STARTING A SCHOOL IN WESTERN KANSAS.

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At the time of which I write—in 1884—nearly everything here was just starting. Farms were being opened up, towns laid out, churches organized, and school districts formed. In order to understand the disadvantages under which the farmers of the West have to labor to give their children even the rudiments of an education, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the country in which they live, of the way in which it is settled, and of the character of the people who have settled it.

Much of Kansas is what is called a "rolling prairie." The land lies in low, parallel ridges, something like a wooden washboard, only, of course, not so regular, being a natural formation. These ridges are from one-half to a mile wide, separated from each other by what we here call draws. They are also known by the names of ravine, canyon, slue, and pocket. They resemble nothing in the East, that I can think of, so much as the bed of some small mountain brook, if the same were perfectly dry and had no trees or brush growing near it. The prairie is covered with buffalo grass. This never grows more than two or three inches high, cannot be mowed, and dies early in the autumn. Cattle grazing on it will keep in good condition all the winter if there is not too much snow.

Starting from the top of one of the ridges before mentioned, and going toward a draw, we should travel over this grass, soft as a carpet, down a slope so gentle as to be hardly noticeable, for a half mile or more. The descent is not more than ten or fifteen feet to the mile, just enough for good drainage.

But now, within a few rods of the draw, the ground suddenly gets rough and uneven, the buffalo grass gives way to a coarse, wiry kind, which grows to a height of eighteen inches, and is called bunch grass, from its habit of growing in bunches. The descent here is much steeper, probably three feet to the rod. This continues for about five rods, when we should come to a bank that is from four to eight feet straight down. This bank is broken in places, with here and there a place where a wagon could be driven up. Climbing down the bank, we should find ourselves in the nearly flat bottom of the draw; this is from four to eight rods wide, and is covered with blue stem grass. This grass grows two feet high, and is the only grass that we have that can be put up for hay. Numerous smaller draws—feeders, we call them—run into this from each side, like the branches of a creek; but they are all very short, seldom over a quarter of a mile in length, while the draws are often six to ten miles long and run to the nearest creek.

The land has nearly all been settled under the Homestead, Timber Culture, and Pre-emption rights. Any person over twenty-one years of age may use any two of these rights. Each right entitles him to one hundred and sixty acres of land; therefore, every man who wishes it can get a half section, three hundred and twenty acres.

The Government has had the land surveyed in tracts one mile square, called sections, and each section is easily divided into quarter sections of one hundred and sixty acres. A man is not obliged to take his land in a square field of one hundred and sixty acres, but may take it in four square fields of forty acres—provided these forties (as they are called) are subdivisions of the section and join each other. This leads to a great deal of picking of land by the first settlers. The ridges, which are splendid farm land, are all taken, while the draws, which are only good for hay, are left as Government land for many years. Another thing that tends to keep the country thinly settled is the amount of land which may, with a little management, be owned by one man.

A bachelor, for example, settles here with his unmarried sister and their mother. The man takes a homestead and timber claim, has his sister and mother do the same, and then he buys two deeded claims. There are only three in the family, yet they own two sections, one thousand two hundred and eighty acres. Of course, with their house in the centre of this, neighbors are not very near them.

The people who settle here are of every nationality, and nearly every color. They come from every State in the Union and every country of Europe; yet we soon learn one another's ways, and it would be hard to find a place where better feeling exists among neighbors. We have this common bond of sympathy; we are poor and have all come here to make homes.

But my short description has somehow grown into a long one; and I will now proceed to tell you about how our first school was started.

After getting our house up and a crop of sod-corn in, one of the first things we felt in need of was a school. But our nearest neighbor was over a mile to the west of us, the next nearest a little further to the south, and no others nearer than the creek, six miles away; so we were compelled to wait one—two—three long years while the country was being slowly settled.

As, one by one, the sod-houses are built around us we visit each, and as we get acquainted talk of the time when we can start a school.

There must be fifteen persons of school age, from five to twenty-one years, in the district to be formed, and it is for this we have been waiting. At last there are enough scholars, and we may try to start a school.

To be sure, we have to include in the number the eighteen and twenty year-old wives of two of the newly married men; but this is often done. The first thing we do is to write a petition to the county superintendent, stating that we have the required number of scholars, and asking that our congressional township be set apart as a school district. This makes a very large district—six miles square; but there were several of that size formed in this county and, since then, divided into about four districts.

The next thing we do is to take the petition to the county superintendent, who sets off the district as we wish it, gives it its number (26) and prepares and hands us five notices of the first district meeting. The law requires that these should be posted in five public places in the district. We do not post them on fences, trees, stumps, and stone walls, as is done in the east, because we have none of these things. The way we do is to get a board, saw it into blocks, paste the notices on the blocks, and then nail to the block a short stick that can be driven into the ground. They look like signboards, but are not so high. The notice states that "on the fifteenth day of August, 1884, the first district meeting of school district No. 26 will be held at the home of Mr. Otis Breece, for the purpose of electing school officers and transacting such other business as shall be necessary."

The fifteenth is a bright, sunny day, with the wind blowing—a sample of nearly all Kansas days.

