacrifice to the demands of this cruel time.

How we should welcome a small part of your surplus rain! We have had none in a month. The extreme heat and almost constant high winds have destroyed all hope of a satisfying return from the garden. The potatoes were set back seriously by the early hail, and, though the vines grew out, they are now dying down, with little potatoes like marbles half cooked in the parched ground. Canada field peas, which we hoped would provide a late crop after the earlier peas were gone, blossomed fully, but, like the tomatoes, were blighted by the withering winds. Cowpeas and peanuts are standing the heat the best of anything, and, along with the field crops, *may* hold out until rain comes. No one knows. The cattle still have sufficient pasturage on the weeds and grasses among the ruined wheat, but the prairie grass is brown again and crackles under one's feet.

Heat + wind

This has been another long day of wild wind and blistering heat. Tonight I am quite alone—a mile and a half from anybody. The wind has gone down and the quietness makes me think of Will's memories of his old cowboy days, of silences out on the open plains so intense that one's ears would ache with listening.

Will and Eleanor, with a neighbor's boy to help them, have gone with truck, car, tractor, combine, and oil wagon to harvest a half section of wheat for some people out in the adjoining county, seventeen miles from home. Money is scarcer than ever with us, and they are taking their pay in wheat at three bushels for the acre. Whether they will make anything to compensate for their exhausting effort and for the expense and depreciation of the machinery depends on the future wheat market.

The wheat yield is disheartening all through this part of the country; there is hardly one stalk where three or four grew last year. The man for whom our folks are harvesting counted on about twelve bushels to the acre and is getting less than five. It puzzles everyone to know how to manage these poor crops. They will not pay handling expenses. . . . Many fields will not be cut at all. On three sides of our

Bad wheat harvest

own home farm are 330 acres left for the birds—potentially something like a thousand sacks of flour poured out on the ground in a hungry world!

People still toil amazingly and make a conscious effort to keep cheerful. But it seems to me that the effort grows more apparent. Behind the characteristic American nonchalance one detects a growing anxiety, especially about the coming winter. People speak openly of their dread of cold weather. I am told by a man who is familiar with neighborhood conditions that many farmers once regarded as well-to-do will not be able to put in another crop on their own resources. City folk talk lightly of the obvious remedy. "Let the farmers stop producing if they can market their stuff only at a loss," they say. But the thing is not as simple as that. When all of one's investment is in land and equipment for working it, there is nothing else to depend on for taxes, repairs, the upkeep of buildings and fences, and the maintenance and education of a family.

But it is useless to tackle that problem tonight. It is already late, and day comes soon. Tomorrow I must care for the new shorthorn I found this evening when I went for the cows; look over the winter-squash vines for bugs; go around a mile and a half of fence and put in missing staples; finish hoeing and working the ground around the small trees which we are trying to save through the drought. Why do people speak of "the monotony of farm life?"

SEPTEMBER 17, 1932

MY DEAR EVELYN,

You and your responsibilities have been much in my thoughts as the season's work draws to a close. All about us, in maturing seeds, in asters and goldenrod and yellowing leaves, in some indefinable, lingering, caressing quality in the sunlight, we see reminders that "the harvest is past, the summer is ended."[24] And we, like you, have little enough to show for it. Judging by any standards that the world would recognize, we should have been further ahead if we could have spent the year in sleep.

Poor harvest

The harvesting away from home was at last completed. Of the wheat received in payment we sold several loads to cover repairs and other expenses, and we have left 400 bushels, worth to-day 33 cents. Will and I gleaned by ourselves the small amount of wheat that was spared for our own harvest by the hailstorm and the cutworms. From the hundred-acre field which yielded 1800 bushels last year we salvaged about 215 bushels, most of it of poor quality.

Lest you think that we are the sole darlings of misfortune, I might mention the neighboring farmer who sold his crop from 75 acres at 30 cents and had $12 left above combining expenses to pay for his seed, for the use of his land, for the labor of preparing the ground, drilling the wheat, marketing the crop, and for board for the combine hands; or another neighbor who sold $49 worth of wheat from 250 acres and owed one fourth of it for rent. Sadder still, I might tell of the man who kept on persistently trying to raise wheat before anyone else here thought it practicable. He did at last succeed in showing that over a series of years wheat is probably our most dependable crop. But troubles in his family, some years of short crops, and the low prices of the past three seasons have broken him. He has lost his 960 acres of land and most of his stock. He is now trying desperately, and I think without much chance of success, to get a government loan to buy back a few of his cattle and start all over again—old, half-blind, almost bare-handed—in a Texas valley, where, as he told us, he hopes to avoid the mistakes he has made here.

The rain for which we were hoping so eagerly when I wrote last has never come. Indeed, we have had no effective moisture since early in June. One good rain during the summer would have given us at least roughage for our stock. As it is, the sowed cane and Sudan grass died down when it was six inches high, and our crops of maize and Kafir corn are little better—hardly a start on what we shall require for winter feed. I really do not know what we shall do. Our choice seems to lie between sacrificing the cattle at the ruinous prices now prevailing—we recently sold five well-grown young steers for $122.50—or trying in some as yet unthought-of way to get roughage for them through the winter.

How to get by?

The situation throughout the country is much more serious, I believe, than many people suppose. Think of the loss of homes, the decrease in land values, the idle shops and idle men, the closed banks, delinquent taxes, rents hopelessly overdue, children deprived of school privileges, thousands of young men and women roaming over the country ~~freed from the normal restraints of orderly social conditions.~~ A neighbor recently told us that he had counted eighty-five such wanderers on one freight train in northern Texas. Just a few days ago I talked with a merchant who was elated because, as he said, even the most destitute folk in St. Louis are making no complaints about their condition. He regarded this as a hopeful sign, but it seems to me a sign of lethargy unworthy of a people with the history and traditions of America behind them.

wanderers

I, too, have been interested in the farmers' movement in Iowa, both for its own sake and because it centers around the vicinity of my girlhood home.[25] In these days, when canned fruits and vegetables and condensed milk and supplies of all sorts can so easily be transported, if not in one way, then in several others, the farmers' holiday plan, if I understand it, seems doomed to failure as a practical measure for securing any widespread or permanent increase in prices. It may have some value in directing attention to the crisis in the farming situation in general.

Reasons to be hopeful

If there are any definite reasons for farmers to be hopeful, they would seem to lie in their habitual capacity for keeping at work in spite of failure and loss, their lifelong training in facing hard facts, their comparative adaptability, and their opportunities under normal conditions to produce at least a great part of their own necessities of life. These are all characteristics favorable to survival. At best, however, agricultural recovery must, I think, be slow, variable in rate and method, "here a little, there a little," depending largely on individual planning and initiative to meet local conditions. Permanent gains will require an awakened spirit of fair play, passion for the common welfare, sympathy and cooperation, both among farmers themselves and among the American people as a whole. In creating and expressing this spirit, everyone, whether of town or country, may have a share.

Things (amenities) they no longer have

Fact

As for us, you must not feel unduly anxious. We have traveled rough roads before. Many cherished plans have failed. Not only radio and telephone, but running water in the house, furnace heat, modern lighting and refrigeration, have all passed beyond our dreaming. Even the three-cent postage is a burden. Obviously the national budget had to be balanced, but I could use the new stamps more cheerfully if they would print on each the old Scotch proverb, "Willful waste makes woeful want." Estimates at our state school of agriculture show that it took *ten times as much wheat* to pay the 1931 taxes as it did to pay the average tax in the years between 1916 and 1921! The road ahead seems blocked. All sense of security for our old age has vanished. But we have not given up.

Still not in debt

In some way—I hardly see how myself—we have managed to keep out of debt. We can still eat home-ground wheat cereal. The spring pullets are beginning to lay and the fall calves to arrive. We plan to gather driftwood from the distant river and "cow chips" from our pastures to help out on the winter's fuel supply. We take courage from thinking that, while we rarely have two good seasons together here, we have never had two as disheartening as this in direct succession. I believe that the experiences of the past two years have made us somewhat more sensitive to "the still, sad music of humanity."[26] Above all, we have shining memories to brighten gloomy days, and friendships beyond our deserving.

Perhaps, in what many people would count ignoble poverty, we are rich after all.

* * *

DEC. 12, 1932

DEAR ROSE:

I have just been re-reading your letter and enjoying again the glimpses of your home, of old friends, and of what must have been a delightful fortnight last summer in Vermont. . . .

Mother Earth

A few days after your letter came The Good Earth.[27] Will got started on it first and became so absorbed in it that I could hardly get him away from it at all until he was through. And when I began it myself, I could understand his feeling. It is rarely that one finds a person able to understand and sympathize with the primitive feeling of kinship with the earth—our common mother. Still more rarely can such a person express that feeling so that other people may realize and possibly share it. We are both near enough to pagans to have a good deal of that instinctive love for the earth. I think that has had much to do with our continuing the long struggle here. So the book had for both of us a strong appeal and we appreciate deeply the generous gift. Indeed, it seems almost too generous in these difficult days. . . .

Vote *

I had to laugh when I came to your question about the candidates for President. I told Will then what I hadn't admitted before,—that I had been sure my sin would find me out. In other words, I didn't vote for either Hoover or Roosevelt. Of what seemed to me two evils, I chose neither. I have never questioned Hoover's personal integrity or idealism, but I felt as I imagine you did that he was tied in with a bad bunch, and practically committed to policies which in my judgment are largely responsible for the status quo. . . . So when the Democrats nominated Roosevelt who seems to me quite inadequate for the position, I decided to vote for Norman Thomas, who seemed to me more free than either of the others to work for "a new deal" all around. We have been through too much to be alarmed or charmed by mere words. I am not crazy about normalcy which we are beginning to understand now has always meant misery for millions. Nor am I afraid of the name socialism. Most of the more progressive legislation of recent years, looking toward fairer conditions for all has at some time been called socialistic. I was so certain that I should vote in protest against both the old parties that when we reached the polling place and learned . . . an "outrageous decision of the Oklahoma Supreme Court" would make it impossible to vote for Thomas, I decided to let the people who thought they knew what was best decide the election. Evidently there were a lot of them, and I can only hope Roosevelt may do much better than I believe he is capable of doing.

quote

It has been a tough year for us with cut worms, hail, drought and short crops, losses of small savings and investments and always the problem of trying to adjust expenses to the incredibly low prices that have prevailed through the entire year. Yet as we compare even our modest and often very pinching comfort with the boys—and girls, too—roaming over the country in freight cars, with the man and woman Eleanor saw on Thanksgiving Day footing it along the highway, dragging a little wagon and two small children, or with people here in our own community destitute of the simplest things such as sheets, night clothing, clothes pins—or even a can-opener!—we think we ought not to complain. We are trying to put our socialism into practice by helping where we can, and there is of course, no end to the bitter need.

