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STERLING WOMEN FROM STERLING TOWNSHIP
WOMEN'S WRITING AS LITERATURE AND HISTORY

BY

JANET HOVEY JOHNSON

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
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1981

STERLING WOMEN FROM STERLING TOWNSHIP
WOMEN'S WRITING AS LITERATURE AND HISTORY

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Dr. Ruth Alexander
Thesis Adviser

✓ Date

✓ Dr. Jerry Yarbrough
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✓ Date

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JHJ

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Chapter One

Introduction

In a discussion about women writers, Emily Toth criticizes those who insist that regional writers are "bad" writers. Literary critics, according to Ms. Toth, always add a disclaimer to good regional writers' works by saying that although these writers are "regional," something in their works hints at the "universal." What makes these works universal, according to these critics, are metaphors for the human condition--war, winning the West, whale hunting--subjects about which men are knowledgeable. As a result, women too frequently are not considered universal writers, because women's experiences are limited to their own localities--to what critics sometimes call trivialities. However, Ms. Toth goes on to say that it is precisely these "trivialities" that should be considered metaphors for the human condition because small things usually say more on an emotional level, and thus they are more universal. In fact, she says, raising a child more nearly represents the human condition than wars or any other grand male experience.¹

One might ask herself what Emily Toth's discussion of regionalism versus universality has to do with the women writers of Sterling Township in Brookings County, South Dakota.

¹"Some Introductory Notes on Women Regionalists," in Regionalism and the Female Imagination, ed. Emily Toth (University Park: Penn State Univ., [1976?], pp. 1-3.

After all, Emily Toth is discussing women who primarily write fiction--sometimes good fiction--meant for publication. The women of Sterling Township wrote, for lack of a better word, essays, and few ever dreamed of publication. Yet there is a connection. Just as the women that Emily Toth discusses are not considered universal writers, so have the women of townships across America been discounted as the subjects of serious studies. These women belong to a world of "trivialities"; therefore, their experiences and the essays that they wrote have seldom been examined as part of the historical process, or for that matter, the literary process. Men, who were experienced in wars and government, found their way into history books and wrote literature that became universal, but women seldom had the same opportunity.

Virginia Woolf's essay about Shakespeare's sister in A Room of One's Own is an apt example. Ms. Woolf raises the following supposition: what if Shakespeare had had a very gifted sister? Considering the treatment of women in the Elizabethan age, she would not have known how to read. Her parents would have expected her to marry the man of their choice. If she had rebelled and run away, she would have been seduced in the streets of London. After she had become pregnant, she would have killed herself.² Ms. Woolf's example cannot be limited to the Elizabethan age. Because

²A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 80-84.

women have traditionally been forced into domesticity, they have seldom had a chance to develop other talents, nor have they often been able to experience anything outside their worlds of home and family. Because the events that touched their lives were considered insignificant, women have usually not been taken seriously.

Emily Toth suggests the need to correct the omission of women from serious historical and literary studies by looking closely at women regionalists. She says that not only should fiction, poetry, and drama be examined, but also autobiographies, diaries, and journals, in order to hear the voices that contribute to the universality of the female experience.³

It follows, then, that critics and historians can learn much by reading manuscripts written by women in small communities across America. After reading about churches or families, they can make the connection between these female subjects and the human condition. They can determine whether or not these manuscripts have literary merit. They can decide if the manuscripts, although perhaps not universal in the sense of great fiction, are nonetheless a worthwhile contribution to literary studies.

In looking at the essays written by Sterling Township women, one must keep in mind Emily Toth's contention. One must consider the writers' regional status and then determine

³Toth, p. 3.

whether or not their works are representative. One must ask the following questions: Who were these women? What did they write? Why did they write it? What were their topics? Does their work have literary merit? Is it history? How well is it written? Once these questions are answered, one can make a judgment on both the literary and historical value of the essays.

The purpose of this study, then, is to show how literature and history can affect one's sense of identity. After determining whether or not locally written chronicles have literary and historical value, then one can show why these essays are important not only to Norwegian-Americans, but also to women everywhere.

In order to illustrate this purpose, one must look at the essays under consideration from several angles. Thus chapter two deals with the identity of the women--who they were and what the values that they inherited from their parents were. Chapter three examines the essays themselves--concentrating on what the women said. Chapter four looks at the women's choice of topics and whether or not those topics are representative of women elsewhere. Finally, chapter five categorizes the essays as literature and history, as well as dealing with the value of the essays for Norwegian-Americans and women.

Chapter Two

Middle Class, Norwegian Lutherans

In the middle of Brookings County, South Dakota, there lies land that runs parallel to the Big Sioux River which winds its way south past Bruce. The topography of the area is pleasing to the observer's eye. If one happens to be in the area in early June, for instance, she will see miles and miles of softly rolling farm land in colors of black and green and blue. Rich, black soil lines the green rows of young corn, creating stripes across large fields. Light spring-green oat fields lie thick and lush. Shading the edges of the fields are dark green tree tops, clustered together in tree claims nearby. The ocean blue of blooming flax is visible past the trees.

There is more. Through the center of pastures dotted with cattle runs Deer Creek. At this time of year, the water is nearly level with the banks of the creek. Another rainfall could almost send the water spilling onto the pasture ground. That probably will not occur; as the summer passes, Deer Creek will shrink until it is hardly more than a trickle.

If one looks further, she can see farm sites, with old, two-story white houses built with dormers, front porches, and occasionally an addition onto the back. Big red barns and numerous outbuildings can be seen past the houses. Farm

equipment that is not in use is lined up beside the buildings.

This is Sterling Township.

One hundred years ago, Sterling looked different. Instead of the many hues of green coloring the countryside, there was only one--prairie grass green--broken only by the blues and yellows and violets of pasques and marigolds and purple cone flowers. Occasionally, black patches of soil dotted the landscape, where sod which had lain undisturbed for centuries was broken by pioneers.

It is from this setting that the essays of Sterling Township emerge. The women who wrote these essays were, for the most part, second or third generation Norwegian-Americans. Perhaps their names are unimportant, because in a sense they represent thousands of women in thousands of localities, and yet their names say something about them. They are Norwegian names. They were women born as early as 1880, as late as 1895. Ella and Nora Thompson were part of a large family who lived two miles east of Bruce. Clara Thompson, along with her family members, lived east of Ella and Nora. Clara was a cousin. Two miles to the northwest lived the Ericksons. Lottie belonged to that family. One-half mile south, the Hovey family was homesteading, and Ida was the youngest member of that family. In 1915, Christianne Jacobson married Ida's brother, Carl.

Although the women of Sterling Township never expected

anyone to seriously study what they wrote, their manuscripts can provide a basis from which to judge the importance of an experience. Interpretation of experience is only possible when there is something with which to work; human memories are good but not infallible. Consequently, there are other family members who have not been named, not because they were less important, but because they did not leave manuscripts behind.

The manuscripts, then, are a key not only to the lives of the Sterling writers, but also to the lives of other women in their community and to the lives of women nationwide. Thus the answer to the question "who were these women?" is specifically answered in interviews with the women themselves and their family members, but it is answered in general terms as well because thousands of others have had similar experiences.

Their parents, or in the case of Christianne Jacobson Hovey, their husbands' parents, had come to Dakota Territory in 1878. Their parents were not unusual. Of the 273 people living in Sterling Township in 1880, 181 were Norwegian.¹ This heavy Norwegian population was common throughout Eastern South Dakota, so that by the end of the main Norwegian

¹ Donald Dean Parker, ed., Early Residents of Brookings County, South Dakota: Census Data for 1860 - 1870 - 1880 (Brookings, SD: The Brookings County Historical Society, 1960), pp. 57-62.

expansion, 51,455 Norwegians lived in South Dakota.²

The reasons that so many of the settlers in the area were Norwegian are complicated. First of all, there was economic dissatisfaction in Norway at the time. If people who had no chance of improvement heard that conditions in America were good, they emigrated. It is interesting to note that immediately after the panics of 1857, 1873, 1897, and 1907, fewer people came from Norway. Besides good economic conditions to lure people to America, Norwegians had heard of the free land under the Homestead Act, the good wages one could make, and the advantages for the common man in American democracy. With the cost of a steamship ticket only \$50, America loomed across the Atlantic as a land of opportunity.³ Therefore, during the period between 1866 and 1915, 700,000 Norwegians came to America.⁴

It happened that much of the emigration from Norway occurred with the opening of the Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota frontiers. Upon arriving in America, the immigrants often took the railroad as far as it would go. In the 1870's and

²Douglas Chittick, "A Recipe for Nationality Stew," in Dakota Panorama, ed. J. Leonard Jennewein and Jane Boorman, 3rd ed. (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, 1973), pp. 137-38.

³Theodore Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940), pp. 462-63.

⁴Hjalmar Rued Holand, Norwegians in America: The Last Migration, trans. Helmer M. Blegen (Sioux Falls: The Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1978), p. 2.

80's, Dakota was the end of the railroad line.⁵

Not all Norwegian settlers in the area were directly from Norway, however. Promoters of Dakota worked hard to lure people from surrounding states. The railroads, land speculators, communities, and even private individuals circulated literature on the benefits of living in Dakota.⁶ The literature attracted not only foreign immigrants, but also people who had come to this country as children and also those born in this country of immigrant parents.

Settlers in Sterling Township came both from Norway and surrounding states. The fathers of the Thompson girls and the mother of Nora and Ella Thompson were born in Norway. The father and mother of the Erickson girls were also born in Norway. As children, these parents came to the United States. Because of free land and good opportunity in Dakota, these families left Fillmore County, Minnesota. The Thompsons had hoped to settle near Sioux Falls, but all the land was taken there.⁷ The Ericksons had planned to settle in Lincoln

⁵Gary D. Olson, "The Historical Background of Land Settlement in Eastern South Dakota," in Big Sioux Pioneers: Essays About the Settlement of the Dakota Prairie Frontier, ed. Arthur R. Huseboe (Sioux Falls, SD: Nordland Heritage Foundation, Augustana College, 1980), pp. 27-28.

⁶Kenneth M. Hammer, "Come to God's Country: Promotional Efforts in Dakota Territory, 1861-1889," South Dakota History, 10 (1980), 301.

⁷[Ole Thompson], "Ole Thompson Files Claim in 1878 Just Before Blizzard," in Pioneer Life: Dakota Territory, 1861-1889, ed. Arthur S. Mitchell ([Brookings, SD]: n.p., n.d.) p. 17.

