

GALEWOOD CROSSING

by Alta Halverson Seymour

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Also by Alta Halverson Seymour

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Print book originally published by
The Westminster Press, 1946
eBook formatting © 2012 Bethlehem Books

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212 pages in the print book edition

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

*To Jean,
who has criticized many a story for me,
and always favorably*

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1. On the Westward Trail

“HI, THERE, Tildy! Matilda Gale! What do you mean by skulking in the house? Get out here and do a woman’s work!”

“I’m helping Grandma with dishes—a woman’s work if you could ever find any, Steve!” Tildy called back, but her fingers flew and she glanced eagerly out into the yard where the rest of the Gales were hard at work loading household gear into a large new wagon.

“O Grandma!” she exclaimed. “If only you were going with us!”

The elder Mrs. Gale’s eyes were wistful, but she shook her head as she said: “I’ve pulled up stakes twice, Tildy—when we came from Connecticut to York state and again when we came west to Ohio. I don’t want to do it again, and Wisconsin’s a long way off. But I’m sure,” she added quickly, “that it’s a good thing for the rest of you. And the Stantons’ already being out there will make it seem more like home. They’re anxious for you to get there too.”

“Yes, I know,” agreed Tildy, “only I do wish we weren’t going so far. Father thinks Wisconsin will give such fine opportunities for the boys—chances at large farms or at starting in business—whatever they want. So of course Charlie and Steve are anxious to go. And Tommy thinks it’s a wonderful adventure.” She was silent for a moment and then burst out: “Why doesn’t anyone ever think about giving opportunities to girls? Anna and Celia dread going out to that rough country, and they’re just the age when girls want things nice—almost grown-up. And I want to have a chance to go to school. Even college!”

Tildy looked somewhat alarmed at her own outburst, but her grandmother did not seem at all shocked. Of all the family, she was the only one who sympathized with this daring idea. When Tildy had confided it, as she confided most things, to her brother Steve, he had laughed heartily and told her that a redhead had no right to think of being a bluestocking. Even her father, who could almost always be counted on as an ally, shook his head. “We don’t even figure on sending the boys to college, Tildy,” he said soberly. “We could hardly think of sending a girl.”

But her grandmother seemed to understand how she felt, and now she said: “Well, you just keep at your books, Tildy. You never

know what may happen, and it's your business to see to it that you're ready if you do get the chance."

"Oh, yes, I'll do that," promised Tildy. "The folks decided the books were necessities, and we're taking all we have."

"Yes, and there's something else I want you to make your special chore."

"Really?" Tildy's face brightened. She felt that at fourteen she was old enough to have some responsibility. Charlie and Steve helped Father, and Mother depended on the two older girls. Even Tommy, at the age of eleven, considered himself one of the men of the family, and right now he was working like one. "What is this chore of mine?" Tildy asked.

"Well, Tildy, it's one that may not show a whole lot, but it's important just the same. Making a home in a new, unsettled country isn't easy. I know your mother isn't very anxious to go, though she's willing to do whatever your father thinks best. She'd really like to stay here near the mills, where he could experiment with that new invention of his. But he thinks he can start a mill of his own out there in Wisconsin."

"I know that," said Tildy, and her eyes softened as she looked out at her father. "See how happy he looks!" she exclaimed. "I know he thinks this is going to be a wonderful move for us all. But what's the chore, Grandma?"

"Lots of times, Tildy, things won't seem very cheerful—they'll seem pretty hard. Settlers in a new district have to learn to take things as they come and make the best of them. Lots of times you have to pretend you're not scared when your knees will just hardly hold you up. Plenty of times you have to figure fast to find any way to turn." She paused a moment. "It's your chore, Tildy, to keep folks out of the dumps—keep things kind of lively. You're good at that."

"Do you think so?" asked Tildy eagerly. "Well, that doesn't seem such a very hard chore. That kind of comes natural to me. I'll do it, Grandma, I promise."

"Tildy!" roared her brother again. "Get out here!"

Tildy hung up her dish towel and flew out into the yard, her brown eyes eager. Household gear, boxes, barrels, bedding, crates of chickens were piled all around. It seemed impossible that they could all be stowed away in the big wagon. But her mother could

manage it if anyone could, Tildy thought, looking with confidence at the compact little figure standing, solid and capable, in the center of the array of goods, directing, suggesting, repacking, so that the work went on briskly yet smoothly.

But at last Mr. Gale said regretfully: "I don't think we can possibly get everything in. That box of books we shall have to leave, I'm afraid, and the best dishes, and those pictures. We can send for them later, perhaps."

But Grandma, busy now with the rest of them, caught sight of Tildy's face at the mention of leaving the books. She knew too, from her own experience, how much the best dishes and pictures would mean in the new home. "You'll do nothing of the kind, son," she said briskly. "You'll take my oxcart and old Miles and Jep. I don't intend to do any more farming— just a garden. The oxen would only be a burden to me."