Still helping others

A peculiarly distressing case recently has taken time and effort and much thought. We spent Thanksgiving Day trying to help in a sorely afflicted family. Five of the children were down at once with typhoid fever in a family who had already lost their stock, truck, car, tractor, and some say their farm. One boy had already died and two girls since, with two young men still very low. We haven't heard from them for a day or two now. And such utter lack of every thing to make life decent or endurable, I hope you have never seen. One feels quite helpless in the face of such misery. The neighborhood and county are having to bear the entire expense for they haven't a thing left from comparative prosperity. Just an instance of the sort of thing that has been happening all over, I suppose. It wouldn't be fair to blame the Lord or the government for all of it, because anyone could see that there had been poor management. But the question now is, what is going to become of such people. Personally, I can't see any way out for them. The new comforter I am making them for Christmas is but a feeble gesture. . . .

If you see the Atlantic you may after a time hear a little more of our year's endeavors. I am not at all satisfied with the project which was not of my own seeking. I feel rather apologetic about it. A lady in Maryland, who has had a much wider experience than I both in living and farming, was interested in our little harvest story last year. I wrote a friendly letter. This spring, being in pretty desperate shape financially, she proposed a joint effort—a series of letters telling the "low down of present farming conditions," which the editor of the Country Gentleman had promised to consider. I wasn't very strong for it and felt that it would not be accepted, but hated to refuse to make the attempt. The Country Gentleman politely returned the stuff. I think a mild expression of my own of interest in the outcome of the Russian experiment—helped to settle our hash. Without even consulting me Mrs. Harris submitted the same material to The Atlantic, who professed interest in the scheme. They wished us to write a mass of material from which they might make selection, editing in continuous form, though keeping the letter framework. . . .

I have written wearisomely I fear, waiting for Will to return from a belated trip to the south farm to shut off the wind mill there, for fear of damage from a threatened storm. We have had unusually severe weather lately. Yesterday after I had had the fire burning for some time in the kitchen the thermometer stood at only 10 degrees above zero! Our thanks and best wishes for a restful vacation and a good Christmas.

Severe weather

* * *

DEC. 19, 1932

DEAR MRS. ALDEN:

Many circumstances have combined to delay my Christmas writing so now I must hurry if I do it at all. We have just passed through a season of severe storms and extremely cold weather. Our country is still "frosted like a wedding cake." Tanks froze solid and then the wind ceased so that watering the stock has been a problem and for two or three days we had no water—even for drinking—except what we could melt from snow or ice. Two new roan sisters have appeared at the barn in the midst of these bad weather conditions, and you may be shocked but we had to let one of them stay on a pile of sacks in the kitchen through her first night. It was too severely cold to risk her out at the barn.

quote

Caroline Boa and her sister, Susan, ca. 1885. (Grandstaff Collection)

Caroline and Will at the time of their wedding in 1908. (Grandstaff Collection)

Caroline (right) and her sister, Susan, ca. 1936. This photograph may have accompanied an article about Caroline in the *Wichita Eagle*. (Grandstaff Collection)

Will and Caroline at a community gathering honoring "old settlers," 1964. (Author's collection, courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Johnson)

The Henderson home, ca. 1908. (Grandstaff Collection)

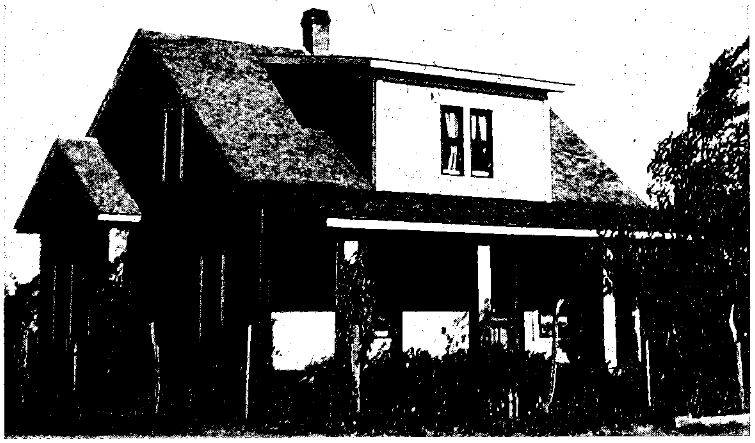
Will and Eleanor outside their home, ca. 1911. Note the addition to the home. (Grandstaff Collection)

Children gathering at Center school, where Caroline first taught, ca. 1914. (Grandstaff Collection)

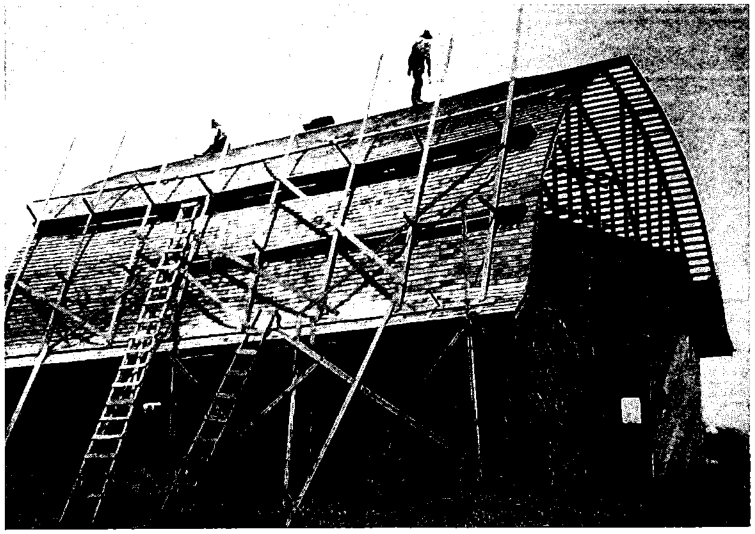
Caroline and Will, July 1958. (Jaffe Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries)

Henderson homestead covered by snow, ca. 1911. (Grandstaff Collection)

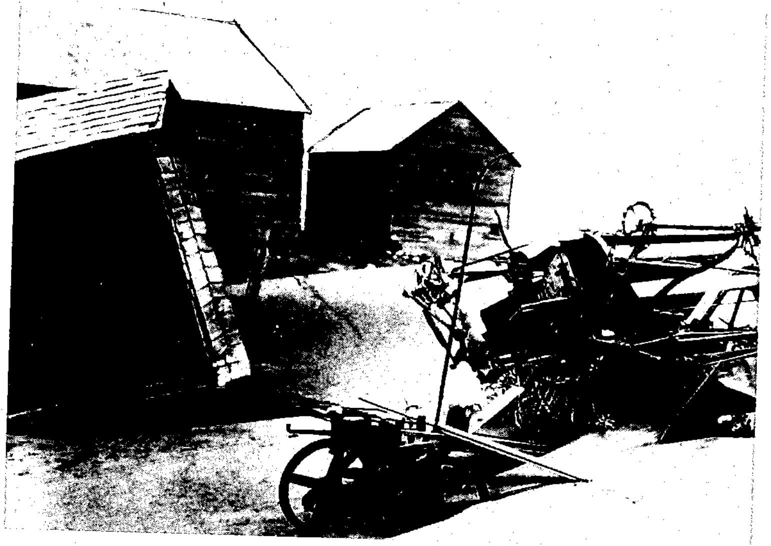
Caroline with one of her pets, ca. 1930. (Grandstaff Collection)



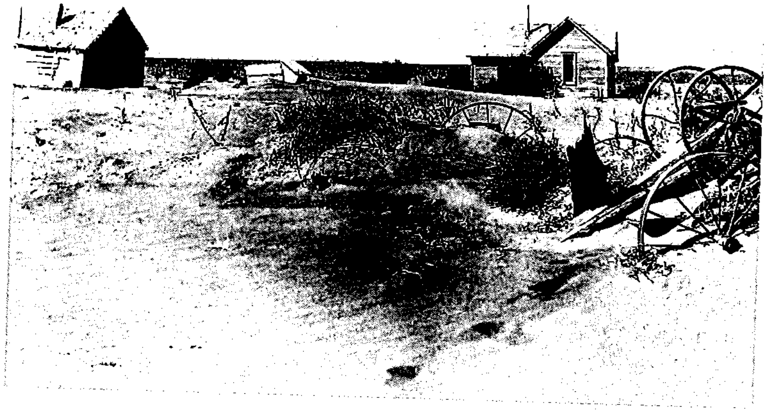
The Henderson home, ca. 1930. (Grandstaff Collection)



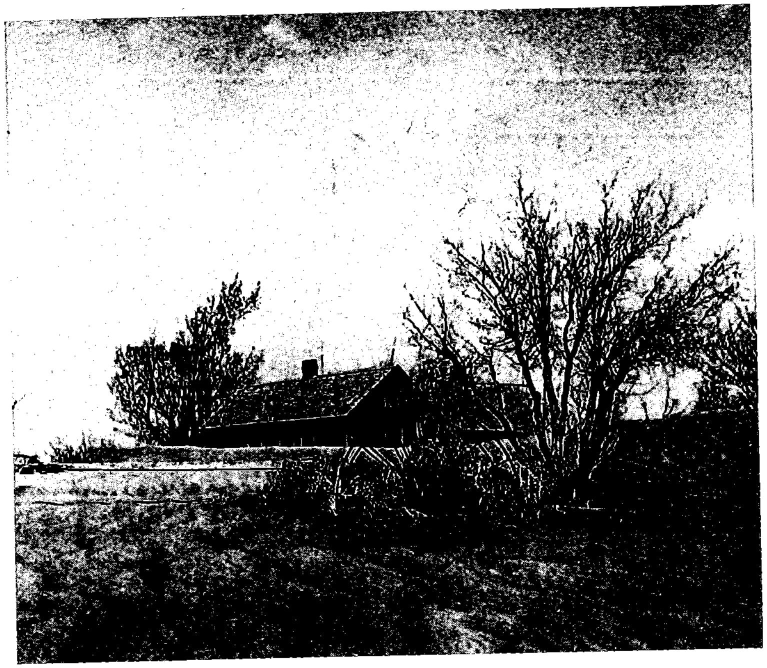
Will Henderson, probably at right, designed and supervised the construction of the barn, ca. 1925. (Grandstaff Collection)



