

Chapter 11

Gertrude Lee Bell Jarboe

THE SPRING OF 1874 at Osage Mission, Kansas, was bursting with new life, as most springs are before the unpredictability of summer weather arrives. Tom and Louise Bell were blessed with their fourth daughter named Gertrude Lee on April 23rd. Louise enjoyed tending her growing flock of chickens as she watched little Gertrude grow. It was now seven years since Tom and Louise had left Lakenan, Missouri, and homesteaded near the Neosho River.

Life had gone reasonably well for the Bells, with no more than the normal daily struggle for basic survival that all pioneers faced on the prairie. They had land with good trees and access to water and stones for building materials in the river. The Catholic community at Osage Mission was well established and Tom helped build the new church of St. Francis. A number of the families in the community were also Catholics with Missouri and Kentucky backgrounds. Tom and Louise were related to some of these families by blood or by marriage or, as was often the case in small communities, by both blood and marriage.

They had started their life together after the tragic loss of Tom's first wife, and Louise's best friend Mary Alice Eddings in June 1864. Mary Alice died in childbirth along with her second son, Robert. Her first son William, or Willie as he would be known, was not yet two years old when she died. He would be almost three when Tom and Louise married in September 1865. One year after that, their own family began, first with a son Joseph Emory and then three girls: Mary Alice, Rose May and Susan Agnes. Emory was born before they moved to Kansas but the rest of their children were born at their homestead near Osage Mission.

By the spring of 1874, Willie was eleven, Emory eight, Mary Alice six, Rose four and Agnes two. All children were healthy and growing rapidly, a major victory for any pioneer family homesteading on the prairies.

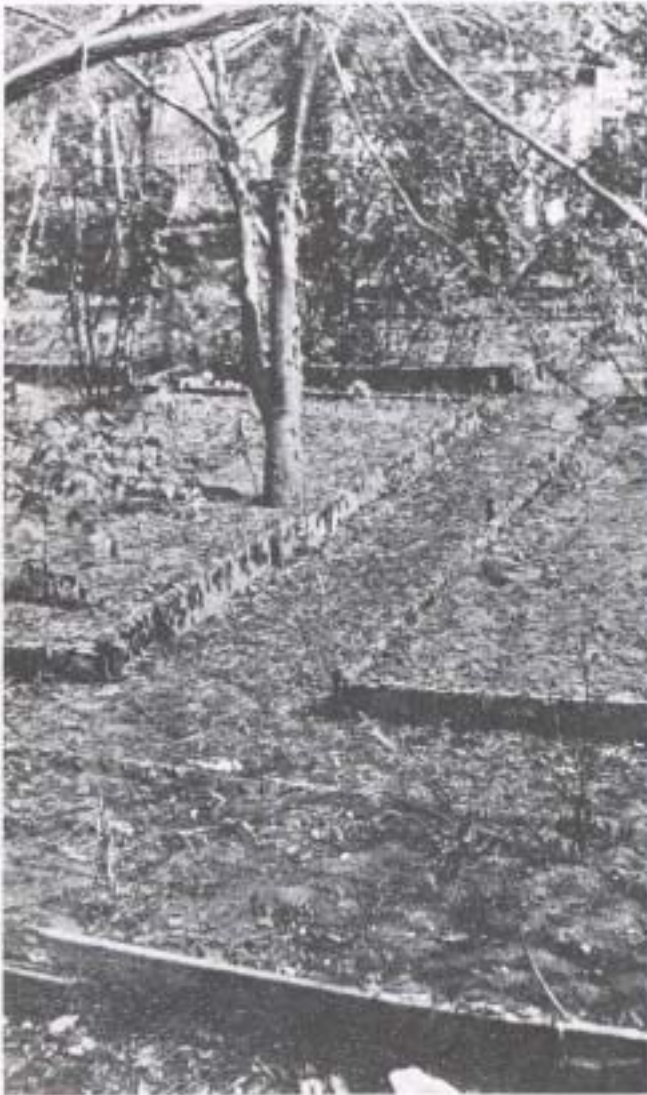
A New Challenge from the West

That spring however, was hatching more than pretty baby girls and little baby chicks. Tom and Louise had no inkling at that time of the growing life force that would bring such devastation by August. There was no way for them to realize that 1874 would be long remembered for a plague of biblical proportions that would arrive from the west. A plague of grasshoppers so thick that all vegetation was stripped from the earth, trains were brought to a halt, the sky darkened by the clouds of insects.



A swarm of grasshoppers stopping a train. Illustration from Nebraska History Magazine.

Word started coming in from the west telling unbelievable tales of destruction. The scale of the attack was unthinkable. People tried all sorts of ingenious and desperate methods of saving their crops and their gardens. Every available cloth, quilt, sheet or other cover was enlisted as a defense. The legions of grasshoppers were so ravenous and overwhelming that they left nothing but bare plants and shredded cloth in their wake. They piled up four inches thick in the yard. Coming down so hard that first hand observers said it sounded like hail hitting the ground.