County, Minnesota, but since the best land had also been taken there, they continued east to Sterling Township.⁸ Ida Hovey's parents, both born in the United States, were also drawn by the lure of free land. They came from Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, settling for a short time in Northville, Iowa, before coming to Sterling Township.⁹

Regardless of the length of time that these people had been in America, they all had one thing in common. They were proud of their heritage and maintained it in several ways. Norwegian values were instilled in these women, who as children learned to speak Norwegian and who, as adults, continued to hold on to their parents' values.

One of the ways in which they maintained their heritage was through their faith. They were Lutheran. It is true that when some Norwegians came to America, they broke with the Norwegian Lutheran Church, so that there were small numbers of Norwegian Quakers, Baptists, Mormons, Methodists, and Episcopalians.¹⁰ But for the most part, Norwegians remained faithful Lutherans, even though there was some controversy among the four Norwegian synods at the time. Members of any synod would organize a congregation as

⁸Typescript of the Family History of Ole and Petra Erickson prepared by Lottie Erickson Moody, 1 June 1964, in possession of R. Esther Erickson. Hereafter referred to as "Erickson History."

⁹Personal interview with Rolf N. Hovey, 13 Mar. 1981.

¹⁰Blegen, Norwegian Migration, p. 105.

soon as possible after they had settled in a community.¹¹ This trend was reflected in South Dakota, where by 1890, the Lutheran faith ran second only to Catholics in numbers in the state.¹² Lutheran churches were often organized only a few miles apart. Sterling Township families, for instance, could attend Sterling Lutheran in the south part of the county, Deer Creek Lutheran southeast of Bruce, or St. Petri Lutheran in nearby Eureka Township.

Because churches were of primary importance to the settlers, each of the women became involved in church activities in early childhood. Parishes were often served by itinerant pastors; therefore, home services also became important, and each woman was a part of those services.¹³ Christianne Jacobson's involvement in the church was perhaps even more significant. Her father was a well-known Norwegian pastor, who, in a visit to Dakota in 1861, became the first Norwegian pastor among the Norwegians in the state.¹⁴

Christianne had the opportunity for formal instruction at any time, whereas the others had to wait for parochial

¹¹ Blegen, Norwegian Migration, p. 172.

¹² Herbert Schell, History of South Dakota (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 42.

¹³ Personal interview with Eva Thompson, 6 Mar. 1981.

¹⁴ Abraham Jacobson, "A Pioneer Pastor's Journey to Dakota in 1861," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 6 (1931), 58.

school to begin or for confirmation instruction. Nonetheless, the other women's instruction in the Lutheran faith was as complete as Christianne's. All the parents of these women wanted their children to grow up strong in the faith.

A second way in which the Norwegian heritage was preserved was reflected in the importance that the settlers placed on education. In addition to sending their children to the public school, Norwegians formed parochial schools, which not only emphasized religion, the Bible, church history, and hymns, but also often taught non-religious subjects.¹⁵

The importance of the parochial school to the Norwegian families cannot be overemphasized. In 1909, for example, of the 3,001 congregations in the four Norwegian Lutheran Synods in America, 1,715 had parochial schools.¹⁶ South Dakota was no exception. Both St. Petri and Deer Creek Lutheran had parochial schools. These schools, taught in the Norwegian language, emphasized both religious and general education.¹⁷

Not only was parochial school emphasized, but Norwegians were concerned about higher education as well. All of the women who wrote the essays had the opportunity to attend high school. Moreover, Norwegians had built Lutheran colleges or

¹⁵Blegan, Norwegian Migration, p. 247.

¹⁶Blegan, Norwegian Migration, p. 275.

¹⁷Personal interview with R. Esther Erickson, 9 Feb. 1981.

normal schools quite early.¹⁸ Several of the women were encouraged to attend one of those. Ella Thompson Amundson, Clara Thompson Holm, and her sister Eva all attended Augustana Normal School at Canton, South Dakota.¹⁹ Christianne Jacobson Hovey went to St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.²⁰ Another option was the state school which also offered further education. Lottie Erickson Moody attended Madison Normal School, while her sister Esther went to Aberdeen Normal School and later Fairview Hospital Nursing School in Minneapolis.²¹

A third characteristic typical of these Norwegian settlers was their conservative Republicanism. Part of the reason for the conservatism stems from the time in which the first major wave of Norwegian immigration took place. In the 1840's and 50's, America was deeply divided over the controversial slave issue, and the issue immediately caught new immigrants' interest. The Norwegians abhorred slavery, and, in fact, that was one reason the group settled in Wisconsin and Minnesota during the 1840's and 50's, rather than in the South. Their horror and hatred of slavery was first a moral conviction; it soon became a political one.

¹⁸Blegen, Norwegian Migration, p. 543.

¹⁹Personal interview with Nora Thompson Alseike, 4 Mar. 1981.

²⁰Rolf Hovey interview.

²¹Erickson Family History, pp. 31, 34-35.

As the Norwegians banded together over the slavery issue, they quickly indoctrinated newcomers, and so it was that prior to 1884, almost every Norwegian immigrant became a Republican. After that, some of them occasionally became caught up in other movements--with the Populists, for example--but they nearly always returned to the Republican fold when the movement had died.²²

The slavery issue was not the only reason that Norwegians became Republicans, however. Their characters and heritage also played an important part in their conservatism. They came from one of the most democratic countries in Europe.²³ As a result, they had a natural independence, a respect for government, and a concern for public affairs.²⁴ Moreover, once they established themselves in America, they became landowners. As landowners, their goals were different from those of the workers who comprised the population of urban centers. As landowners, Norwegians were more likely to pay property taxes and to be concerned about government spending. Their progress in communities illustrates their wise use of government funds. When they

²² Kendric Charles Babcock, The Scandinavian Element in the United States (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), pp. 157-60.

²³ N. A. Grevstad, "Participation in American Politics," in Norwegian Immigrant Contributions to America's Making, ed. Harry Sundby-Hansen (1921; rpt. San Francisco: R and E Research Assoc., 1970), p. 107.

²⁴ Babcock, p. 157.

were elected to local governmental posts, they provided generously for public schools, road construction, and other improvements, but guarded against foolish waste or dishonesty in the use of public monies.²⁵

The Norwegian-Americans implanted their values in the minds of their children, who, in turn, also became conservatives. The settlers of Sterling Township were no exception. Conservative by nature, involved in public affairs, the fathers instilled their values into their children. When women became eligible to vote, all the women of Sterling Township voted out of interest and with a sense of responsibility. Most reflected their fathers' views.²⁶

A composite picture, then, of the women whose essays are under examination shows rural, middle class, educated, conservative Norwegian Lutherans. These characteristics are important, because it is within a regional setting that the essays can be best understood. Once one understands who these women are, she can then look at what the essays say, as well as why the women wrote them at all.

²⁵Grevstad, pp. 107-09.

²⁶R. Esther Erickson interview.

Chapter Three

A Wagon for an Altar

Lottie Erickson Moody once told the story of an incident that she remembered her mother telling her. A bride and groom were married at the Erickson homestead before any church in the area had been built. Any couple certainly wanted the marriage ceremony to be sacred in the eyes of God, and so the couple needed an altar. The Ericksons quickly improvised, putting a blanket over a wagon.¹

The point of Lottie's story is this: it is personal incidents such as these that really "make the history." Apparently the groom in the story was involved in the organization of St. John's Lutheran Church east of Sterling Township. Even though the St. John's history mentions the groom's name several times, it never once refers to the story of his marriage. If only the St. John's history had mentioned the event, Lottie said, how much more real it would have been.²

Lottie's words reflect her philosophy in her own writing, as well as the writing of most of the women in Sterling Township. They write history, but they also pepper their essays throughout with personal experiences that help the reader

¹Personal interview with Lottie Erickson Moody, 12 July 1975.

²Moody interview.

visualize the writers and their lives.

The three essays that Lottie wrote all contain personal incidents. The first, "History of St. Petri Church," is the most formal. Lottie gives a list of pastors who served the congregation. She includes lists of charter members, church officers, and various "firsts"--baptisms, confirmations, weddings and Christmas programs. She tells about the church building, the parochial school, and the choir. She gives the date when the church stopped conducting services in Norwegian, and she tells when St. Petri merged with First Lutheran of Bruce.

Not everything in the history is an impersonal list, however. Lottie indicates the importance of women in the church; and whenever she speaks of women's activities, her account grows more personal. For example, Lottie mentions the dedication of St. Petri Church on July 12, 1914. She takes special care to mention that "the women of the congregation served dinner in the grove back of the church between services."³ Later, Lottie describes one of the congregation's pastors, but it is only in connection with the Ladies Aid: "He was faithful in attending and conducting devotions at Ladies Aid meetings."⁴ Even though a formal church

³Lottie Erickson Moody, "History of St. Petri Church," manuscript in the possession of Grace Lutheran Church, Bruce, SD, about 1956, p. 8. Hereafter cited as "St. Petri Church."

⁴"St. Petri Church," p. 10.

history could easily have been written with no thought to the women's role, Lottie includes items about them that make the history more complete.

Lottie is even more personal in her "Reminiscence," which is also about St. Petri Church. In this essay, hardly any formal lists are given. Instead, Lottie looks at church customs. She talks about the financial obligation of the church members. She says that committees convened to collect money for specific projects, "whether it was to buy a stove, paint the church, or pay the minister's salary."⁵ Ministers, she says, were paid once or twice a year, but they always received festival collections.

Next, she explains the role of the "klokker"--the song leader. He was an important figure before the purchase of the organ. Lottie says that he was not paid, but at times he received a festival offering, too.

Lottie also talks about parochial school which was held six weeks in the summer. She says: "This did not work as great a hardship on the children as it might seem as public school was usually of only six or seven months duration."⁶ The indirect comparison with today's education gives the reader some perspective on the times. Lottie continues her

⁵Lottie Erickson Moody, "Reminiscence," manuscript dated October 1956, in the possession of Grace Lutheran Church, Bruce, SD, p. 1. Hereafter cited as "Reminiscence."

⁶"Reminiscence," p. 2.

paragraph about parochial school with the following personal item: "Sometimes a picnic and program was held at the close of school. Usually at the Ole Erickson home because of the grove and large lawn. Lumber was borrowed from the lumber yard at Bruce for erecting a platform and for benches."⁷

Ole Erickson was Lottie's father, and the Ole Erickson home was, of course, Lottie's home. What Lottie remembers most about parochial school is not necessarily the instruction, although she did, of course, think that was important. Instead, she remembers the picnic which took place at her home and to which she probably looked forward for days and days before the event.