Buildings and equipment covered by an Oklahoma dust storm, September 8, 1937. (Minneapolis Public Library Collection, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society)

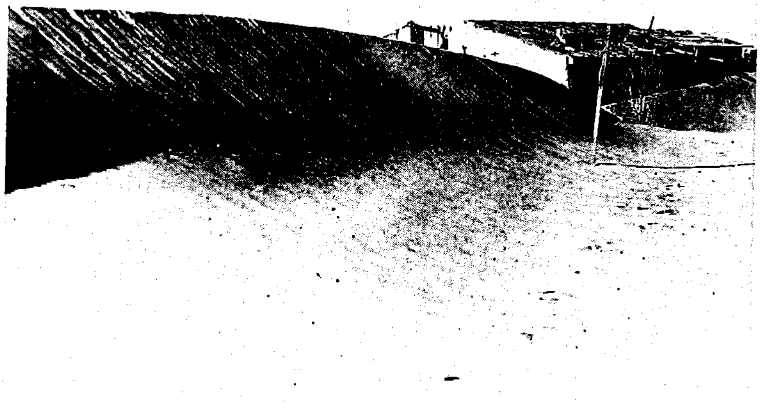


Abandoned farmstead, Texas County, Oklahoma, 1937. (USDA, Soil Conservation Service, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Norman, Oklahoma)

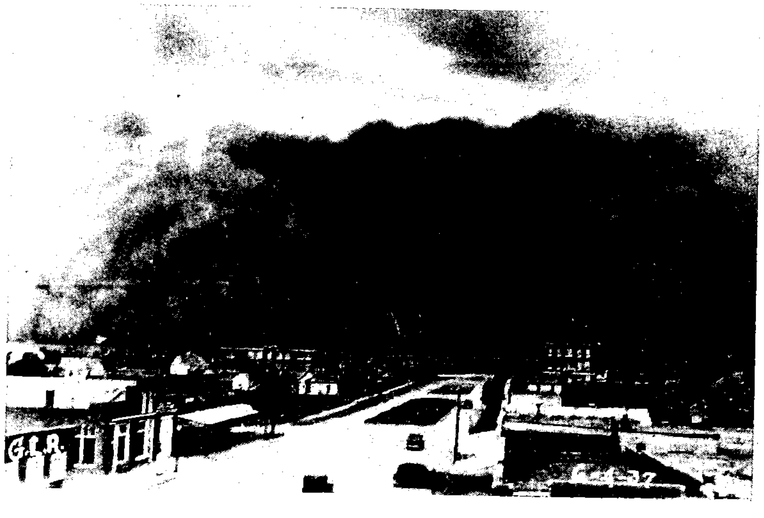


A Panhandle orchard covered by drifting dust and sand, ca. 1936. (FSA Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma)

Eleanor sits in a cart as Will harvests broomcorn, 1911. (Grandstaff Collection)



Drifting dust and sand reached the barn roof on a western Oklahoma farm, April 1935. (World Wide Photos, Inc., Minnesota Public Library Collection, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society)



Dust storm approaching Hooker, Oklahoma, June 4, 1937. (Photograph by G. L. Risen, Haskell Pruett Collection, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society)

Residents of Guymon, Oklahoma, watch as "roller" nears, 1937. (Maupin Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries)

Dust storm approaching Knowles, Oklahoma, 1935. (Morris Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries)

Chapter 4

Dust to Eat, 1935–1937

By 1932, Caroline claimed she had lost her self-respect. The conditions she faced during the next six years compounded her woes and brought her to a new degree of despair, from which she would never fully recover. By 1938, her dream of building a life that fulfilled the Jeffersonian vision had vanished. During these years, when the Hendersons experienced the horrors of raging dust storms and summer temperatures as high as 120 degrees, their farm produced no significant crops. In 1938, they were still saving seed for their next planting, eating boiled wheat cereal, and feeding their remaining livestock from what they saved from the harvest of 1931.

This chapter consists largely of Caroline Henderson's published writing through the dust bowl years. These accounts are complemented by those she wrote to Rose Alden and another letter, entitled "Dust to Eat," dated April 1935. That letter was eventually sent to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, but Caroline may have first submitted it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, which published two more of her articles in 1936 and 1937. The first of these, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," retained the format that she had employed in her joint effort with Evelyn Harris, complete with the salutations to "Dear Evelyn." In this instance, however, the magazine did not print any accompanying letters from Harris, and it is not clear whether any had actually been submitted.

Both "Dust to Eat" and "Letters from the Dust Bowl" contain some of the most vivid descriptions of the dust storms and accompanying devastation ever published. Caroline's talent justified the praise a Wichita writer afforded her in 1936 as a "noted woman writer . . . recognized as one of the nation's best descriptive artists with the English language."[1] Her publications from

JULY 26, 1935

"DUST TO EAT," TO HENRY A. WALLACE, SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

Who has given to me this sweet
And given my brother dust to eat?
And when will his wage come in?[5]

. . . For twenty-seven years this little spot on the vast expanses of the great plains has been the center of all our thought and hope and effort. And marvelous are the changes that we have seen and in which we have participated.

The almost unbroken buffalo grass sod has given way to cultivated fields. The small rude huts or dugouts of the early days have been replaced by reasonably comfortable homes. The old trails have become wide graded highways. Railways have been built, reducing our journey to market from thirty miles to fifteen and later to two and a half. Little towns have sprung up with attractive homes, trees, flowers, schools, churches, and hospitals. Automobiles and trucks, tractors and combines have revolutionized methods of farm work and manner of living. The wonderful crop of 1926 when our country alone produced 10,000,000 bushels of wheat—more, it was said, than any other equal area in the world—revealed the possibilities of our productive soil under modern methods of farming. I can shut my eyes and feel yet the rush of an almost painful thankfulness when we looked out over our fields that summer and watched our ripening grain bending, rising, bending again in golden waves swept on interminably by the restless wind. It seemed as if at last our dreams were coming true. . . .

#
(good year)

Yet now our daily physical torture, confusion of mind, gradual wearing down of courage, seem to make that long continued hope look like a vanishing dream. For we are in the worst of the dust storm area where William Vaughn Moody's expression, "dust to eat" is not merely a figure of speech as he intended, but the phrasing of a bitter reality, increasing in seriousness with each passing day. Any attempt to suggest the violent discomfort of these storms is likely to be vain except to those who have already experienced them.

Loss
of
hope

There are days when for hours at a time we cannot see the windmill fifty feet from the kitchen door. There are days when for briefer periods one cannot distinguish the windows from the solid wall because of the solid blackness of the raging storm. Only in some Inferno-like dream could any one visualize the terrifying lurid red light overspreading the sky when portions of Texas are "on the air." This wind-driven dust, fine as the finest flour, penetrates wherever air can go. After one such storm, I scraped up a dustpanful of this pulverized soil in the first preliminary cleaning of the bathtub! It is a daily task to unload the leaves of the geraniums and other house plants, borne down by the weight of the dust settled upon them, and to excavate the crocuses and violets and other little growing things that we have cherished out of doors. A friend writes of attending a dinner where "the guests were given wet towels to spread over their faces so they could breathe." At the little country store of our neighborhood after one of the worst of these storms, the candies in the show case all looked alike and equally brown. . . . "Dust to eat," and dust to breathe and dust to drink. Dust in the beds and in the flour bin, on dishes and walls and windows, in hair and eyes and ears and teeth and throats, to say nothing of the heaped up accumulation on floors and window sills after one of the bad days.

quote

good
quote

*
quote
(dust)

#

Yet these personal inconveniences are of slight moment as compared with the larger effects of the persistent drought and wind erosion. The year 1929 brought a good wheat crop and we bought and paid for a small tractor and combine. In 1930 our harvest was cut short by hail. In 1931 we again raised a good crop of wheat and sufficient forage for our stock, but the ruinous prices and heavy expenses left little or nothing in return for our labors. Since 1931 the record has been one of practically unbroken drought resulting in complete exhaustion of subsoil moisture, the stripping of our fields of all protective covering and the progressive pulverization of the surface soil—an effective combination to produce exactly the results from which we are now suffering. In one limited respect we realize that some farmers have themselves contributed to this reaping of the whirlwind. Under the stimulus of war time prices and the humanizing of agriculture through the use of tractors and improved machinery, large areas of buffalo grass and blue-stem pasture lands were broken out for wheat raising. The reduction in the proportionate area of permanent grazing grounds has helped to intensify the serious effect of the long drought and violent winds.

No
crop
since
1931

Farmers
blame,
how
much?

Now we are facing a fourth year of failure. There can be no wheat for us in 1935 in spite of all our careful and expensive work in preparing ground, sowing and resowing our allotted acreage. Native grass pastures are permanently damaged, in many cases hopelessly ruined, smothered under by drifted sand. Fences are buried under banks of thistles and hard packed earth or undermined by the eroding action of the wind and lying flat on the ground. Less traveled roads are impassable, covered deep under sand or the finer silt-like loam. Orchards, groves and hedge-rows cultivated for many years with patient care are dead or dying. The black locusts which once gave something of grace and distinction to our own little corner are now turned into a small pile of fenceposts while the carefully gathered brush has helped to feed our winter fire. . . .

Thousands of acres of carefully and expensively tilled soil show only the drill marks in the hard subsoil to prove that the wheat had been sown. Over much of this area the wind and eroding sand have obliterated even the traces of cultivation. Pastures have changed to barren wastes and dooryards around humble little homes have become scenes of dusty desolation. Small buildings have been almost buried. Stock ponds have in some cases been gradually built up into miniature sand dunes as the dry dust, shaken from the wings of the wind, has settled into water of the pool and later deposits have adhered to the accumulating moist earth.

Quote (dust taking over-Hogue)

It might seem that the conditions here suggested were in themselves sufficient cause for discomfort and regret. Yet one must endeavor to resist not only the violence of the physical tempests but also the influence of erratic "winds of doctrine" which seem to blow most vigorously in time of trouble. Some would-be prophets are sure that the days of grace and mercy and rain for this great prairie land are forever past; that the future promises only hopeless and permanent desert conditions. Others, according to their own words, are quite as sure that fervent prayer is the one thing needful to bring relief. Special prayers for rain were offered at our county seat last Sunday morning. The afternoon brought one of the most sudden, dense, and suffocating dust storms of the season. . . . A revival preacher—a true Job's comforter—proclaims that the drought is a direct punishment for our sins. Some regard it as retribution for the ploughing out of cotton hundreds of miles away. . . .