A garden covered with grasshoppers.

relish the green peaches on the trees, but left the pit hanging. They went from the cornfields as though they were in a great hurry, and there was nothing left but the toughest parts of the bare stalks. Our potatoes had to be dug and marketed to save them.

“I thought to save some of my garden by covering it with gunny sacks, but the hoppers regarded that as a huge joke, and enjoyed the awning thus provided, or if they could not get under, they ate their way through. The cabbage and lettuce disappeared the first afternoon; by the next day they had eaten the onions. They had a neat way of eating onions. They devoured the tops, and then ate all of the onion from the inside, leaving the outer shell.”

Tom and Louise Bell read the August 12, 1874 edition of the Neosho County Journal with concern:

GRASSHOPPERS

The Devastation in Northwestern Kansas

[To the Journal of Commerce [sic].]

I have been out nearly two weeks of this very warm and dry weather, which has been exceedingly unpleasant. For the first few days all conversation and comment were directed to the drouth, now everything is

GRASSHOPPER.

A few days ago a perfect cloud of these pests came in the shape of foraging parties, and took without requisition, nor left vouchers for indemnity. All middle men have been disposed of as they gathered for themselves. Whole fields of corn have been stripped in a few hours, leaving the heavy part of the stalk standing shorn of their valuables, as clean as could be done with a knife; and not one field has escaped them from a few miles east of Frankfort to as far west as we can hear from. Their course appears to be from the north west to south east. If they should keep their present course, the farmers around Kansas City will receive a visit from them, and when the advance guard comes, let them prepare to see every stalk of corn and their fruit trees stripped. I saw a gentleman to day just from

NEBRASKA

who says everything is laid in waste there. I will venture the assertion that within the whole scope of country over which I have traveled this week, known as the grasshopper district, there will not be five hundred bushels of corn saved.

The remarkable book *Pioneer Women* by Joanna L. Stratton gives several vivid first hand accounts of this event. Mary Lyon recalls:

“August 1, 1874, is a day that will always be remembered by the then inhabitants of Kansas. ... For several days there had been quite a few hoppers around but this day there was a haze in the air and the sun was veiled almost like Indian summer. They began, toward night, dropping to earth, and it seemed as if we were in a big snowstorm where the air was filled with enormous-size flakes.”

Mary Lyon continued to explain how the grasshoppers consumed everything remotely edible:

“They devoured every green thing but the prairie grass. They ate the leaves and young twigs off our young fruit trees, and seemed to

Yet the people feel thankful that they have secured good wheat, barley and oats crops, and have plenty fat cattle to sell. There will be no hogs fatted. This, however, will be the least felt of any general loss. There will be a great disappointment, as but a few weeks ago everything looked so flattering, and of course but little charity will be shown Kansas as so many will know that there could never be made a farming [sic] country out of this State. While other and older states have been equally or more unfortunate, not a single complainant will cast an eye to those older regions. But our Kansas brethren have lost none of their devotion to their adopted state, and all think she is bound to take rank among the first of the nation.

T.J.W.

Later editions of the Neosho County Journal did not comment on the extent of the damages caused by grasshoppers. A crop report around November noted that the crops had been damaged by the drought and an infestation of chinch bugs, but did not mention grasshoppers. Nevertheless, a history of the state written only eight years later did note an impact on the county. The population of Neosho County would decline temporarily after this plague. William G. Cutler wrote in his 1882 book, *History of the State of Kansas*, that the population of the county in 1860 was 88; in 1870, 10,206; in 1874, 11,324; in 1876, 11,076; in 1878, 11,055; in 1880, 15,124; in 1882, 15,155. The grasshoppers were a severe problem in 1874 and again in the spring of 1875 when the eggs left behind hatched. But there was time to replant crops after the hatchlings emerged and they were not a serious problem in years after 1875.

Among the Kansas homesteaders who would endure this onslaught were James and Mary Avery White. Mary recounted a similar tale of trying to desperately save her lettuce by covering it with a quilt. When she lifted the quilt, there was nothing underneath.

The Bells and the Whites would eventually share more than a common history of survival on the Kansas prairie. Although they would never meet each other, Mary White and Louise Bell would become relatives. Some sixty-three years later, the marriage of Mary's grandson Clifford Gander to Louise's granddaughter Josephine Jarboe would join their families together.

Tom and Louise Bell had three more daughters and one son - Nora, Louise, Thomas and Anna Laura - in the

years following the grasshopper plague. They continued to develop their homestead and beautify their home.

Girls Become Women

The children of Tom and Louise Bell grew up and started marrying. This is a photo of Gertrude Lee Bell (right) and her bridesmaid and cousin, Maude Saunders.