Lottie also mentions women sitting on one side of the church and men on the other, as well as transportation to church, and church furnishings. Lottie ends with one of the only lists in the essay--that of descendants of the original members of St. Petri at the time of the merger with First Lutheran.

Lottie's last essay is a history of her immediate family. In it, she not only gives a short biographical sketch of each of her brothers and sisters and her parents, but she also goes into detail about early days. She talks about immigration; she discusses the homestead and environmental problems; and she talks about childhood, school,

⁷"Reminiscence," p. 3.

social life, religion, clothing, and living improvements. She devotes two paragraphs to music. In the first one, she says:

We were a music loving family but had little opportunity to gratify that taste. We had to make our own music, for the most part, and that consisted mainly of singing....I think we could sing as soon as we could talk. No one had a voice of any special beauty but we all enjoyed singing together, and we were encouraged to do so by our parents.⁸

Music represents the joyous part of the Erickson family life, but Lottie also reports the more difficult times. She says:

Rudolph became ill the fall of 1904. He grew steadily worse and in January, Doctor Kenney accompanied him to Minneapolis. The doctors who were consulted diagnosed his case as inoperable. He grew steadily worse and died March 17, 1905. This was the first death in our immediate family, and was a great sorrow to all of us, but especially to our parents.⁹

Rudolph was Lottie's brother. His death illustrates the hard times as well as the pleasant times that the family had together. All the times that Lottie describes are personal; after reading the Erickson History, the reader feels that she knows the Ericksons.

Other women of Sterling Township did work that was similar to Lottie's. Like Lottie, who wrote about St. Petri Church, Clara Thompson Holm wrote about Deer Creek Church.

⁸"Erickson History," p. 11.

⁹"Erickson History," p. 12.

Like Lottie, Clara also lists pastors, talks about parochial school, and explains the change from the Norwegian to the English language. Like Lottie, Clara also provides personal details. She says:

Adolph Hendrickson was born in a covered wagon on the banks of Deer Creek, where Ole Thompson, his uncle, had his homestead. Very early his parents drove in a lumber wagon to the home of Michael Trygstad near Lake Campbell to have him baptized. This took most of the day.¹⁰

Clara includes this personal event in her history for two reasons. First of all, it illustrates how important baptism was to the settlers. Lake Campbell was about 15 miles south of the Sterling settlement and a long way to take a newborn baby. Secondly, Adolph Hendrickson was Clara's cousin, so that the event was familiar to her.

In "Deer Creek Church," Clara takes advantage of familiar events in order to make the essay seem more personal. However, she does not continue that practice in her other essay, "Pioneer Women of Sterling Township, Brookings County, South Dakota," and this is how her writing differs from that of Lottie Erickson Moody. Clara does explain in detail the migration of her parents to Sterling Township, their sod house, and the frame house which replaced the sod one. Nonetheless, her descriptions of each of the

¹⁰ Clara Thompson Holm, "Deer Creek Church," manuscript in the possession of the author, 1975, pp. 1-2. Hereafter cited as "Deer Creek Church."

neighborhood women--Maren Kristine Krogstad Thompson, Inger Westrum Hovey, and Maren Vangen Ask--are rather sketchy. Clara does provide short biographies of each of the women, including when they were born, when they were married, and if they still have children living. However, she does not provide interesting anecdotes about their lives. There is one exception. That is Mrs. Fasbender, Sterling Township's midwife. Because Clara knew little about her, the sketch concentrates on one incident in Mrs. Fasbender's life. From that one incident, one learns more about her than about all the other women whom Clara describes:

A German family by the name of Fasbender settled on the land joining the Thompson's. Shortly after they had come, the father died, leaving his wife and several children. They were of Catholic faith. There was no Catholic priest for miles away, so the mother conducted the service for her husband much to her neighbor's admiration.¹¹

Because Mrs. Fasbender was German, Clara did not know her very well. Thus, Clara could not list Mrs. Fasbender's birth date, marriage date, and who her children were, as she could with the Norwegian neighbors. Instead, Clara is forced to describe her differently, so she looks at Mrs. Fasbender's strength at the time of her husband's death.

The third woman to write an essay about the community

¹¹Clara Thompson Holm, "Pioneer Women of Sterling Township, Brookings County, South Dakota," manuscript in the possession of R. Esther Erickson, about 1973, p. 3. Hereafter cited as "Pioneer Women."

was Ella Thompson Amundson. Ella's essay, "History of the First Lutheran Church and Aid of Bruce, S.D." fills the gap between Clara's essay on Deer Creek Church and Lottie's essay on St. Petri Church. In 1922, Deer Creek Church was moved to Bruce, and its name was changed to First Lutheran Church. St. Petri was also moved to Bruce in 1956, and it was joined to First Lutheran. The congregation's name was then changed to Grace Lutheran. Ella's essay covers the time from the organization of Deer Creek Church to about 15 years before First Lutheran joined with St. Petri.

Ella's essay is very similar to both Lottie's and Clara's church histories. She speaks of pastors and organizations, and of the chronological history of church activities and their effect on the ladies aid. At the same time, Ella also describes specific events and customs, making the history more personal. Of the organization of the ladies aid, Ella says:

...at the invitation of Mrs. P. J. Hovey the first meeting was held at her pioneer home. The home was perhaps more roomy than most of the others in the neighborhood. It consisted of three rooms on the first floor, a sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen and a low upstairs or loft used for a sleeping room. The pioneer homes were all small, simple and inconvenient, but they were full of hospitality towards everyone and there were hopes of bigger and better homes in the future.¹²

¹²Ella Thompson Amundson, "History of the First Lutheran Church and Aid of Bruce, SD," typescript in the possession of Grace Lutheran Church, Bruce, SD, about 1942, p. 1.

Describing Mrs. Hovey's home in such detail certainly personalizes the account. The description makes it easier for the reader to visualize the first meeting, which Ella goes on to describe:

As nearly as can be remembered the lunch served by Mrs. Hovey at this first meeting consisted of dried apricot sauce, bread and butter, cake, coffee, and possibly cold meat. This was the usual type of a lunch served according to the rules of the Aid. The food was all placed on the table and the guests seated around the table instead of being served cafeteria or lap supper as they do now.¹³

The specific incident--cataloguing the food--flows into the explanation of the custom--eating around the table instead of holding lap suppers.

Ella often begins with a specific fact about the aid and then relates it to a custom. Another example follows:

After the church was completed the Ladies Aid continued their work and donated to charities, missions and local expenses. As the years passed on a favorite means of raising money was by having ice cream socials during the summer. The ice cream was homemade and the socials very well attended. The young people amused themselves by games on the lawn like pig in the parlor, etc., and the ladies served the ice cream, cake and coffee.¹⁴

Ella begins with the fact that the Ladies Aid continued with its work, but very soon she is describing the custom--the ice cream social.

¹³Amundson, p. 1.

¹⁴Amundson, p. 2.

One other woman, Ida Hovey Pickering, wrote about the church. Ida's untitled letter is especially personal and reminisces about the church, the ladies aid, and her family in relation to the church. She does not spend much time on formal lists. Instead, she tells about events if they involve herself. She says: "Services in church were every 3rd Sunday. Between those times we had services every Sunday A.M. to home. Mother & Father would take turns reading from the text book, sometimes some 5 pages."¹⁵ Rather than talking about the services held at the church, Ida remembers best the intimate devotions held among her family members.

Later, Ida continues: "Everyone in my family are burried where the church used to be except Rhoda. She is burried in Minnesota where Otto had a congregation."¹⁶ Ida shows the importance of Deer Creek Church to her family. All except her sister Rhoda were buried in its cemetery. Rhoda permanently left the community, doing as most brides did. She followed her husband to his congregation in Minnesota.

Like her sister, Ida did not stay in the community either. She calls herself "almost a native Californian."¹⁷

¹⁵Letter received from Ida Hovey Pickering, 6 July 1975, p. 3.

¹⁶Pickering letter, pp. 5-6.

¹⁷Pickering letter, p. 5.

The rest of her letter is about herself and her move to California. She says that her parents spent winters in California; and as a result, she found work there. Other than during a short time after her marriage when she lived in South Dakota, she continued to live in California.

At the end of her letter, Ida refers once again to her girlhood church: "I was in that church in 1956 to my brother Peter's funeral. Very few of that generation left."¹⁸ "Very few of that generation left"--Ida's letter seems to close the chapter on those pioneer experiences. Her memory is one of the few remaining.

Nora Thompson Alseike's essay is slightly different from the others. Nora writes a biography of her mother that looks like an autobiography. Writing as if it is her mother speaking, Nora tells the story of her mother, Mary Thompson. The essay relates personal events. It talks about the trip to Sterling Township, for instance. It relates the events surrounding the building of the house, working, and marrying. Sterling Township's midwife is also discussed. The essay is generally optimistic. At one point, Mary's relationship with her husband is given: "Here he and I raised our family of seven children and enjoyed and endured the hardships of

¹⁸Pickering letter, p. 6.

life together for many years."¹⁹ At the end of the essay is this: "Needless to say, in spite of all the hardships and privations connected with pioneering, we were all happy and had lots and lots of good times together."²⁰ The optimism shows that pioneers were not obsessed with drudgery nor despondent about hardships. They had good feelings about their experiences and "lots and lots of good times together."

The last woman whose essays are under consideration is Christianne Jacobson Hovey. Unlike the others, Christianne was not born in Sterling Township. She came to the Hovey homestead after she and her husband decided to move there from Sioux City. Christianne's work, however, complements the other essays. It deals with many of the same concerns as the other essays, and it sometimes deals directly with Sterling Township events.

Her first essay, "History and Development of the Young People's League," was written about 1913 while she was principal in Hettinger, North Dakota, and before she came to Sterling Township. Nonetheless, it deals with a subject in which all the women were interested--the church. The work is scholarly and shows Christianne's avid interest in the

¹⁹ [Nora Thompson Alseike], "Mrs. Mary Thompson of Bruce Relates Hardships & Joys of Pioneer Days," in Pioneer Life: Dakota Territory 1861-1889, ed. Arthur S. Mitchell ([Brookings, SD]: n.p., n.d.), p. 79. Hereafter cited as "Mrs. Mary Thompson."