Prayer

In this time of severe stress, next to the enduring character of our people credit must be given for the continued occupation of the plains country to the various activities of the federal government. Without some such aid as has been furnished, it seems certain that large sections must have been virtually abandoned. As it is, aside from the actual physical effects of the dust clouds, life goes on in a manner surprisingly near to normal, so near in fact that superficial observers have not realized the true situation and have felt that the reports of drought conditions have been exaggerated. One is forced to wonder whether such reporters expected to find people dying of starvation by the roadside! . . .

Credit to government for aid

In our own section, the largest amount of direct cash benefit has come through the rental checks under the wheat acreage control program. I realize perfectly that this whole question is debatable. I do not know of any farmer who can give his whole-hearted approval to policies involving voluntary restriction of production. Such measures are contrary to the whole theory and habitual practice of agriculture. I do not know of any real farmer who would not gladly produce all that his acreage and equipment and the weather would permit him if he were sure of being able to secure by his labor the means of continued production, of clean, reasonably comfortable living, of education for his children, or professional care and some measure of security for the days when "the almond tree shall flourish—and desire shall fail."[6] The important point is not the market price of our products but their actual value in exchange for the things we need. But who would venture to suggest a scaling down of interest, taxes, the cost of manufactured goods, labor, wages, or special services to correspond with the twenty-five cent wheat, ten cent corn, six cent eggs and five cent cotton of recent years? . . .

How to $ look at money

To ourselves, inured by twenty-seven years of experience to the "plan-as-you-go" system of agriculture, dependent principally upon the vagaries of the shifting seasons, the very flexibility of the [AAA] plans, the apparent willingness of those in charge to adapt the program to new or unforeseen conditions, gives us confidence in the sincerity of the purpose to prepare the way for better days in agriculture. Our personal hope is that eventually the limitation policy may give way to a more ample production program with storage facilities sufficient for all emergencies, planned on the broad basis of human need. A country blessed with America's actual and possible wealth ought to feel humiliated by the thought of a single ragged, undernourished child. . . .

In our own part of the country the voluntary responses to the campaign for controlled production as an experiment for the benefit of farmers was practically unanimous. Undoubtedly the immediate results have been beneficial and we are glad for even one hesitating step toward what has been called "the American dream," the equalizing of opportunity so that even the humblest may be free to develop

Feelings on New Deal

whatever native gifts he may possess. . . . I did not vote for the New Deal and certainly not for the old one. I can therefore claim no credit for its accomplishments or responsibility for its mistakes. I am not appointed to defend it. But I do like fair play. There are certain accusations made against the present attempts at social reconstruction that are wickedly unjust so far as we can determine from local conditions.

One of these criticisms relates to the alleged wastefulness of relief administration and the useless or damaging work projects attempted. In our county with a population of 14,000, between November 15, 1933, and December 27, 1934, the public work pay rolls under [the CWA and FERA] are reported as totaling $331,760.69. The sum expended seems to us truly enormous, and the extent of aid required is most unusual in a section where pioneer traditions of self-help and neighborly assistance are still strong. Yet certain facts should be considered. In the late summer of 1934 the county relief administration reported that they had been operating on about a 3% margin.[7] . . . This, too, in a county of "magnificent distances" requiring much driving over an area 34 miles wide and 60 long, almost twice as large as the state of Rhode Island and nearly as large as Delaware. Even if this 3% overhead expense were doubled or quadrupled, it would still be far below the cost alleged by some severe critics. . . .

If mere dollars were to be considered, the actually destitute in our section could undoubtedly have been fed and clothed more cheaply than the work projects have been carried out. But in our national economy manhood must be considered as well as money. People employed to do some useful work may retain their self-respect to a degree impossible under cash relief. . . .

Less Moral Character Concern w/ aid

Hope

A second anxiety, whether real or assumed, relates to the fear of wide-spread and serious degradation of moral character, resulting from the various relief projects. . . . When a man will drive several miles to some FERA project, work with his horses for the required time under any weather conditions, spend most of his earnings for high-priced stock feed so as to conserve the means of his family's livelihood and be ready for farming again whenever rain may come, the danger of his becoming a habitual pauper through government aid seems to me quite negligible. If we must worry so over the ruinous effects of "made work" on people of this type, why haven't we been worrying for generations over the character of the idlers to whom some accident of birth or inheritance has given wealth unmeasured, unearned and unappreciated? If we must continue to protest against the AAA efforts to effect some fair balance between prices of farm and industrial products because of increased cost to the consumer, why haven't we for a century been crying out against the similar effect of protective tariffs, imposed with the conscious purpose of maintaining prices sufficient to build up and increase enormous fortunes for a comparatively few?

A third criticism is based on the overworked idea of "regimentation," concerning which certain syndicate writers and politicians have wasted too much ink and breath . . . over this alleged menace to American liberties. . . . I have attended nearly all of the wheat meetings in our own district and the most distinct impression received was the entire absence of anything like standardization or compulsion. . . . Many of these self-appointed defenders of freedom seem to know nothing of the loss of liberty attendant upon seriously adverse economic conditions. No regimentation is more cruel than that of extreme poverty. The cramped and barren lives of millions of sharecroppers in the southern states, the deplorable conditions in some of the coal-mining areas, the slum districts in almost any large city, are a pitiful contradiction to our boasted "inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

quote

. . . We did not wait ourselves for the government or any one to tell us to go to listing[8] our own fields to control as far as possible the blowing and loss of surface soil. But this work is wearing on both men and machinery and especially hard on our thin pocket book. A prominent political interpreter recently referred to the idea of the possible exhaustion of people's resources as an "alibi." Perhaps he really thinks that small savings renew themselves like the widow's cruse of oil[9] and that people prefer to ask for government aid rather than to depend upon their own efforts. To go back to our listing, we feel that to some extent it has been helpful in holding our own acreage this far. But to be genuinely effective, such a plan must be carried out on a large scale and not left to piecemeal efforts. . . .

Our reduced herds of cattle were carried through the past winter largely on waste materials. Straw had been saved from the meager wheat crop that survived the drought and dust of 1933 and 1934. Crops not worth harvesting were pastured out and utilized to the last stalk. Russian thistles were gathered and stacked; in some cases where wheat was worth harvesting with a combine, the stubble was later cut with a mower and the rough, poor feed laboriously saved. We even hear of bear grass, or "soap weed," the yucca plant of the broken grazing lands, being ground and utilized for stock feed. There is in our section

*

* quote (Government aid)

no supine waiting for government assistance. The people we know are meeting a hard situation with vigor, and individual resourcefulness. Yet there is moral support in feeling that agencies more comprehensive and powerful than any one person can control are supplementing our efforts. . . .

To many old-timers like ourselves who have for twenty-five years or more wrought the persistent effort of bodies and minds into the soil of this now barren land, the greatest cause of anxiety is the fear that our county may yet be designated as "submarginal" land and included in the areas now being purchased for public domain. A fourth year of failure such as now seems probable would give added weight to the arguments for such a procedure. Repossession of our land by the federal government and a general migration to more favored localities may be the best way to meet the present disheartening situation. Yet the problem is not one that admits of a simple, off-hand solution. . . . It involves the interests not only of farm people but of the many small towns which have sprung up as trading centers throughout the plains region. . . .

Yet common sense suggests that the regions which are no longer entirely self-supporting cannot rely indefinitely upon government aid. So the problem remains and the one satisfactory solution is beyond all human control. Some of our neighbors with small children, fearing the effects upon their health, have left temporarily "until it rains." Others have left permanently, thinking doubtless that nothing could be worse. Thus far we and most of our friends seem held—for better or for worse—by memory and hope. I can look backward and see our covered wagon drawn up by the door of the cabin in the early light of that May morning long ago, can feel again the sweet fresh breath of the untrodden prairie, and recall for a moment the proud confidence of our youth. But when I try to see the wagon—or the old Model T truck—headed in the opposite direction, away from our home and all our cherished hopes, I can not see it at all. Perhaps it is only because the dust is too dense and blinding.

Staying (hope)

Meanwhile the longing for rain has become almost an obsession. We remember the gentle all-night rains that used to make a grateful music on the shingles close above our heads, or the showers that came just in time to save a dying crop. We recall the torrents that occasionally burst upon us in sudden storms, making our level farm a temporary lake where only the ducks felt at home. We dream of the faint gurgling sound of dry soil sucking in the grateful moisture of the early or the later rains; of the fresh green of sprouting wheat or barley, the reddish bronze of springing rye. But we waken to another day of wind and dust and hopes deferred, of attempts to use to the utmost every small resource, to care for the stock and poultry as well as we can with our scanty supplies, to keep our balance and to trust that upon some happier day our wage may even yet come in.

*

quote (reality) *

* * *

MAY 1936

"LETTERS FROM THE DUST BOWL," *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*

JUNE 30, 1935

MY DEAR EVELYN:

Your continued interest in our effort to "tie a knot in the end of the rope and hang on" is most stimulating. . . . Wearing our shade hats, with handkerchiefs tied over our faces and Vaseline in our nostrils, we have been trying to rescue our home from the accumulations of wind-blown dust which penetrates wherever air can go. It is an almost hopeless task, for there is rarely a day when at some time the dust clouds do not roll over. "Visibility" approaches zero and everything is covered again with a silt-like deposit which may vary in depth from a film to actual ripples on the kitchen floor. I keep oiled cloths on the window sills and between the upper and lower sashes. They help just a little to retard or collect the dust. Some seal the windows with the gummed-paper strips used in wrapping parcels, but no method is fully effective. We buy what appears to be red cedar sawdust with oil added to use in sweeping our floors, and do our best to avoid inhaling the irritating dust.

Dust still gets in

In telling you of these conditions I realize that I expose myself to charges of disloyalty to this western region. A good Kansas friend suggests that we should imitate the Californian attitude toward earthquakes and keep to ourselves what we know about dust storms. Since the very limited rains of May in this section gave some slight ground for renewed hope, optimism has been the approved policy. Printed articles or statements by journalists, railroad officials, and secretaries of small-town Chambers of Commerce have heralded too enthusiastically the return of prosperity to the drouth region. . . . But you wished to know the truth, so I am telling you the actual situation, though I freely admit that the facts are themselves often contradictory and confusing.