Promptly at two o'clock we are at the home of Mr. Breece. He lives in a dugout; just a hole dug in the bank of the draw, and the top covered with poles, sod, and dirt. On the outside we see only a door and window in the straight bank of the draw. But once inside, what a transformation! It is not a dirt hole that confronts us now, but a very clean and nicely furnished room. The dirt walls are covered with a coat of plaster, the dirt roof with a white muslin sheet stretched from wall to wall, and the dirt floor has given place, in one-half of the room, to a board floor, and the rest is hidden by a carpet. We notice that the room contains a cabinet organ, something very unusual here.

We are greeted very pleasantly by Mr. and Mrs. Breece, and sit down to wait for the rest. But the others are far from being prompt, and it is two hours later before they are all here.

One by one they drop in, seating themselves on the doorstep to be in the bright, warm sunshine, while others are perched on the woodpile, the corn-crib, and the housetop. At four o'clock Mr. Breece becomes impatient, goes to the door, and calls out: "Boys, 'tain't no use to wait any longer. Come into the house and let's git to work." The call is instantly obeyed, and the little 14x20 dug-out is nearly full; yet there are only ten men present, but most of them have brought their families. The women have a vote in all school business, and they seem even more interested than the men.

When we are all seated on the bed, benches, upturned pails and chairs, Mr. Breece again addresses us: "Boys," says he, "there is two or three more that ought to be here; but we can't wait any longer. We've got to git to biz. The first thing to do is to elect a chairman. Who will you have?"

Mr. Anderson is soon elected—a wise choice.

"Now, whom will you have for director?" says Mr. Anderson, as soon as he is given the chair. This district meeting is no formal affair. A perfect babel of voices follow this question.

One says: "Mr. Breece, you are the man"; another: "Mr. Brown, can't you act as director?" and another: "Mr. Deitz, that means you."

As each man's name is called, he loudly protests that he is not the man for the place. But at last a vote is called for, and Nicholas Deitz is elected.

"Old Nick," as he is familiarly known to us, loudly objects in words like these: "Me know noding about schools in dis country. Me no got any chil'ens to send. Me no can write goot. Me not want him one bit."

But it is of no use. We all know that "Nick" is well educated in the German, and we can trust him to get along with the English in some way. Having talked to "Nick" until he consents to accept the office, Mr. Anderson offers him the chair; but he will not so soon assume the duties of his office, and Mr. Anderson was prevailed on to "stick to it until dis meetin' vas oudt."

Mr. Anderson is next elected clerk, Mr. Rinkenberg, treasurer.

The next thing in order, the chairman announces, is to select a site for the schoolhouse. This is soon settled. Several of those living near the centre of the district offer to give two acres of land for the playgrounds if we will build the schoolhouse on their land. The vote places it on Mr. Votopka's farm.

Then follows a long discussion about how and when to build. Of course the house would have to be built of sod; but there were many different opinions as to its size and when we could build it.

"It is finally settled that the house shall be 14 x 22 feet, with two windows on a side, and the roof covered with poles and sod. The following Monday we are all to be on hand at the place selected, and begin the house."

"Now," says Mr. Anderson, "we come to the part which will tell how much you really want a school. You know we shall have to have money to buy the windows and doors, and lumber for seats. Besides, we must pay the teacher out of our own pockets, for three months, before we can draw any money from the State or levy a school tax. Now we have all got to come down fine with our 'tens' and 'fives,' or it is no use to go one step further. I have a paper here, and you can each one write down what you will give. Then we can tell if it is any use to go on. Of course you have only to pay part of it until the teacher is to be paid. I have started it with fifteen dollars. Now, boys, fill it up, quick."

In a very short time names were down to the amount of eighty dollars.

It was next decided that the school shall begin the fifteenth of the following month.

A few other little things are attended to, and then the chairman announces that the meeting is closed. It is nearly sunset as we again come out into the open air; but we have spent an enjoyable afternoon, and are well pleased with the work done.

Monday morning is another fine day, but it will be scorching hot by noon. We harness the horses, hitch to the lumber wagon, throw off the wagon-box and place three long two-inch boards in its place; throw on the breaking plow, spade, hoe, a rope, and a jug of water, and are off to help build the schoolhouse.

The spot selected is on the top of a ridge where the ground is perfectly level. This time we are not the first ones on the ground. As we near the place we can see several teams hitched to wagons, and a number of men standing around, idle, evidently waiting for someone to take the lead and set them to work.

But here comes Mr. Anderson, and, as at the school meeting, we may look to him to make things go as they should; he at once sets a man to breaking the sod where the house is to stand. The buffalo grass is so soft and velvety it seems a pity to have it all removed from what is to be the floor of the house; but it would soon wear out, leaving only the roots, and these would bother in sweeping. So we think it best to take off the sod to the depth of three inches, thus leaving for a floor the dirt entirely below the grass roots. This will pack hard, if kept wet at first, and is not very *dirty*, if it *is* dirt. While part of the men remove the sod and stake out the house the required size, we will go out to where the others are preparing the sod to build with.

We notice, first, two rows of short stakes about