²⁰ "Mrs. Mary Thompson," pp. 78-79.

church. First of all, she speaks of the perseverance of the immigrant; secondly, she looks at the conflict in the church; and finally, she extends a plea to the young people of her time to continue their interest in the church. She ties the issues together near the end of the essay: "We the young people owe our church and the church of our forefathers a great debt. How shall we pay it? By giving our youth, our strength and our sincerity. Let us help to build up rather than to tear asunder."²¹ Christianne's plea to the young people is personal; it is an affirmation of her faith. It also reminds the young people of the sacrifices of their forefathers. Then she reminds them not "to tear asunder," calling to mind church conflict.

Her other essays are about events that occurred in Sterling Township. One work, "Life In U.S.," is a sketch in which she describes her twin son, Rolf. The other is an autobiographical poem. In it, she speaks of her childhood, education, and career; but she also talks about her life after moving to the Hovey homestead. She says:

Taxes, interest, no farm relief
Drought, besides low price for beef
But all in all we're thankful to be
Here on the rich fertile prairie.²²

²¹ Christianne Jacobson Hovey, "The History and Development of the Young People's League," manuscript in the possession of Judy Hovey Rentsch, about 1913, p. 8. Hereafter cited as "Young People's League."

²² Christianne Jacobson Hovey, untitled poem in the possession of Judy Hovey Rentsch, about 1933, p. 2.

Like the essay about Mary Thompson, Christianne maintains her optimism. In spite of drought and hard times, the land is rich and promising. Christianne ends her poem with her reasons for joining the legion auxiliary. She says:

In nineteen hundred and thirty three
I joined the Legion Auxiliary.
May I together with all the rest
Be patriotic. Do what is best.
May I live the A.L.A. Code loyal and free
With love, courage, and fidelity.²³

Once again, her optimism for her future and her country is emphasized.

Other than Nora Thompson Alseike's chronicle about her mother, which was published by Arthur S. Mitchell along with the stories of many other Brookings County pioneers, none of the manuscripts were meant for widespread public consideration. Rather, they were reflections of the women themselves. These women bared their souls on paper. They told about their faith, they spoke of their families, they wrote about themselves, and they presented many of their own ideas.

It is through these essays that the reader starts to see distinct personalities emerge. In many ways, the women are alike. They have the same concerns. They write only about topics with which they are familiar. As members of a Norwegian community, they think like others who have their backgrounds.

Nonetheless, the reader sees some differences. Lottie

²³Hovey, poem, p. 2.

Erickson Moody is conscious that personal experiences count in history. She uses them deliberately. Clara Thompson Holm's approach is different. She is concerned with dates and facts. If she thinks of a personal experience, she uses it, but she is not as conscious of form.

Ella Thompson Amundson works with relationships. Unlike Lottie or Clara, Ella relates everything in her history to the community at large. Her concern is with customs, and those are the qualities that make her work personal. Ida Hovey Pickering, on the other hand, ignores the larger community. She tells almost everything as it affected her family or herself. Her work is immensely personal.

Nora Thompson Alseike is different from Ida. Nora takes no credit for her work, preferring to be the ghost writer. It is her mother whose story is of interest; Nora does not consider offering something about herself. Christianne Jacobson Hovey, however, wants to let people have a chance to know her. She writes specifically about her experiences.

Even as differences in styles and personalities emerge, the reader wonders why the women bothered to write at all. The answer goes more deeply than just a wish to preserve events of the past. The women of Sterling Township want to preserve something of themselves. They need to prove their presence in the community, as well as to identify their roots. Consequently, almost every essay talks about family

members, even when the essay itself is about something else.

One could examine a number of examples. In her "Reminiscence," Lottie Erickson Moody includes a list of couples who celebrated their golden wedding anniversaries in St. Petri Church. Among the couples were her parents, Ole and Petra Erickson.²⁴ Ella Thompson Amundson does something similar. In her "History of First Lutheran Ladies Aid, Bruce, SD," Ella makes the following remarks:

Fifty five years have passed since the first meeting held in the simple pioneer home of Mrs. Hovey. They have been years of earnest endeavor and have been inspired by the age old motive: Love for the Gospel of Christ and the church. Of the original members, one remains, Mrs. Mary Thompson. The last three years she has been confined to her home on account of illness but up until then she was keenly interested in the affairs of the church and Aid. She is eighty years old.²⁵

Mrs. Mary Thompson was Ella's mother. Ida Hovey Pickering mentions what she believes to have been the first wedding in Deer Creek Church. That happened to be the wedding of her sister, Rhoda.²⁶ Besides, there is Nora Thompson Alseike, who wrote her mother's memoirs; Clara Thompson Holm, who talked about her mother and home in "Pioneer Women of Sterling Township, Brookings County, SD"; and Christianne Jacobson Hovey, who wrote the sketch about her twin son.

²⁴"Reminiscence," p. 6.

²⁵Amundson, p. 4.

²⁶Pickering letter, p. 6.

It was not until they were adults, though, that the women realized the importance of preserving their heritages. Nora Thompson Alseike says that she did not ever consider her parents as a significant part of the pioneer experience.²⁷ R. Esther Erickson says that all the women grew up in a peaceful time. The Spanish-American War was over, and, she says, "nothing serious was happening." As a result, the women were unaware of any need to preserve their identities.²⁸

As they grew older, however, they began to think about their experiences and their parents' experiences as part of history. R. Esther Erickson explains her sister Lottie's interest. Lottie Erickson Moody took turns with her other sisters in caring for their mother. Lottie started to ask her mother what it was like when she was young. Lottie took notes. Years later her family encouraged her to put her notes into essay form.²⁹

As Lottie asked her mother about her girlhood experiences, she began to realize the value of the pioneer experience. She was interested. Ella Thompson Amundson was also "interested," according to her sister, Nora. Ella turned her energies toward a history of the ladies aid. Nora says that the history was probably not done for any

²⁷Nora Thompson Alseike interview.

²⁸R. Esther Erickson interview.

²⁹R. Esther Erickson interview.

special occasion; instead, it was done because Ella thought that the organization of the ladies aid was significant enough to record.³⁰ Christianne Jacobson Hovey apparently had the same attitude as Ella. Her work suggests a wish to preserve a part of herself, regardless of whether or not it was written for any special occasion.

While some of the women realized the importance of their time when they were still young women, others did not begin to write until they were old. Then, it occurred to them that their memories were important links with the past. Often, at the urging of others, they began to record the people and events that they remembered. Clara Thompson Holm and Ida Hovey Pickering are examples of women who wrote essays as late as 1975. At that time, Ida was 89 years old and Clara 94.

It is, then, a wish to preserve something of themselves that is a motivating force for the women. As they got older, they realized just how important their parents' roles were in the settlement of the area. They understood the importance of these events. They saw that they provided a link between their parents' past and their children's future. They knew that those past experiences would be lost if they did not preserve them, and with those past experiences would go part of their roots and themselves. Their presence in

³⁰Nora Thompson Alseike interview.

the community would be forgotten, and if they would be remembered at all, it would be only as a name, not as a personality.

As a result, the women wrote. They preserved. What they preserved, of course, were the events with which they were familiar. They hoped to be remembered either for what they did, or, perhaps, of even greater significance, for what they knew. Were their stories very different from the stories of other women? One can only answer that question by comparing the two and also by analyzing what they chose to write about.

Chapter Four

No Search for a Topic

In her article, "Frontier Women: A Model for All Women?", June Sochen says that there were few if any women who could do as Huck Finn did and light out for the territory; there were few who could be an Odysseus with adventures and explorations of their own.¹

Instead, women were locked into a role as mother and homemaker whose concerns were restricted to domesticity and certainly to the community of which they were a part. Consequently, their interests did not involve events outside their experiences. As Elizabeth Hampsten points out, women never wrote about wars, Presidents, local governments, science, or even suffrage.² Rather, they wrote about the church, their families, their careers--all subjects to which women were closely tied.

These are the topics about which the women of Sterling Township chose to write. As the women were growing up, the suffrage and temperance movements were strong in South Dakota. Susan B. Anthony's involvement in the South Dakota

¹"Frontier Women: A Model for All Women?" South Dakota History, 7 (1976), 38.

²"Warning: This Is Not a Book," in To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota, ed. Elizabeth Hampsten (Grand Forks: Dept. of English, Univ. of North Dakota, 1 Jan. 1979), p. 2.

campaign during 1889 and 1890 attracted national attention.³ The Populist movement also grew. In 1896, for instance, the Populists achieved victory when they joined forces with the Democrats and Free-Silver Republicans as the Fusionists. Andrew E. Lee, the Fusionist candidate, was elected governor in a traditionally Republican state.⁴ These movements are never mentioned in the essays. The women deal only with those events that touch their lives directly.

The reasons for dealing with church, families, and careers, however, go beyond mere familiarity with the topics. In fact, each subject involves intricate relationships--of the women to their God, to their families, and to society. Moreover, the women of Sterling Township are not alone in these relationships. Several novels have been written that describe the same relationships. The novels perhaps have more complicated plots, perhaps employ more sophisticated literary techniques, perhaps have more memorable characterizations than the essays written by Sterling Township women, but they convey the same ideas and emotions because they are concerned with the same subjects.

Consequently, one can determine why the women of

³Dorinda Riessen Reed, The Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota (Vermillion, SD: Governmental Research Bureau, State Univ. of South Dakota, 1941), p. 114.

⁴Herbert S. Schell, South Dakota: A Student's Guide to Localized History, ed. Clifford L. Lord (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia Univ., 1971), p. 28.

Sterling Township wrote about the church, the family, and their careers if she looks at the general reasons behind the choice of subjects and at novels that deal with similar concerns. The novels chosen for comparison are set in South Dakota and are, for the most part, about immigrant Norwegians. The novels indicate that Sterling Township women are representative of their area and in their experiences. After examining both the reasons behind the women's choices and the comparison with the novels, one can conclude that the women of Sterling Township wrote about affairs closely tied to their environment. Because of the close tie, much of the women's writing is regional; it describes the locality and the values of the area. It is also universal, however, because the topics are related to concerns of all women.

It has already been established that the church was an important force in the lives of these women, but it is important to analyze their involvement in greater detail. According to O. M. Norlie, Norway was probably the most Lutheran country in the world during the period of immigration.⁵ Even as late as 1925, 99 percent of all Norwegians were Lutherans.⁶ As emigrants boarded ships, those left behind emphasized the importance of reading the Bible and saying prayers, even amidst good-byes. Most Norwegian

⁵History of the Norwegian People in America (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1925), p. 207.