The area doesn't want others to know

~~our task. We may *have* to leave. We can't hold out indefinitely without some return from the land, some source of income, however small. But I think I can never go willingly or without pain that as yet seems unendurable.~~

~~There are also practical considerations that serve to hold us here, for the present. . . . We could realize nothing whatever from all our years of struggle with which to make a fresh start.~~

~~We long for the garden and little chickens, the trees and birds and wild flowers of the years gone by. Perhaps if we do our part these good things may return some day, for others if not for ourselves. . . .~~

AUGUST 11, 1935

MY DEAR EVELYN:

On this blistering Sunday afternoon I am, like Alexander Selkirk: *Monarch of all I survey; My right there is none to dispute.*[10] There is no one within a mile and a half, and all day I've seen just one person pass by in an old stripped-down Ford.

Will and Eleanor went early this morning with a family of neighbors to visit the dinosaur pit in the next county to the westward—about seventy miles from here—where the State University is engaged in excavating the bones of some of these ancient monsters, reminders of a time when there was plenty of water even in the Panhandle.

Dino?,

It seemed impossible for us all to leave home at once, so I stayed here to care for a new Shorthorn brother, to keep the chickens' pails filled with fresh water, to turn the cattle and horses in to water at noon, and to keep them from straying to the extremely poisonous drought-stricken cane. We spent the better part of a night during the week trying to save two of the best young cows from the effects of the prussic acid which develops in the stunted sorghum.[11] We thought they would die and I am not sure yet whether they recovered because of the liberal doses of melted lard and molasses. . . .

We cannot complain of laziness on the part of our citizens. Oklahoma is one of the first states to get away from direct relief. Official reports of the administrators here emphasize the eagerness with which people accept any sort of work to help themselves and to make unnecessary the acceptance of public aid.[12] . . .

This progress toward more nearly normal conditions of employment occurs in the face of the most critical farm situation that we have ever encountered. For over a month we have had *no* rain, and the two light local showers early in July had only a slight and temporary effect.

No
Rain

All hope of an adequate forage crop has now followed into oblivion the earlier hopes of wheat and maize production. We have no native or cultivated hay crops. The cattle stay alive thus far on weeds, but the pastures are destitute of grass. Many think it can never be restored. The heat is intense and the drying winds are practically continuous, with a real "duster" occurring every few days to keep us humble.

. . . Will has been working early and late with one of the county terracing machines, laying up ridges on contour lines for every foot of fall. He hopes to be ready tomorrow to turn the machine over to a neighbor who will also make the experiment. Later on he would like to run the terrace lines across the pasture lands, but the future for us is most uncertain.

Everything now depends on whether a definite change of moisture conditions occurs in time for people to sow wheat for 1936. The "suitcase farmers"—that is, insurance agents, preachers, real-estate men, and so forth, from cities near or far—have bet thousands of dollars upon *rain*, or, in other words, have hired the preparation of large areas of land all around us which no longer represent the idea of *homes* at all, but just parts of a potential factory for the low-cost production of wheat—*if it rains.*

A short time ago a big tractor . . . accidentally hooked on to the cornerstone of the original survey and dragged it off up the road. All these many years that stone has marked the corner of our homestead. . . . It has suggested the beauty of the untouched prairie as it was when the surveyors set the stone, the luxuriant thick turf of native grasses,—grama grass, buffalo, and curly mesquite,—the pincushion cactuses, straw-color and rose, the other wide flowers which in their season fulfilled the thought of Shakespeare: — *The summer's flower is to the summer sweet, Though to itself it only live and die.*[13]

The cornerstone has also suggested the preparation for human occupation—the little homes that were so hopefully established here, of which so very few remain. After twenty-nine years, eight places in our township, out of the possible 136 (excluding the two school sections), are still occupied by those who made the original homestead entry. And now the stone is gone and the manner of its removal seemed almost symbolic of the changes that appear inevitable.

Loss
of
place/land

. . . We feel rather proud that the proprietor of the Elkhart flour mill which we have patronized for many years has withdrawn from the group of Kansas millers suing the government for recovery of the processing tax. He explained his position by stating that, as the benefits derived from these taxes had been an actual lifesaver for farming and general business interests in this section, he would not seek to embarrass the government in its attempt to collect the tax. . . .

It's time to do the evening work, put the guinea pig to bed, and begin to watch for the return of our explorers. I do hope weather conditions are favoring the growth of your crops.

JANUARY 28, 1936

DEAR EVELYN:

As I have said before, our own problems seem of slight moment as compared with yours. Yet more than ever of late "the day's journey" has indeed seemed to "fill the whole long day." As yet there are no decisive changes, no clear light on our way. Late in the summer, before Eleanor returned to her work in the medical school, she drove the tractor for her father, and with the help of the old header they worried down the scattering, scanty crop of sorghum cane and Sudan grass which had made all the growth it could through the hot, dry summer. That there was anything at all to harvest we attribute to the new planting methods encouraged by the Soil Erosion Control Service,[14] of listing on contour lines and laying up terraces. . . . A shower the night they finished cutting and another about ten days later, conserved in the same way, gave us most fortunately a second cutting over the same fields, and a few loads of maize fodder from spots here and there on another part of the farm. These crops of roughage have little or no market value, but are indispensable if one plans to winter any cattle. The old, nutritious native grasses which used to provide winter pasturage are forever gone. Killing frosts happily came later than usual. In October, I drove the tractor myself and we two cut and hauled and put into the barn loft (including the earlier cutting) some twenty tons of fodder from two hundred acres, expensive feed when regarded as the entire outcome of a year's work and investment, yet essential to our attempt at carrying on.

As you know, however, wisely or otherwisely, this region has permitted wheat growing to become its main concern. The wheat situation around us is so varied and precarious as to be most difficult of appraisal. Our own acreage is fairly typical of the general condition. We have a little wheat that came up in September, made a fair start, and for a time furnished pasturage for the small calves. A part of it was early smothered out by the drift from near-by fields. Part of it would yet respond to abundant moisture if that were to come. . . .

After the four-to-six-inch snow of early January, the editor of our county paper was asked by the United Press [International] for a candid report of actual conditions. His estimate allowed the county as a whole a 25 per cent chance; not, if I understood him, a fair chance for a 25 per cent crop, but about one chance in four for anything at all. . . . And you must try to remember that a failure this year would mean five in succession for a large part of the high plains region. . . . You can readily see that the conditions I have so hastily outlined promise no protection against the ravages of dust storms if the spring winds rage as in previous years.

Crop chances

On the whole it is not surprising that here and there some bitterness should have been felt and expressed, perhaps immoderately, over the recent AAA decision in the Supreme Court. People here, business men as well as the farmers themselves, realize that the benefit payments under AAA and the wage payments from Federal work projects are all that have saved a large territory here from abandonment. A December statement by the Soil Conservation service reports an area in five states, including part of all of sixty-eight counties and 87,900 square miles of territory, as in need of active measures for protection and control of the dust-storm menace. Mr. [Hugh H.] Bennett, director of the service, regards this as the greatest "physical problem facing the country to-day." I was astonished to find by a little primary arithmetic that the area involved is equal to that of all the New England States, with New Jersey and Maryland and about half of Delaware added for good measure. . . .

Farmers are not asking for special favors. They ask only an even chance as compared with other workers. But people don't understand.

quote #
(Farmers)

Perhaps the many books on pioneer life with the usual successful and happy outcome have helped to give a wrong impression and perpetuate the idea that country people live on wild game and fish and fruits and in general on the free bounty of heaven. Many people have no idea of the cash expense of operating a farm to-day, or the work and planning required to keep the wheels going round, to say nothing of a decent living or suitable education for the children. . . .

I think I told you of shipping our cattle to pasture. It proved to be a disastrous mistake. To keep in tune, I suppose we should blame Secretary Wallace or the broad-shouldered Mr. Tugwell, who likewise had nothing to do with it.[15] Really the source of trouble was our own erroneous impression that grass is grass, and that our cattle would gain if they could have ample pasturage. Evidently other factors of acclimatization must be considered. . . . I was quite alone here for a week while Will went after our little bunch.

That was November first, and most of our efforts and resources ever since have been devoted to trying to bring our cattle back to a normal condition. They are gaining slowly, but our homegrown feed is disappearing rapidly, and the grain feed of threshed maize which we must purchase . . . is piling up expenses. We have sold one mixed bunch of older cows and summer calves. . . . In general, there has been an improvement in farm prices, both absolutely and relatively, which has given us courage to keep on working, and has kept alive our hope for some definite change in weather conditions that may once more make our acres fruitful and restore to us some sense of accomplishment. . . .

Prices ↑

Perhaps it is a sin to parody anything as beautiful as Ulysses. Yet as we gray, lonely old people sit here by the fire to-night, planning for the year's work, my thoughts seem bound to fall into that pattern. It may be that the dust will choke us down; It may be we shall wake some happy morn and look again on fields of waving grain.[16] So good night, dear friend, and a happier to-morrow.

MARCH 8, 1936

DEAR EVELYN:

Since I wrote to you, we have had several bad days of wind and dust. On the worst one recently, old sheets stretched over door and window openings, and sprayed with kerosene, quickly became black and helped a little to keep down the irritating dust in our living rooms. Nothing that you see or hear or read will be likely to exaggerate the physical discomfort or material losses due to these storms. Less emphasis is usually given to the mental effect, the confusion of mind resulting from the overthrow of all plans for improvement or normal farm work, and the difficulty of making other plans, even in a tentative way. To give just one specific example; the paint has been literally scoured from our buildings by the storms of this and previous years; we should by all means try to "save the surface;" but who knows when we might safely undertake such a project? The pleasantest morning may be a prelude to an afternoon when the "dust devils"[17] all unite in one hideous onslaught. The combination of fresh paint with a real dust storm is not pleasing to contemplate.

* quote (must experience it)

The prospects for a wheat crop in 1936 still remain extremely doubtful. There has been no moisture of any kind since the light snow of early January. On a seventy-mile drive yesterday . . . we saw more wheat that would still respond to immediate rainfall than I . . . had expected to see. A few fields were refreshingly green and beautiful to look upon. There seems no doubt that improved methods of tillage and protection are already yielding some results in reducing wind erosion. But rain must come soon to encourage growth even on the best fields if there is to be any wheat harvest. Interspersed with the more hopeful areas are other tracts apparently abandoned to their fate. A field dotted thickly with shoulder-high hummocks of sand and soil bound together by the inevitable Russian thistles presents little encouragement to the most ardent conservationist. My own verdict in regard to plans for the reclaiming of such land would be, "Too late." Yet such fields are a menace to all the cultivated land or pasture ground around them and present a most difficult problem.