Mr. Gale hesitated and glanced at his wife, for they both realized that this was a sudden decision made strictly for their benefit. He started to shake his head, but his mother said decidedly: "I don't want to be bothered with oxen any more. If I want them, I'll send you word," she added, laughing, "and you can send Tildy back with them. She's always been a good one with the oxen. Put that box of books in the oxcart, Steve. What are you waiting for?"

"And the tub—where does the tub go?" asked small Emmy Lou, her pigtails dancing. "Because I'm going to ride in it, like 'rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub!' any time I want to. That's what Tildy told me."

"That goes in the big wagon. And now we put the canvas on, and this extra piece will cover the oxcart. And we're ready to start first thing in the morning," said Mr. Gale with satisfaction.

It was not easy for the Gales to leave the old home, but fortunately many old friends and neighbors came to see them off, bringing baskets of food for the journey, and providing plenty of excitement as the big wagon and the smaller cart set off.

There was a lump in Tildy's throat as she watched Grandma standing at the gate waving her apron, but the fall morning was fresh and bright, and her father looked so happy and so hopeful to be setting off at last on the journey for which he had so long planned that her spirits soon rose, and she began to enjoy the journey.

The first days were, indeed, as Tommy said, like a long, splendid picnic. Mr. Gale had decided upon early fall as the best time for their journey, for then the roads would be dry and easily passable. He drove the horses most of the time, and Mrs. Gale rode in the wagon beside him, with little Emmy Lou perched blissfully on her tub, or taking a turn at riding in the oxcart with Tommy and one of her sisters. When it rained, Emmy Lou liked to curl up under the canopy of the wagon and coax Tildy to tell her stories of all the delightful things that were to happen when they reached their new home.

Tommy and Tildy had the job of driving the oxen, with one of the older boys spelling them off at times. Steve and Charlie walked most of the way, taking charge of the little herd of cattle. Anna and Celia, like Emmy Lou, took turns riding in the cart and wagon: Tildy often jumped down to walk a ways with the cattle drivers.

Grandma and the neighbors had supplied them plentifully with bread and pies and doughnuts and cookies, eggs and baked beans and roasted hams, pickles and preserves. Sometimes they stopped beside a stream to catch fish and broil them over a campfire. Sometimes they shot a rabbit or some quail. They baked corn bread on hot stones, and even biscuits. Celia and Anna became expert at camp cookery, but Tildy preferred to help her brothers to get in wood for the campfire. Everyone felt gay and carefree.

But as they went farther and farther westward, the roads became little more than trails, rocky and hilly and full of holes. Many times they would find a rough corduroy road, where tree trunks had been laid across a quagmire to make crossing possible. Often they had to stop and cut and lay their own logs before they could cross bogs and marshes.

“When we start out in the morning, I always wonder what’s going to happen before the end of the day,” Celia confided to Tildy as they jogged along in the oxcart one rainy morning.

“Rather a lot of things have been happening,” admitted Tildy, her brown hands tightening on the lines. “All those delays while we made the log roads over the swamps. But it isn’t so much farther now, Father says.”

“Oh, be careful how you drive, Tildy!” exclaimed Celia, clasping her hands together nervously as they lurched in and out of a mudhole. “It seems to me it’s too hard for you to drive here.”

“But Steve and Charlie have to keep a close watch over the cattle since old Sunflower broke her leg in that hole and had to be shot,” said Tildy soberly. “We can’t afford to lose any more cattle, you know, Celia. Tommy wants to drive, but he’s not careful enough for these bad roads.”

“Roads, do you call them?” asked Celia. “Mud swamps is a better name. Oh!” her voice rose to a scream as the cart jolted down on one side and almost turned over in the slippery mud. “Help!” she cried, as Tildy did her best to keep the oxen steady. “Help!”

Fortunately the wagon was not far behind, and Mr. Gale and the boys rushed forward. Poles were quickly cut, but there was a long wait while the wheel was pried free.

“Good thing we’ve had practice at this,” Mr. Gale said cheerfully, when they were ready to start at last. “Now, Celia, you ride in the big wagon with Mother and Anna for a while. How about you, Tildy? You want to go in the wagon too?”

“I’d rather keep on driving, Father, if you think it’s all right,” returned Tildy promptly, and her father gave her shoulder a quick pat. “Good girl! Tommy can keep you company the rest of the morning.”

Everyone was glad when the sun came out. After several days of jolting along in the rain, it was pleasant to make a campfire on the banks of a little stream where there was good fishing.

“Let’s make a real feast,” said Mr. Gale. “I think I have some good news for you.” Everybody flew around, getting the feast ready. Celia made corn bread and Anna got out the last of the preserves, and in the very midst of the preparations Tildy suddenly cried out: “Oh, I know, Father. I bet a thousand dollars we’re nearly there.”

“Better bet your small change first, Tildy,” laughed her father, but she knew, and so did the rest of them, that her guess was right. Tongues flew fast as they gathered around the festive meal.

“The rest of the way is the hardest,” Mr. Gale said soberly, “but the Stantons have promised to have some kind of house ready for us, so when we get there we can feel we are really at home. That is a great deal for them to do in this busy season.”

“Then I suppose we’ll go over later and help them with some of their work,” said Steve. “Isn’t that the way they do in a new settlement?”