⁶Norlie, p. 188.

immigrants came to America not only with their hopes for a prosperous future, but with their Bibles, hymn books, and catechisms.⁷ The immigrants were deeply religious and often thought back to their home church in Norway. The book, Haul the Water Haul the Wood, by Doris Stensland, gives an example. The main character, Johanna, still thinks of her home church. Her love of God is as strong as it was when she left Norway.⁸

The result of the strong tradition of Lutheranism among the Norwegian-Americans was that the settlers came with the immediate concern of organizing a congregation and building a church. Trina Burson, the main character in the book Trina, by Inga Hansen Dickerson, is Danish, but her concerns are precisely those of the Norwegian settlers. She says, "The buiding of a church is the greatest step we can take to subdue the prairie. After the church will come everything."⁹

Feelings among the Sterling Township women were no different from those of Johanna and Trina. Sterling parents had taught them well, as Clara Thompson Holm writes in her essay, "Deer Creek Church": "As children were born to them they became zealous in bringing them up in the fear and

⁷Norlie, p. 191.

⁸Haul the Water Haul the Wood (Aberdeen, SD: North Plains Press, 1979), p. 89.

⁹Trina (New York: Comet Press Books, 1956), p. 171.

admonition of the Lord and especially to teach them 'To keep the Sabbath Day Holy'! How Important."¹⁰

In addition to a strong theological heritage, the church was a comfort to Norwegian-Americans in times of trouble. The church became a stable force in a sometimes difficult environment. Settlers were forced to contend with floods, droughts, hot winds, insects, prairie fires, blizzards, and subzero temperatures. These problems were particularly difficult because the land was new and strange to the settlers, and they were not prepared for the problems that the environment caused.¹¹

As a disaster descended upon them, the settlers expressed a need for their God. It is the only way in which they could cope. In the novels, everything is explained in terms of an angry or a benevolent God. When the grasshopper plague descends upon the Norwegian settlement in Ole Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth, Beret is sure that it is God's punishment for Per Hansa's wickedness.¹² Others, however, thank God for helping them through the crisis. When Johanna and Ole Overseth receive a check from Johanna's

¹⁰"Deer Creek Church," p. 1.

¹¹Everett Dick, The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas and Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas (Lincoln, NE: Johnsen Publishing Co., 1954), p. 202.

¹²Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie, trans. Lincoln Colcord and O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), p. 349.

father during the grasshopper plague in Haul the Water Haul the Wood, they immediately fall to their knees in thanksgiving.¹³ The church, then, provides a refuge, as O. H. Olseth's book, Mama Came from Norway, illustrates. After the Nelsons arrive in drought-stricken Harding County, Siri Nelson's first concern is the organization of the church. She says, "In these times in which we are living we must have good schools and churches...We must organize a congregation soon."¹⁴

Natural disasters were familiar to the settlers of Sterling Township as well. Drought was a problem in 1885 and 1894. Spring floods occurred in 1881, 1888, 1895, and 1897. Particularly bad blizzards occurred in the winters of 1880-1881 and 1887-1888.¹⁵ The settlers learned to turn to their God during these difficulties and encouraged their daughters to do the same. The women, then, could appreciate difficult times and the need for spiritual guidance. Ella Thompson Amundson's interpretation of the early experiences of the settlers links the two:

The first step [toward organizing a congregation] had been taken, and looking into the future these pioneers had visions of a church which would be their own and where the gospel would be preached to them

¹³Stensland, p. 102.

¹⁴Mama Came from Norway (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1955), p. 44.

¹⁵G. O. Sandro, History of Brookings County (Vermillion, SD: Univ. of South Dakota, 1936), pp. 31-32. M.S. thesis in history.

and coming generations. A place where they could bring their children for baptism and where all other sacred rites could be performed. They had very little money and their lives were a struggle as they faced bitterly cold winters and other privations. But they possessed a dauntless courage and determination that overcame all obstacles.¹⁶

Finally, the church provided a social outlet for the women. As June Sochen explains in Herstory, church activities gave them the chance to gossip, to discuss problems, and to forget responsibilities for a while.¹⁷ Getting together for church services was one way in which the women could socialize. Usually, too, the organization of the church meant the organization of the ladies aid, which was extremely important for women. In Giants In the Earth, as everyone gathers at Per Hansa's home for services, many are dreaming of the time in which they will be able to organize their own ladies aid. One woman thinks about the fun that the aid will provide, with meetings, cakes, coffee, and sewing. She can hardly wait to begin.¹⁸ The Overseth's neighborhood in Haul the Water Haul the Wood does organize a ladies aid. The women gather at the Skorheim home. There they have lunch, read the Bible, sing, and knit.¹⁹

¹⁶ Amundson, p. 1.

¹⁷ Herstory: A Woman's View of American History (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., 1974), p. 24.

¹⁸ Rølvaag, p. 375.

¹⁹ Stensland, pp. 112-13.

Just as the ladies aids were formed in several localities across South Dakota, so was a ladies aid formed in Sterling Township. Ella Thompson Amundson writes that the ladies aid met at the home of Mrs. P. J. Hovey for its first meeting because it was the largest home in the neighborhood. Ella explains in detail what the meeting was like, including what Mrs. Hovey served for lunch--"dried apricot sauce, bread and butter, cake, coffee and possibly cold meat."²⁰

A second subject of interest to the women was the home and family. The reasons for the interest are obvious. As June Sochen points out, the responsibilities of the women's wife-mother roles kept them closely tied to the home. All their work, from difficult chores to childbearing, centered around the home.²¹ Because the women's world centered around the home, the house became especially important to them. For early settlers, as Carolyn Sands explains, moving from a sod house to a frame one was a significant development. The frame house was the ultimate goal. Settlers would sometimes progress from a dugout to a soddie to a frame house; sometimes they began with the soddie itself; other times a log cabin or a tar paper shack was a settler's first home. The

²⁰ Amundson, p. 1.

²¹ Sochen, "Frontier Women," pp. 42-43.

temporary homes were always crude, modest, and utilitarian.²² Settlers endured the inconveniences of sod homes until they finally had the resources with which to build what they wanted.

The frame house was such an important step in the settlers' lives that novelists go into great detail when explaining its construction. For example, Inga Hansen Dickerson explains the situation surrounding the large house that Trina and Peder Burson built, from its solid rock foundation to the "corners toward the four winds." Dickerson says, "In all that region there was not a house like it." It is large, and other neighbors envy it.²³ In Haul the Water Haul the Wood, the Overseths also build a new home. The house, constructed in 1878, had a loft of several rooms and even a corner downstairs for another bedroom. The old shanty became a summer kitchen and wash house.²⁴

The frame house was equally as important to the Sterling Township writers. Because the parents of the women had only recently improved their living conditions, the women were interested in the move from soddie to frame

²² Carolyn Sands, "Frontier Architecture of the Big Sioux Valley: 1865-1885," in Big Sioux Pioneers: Essays About the Settlement of the Dakota Prairie Frontier, ed. Arthur R. Huseboe (Sioux Falls, SD: Nordland Heritage Foundation, Augustana College, 1980), pp. 29-30.

²³ Dickerson, p. 168.

²⁴ Stensland, p. 116.

house. Clara Thompson Holm writes that her father built their frame house in 1882.²⁵ Lottie Erickson Moody, like the novelists, gives a detailed description of the Erickson frame house. Lottie says that it was 14 feet by 16 feet. The first winter it was insulated against the cold by piling sod around it from the ground to the roof. Later it was sided and plastered.²⁶

The women's world also centered around birth and children. For the early pioneers, birth was an ordeal. Usually, doctors were miles away, and women had to rely upon each other for support. According to June Sochen, midwives were the doctors of the frontier.²⁷ Beret's neighbor Sørinne helps her through the birth of Peder Seier in Giants in the Earth.²⁸ Johanna Overseth is assisted in birth by the midwife Ingeborg in Haul the Water Haul the Wood.²⁹

Sterling Township also employed a midwife, Mrs. Fasbender, who received five dollars for her services. Nora Thompson Alseike's mother says that she had the midwife for her first four children.³⁰ Eventually, women were able to get a doctor when they gave birth. June Sochen says that

²⁶ "Erickson History," p. 3.

²⁷ Sochen, "Frontier Women," p. 46.

²⁸ Rølvaag, p. 237.

²⁹ Stensland, p. 108.

³⁰ "Mrs. Mary Thompson," p. 79.

often midwives were better trained than the doctor, who had no practical experience. Nonetheless, women assumed that doctors were more competent and knew more about birth. Consequently, women would replace midwives with doctors as soon as possible.³¹ Nora Thompson Alseike's mother had a doctor assist her when she gave birth to her last three children.³² By the time the Sterling Township writers were giving birth to their own children, doctors were common. Nonetheless, most of them had heard about the midwife.

Once the women had children, nothing seemed so precious to them. Their love for their children is not surprising. As Sheila Ruth points out, women have always had almost complete responsibility for their children, in everything from physical needs to spiritual needs.³³ Siri, in Mama Came from Norway, is certain that her children are her greatest blessing. She enjoys the companionship that they provide her.³⁴ Every mother wanted the best for her children. Grace Fairchild, whose story is told in Frontier Woman, homesteaded west of Pierre; yet she worked hard to provide her children with an education in a time when it was

³¹ Sochen, "Frontier Women," p. 46.

³² "Mrs. Mary Thompson," p. 79.

³³ "Women's Private Space: Asymmetry Becomes the Double Standard," in Issues in Feminism: A First Course in Women's Studies, ed. Sheila Ruth (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), p. 256.

³⁴ Olseth, p. 53.

difficult to get to a school.³⁵

Sterling Township women were little different from those mothers characterized in the novels. They loved their children and always tried to do what was best for them. An excerpt from Christianne Jacobson Hovey's untitled poem shows the love that she felt for her children. She explains why she and her husband moved from Sioux City back to the Hovey homestead:

We set up our home in a busy city
 Later we felt it was rather a pity
 To rear a growing family
 On a crowded lot.³⁶

They had moved to Sioux City after their marriage because Carl, Christianne's husband, was working for the railroad.³⁷

Apparently, a healthy environment in which to raise their children took precedence even over Carl's career. Christianne says that a crowded lot is a poor place for growing children; she thinks the farm back in Sterling Township will be much better.

The other subject about which the women wrote was career. Women certainly were not expected to pursue a career, but many of them held careers until they married. After their marriages, though, as June Sochen explains, the

³⁵Wyman D. Walker, Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier (River Falls: Univ. of Wisconsin-River Falls Press, 1972), p. 34.