No Rain

The two extremes I have just suggested—that is, the slight hope even yet for some production on carefully tilled fields, and the practically hopeless conditions on abandoned land—are indicative of the two conflicting tendencies now evident through an extensive section of the high plains. On the one hand we note a disposition to recognize a mistake, to turn aside from the undertaking with the least possible loss and direct one's time and energy to some new purpose. On the other hand we observe that many seem determined to use even the hard experiences of the past, their own mistakes and other people's warning signals, pointing the way to changes of methods and more persistent and effective effort right where they stand.

The first attitude may be illustrated by an incident of the past week, the attempt of former neighbors to sell the pipe from the well on their now deserted homestead. This may not seem significant to you. But to old-timers in this deep-water country, so nearly destitute of flowing streams, the virtual destruction of a well of our excellent, life-nourishing water comes close to being the unpardonable sin against future generations.[18]

quote (well destruction for pipe)

The same disintegrating tendency is shown in a larger and more alarming way by the extent to which land once owned and occupied by farm families is now passing into ownership of banks, mortgage companies, assurance societies, and investment partnerships or corporations. The legal notices published in our county paper for the past week include two notices of foreclosure proceedings and nine notices of sheriff's sales to satisfy judgments previously rendered. These eleven legal actions involve the ownership of 3520 acres of land, the equivalent of twenty-two quarter sections. . . .

I am not questioning the legal right of these companies to take

*

over the title of the farms for their own security or that of the people whose money they have invested. . . . [But] this remote control stands in the way of constructive efforts toward recovery.

Yet there are numerous evidences of the persevering restoration of which I have written. The big road maintainers keep the highways in excellent condition. New license tags are appearing on cars and trucks. Churches, schools, and basket-ball tournaments continue much as usual. One village church reported forty people in attendance on one of the darkest and most dangerous of the recent dusty Sundays. The state agricultural college for this section has an increased enrollment this year. More people are managing in some way—we hardly see how—to keep in touch with the world of news and markets, politics and entertainment, through radio service. A local implement agency recently sent out invitations to a tractor entertainment with free moving pictures of factory operation and the like. The five hundred free lunches prepared for the occasion proved insufficient for the assembled crowd. Within a few succeeding days the company took orders for three tractors ranging in price from around $1200 to $1500. Some people must still have faith in the future!

* hope, *

More impressive to me was the Saturday rush of activity at the small produce house where we did our marketing. Cars kept driving up and people coming in with pails or crates or cases of eggs. Cream was delivered in containers of all sorts and sizes, including one heavy aluminum cooker! . . . In many cases the payments were pitifully small, but every such sale represents hard work and economy and the struggle to keep going.

At the hatchery they spoke of slow business through the extremely cold weather. The young man in charge also referred to the changes or postponements in people's plans because of their failure to receive the expected payments under the now extinct allotment plan. With spring in the dusty air, however, and renewed hope that the government contracts will later be fulfilled, orders were coming in encouragingly.

We plan ourselves for four hundred baby Leghorns about the middle of April. That will be an increase for us, but is about the safest small investment we can make to yield an all-the-year-round return. We shall have to put quite a bit of work and expense into the brooder house to keep out the dust, and the rain—if it ever comes. But we are happier to keep on trying.

hope

This impressionistic account of conditions here and of our hope for the future would scarcely be complete without some mention of government assistance. We have had only slight contact with the Rehabilitation Service.[19] We know that the man in charge here is taking his work seriously, trying to give definite aid and encouragement to those who have reached the end of their small resources and have lost hope and courage. He stopped here the other morning to see whether we really meant it when we promised the use of our tractor and other equipment to a young man in the neighborhood who is trying to make a new start for himself and wife and small daughter through a rehabilitation loan. In spite of seriously adverse conditions, this agent, who meets many people, spoke of a rather surprising general spirit of optimism. I suppose there is something of the gambler in all of us. We instinctively feel that the longer we travel on a straight road, the nearer we must be coming to a turn. People here can't quite believe yet in a hopeless climatic change which would deprive them permanently of the gracious gift of rain.

*

quote (hope)

To me the most interesting and forward-looking government undertaking in the dust bowl centers about the group of erosion control experiments scattered over a wide area. The Pony Creek project, fifteen miles east of our home, includes all of one congressional township and parts of three others, seventy square miles altogether, or something over 42,000 acres. This is a pretty seriously damaged area, principally devoted to wheat growing, and even now blowing badly. If the methods employed succeed in checking the drift and in restoring productivity, much will have been accomplished, both of intrinsic value and of use as a stimulating object lesson. We hope some day to drive over and see how they are progressing. . . .

Our personal plans—like those of all the rest—are entirely dependent on whether or not rain comes to save a little of our wheat, to give grass or even weeds for pasturage, to permit the growing of roughage for the winter, and provide some cover on the surface and promote the intertwining of rootlets in the soil to reduce wind damage. Our terraces are in good condition to distribute whatever moisture may come. We hope we have learned a little about protecting the soil which is the basis of our physical life. In the house the poinsettia and Christmas cactus are blooming a second time and the geraniums blossom in spite of the dust. Eleanor has just sent us budded hyacinth and daffodil bulbs in little moss-filled nests. They will help us to look forward for a time at least.

Soil erosion prevention

* * *

JAN. 19, 1936

DEAR ROSE:

Your Christmas letter found us at the same old place. We made two or three different plans for getting away to investigate other possibilities. Each time some unforeseen circumstance seemed to block the way. There has been no definite or reassuring change in weather conditions here. The hoped-for fall rains were very scanty, yet with even so slight encouragement, people have gone on and put in their wheat, hoping to accomplish a double purpose: that is, first to qualify for the benefits under the AAA—in reality the only thing that has saved the country side here from complete abandonment and the small towns from ruin; and second, to keep up the struggle to hold their land from blowing, even if the wheat didn't prosper as we hoped. Logically, I suppose I've got the two considerations in the wrong order. Yet, as an immediate hope, the AAA looked the more dependable. Now it is wrecked and only the uncertainties of the weather for the next few weeks can determine whether the other purpose may not be quite as illusory. Much of the wheat sown has never yet come up. . . .

I thought of you and Mabel the night of the Christmas Carol concert and it was pleasant to know that you could be together. Mabel also spoke of their anticipation of a happy evening. I am afraid I do not remember the Dr. Barnes you spoke of, but can understand your feeling about his little Testament. You may remember Grissell McLaren ('98). I had a letter from her also at Christmas time. . . . I am sorry to say that my young nephew (12 yrs. old) balked in public school work, so they put him into a military school, with a $105.00 uniform! Yet they are (politically) opposed to "regimentation," the bugbear of all good individualists.

Aren't we all funny folks anyway? I wonder if by chance you have seen the book "Man, the Unknown" by Dr. Alexis Carrel[20] and whether it is worth the price ($3.50). I have seen some very good reviews of it and it is apparently the kind of discussion that interests me. But I've hesitated about spending so much for one book which perhaps no one else would care for.

$

You may have heard of Eleanor's recent marriage as I sent a note and newspaper clipping to Neshanic [New Jersey]. . . . They came home for their vacation Dec. 22. We met them in Guymon and I was

too happy to sleep that night. The next day we carried out a plan of many years' postponings—to drive out into New Mexico and bring home a Christmas tree. It was a beautiful Oklahoma winter day. On the way we found interest in visiting the dinosaur pit in the western edge of Oklahoma, where the State University is excavating quite successfully a very well-preserved accumulation of several types of those remote and peculiar creatures. They were working very carefully and patiently upon a large femur—over four feet long and nearly that much in circumference at the enlarged ends. It was pleasant to learn that the man in charge, crippled with arthritis, but with the most gentle and gracious personality, was a friend of a Mount Holyoke woman, Mrs. Margaret Morse Nice, whose husband used to be in Okla. University but is now in the University of Ohio. They had cooperated in bird studies of this western area. We cooked our dinner opposite a large striking bit of erosion called locally the Battle Ship and were near another still more interesting relic of ages gone by, called the Wedding Cake because of its almost perfect symmetry, cone-shaped summit, and distinct stratification in varying colors. The children wandered around, Will cut a branch from a pinon (I couldn't be willing in this barren land to sacrifice a whole tree) and we ate our dinner on a large flat rock facing the haze-filled valley leading on to the west-ward. It was a happy day for us to remember. . . .

Dinos?

Yes

It smells good tonight with bread just out of the oven and the narcissus bulbs that Eleanor brought home coming out in all their fragrance. Altogether I think your Christmas wish for us was pretty well fulfilled. Thanks and the same to you for every day.

* * *

JANUARY 1937

"OUR OWN LETTER FROM THE DUST BOWL," *AMERICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE JOURNAL*

DEC. 8, 1936

DEAR NEIGHBOR—ACROSS THE WORLD: [MR. WALTER ROBB]

I've just been reading again your friendly letter which brought to us so much stimulus and encouragement. I'm sorry that even after the long delay I cannot write the kind of "postscript" to my spring letter that we know you would be happy to receive. . . .

For 1936 we must record another year of failure. Yet that failure

No crop

might so easily have been changed to moderate success by one good rain in late July or August that we do not altogether despair. As I write I can hear the tractor laboring along on the north field while Will is laying up a fresh set of terraces in the hope that next year may give us all a better chance. It seems impossible to dispense with that little word hope, even though at times we are conscious of the pain of hopes too long deferred.

Soon after my last letter was mailed, Will suffered a painful accident which might easily have proved a permanent handicap. While he was unloading a barrel of coal oil, it slipped and fell, bruising one ankle severely and, I still believe, fracturing some of the smaller bones. At that time the dust storms were at their worst. For a while it seemed that perhaps, regardless of desire, we could not go on. There were many days, as I struggled to care for the stock, when I could not see from one of the farm buildings to another through the blinding, choking clouds. Dust was piling up every where, filling gateways, burying machinery, drifting around the buildings, making the less traveled roads almost impassable. The mere matter of getting milk or even water to the house in a condition fit for use presented a difficult problem. Will improvised a crutch from a short length of pump rod and after the first few days helped all he could to direct and carry on the outdoor work, actually crawling on hands and knees the length of the barn loft to break open the bales of Colorado alfalfa and get it ready for me to drop into the mangers. In spite of his being almost compelled to do the things he shouldn't have done, the injured ankle slowly regained its shape and strength and the recovery is one thing to be grateful for as we look back over a difficult year.

