

Edith: Grace and I always agreed that our most cherished memories were those of our prairie childhood among the pioneers and settlers who staked their very lives on the immigration into the wilderness. We were born in the late 1870s in Grand Island, a tiny Nebraska town less than a mile from the busy overland trail. In those days the first question Grace asked anyone was . . .

Grace: Where do you come from?

Edith: When Robert Louis Stevenson journeyed through the vast prairie country of early Nebraska, he described our homeland as . . .

Stevenson: An empty sky, an empty earth with but one railroad stretching across it, like a cue across a billiard table.

Edith: But it was not an empty earth to us.

Edith and Grace: Dust of the stars was under our feet, glitter of stars above.

Edith: There were new people coming and coming all the time, some of whom would stay while others pushed on further west. No one ever seemed to go back. Mother and father were among those early pioneers, pioneers of the mind as well as of the land. They worked together in the first Nebraska campaigns to secure the vote for women. When we were girls, Grace and I treasured a tattered old copy of John Stuart Mill's book on women's rights, *The Subjection of Women*. Father had given the volume to mother before they were married, and the margins of many a page still contained the penciled notes written by one to the other. A favorite family story said that it was through this exchange of notes that Father courted mother to marry him, a procedure which I feel quite certain was no more common in those days than it is at present. In 1882, Susan B. Anthony announced that she would be traveling out to Nebraska. How joyful we all were. Miss Anthony stayed at our house when she came to town and spoke at a large public meeting just a few blocks away.

Grace: Mother loved telling us about how tired Miss Anthony was that night after she'd shaken hands with the last person in the audience who lingered to meet her. As they walked from the meeting hall, Mother said . . .

Lizzie: It must be hard, Miss Anthony. To shake hands with so many people after so many meetings?

Anthony: Dear, if you only knew how much easier it is than in the days when no one wanted to shake hands with me.

Edith: Our home did not have an extra room for guests, so it often fell to the lot of my sister or me to share not only a room, but even a bed with mother's suffragist visitors. We felt very important when we were told that we were helping the cause,

and we were quite proud to share our pillow with Miss Anthony the night she spoke at the local meeting when I was six years old.

Grace: And I was only four. Though I never quite understood why mother said . . .

Lizzie: Poor Miss Anthony, that was the best we could do for her.

Edith: Father was a fighter. The first lawyer in our part of Nebraska and the only lawyer in the county for many years. He drew up the charter for our hometown and he was Nebraska's very first Lieutenant Governor.

Grace: How he loved the law and politics.

Edith: Father was often to be found at the county courthouse, which was, I suppose, our substitute for the modern movie house. When we were young, Grace and I hung over the courtroom balcony during political conventions and felt very important when we were able to contribute some genuine political stories to parlor conversation.

Grace: I stayed to hear William Jennings Bryan today, and you may not like what he says, Father, but I can tell you that he is a wonderful orator. Everyone in the convention stood and cheered him after his speech, and I wanted to cheer him too.

O.A.: Stuff and nonsense, Gracie. You have too much sense to be taken in by a windbag.

Edith: But she stood her ground and argued, even when she was little, and even when it annoyed father. Though I think father enjoyed being annoyed by Grace. He encouraged us to come to the court whenever there was an exciting case, especially one with grand oratorical flourishes.

O.A.: You can hear Henry D. Estabrook today just out from Omaha. Come in about eleven and he'll be telling the jury what he thinks of your father.

Edith: Father was never too busy to look up and wave to us in the courtroom gallery, and some of the other lawyers would wave too, or even come up to speak to the little Abbot girls. It was an exciting world.

Grace: I was sure I wanted to be a lawyer or a politician.

Edith: Grace seemed to be born with a political instinct. I remember a fight that we got into when we were both very small. It was only a silly little quarrel, but one thing led to another until . . .

Grace: I can't do it because I can't, and I don't want you to teach me! [slap]

Lizzie: Grace, did you strike your sister? Give me your hand, Gracie. Now, Gracie, you can no longer say, "this little hand never struck my sister."

Grace: No, but I can say this other little hand didn't strike my sister. May we go out to play now?

Edith: Our life on the plains was certainly rich in contrasts. I recall one particular Sunday. It was late August. Mother was working in her flower beds. Gracie and I were over among the wonderful cottonwood trees that gave the whole place such a spacious air. Here was the children's swing, where we had father for a playmate in the long summer evenings when he would swing us to thrilling heights.

O.A.: Hang tight now, Gracie. And away you go!

Edith: And away she went in her little pink chambray dress, higher and higher, holding fast to the ropes with the prairie wind whispering through the rustling cottonwood leaves like a strange mysterious friend. It was just then in the early twilight that a woman, a stranger, came up the road. She stopped at our house and waited patiently. At last, father went to see what she wanted. She said that she'd been traveling for hours to get here. She'd had a long and dusty journey with lifts along the way, given by farmers, whose sympathy never failed when anyone was facing . . .

Woman: Foreclosure proceedings, Mr. Abbott.

O.A.: It's come to that.

Woman: That's why I'm here, sir. Folks say you know how to save a man's land. It's been such a long struggle, Mr. Abbott, pulling together the little farm equipment we got. Then few years of good crops what made my husband think to mortgage the farm, though I warned him, I tell you. Then come last spring with no rain. The summer and that bad, bad dust storm. Even our little garden went.

Lizzie: But what do you eat?

Woman: Don't ask, ma'am. We just don't eat.

O.A.: The bank started proceedings on your home.

Woman: I don't mind pinching and scraping. I don't even mind going barefoot, but I'll never give up and I'm not going to be drug out.

O.A.: Did you bring the papers the bank issued? Come along to the office.

Grace: Father seemed to have the final word about any injustice, and we thought he knew what ought to be done about everything. Even the dust storms and droughts. He and mother, both were just, I don't know, different.

"A Prairie Childhood" from The Children's Champion by The Abbott Sisters Project

Edith: Gracie herself was different, and there was always variety with her as a companion.