³⁶Hovey, poem, p. 1.

³⁷Rolf Hovey interview.

women quit work because they were expected to be wives and mothers. Careers were considered only of secondary importance to women, suitable only until their marriages.³⁸

Nevertheless, there were several careers open to single women. One such occupation was teaching. Grace Fairchild, in Frontier Woman, comes to Parker, South Dakota, to teach school. After she marries Shiloh Fairchild, she quits teaching in order to go west with him. Sometimes she wishes that she could go back to teaching, but she knows that it is impossible with babies coming every year. She never teaches again.³⁹ Christianne Jacobson Hovey's untitled poem expresses the same situation as Grace Fairchild had.

Christianne says:

And ere long we decided to wed
Thus ends the career of one co-ed
Our marriage took place in early June
Midwinter next was our honeymoon.⁴⁰

Many of the women became teachers. Lottie Erickson Moody taught both in South Dakota and Montana. Her sister, R. Esther Erickson, taught school in South Dakota and Minnesota before going to nursing school. Both Clara Thompson Holm and Ella Thompson Amundson taught. Christianne Jacobson Hovey was history and Latin teacher as well as principal in Hettinger, North Dakota. Once they were

³⁸ Sochen, "Frontier Women," p. 48.

³⁹ Walker, p. 20.

⁴⁰ Hovey, poem, p. 1.

married, their teaching careers usually ended.

Sometimes, before a woman became a teacher, she would become a housekeeper. Children of immigrant parents, in particular, often found jobs in other people's homes in order to help their parents pay debts or in order to support themselves in school. Willa Cather's My Antonia talks of the opportunity for the immigrant girls as hired housekeepers. Antonia, Lena Lingard, and Norwegian Anna all make money in town and send it home to their families. The money given to the parents helps to make the immigrants prosperous early.⁴¹ In Trina, the same type of situation occurs. Trina's sister-in-law, Cathrine, becomes a maid in the home of a doctor in order to help the family. The doctor's family likes her so much that she promises to stay indefinitely.⁴²

In Sterling Township, both Clara Thompson Holm's and Nora Thompson Alseike's mothers worked almost immediately after coming to Dakota. Their parents had not forced them to do so, but they were proud of the salary that they made. Nora's mother started at two dollars a week and eventually made three dollars.⁴³ Nora herself worked for her room and board so that she could attend high school.⁴⁴ Lottie

⁴¹My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), p. 200.

⁴²Dickerson, p. 75.

⁴³"Mrs. Mary Thompson," p. 79.

⁴⁴Nora Thompson Alseike interview.

Erickson Moody's sister, Esther, did the same thing. Lottie herself talks about several housekeeping jobs that she and her sister Bertha held as they embarked on their "big adventure." Lottie and her sister wanted to see the West, so, as Lottie says, they did "as the hobos do." They worked their way, mostly doing housekeeping. At one point, they even picked olives in the San Fernando Valley.⁴⁵

Occasionally, women did find unusual careers. In Deborah, by Marian Castle, there are several women who do not follow traditional job patterns. Deborah's daughter Arden works as an advertiser; her daughter Gay wants to be an artist.⁴⁶ Grace Fairchild, in Frontier Woman, becomes a homesteader. Although she claims the land along with her husband, she is the one who manages the homestead, and she is the one who eventually farms the 1440 acres of land that she acquires.⁴⁷ Grace also acquires veterinary skills. She served as midwife for most of the farm animals. Grace says that she did not mind the job and that "life was more important than being squeamish about it."⁴⁸ Lottie Erickson Moody also became a homesteader. She proved up on 120 acres

⁴⁵"Erickson History," p. 31.

⁴⁶Deborah (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1946), p. 235.

⁴⁷Walker, p. 2.

⁴⁸Walker, p. 66.

of land in Montana in 1919.⁴⁹

Another person in Sterling Township who had an unusual career was Ida Hovey Pickering. She says that she worked for the phone company in 1912 in Los Angeles. She and her parents spent the winter there and came back to South Dakota in the spring by train. Their second winter was spent in Long Beach and their third in San Diego where Ida again worked for the phone company. She held the job until she married and went back to South Dakota to live. Ida says that her experience was not actually by choice, but just the way it happened. She did what her mother wanted her to do.⁵⁰

Eventually, one can understand why women chose to write about church, family, and career. The women had personal experiences involving all three. They had been brought up in a religious environment, had learned to turn to the church in times of trouble, and had enjoyed the social affairs that the church provided. They helped each other during childbirth; they loved their children. They found jobs--usually teaching or housekeeping, occasionally something less usual. They quit their jobs when they married. Finally, they put their experiences on paper, or if not their own experiences, they described situations close to their experiences, whether

⁴⁹"Erickson History," p. 31.

⁵⁰Pickering letter, p. 5.

it was something that they had observed or something that they had heard about. They ignored other areas in which they were not involved--government, suffrage, temperance.

Most important, they did not have to search for a topic, because what they wrote about was not unusual. The significance of their subjects has been discussed by many social historians; the subjects themselves have been illustrated in novels and other accounts. The subjects, which are the concerns of every woman, are, as Emily Toth suggests, the closest to defining the human experience on an emotional level. These are the subjects that are universal.

Chapter Five

The Literature of the Unlettered

If the women of Sterling Township wrote essays about universal subjects, then certainly the essays must be of some value. Yet, until recently, the essays would have been discounted as history, to say nothing of any consideration for their literary value. As such, their significance would certainly have been over looked.

There were several reasons for this lack of interest in local histories. First of all, local histories have often appeared as a group of unrelated facts and events. Underlying reasons for the historical developments--the how and the why--have been ignored.¹ Secondly, there has frequently been an air of impersonality surrounding studies of history. The immigrant experience, for instance, has always been dealt with generally by the historian. Rather than looking at the individual's experience in immigration, the historian has looked only at the public and common reasons that people came to the United States, assuming that the aggregate experience was simply a summation of the individual experience.² Thirdly, and most important, there has been what Theodore

¹Clifford L. Lord, Teaching History with Community Resources, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia Univ., 1946), p. 16.

²Theodore Blegen, ed., Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 7.

Blegen calls "inverted provincialism." Historians have failed to grasp the importance of the common person and of everyday life.³ Instead, they have examined political, diplomatic, and military history. Women, who were not concerned with those things, have simply been neglected.⁴ Subjects considered important to women--church, family, their careers--have been ignored.

In light of inverted provincialism, Theodore Blegen says that it is the novelist who has done a better job than the historian in interpreting the experiences of the common person.⁵ In fact, the Norwegian-American immigrant literature, which for the most part has never been translated, provides many historical facts.⁶ Most of these works are not artistic, and in fact, only Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth transcends the immediate experience, as Carolyn Geyer points out.⁷ Nonetheless, as Dorothy Burton Skardahl says, most of the novels are good source material for history, because

³Grass Roots History (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1947), p. 5.

⁴Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," Journal of Social History, 4 (1969), 333.

⁵Blegen, Grass Roots, p. 9.

⁶Blegen, Norwegian Migration, p. 585.

⁷Carolyn Geyer, "An Introduction to Ole Rølvaag (1876-1931)," in Big Sioux Pioneers: Essays About the Settlement of the Dakota Prairie Frontier, ed. Arthur R. Huseboe (Sioux Falls, SD: Nordland Heritage Foundation, Augustana College, 1980), p. 59.

they reconstruct the immigrant experience, looking at cultural problems, conflict, and tensions.⁸ However, Blegen continues, the writers of this fiction always record the dramatic, always talk about the hardships and sacrifice. The good things in life are often forgotten.⁹ Therefore, novels in themselves are hardly adequate as documents of social history.

As a result, people who express an interest in studying the life of the common person have begun to look elsewhere--away from traditional histories and historical novels. People have begun to look at journals, diaries, letters, and scraps.¹⁰

Because Scandinavians usually did not keep journals--and if they did, they only recorded weather, crops, and prices--those who are interested in the experiences of plain Norwegian-American men and women have turned to the "America-letters."¹¹ Theodore Blegen calls the letters a "diary on a grand scale" of the Norwegian immigrant experience.¹² As an example, he tells the story of a woman who

⁸The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experiences Through Literary Sources (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 53.

⁹Blegen, Grass Roots, p. 103.

¹⁰Elizabeth Hampsten, "This is Christmas Eve and I am in Tintah," College English, 39 (1978), 671.

¹¹Skardahl, p. 335.

¹²Blegen, Grass Roots, p. 6.

came to America in 1862 and lived until 1878 near Estherville, Iowa. Blegen says that those dates would be the extent of the knowledge about her except that she wrote countless letters back to Norway about her American experiences. Those letters tell of the death of one of her children, how she learned English, the newness of life for her in America, and of her husband's Civil War service. The letters stopped just after the birth of her tenth child.¹³

These letters examine the social and intellectual experience of the common person which is often ignored by traditional histories or overly dramatized by historical novels.¹⁴ Blegen calls the letters the "literature of the unlettered." He says that some might argue with the use of the word literature, but the point is that the people who wrote the letters are articulate.¹⁵ More important, these people become real personalities through the letters. They are human beings with names; they are people who fell in love, married, had children, worked in their churches; they are people who had sorrows, joys, and dreams for their lives.¹⁶

Although these people who wrote the "literature of the unlettered" may not have had the finesse of the professional historians and novelists, they nonetheless were able to

¹³Blegen, Grass Roots, pp. 19-26.

¹⁴Blegen, Grass Roots, p. 7.

¹⁵Blegen, Grass Roots, pp. 18-19.

¹⁶Blegen, Land of Their Choice, p. 9.

convey the experience of the moment. They certainly provided literature in its broadest possible meaning, as Florence Howe defines it, the written account of people's lives.¹⁷ But many of them did more than that. They provided literary qualities associated with formal definitions of literature-- of literature as prose or verse that expresses ideas of permanent and universal interest and that shapes the experience through the imagination.¹⁸ They talked not only about wars and politics, but also about families and daily life. They supplied imaginative accounts.

The Sterling Township essays are also the "literature of the unlettered." Certainly their topics--the church, the family, careers--are of universal interest, if Emily Toth is correct in her assumption about universality. At the same time, the Sterling Township women have managed to shape the experience imaginatively by using many of the techniques of literature--original ideas, local color, and characterizations.

They begin with the imaginative handling of ideas. They think about beauty. Sometimes their words are subtle. There is no doubt that Lottie Erickson Moody sees beauty in

¹⁷ "Feminism and the Study of Literature," The Radical Teacher, 1, No. 3 (1976), 3.