Will-
ankle
injury

Story

The wind and dust continued without much abatement through March and April and early May. The first sign of any hopeful change came with a light rain on May 17 though the following week of high winds destroyed most of the benefit. By this time any lingering hope of wheat production in our vicinity had faded away, though limited areas in the extreme eastern part of the country returned small yields. The ground was too dry and hard to permit satisfactory preparation for spring planting, though Will had done some listing and "chiseling" as well as the condition of the soil would allow. On June 4 as if to confute all theories about the diversion of our moisture-bearing winds to Greenland and such attempted explanations of the long-protracted drought, we had one tremendous rain—a regular "gully-washer"—when two and a half inches poured down in half an hour. The unworked

soil could not absorb it fast enough, especially as there is a strong tendency for the fine wind-ground silt to coat over the surface, closing the pores of the soil as if with a thin cement and preventing natural penetration. So much of this precious moisture proved ineffective for actual crop production, broke over contour and terrace lines and finally formed several "playa" lakes in the neighborhood in basins which have no outlet. One of our neighbors now plans to pump some of this still standing water back upon his fields.

During the fall these temporary lakes furnished sanctuary to immense flocks of seagulls, possibly driven inland by storms along some coast or attracted by the hosts of grasshoppers which had helped to complete the damage done by the drouth. It was a new and delightful interest to us to watch the strong, impetuous flight of these gulls as they skimmed low over our fields or massed in silvery shimmering clouds against the darkening horizon as they returned at nightfall to the sheltering lake. All at once they were gone and we saw them no more.

That heavy rain on June 4 before a seed was planted was our only source of moisture through the growing season aside from two or three drouth showers which scarcely dampened the surface. . . . Where our terrace lines remained unbroken and held the water back to soak slowly into the soil, the effect upon production was noticeably beneficial. From one small field where the water had stood, which was sowed to cane as soon as the ground was dry, we were able to save two fair cuttings in August and October. From still smaller areas of maize along the terrace lines we threshed out about forty-five bushels of grain for chicken feed. . . . On the other hand where our terraces broke in the swift onrush of the flowing water, there was slight penetration, the ground dried quickly and seed failed entirely to come up. . . .

Rain,
nothing
planted

A few families have removed from our neighborhood during the spring and summer but most of those who held out through the dust storms are still here, working along various lines toward their individual hopes for the future. There is no constraint and little agreement as to the best methods to pursue in attempts at recovery. The planners, however, might be divided into two large groups, those who would rely upon improved cultivation to conserve every bit of natural rainfall, and those who believe in the possibility of rather extensive irrigation by pumping from deep wells. The first group includes the adherents of contouring and terracing methods and also those who abhor the crooked lines and inconvenience of that type of farming but would seek to gain similar results while keeping their fields square and their rows straight. These people are placing much reliance upon the further development of the so-called "basin-type" lister, which has a special device for dumping little dams every ten or twelve feet across the furrows, thus preventing run-off of water in any ordinary rain.

Each irrigationist has his own pet plan but the great obstacle in all of them is the initial expense required for the deep wells and an effective pumping system. Some question the feasibility of irrigating comparatively small plots while the surrounding area might be up in the air or drifting in upon the watered field or garden. Others wonder whether even our apparently unfailing supply of deep ground water could stand the drain of continuous pumping. . . . I haven't myself any technical knowledge regarding either the water supply or the engineering required to make it available. . . . Some enthusiastic advocates of irrigation believe that eventually the supplies of gas under the Panhandle can be utilized to develop cheap power for pumping. Here again we come up against the hard fact that every material resource comes to an end unless constantly replenished. But at least these various possibilities provide subjects for discussion and some incentive to look forward to happier days.

So we work on caring for the house and the chickens, the horses and cattle, trying to make our scant supply of feed go as far as possible, filling the days with the innumerable tasks necessary on any farm, hoping somehow, as the passing years steal away our strength, to be able to provide easier, more convenient ways of accomplishing the essential tasks.

We were interested in what you said about Mr. Cordell Hull's foreign policies, for we regard him as one of our most useful and far-seeing public men. We hope he may be equal to the great responsibility he now has in the South American conference for strengthening and giving form and direction to the world's desire for peace. Mr. Hull is surely right in thinking of international peace as something not merely to be accepted but to be striven for actively and devotedly.[21] We might think of it as Edgar Lee Masters did of immortality, that it is "not a gift but an achievement."[22]

. . . Will joins in thanks for your letter and in the hope that 1937 may be for you a year of accomplishment and generous fulfillment. If ever you come back to look over those homesteads of earlier years, just take another step and look up ours too. We have set back that old cornerstone as you desired and shall probably not wander far away from it for any length of time.

Cornerstone back

So be sure of a welcome here from the Hendersons.

* * *

~~DEC. 20, 1936~~

~~DEAR ROSE,~~

~~This paper was evidently not intended for correspondence, but perhaps you can make it out. I got up early to get the chicken roasted in the pressure cooker before we have to start on the thirty mile trip to Guymon to meet Eleanor who is expected at noon today. We had them both with us for a time in the late summer and enjoyed a few blessed days together out in New Mexico where we have before found rest and refreshment. Later we made a harder, but apparently necessary trip to the old farm home in Iowa, where we spent all our time making some of the most essential repairs. On the last afternoon Eleanor and I repaired the stepping stones at "The Ford" on the little stream where Susie and I spent so much of our time in the long summers of long ago. . . .~~

~~I wish I could write hopefully of the situation here. Even if we were "liquidated" there are a good many people still clinging to their little homes. It would need only "a quarter of a turn" in the weather, as Henry Wallace said of the world's heart and will to bring comfort and some sense of accomplishment. The very insufficient amount of forage and chicken feed that we did raise was due to the newer methods of tillage encouraged by the Soil Conservation Service. The scanty crop had no rain during the growing time and grew entirely on stored moisture.~~

hope

No rain

~~Mr. Henderson's chronic cough is much worse this winter and he has become very hard of hearing and has no teeth, not even the factory sort. I have only a few with just two matching and show the wear and tear in many ways. So we see we aren't going to be young any more and must get what good we can from those whom we hope to see going on. . . .~~

~~I love to get your letters and hope to hear of yourself and the rest of the family.~~

* * *

JUNE 1937

"SPRING IN THE DUST BOWL," *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*

APRIL 6, 1937

DEAR ATLANTIC:

The kindness of your letter brought us definite encouragement. It is difficult to appraise our present situation with any exactitude, but some incidents and observations from our daily life may help you to judge of the prospects for 1937.

On our bleak Easter morning a jack rabbit sat crouched in the kindling pile by the kitchen door. He was, however, no frolicsome Easter bunny, but a starved, trembling creature with one eye battered out by the terrific dust storms of the preceding week. He made no effort to escape. I bathed his eye and put him into shelter with our guinea pig, hoping that he would live until showers might bring some tinge of green upon our dust-covered wasteland. Another blinded rabbit picked up in the yard had just died in spite of all my care. When these wild creatures, ordinarily so well able to take care of themselves, come seeking protection, their necessity indicates a cruel crisis for man and beast.

Blind Rabbit (story)

After another dry summer in 1936, with only the scantiest production, hope was revived by light rains in late September. This moisture was barely sufficient to encourage the sowing of wheat for the possibility of spring pasturage. Our acreage, like that of our neighbors, was materially reduced. The seed sprouted, but again the hope of a crop has vanished with the dry winter and the raging winds of spring. We are now reluctantly feeding the last small remainder of the crop of 1931.

Using last of 1931 crop

High winds and consequent dust storms began early this year and still continue at frequent intervals. While perhaps no more violent than the storms of previous years, their effects, being cumulative, seem more disastrous and overwhelming. On some days the limit of vision has been a row of little elms about thirty feet from the front windows. No eye could penetrate any farther the swirling, blinding clouds of dust which made noonday as dark as late twilight of a clear evening. The worst storm thus far in 1937 occurred immediately after a slight snowfall which again roused delusive hopes. That snow melted on a Tuesday. Wednesday morning, with a rising wind, the dust began to move again, and until late Friday night there was little respite.

Bad dust storms (quote)

Almost as distressing are the more frequent days when the northward-creeping sun shines faintly above the dizzying drift of silt, ground to a fine whitish powder, which gives a ghastly appearance of unreality to the most familiar landscapes. On such days we suffer from a painful sense of helplessness and utter frustration. We need no calendar to tell us that planting time is here again. The cranes went north some time ago. Our hyacinths bloom fragrantly in the windows, and the Easter lily has a bud ready to open. The hardy yellow roses are struggling to put out a few green leaves on the tips of twigs rising above the dust. The other morning a solitary shrike trilled his spring song from the

windmill tower. Yet any attempt to proceed with planting under present conditions would be stubborn and expensive folly. . . .

The stripping of humus from the top soil is one of our most serious losses during these critical years. A striking evidence of this regrettable waste came to my notice last summer. I was herding our cattle near a temporary lake formed by the run-off in one rain which fell so fast that the unworked, wind-swept fields could not absorb more than a small portion of the precious moisture. Surrounding the lake were thick sheets of pure vegetable material, ground by the winds and washed away and deposited by the flowing waters. Both humus and rainfall should somehow have been saved to fill and fertilize the depleted subsoil. . . . Verily we are losing the "cream" of our land.

Seeds for field crops are scarce and expensive, and their purchase requires the closest planning. Forage crops are all-important, as we can go no further with cattle or poultry unless we can provide them with home-grown feed. Our seed supplies include cowpeas, pie melons (for winter greens for chickens), sweet clover and crested wheat grass for experimental purposes, Indian corn, cane seed of different types, Sudan grass, Kafir corn, hegari, broomcorn, and millet. If rains come even by the middle of June, we must somehow secure seed of milo maize, our most dependable grain crop, which, under normal conditions, could still mature before frost.

In attacking the problem of erosion control, one great handicap lies in the scarcity of people left to do the essential work. On a recent drive to our county seat thirty miles away, we could count only sixteen occupied homes, including those within half a mile on either side of the federal highway.

occupied homes

Yet experienced people with ample opportunity for knowing the difficulty of the struggle are advising against general abandonment. As the dirt ploughed up here by the unrelenting winds darkens the sky in cities hundreds of miles away, there is a growing realization that the problem is not simply that of a few unsuccessful farmers who might be as well off in one place as another. People are beginning to understand that such conditions, if left unchecked, are progressive and threaten the welfare not only of other agricultural areas but of towns and cities dependent upon rural prosperity.

Beginning to realize seriousness

I am almost ashamed to remember that some years ago, when we first saw the extreme desolation in parts of New Mexico, I thought that surely our own locality could never experience such tragedy. The answer to that mood of unintentional pride is all around us to-day in barren fields, ruined pastures, buried fences, dead trees, abandoned wells, desolated homes.

We can easily understand the skepticism of those who ask what the government can do to help, since obviously it has no power to rule the winds or grant the of blessing of rain. But other important things do come within its legitimate scope. In fact, to restore large areas to production and to prevent the increase of the seriously damaged acreage, rain alone no longer seems sufficient. We may say, as Robert Frost said to his young orchard trees, "Something must be left to God,"[23] and still recognize the need for human toil to counteract the damage already done. . . .

When the entire root system of the hardy yuccas may be seen in places of special exposure, with their thick woody roots writhing on the surface and the finer rootlets extending like guy wires for perhaps twenty feet in different directions, the indications of serious erosion are too plain to be ignored. Often, while trailing the cattle around for scattered grazing, I have been dismayed to notice how tracks of cattle, horses, or tractors, made some time on dampened surface, now project sharply several inches above the surrounding soil like rude cameos carved by the restless wind.

We cannot criticize the conservation plans of the Department of Agriculture. They embody many of the control measures that our own experience would recommend. They grant large individual liberty in working out contributions to the common welfare. The proposals seem practical and sufficiently generous. . . .

We personally hope for the gradual success of these methods, because for the past two years we have had cane on terraced land. Though the crop was lighter than in normal years, enough stubble and roots remained on the ground to prevent appreciable erosion. Moreover, that particular plot still holds subsoil moisture. Dirt brought up with a post auger from a depth of over three feet retains sufficient moisture to be packed into a solid ball.

No rain

Naturally, all these plans must fail, at least for this year, unless rains come soon to settle the soil and prepare a normal seed bed. For that we must trust a government established in the nature of things beyond our utmost reach. It is good to remember that the laws of the universe recognize no favorites and cherish no hostility or small vindictiveness; that before sun and rain, stormy winds, or summer's kind beneficence, we all stand upon one common level.

Your interest and that of other friends have been to us a very real and present help.

Chapter 5

Slow and Partial Recovery, 1938–1951

This chapter documents a period of slow recovery for the Hendersons and for the Great Plains generally. From 1938 to 1940, the region continued to experience damaging winds, but 17.64 inches of rain in 1938 and 15.77 and 16.32 inches in the next two years provided enough moisture to stimulate some recovery. Record-breaking rains in 1941 effectively ended the dust bowl, and agricultural prices rose sharply with the beginning of the Second World War in Europe. In 1948, the Hendersons reported their best year ever financially, but the hard years of pioneering and persistence through the Depression and dust bowl had exacted a human toll far more enduring than the damage to the land.

The spirit of optimism that had defined Caroline's early years had been replaced by a generalized sense of anxiety. Her physical deterioration paralleled the destruction of her hopes. She suffered from chronic asthma, undoubtedly exacerbated by the dust storms of the preceding decade, while other injuries and ailments continued apace. Even as the Hendersons celebrated more than a decade of largely favorable weather, Caroline lived in dread of the next disaster.

Something of Caroline's state of health and mind can be seen in her first expression of concern about aging. In 1935, a newspaper account of her visit with her sister Susie in Wichita had identified her as Susie's mother, and the accompanying photograph could well justify the writer's error. The picture presents her as a thin, wrinkled, and worn woman who stood in stark contrast to her much better dressed and sleeker sister.[1]

Caroline's letters from 1938 to 1951 include her continuing correspondence with Rose Alden plus two new correspondents: In music. It is late and "time to retire" so I'll close with every good wish for yourself and your work, both personal and social. Your Sincere Friend

* * *

May 29, 1939

Dear Rose:

Your letter was most welcome and I was interested in all your employments and reflections. Just last night while waiting up to see whether a young heifer was going to need our special help, I filled in the time with the closing portion of Reaching for the Stars.[6] I too was impressed with the writer's complete sincerity and yearning love for all people. Her restraint and generosity in writing of the gross brutalities of the Hitler regime seem admirable and wise—considering her purpose—even though I couldn't duplicate them myself. (The young cow has a beautiful daughter this morning.)

If this attempt at an answer to your letter lacks any sort of coherence, perhaps you will be forbearing enough to lay part of the blame upon our restless cows. In the recent desperate years, our greatest loss has been the ruin of our native grass pastures. The soil conservation service now admits the sad fact, and in 1939 for the first time the sowing of grazing crops on denuded pasture lands is permitted. Heretofore, the theory had been that with normal rainfall the grass would come back. That too optimistic idea is now officially abandoned. So on this breezy morning with the dust resting for a time I am straying with the cattle among the dust filled hammocks of a once smooth field then thickly set with buffalo and grama grasses. They eat eagerly the Russian thistles which form a heavy mat among the masses of dried thistles remaining from last year's growth. I must try to keep them from wandering to our neighbor's withered wheat or to our own freshly planted furrows. Many small lizards go scurrying among the dust heaps, big brown crickets work industriously at digging underground shelters, and the bob-o-links fill the air with their cheerful music.

Across the road Will is planting Sudan grass in the old pasture for later grazing. The continuing noise of the tractor makes a kind of background for all lighter sounds. Though we are far away from normal conditions as yet, we are thankful for a little gain during the past year; for home-grown feed through the past winter; for some replenishment of subsoil moisture; for the possibility of a partial wheat crop, though it has been seriously damaged by the dry winds and frequent dust storms of the spring. These changes indicate some slight improvement but it will take years of favorable seasons and persistent effort to effect any real recovery.

We have both worn down fast during the years of extreme desolation since 1931. Every small accomplishment now seems to demand a greater output of energy and resolution than in the years that are gone. But perhaps that is common experience.

Aside from our own absorbing task, our supreme interest lies in our daughter, Eleanor, and her home in Kansas City, Kansas. She has found her year's work as anesthetist in the Kansas University Hospital professionally profitable and stimulating and is offered the same work again at a substantial increase of salary. . . .

I am glad you and Mabel are going to the reunion. It will be a happy experience to mingle again with those who in my mind at least, are endowed with the charm of perennial youth. Pictures or hints of change make no difference. I think of you all just as you were "when you and I were young."

Greeting to all and "quietness and confidence" for the years to come.

* * *

Dec. 14, 1939

Dear Mr. Jaffe:

I have just been reading again your friendly letter of away back in the summer. I should be ashamed to admit that I didn't do anything about your suggestion for some sort of cooperative movement for improved conditions for Oklahoma workers. I really didn't know what would be expected and distrusted completely my own value in such a project, which would require all the gifts that I conspicuously lack. But thanks anyway for your complimentary thought, even if it wasn't deserved.

This has been for the Hendersons a most laborious and disappointing year. The spring seemed more hopeful but summer conditions were unfavorable and we had more weeds than crops. We are just now trying to wind up the scattering tasks of the fall harvest, and have got the fodder in the barn or stack and the small amount of grain thrashed and stored away. We haven't sown any wheat this fall and doubt now whether we shall as conditions are all against any reasonable hopes for success.

I am enclosing a review which I thought might interest you. It is from the Manchester (England) Guardian, one of the leading liberal papers of Great Britain. I've never had a chance to read The Grapes of Wrath[7] but have seen many favorable comments. On the other hand a student at the Panhandle College at Goodwell (west of Guymon) said the English teacher there condemned it as giving a false impression of Oklahoma and its people.

We should like to know of your work and whether you still find time and inclination for literary work. I hope the increased feeling against Communism since Russian's ruthless purposes have been revealed has not caused you personal inconvenience or discomfort.[8] I feel that you are too good an American and too appreciative of whatever our imperfect democracy means to all of us to be able to rationalize the Soviet policy. As I think you know, I was sincerely sympathetic with their aims and while I couldn't see in out-and-out Communism the solution of our national problems, I was entirely willing and even glad to have them make the experiment, and ready to accept any phases of their system which promised social betterment for the under privileged groups, provided they could be adopted by democratic procedure. I am all against dictators where or whoever they may be. So I can't go along in mind with Stalin or Molotov anymore than with Franco, Mussolini, Hitler or the Japanese cut-throats. They all look alike to me now, however much I may previously have tried to distinguish among them.

Eleanor and August came in early September and took us for a delightful vacation in New Mexico and Colorado. . . . The real climax of our trip was the night and day we spent in Mesa Verde Park in south western Colorado among the ancient homes of the cliff dwellers. Don't miss it if you are ever anywhere near, for it seems to me of surpassing interest and charm, both for scenery and for human appeal. . . .

You may be tempted to say, "The struggle naught availeth; The effort and the wounds are varied."[9] But don't give up. There is much need for constructive thought and work and above all for human sympathy with which to weave "the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness,"[10] which does at times afflict us all. So good cheer and all friendly hopes from the Hendersons.

* * *

CA. 1940

DEAR MR. JAFFE:

I was deeply touched by your letter and expressions of loyal friendship when I know your mind must regard us as hopeless "Kulaks" or worse. We have been plodding along through heavy going since the storm of Dec 23. Roads have been blocked and everything difficult. I've done my share of ploughing back and forth through the drifts to see what might be going on at the "maternity ward" as Mr. H. expresses it. We have nine very pretty little calves now and you would enjoy the "moving picture" when they get out and frolic in the snow!

I respect the constancy of your faith in Russia, even though I can no longer share it. You may think me a miserable opportunist or compromiser, but I can't see why a person might not be sincerely convinced of the merits of socialism as a method of distributing the wealth created by all working together and at the same time condemn utterly Russia's foreign policy in Poland, Finland, and the other Baltic states.

I realize that argument accomplishes little and I didn't mean that the "Guardian" should be interpreted that way, but I did want you to know that we are some what familiar with your own point of view and that of the pamphlet you sent. (I'll return it soon). In spite of all I have read and heard and thought, my own conclusions are substantially on p. 442 of the "Guardian." Lest you think this is merely another capitalistic paper, I must say that for years I have found it the most sincerely fair and impartial of anything we read: (they were as heartily disgusted with Chamberlain's deal with Hitler at Munich as they are with Stalin's). I think as Americans we should try to give more vigorous life to the basic principles of our own democracy. Let's go!

* * *

APRIL 25, 1941

DEAR FRIEND ELI [JAFFE]

For some obscure reason I am strangely moved this morning toward fulfilling my Christmas promise of "a letter soon." We were distressed by the uncomfortable tidings of your card at that time but grateful for the good wishes and glad for your hopeful spirit of better days to come.