¹⁸ Definition of literature derived from Webster's New World Dictionary, 2nd college ed. (Cleveland: William Collins and World Publishing Co., Inc., 1974); and Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1980).

the St. Petri Church bell, although she does not state it directly:

The hanging of the 1800 pound bell presented quite a problem. A block and tackle was borrowed to raise it...to the roof, then it was skidded on planks into the belfry. For almost fifty years the bell called people to worship and tolled for those who were carried to their final resting place.¹⁹

Lottie associates the bell with two important events in the lives of the Norwegian settlers. The first, worship, was a joyous occasion for the settlers, and the bell summoned them for fellowship and for commitment to their God. The second, death, was also joyous because of the faith of the settlers, and the bell's toll once again was a summons to their God. Lottie does not express the beauty directly, but the reader who shares Lottie's convictions understands.

Sometimes the women's language is more direct, as in Ida Hovey Pickering's description of the Deer Creek bell: "It was a small but lovely church with a steeple and bell. My brothers and I would walk 1½ mile every Christmas Eve and ring that bell. It had a beautiful sound."²⁰ Regardless of the approach, the point is made. There is beauty in church bells.

Sometimes comments are made which, in their simplicity, reveal a great deal about the writer's thoughts. Ida Hovey

¹⁹"St. Petri Church," p. 7.

²⁰Pickering letter, pp. 1-2.

Pickering makes the following observation: "The church was small composed of some 10 to 15 families. Men sat on one side of aisle, women and children on the other side. Years later they mixed which seemed awkward at first. It was a change."²¹ One gets the impression that Ida did not like the change, that it represented a new direction in their lives. The power of the passage is in its understatement.

Sometimes Ida's opinions are clear. She lets her reader know unequivocally what she thought when the church changed from the Norwegian to the English language:

In 1901 I was confirmed in the Norwegian faith. Shortly after that the church changed from Norwegian to English. That was a disappointment to me. Altho we didn't ever use the Norwegian language at home. I have my Norwegian hym book (without notes) but I remember the tune of each hym.²²

Ida's opinion about the change from Norwegian to English not only gives the reader the chance to share her thoughts, but it also gives the reader a sample of Norwegian-American life. It is an illustration of "local color," as that term is understood to refer to the customs and traditions and life of a community. In this Norwegian settlement around 1901, the language spoken in church made a great difference. Language difficulties provide an example of life at the time.

Ida further illustrates the effect of language upon the

²¹Pickering letter, p. 3.

²²Pickering letter, p. 2.

immigrants in this account:

The funny part was Johan Olson trying to preach in English. He was born in Norway but he got by--and Aunt Capitola, Peter's wife was German but brother Peter taught her Norwegian enough to sing in church but her words sounded funny enough to laugh.²³

The local color is especially vivid of the Norwegian-American pastor forced to speak English and of the German Capitola forced to sing in Norwegian.

There are other examples of local color throughout the essays. The women describe marriage customs in the early days, for instance. The similarities between the wedding of Nora Thompson Alseike's parents and the wedding of Lottie Erickson Moody's parents suggest that these weddings were typical at the time. The entire community was present at both; a large wedding dinner was served after the ceremony at both.

The language of both incidents is somewhat rambling, so that the reader finds out a great deal about the circumstances surrounding the wedding. It is as if Mary Thompson herself were speaking in this account:

I was married to Anton Thompson on December 17, 1883. We were married in the school house by the Rev. Mr. Ruste. Of course, all our relatives and the entire community were present and I remember we had turkey for the wedding dinner. This original school building is still a part of the Sterling community and is the house where

²³Pickering letter, p. 3.

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Hovey now live. We had no church at the time so the school house was the community center and was not only for educational purposes but religious as well, there being many weddings, baptisms, etc.²⁴

The wedding day was special for the bride. "Of course" the entire community shared the event with the bride and groom. A special meal was served. The bride was also happy that the schoolhouse remained as a part of the community. After all, it was a part of Mary's fondest memories.

Lottie Erickson Moody's account of her parents' wedding is similar:

Ole Erickson and Petra Bjornstad were united in marriage December 31, 1876, in the Lutheran church at Lanesboro. After the ceremony, they and their relatives and friends repaired to their little home where they served oyster stew cooked in a new washboiler. It became a tradition in our family to serve oyster stew on New Year's Eve when we could afford it.²⁵

Once again the local color is clear. The wedding commands a large gathering, just as the Thompson wedding did. Here oyster stew was served in a "new washboiler." The washboiler would be used because there was probably no other pan large enough, but it was also "new"--perhaps purchased for the new housekeeping enterprise. The new bride was romantic besides; throughout the years she served oyster stew whenever she could on her wedding anniversary. What she once shared with

²⁴ "Mrs. Mary Thompson," p. 79.

²⁵ "Erickson History," p. 3.

her friends and relatives, she continued to share with her family.

Other examples of local color include descriptions of sod houses. For instance, Clara Thompson Holm exemplifies the problems of living in a sod house in the Dakota frontier:

Sod houses were quiet and comfortable and clean looking with a new coat of white-wash. Walls could very easily be adorned with pictures and what-nots, but there was one obstacle, they were infested with fleas. How they could bite! The Reverend Kristian Magelson came to visit his former parishoners and while visiting one by one had to go outside and rid himself of fleas. This caused much humor.²⁶

The incident with the pastor provides the reader with an illustration of life among the settlers. Despite inconveniences, they could still laugh.

There is also Nora Thompson Alseike's description of her parents' sod house. Once again, she tells her mother's story:

We went to housekeeping in a sod house which had been built half on Ole Thompson's land and half on Anton's. This sod house stood in what is now the pasture. Ole and Lise had been married for some time and had built a frame house so Anton and I occupied their half of the house also. When Anton moved my clothes and belongings to my new home, he did so with the use of a yoke of oxen.²⁷

This look at Mary Thompson's life is particularly good local

²⁶"Pioneer Women," pp. 2-3.

²⁷Alseike, p. 79.

color. One can only imagine the sod house built on the line of two brothers' properties. Images are evoked of two brothers sharing a house and yet each owning a different part. Mary Thompson is not the first occupant, yet it is her "new home." Completing the picture is the oxen bringing the bride's belongings to her sod house.

These descriptions of the customs and life styles of a community certainly give a quality of literature. Historical accounts often give only the facts but fail to describe the circumstances surrounding the facts. Literature describes circumstances, and it is these occurrences that create the imaginative picture so important to reader involvement.

The same imaginative picture is necessary when describing people. In character descriptions, the women excel. They describe pastors, teachers, neighbors, and family members. Each description brings the person to life. These women are not only concerned with names; they are concerned with personalities.

For example, Clara Thompson Holm considers an aspect of her pastor's personality:

He had 5 congregations besides one preaching place. Since he had so many places to serve, we had church every three weeks and on a Monday. Pastor Brandt, and sometimes accompanied with Mrs. Brandt and their children, drove over on Sunday afternoon and stayed over for Mondays Services. He drove a span of speckled colored ponies. It was often heard people say, "Pastors are hard drivers. They do not understand

how much a pony can stand as they were so thin and exhausted looking."²⁸

Not only did Pastor Brandt drive himself hard, but he also expected his ponies to keep up with his schedule. Nonetheless, Pastor Brandt is admirable. He served five congregations, but he still managed to spend time with his parishioners. Perhaps that is why Clara says so much about him.

Ella Thompson Amundson characterizes Rev. R. O. Brandt's father, Rev. Nils Brandt. Ella paints a picture of his personality as she remembers him from her childhood:

One of the important activities of the Congregation was the parochial school. Rev. Nils Brandt served for many years as instructor and although he was a stern taskmaster, his patience and devotion to his work was great. Not only did he instruct in the fundamentals of christian religion but he also taught all the beginners the ABC's and to read, as all religious instruction of that generation was in the Norwegian language. The school was held in the home, one week in each home. The children were seated around a long table on benches with Rev. Brandt at the head and woe be unto the culprit who was up to pranks. He or she was sternly brought to justice.²⁹

Rev. Nils Brandt was devoted; he selflessly taught religion and language to the children. He was also stern, and the reader can picture him chastising one of the children seated at the long table. The children loved and feared him at the same time.

²⁸"Deer Creek Church," p. 2.

²⁹Amundson, p. 2.

Neighbors are sometimes characterized. Clara Thompson Holm's description of Mrs. Fasbender, which was mentioned before, is an example:

A German family by the name of Fasbender settled on the land joining the Thompson's. Shortly after they had come, the father died, leaving his wife and several children. They were of Catholic faith. There was no Catholic priest for miles away, so the mother conducted the service for her husband much to her neighbor's admiration.³⁰

The description of Mrs. Fasbender is wonderfully vivid. The Catholics, of course, would certainly not have authorized a woman to conduct any kind of service, but Mrs. Fasbender took on the responsibility when there was nothing else that she could do. It is no wonder that her neighbors admired her. Her actions illustrate her devotion to both her faith and her husband.

Sometimes descriptions show respect and love, as do Clara Thompson Holm's and Lottie Erickson Moody's descriptions of their mothers. Clara praises her mother: "She was a loving mother and friend. How many sick folk waited for her to bring her fruit soup or 'flåte grød' to them."³¹

Lottie's praise for her mother is similar:

Mother was an excellent example of the pioneer woman. Her childhood and youth had trained her for hardship, hard work and self sacrifice. All these were

³⁰"Pioneer Women," p. 3.

³¹"Pioneer Women," p. 3.

the lot of the pioneer woman. She must have felt keenly the loneliness and isolation of the early years on the homestead for she was by nature friendly and fun loving....Mother was ambitious and hard working. She loved the out-of-doors and was the happiest when working outside. She always had a big garden and would have worked in the fields too had not father objected, saying she had enough work as it was....

Mother was very hospitable and liked having guests, especially young people. She was generous to a fault. It was a family joke that we raised a big garden so she could give half of it away.³²

Then there is Christianne Jacobson Hovey's description of her small son:

Anyone who has had experience taking care of twins, especially those abounding in life and spirit, know that it is far easier to manage them when they are separated.

Out in South Dakota several years ago, the parents of a particularly active pair of three year olds, decided that while in Brookings Dad would take one and Mother the other. The older boy accompanied Mother and griefstricken Rolf who found this arrangement a sad and tearful affair. In the course of their shopping tour they came into one of the large stores where mother was busy shopping. Rolf was overjoyed. Sure enough there was his long lost brother! He rushed over to the door to meet the little fellow dressed just like he was. He cried out happily: Roger! But how strange! His twin brother made no response. Rolf had seen himself in the huge mirror!³³

³²"Erickson History," pp. 17-18.

³³"Life in U.S.," typescript in the possession of Judy Hovey Rentsch, n.d.

This incident about Rolf not only shows the bond between Christianne's twin sons, but it also shows considerable literary form. There is the building of suspense, the climax, and the revelation at the end.

These women do, at times, use language well, well enough to recreate situations imaginatively. Lottie Erickson Moody provides an example with her description of the cold:

The trip to church was slow and the open rigs offered little protection from the heat in summer or the cold in winter. Some were fortunate enough to have fur robes but most people used quilts from their beds as a protection against the wintry blasts. The church was inadequately heated by a large stove. In bitter weather the floor and pews were cold as ice. The organist had to warm the keys of the organ before playing the hymns.³⁴

Lottie draws the reader into the experience with her description of the slow open rigs, the quilts from the bed, and the "pews as cold as ice." The reader can easily imagine organ keys so cold that they must be warmed before they will work. Cold is universal; Lottie's sketch provides adjectives--wintry, bitter, cold as ice--that any reader understands.

Lottie also tells the story of a housekeeping disaster. Most people have had similar catastrophes when perhaps a cricket has eaten a hole in a favorite blouse or perhaps

³⁴"Reminiscence," p. 5.

when bugs have made their way into the flour sack. The reader knows instinctively what was going through the Erickson's minds at the time:

Mother had a nice walnut bureau (chest of drawers) which had been given to her by her father. In it she had packed all their best clothes and nicest linen. When they uncrated it in the fall, they found that the field mice had moved in and destroyed practically everything including mother's blue wool dress, in which she had been married, and father's wedding suit. That was a major calamity as they had no money with which to buy new clothes.³⁵

The contrast between the best clothes in the walnut bureau and the field mice is distinctly drawn. Adding the specifics--the wedding clothes--gives the passage even more meaning. After all, everyone understands the sentimental value attached to wedding clothes, to say nothing of their practical value for the Ericksons.

The writers have undoubtedly met the criteria on which literature can be judged. They imaginatively recreate experiences universal in nature by supplying imaginative ideas, local color, and characterizations. Is what they wrote, then, worthy of literature? After all, literature is concerned with plot, conflict, and resolution. These essays have none of these. Yet, literature is also concerned with language, and herein lies the basis for the judgment.

³⁵"Erickson History," p. 3.

Sometimes commas are missing, occasionally there will be a sentence fragment, or here and there a misspelled word will surface.

Despite these faults, the women have succeeded in using effective language. There is romanticism in Lottie Erickson Moody's description of the bell that for 50 years "called people to worship and tolled for those who were carried to their final resting place." There is the personality of the writer surfacing in Ida Hovey Pickering's discussion about language, in her disappointment, although she "didn't ever use the Norwegian language at home." There are fictional elements in Nora Thompson Alseike's story about her mother, in the imaginative way in which she speaks from her mother's point of view: "we were all happy and had lots and lots of good times together." Finally, there is the surprise ending of Christianne Jacobson Hovey's story about Rolf: he "had seen himself in a huge mirror!"

It is the language that makes the idea clear, that provides the local color, that achieves the characterization, that shapes the universal experience. That brings the reader back to the "literature of the unlettered." If Blegen's "America-letters" provide a diary of the immigrant experience, the essays of Sterling Township provide an extension of that diary. Because the letters read like literature, they act as an engaging account of experiences of yesterday. However, these essays do even more. They

also provide accurate experiences.

There are several examples. In the Erickson History, Lottie Erickson Moody talks about winters best remembered by the pioneers. According to Lottie, those were the winters of 1880-1881 and 1887-1888. On January 12, 1888, she says, the most frightening blizzard took place. Lottie says that her family was lucky. Her father, who had been in Bruce, heard that the blizzard was on the way. He immediately brought the message to the school. School was dismissed, so no children were lost in the blizzard as they were in other areas. Lottie says that the temperature reached 40 degrees below zero during the course of the blizzard, which was a 70 degree drop in three days.³⁶

Her information can be verified in G. O. Sandro's History of Brookings County, which also cites the winters of 1880-1881 and 1887-1888 as winters of terrible blizzards. Sandro reports that in the January 12 blizzard, one person in Brookings County was lost and froze to death. He says that at noon on January 12, it was 32 degrees above zero. Two days later, it was 40 degrees below zero.³⁷

Accuracy can also be seen in Ida Hovey Pickering's untitled letter. She describes Rev. R. O. Brandt, Deer Creek Church's first pastor, as "a thin sickly man." She

³⁶"Erickson History," pp. 4-5.

³⁷Sandro, p. 50.

goes on to say that "everybody had to respect his diet."³⁸
That comment can also be verified. In her reminiscences,
Mrs. R. O. Brandt says this about her husband:

At one time my husband was obliged to be careful of his diet; for about two years he ate only beaten eggs and hard toast or Grapenuts. Since many people did not possess a Dover egg beater, he took one with him wherever he went.³⁹

Still another example of the accuracy of the accounts can be seen in Christianne Jacobson Hovey's "The History and Development of the Young People's League." She says:

In the late seventies and through out the eighties the greatest difficulty in the Norwegian Lutheran Church was the different views taken on certain doctrines. The dissension naturally did much to weaken the effectiveness of religious movements among the young people. In 1890 the rupture came and the United Lutheran Church was formed from members of the Norwegian, Augustana, and Hauge Synods.⁴⁰

Her account, written about 1913, is similar to E. Clifford Nelson's 1960 account of Norwegian Lutherans in America. Nelson also talks about the controversy among Norwegians, and of the Norwegian, Augustana, and Hauge Synods, as well as of the Norwegian-Danish Conference and the Anti-Missourians. He also speaks of the 1890 union, although

³⁸Pickering letter, p. 3.

³⁹Mrs. R. O. Brandt, "Social Aspects of Prairie Pioneering: The Reminiscences of a Pioneer Pastor's Wife," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 7 (1933), 45.

⁴⁰"Young People's League," pp. 3-4.

he says that the Anti-Missourians were involved in it rather than the Norwegian Synod.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the accounts have enough similarity to show that Christianne was not ignorant of church movements.

Besides giving accurate accounts, the women manage to provide interpretations. Christianne begins her history of the Young People's League with the following analysis:

When the Norwegian pioneer landed on the American shore he brought with him very little of this world's goods, but he possessed that inestimable quality--a strong character which was shown not only in the fact that he succeeded in a material way--battling against fearful odds, but the more so pious and God-fearing that he was, he sought early to satisfy his spiritual needs. No sooner had he built his own rude home than he with much sacrifice and undergoing many hardships, built the little church where he and his family devoutly worshipped God and thanked Him for all His goodness.⁴²

Christianne's interpretation is similar to those found in traditional histories. She says that the pioneer was successful because of "a strong character." He built a church immediately because he was "God-fearing."

Other women also interpret their facts. Clara Thompson Holm, for example, tells why a congregation was immediately organized in Sterling Township:

⁴¹The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Vol. II, 1890-1959 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), p. 4.

⁴²"Young People's League," p. 1.

Our forefathers were a God-fearing people. They organized a congregation on April 24, 1879....As children were born to them they became very zealous in bringing them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord and especially to teach them to keep the Sabbath Day holy.⁴³

Like Christianne, Clara says that it was because "our forefathers were a God-fearing people" that they organized a congregation and raised their children in the faith.

Then there is Lottie Erickson Moody's "History of St. Petri Church." In it, she analyzes the reasons for merging with First Lutheran:

... there were the smallness of the Sunday School and the fact that there was little chance that the congregation would grow, thus relieving the heavy financial burden of its members. The greatest contributing factor to the merger, no doubt, was a desire to have every Sunday service with the pastor officiating.⁴⁴

Lottie interprets the vote of the congregation. She not only tells the reader what the decision of the congregation was, but she also provides the reasons for the decision.

Because of the imagination, the local color, and the characterizations, the essays written by women in Sterling Township have literary value. Because of their accuracy and interpretations, they have historical value. What, then, is their significance?

⁴³"Deer Creek Church," p. 1.

⁴⁴"St. Petri Church," p. 14.

Florence Howe says that literature affects the lives of the people who read it.⁴⁵ Clifford Lord says that history helps one understand the present situation.⁴⁶ Both provide a link between the prairie grass of yesterday and the corn fields of today.

The essays, then, more clearly define the Norwegian-American experience. In a time in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish one group from another, these essays reinforce attitudes and ideas of Norwegian-Americans. As Douglas Chittick says in "A Recipe for Nationality Stew," each group of European immigrants brought its own social, economic, and political way of life. The best of these cultures have assimilated into life as it is known today.⁴⁷

The Norwegian-American contribution has lasted; it is evident in the blue-eyed blondes, the Lutheran Church, even the lefsa and the Christmas rosettes that are typical in the upper Midwest. For those people, who are now three or four generations removed from the immigrant experience, it is important to maintain the sense of identity.

That sense of identity is still strong among many upper Midwesterners. When they are asked about their nationality,

⁴⁵Howe, p. 4.

⁴⁶Lord, p. 6.

⁴⁷Chittick, p. 89.

they never say "American." They say "three-quarters Norwegian and a fourth Swede," or "full-blooded Norwegian." Perhaps people give that response because they need the security of roots; they need to preserve their heritage and cultural identity.

That is the value of the essays written by women in Sterling Township. This literature of the unlettered defines the past for its readers. The essays not only provide the women who wrote them with a sense of community, but also the Norwegian-American who reads them. By writing about topics with which they were most familiar, the women could say, "I was there. This was my community." By reading about these past experiences, readers can say, "I am here. This is my community. My roots are here." Both the writers and the readers can feel secure that their experiences are important, for it is the experience of the common people that gives people today a sense of identity. The link with the past, that search for cultural identity, is what defines who these people are and what their futures and their children's futures will be.

If Norwegian-Americans can discover a sense of cultural identity by reading these essays, so can women everywhere discover a sense of themselves. The Sterling women write to be remembered as presences in their specific community, but they also write about the concerns of every woman. This literature of the unlettered suggests that women are part of

a cultural identity, that what they say and what they do are as important as the actions of men. Women of today need to better understand their identities, their link with the past. It is through literature and history--and particularly through the literature of the unlettered--that this link can be discovered.

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