

Peder Victorius
and the Strength of Prairie Women

Ruth Olsen

Augustana Academy for Seniors
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WOMEN OF THE PRAIRIE

Emerson Hough, wrote the following in 1921: “The chief figure of the American West, the figure of the ages, is not the long-haired, fringed-legging man riding a rawboned pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before. That was America, my brethren! There was the seed of America’s wealth. There was the great romance of all America—the woman in the sunbonnet; and not, after all, the hero with the rifle across his saddle horn. Who has written her story? Who has painted her picture?” This passage was written before Ole Rolvaag penned *Giants in the Earth* and before Harvey Dunn painted *The Prairie Is My Garden*. We now know the stories of many courageous women who helped to settle the west. We will be looking in particular at Rolvaag’s Beret, whom we meet first as the sad-faced woman following her husband in *Giants* but who develops into a strong and influential land owner in *Peder Victorious*.

Beret represents well the immigrant pioneer woman. Before we look more closely at her, let’s look briefly at other examples of women who helped tame the west. One great resource is the book, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West*, by Dee Brown, in which we learn about a wide variety of western women. Although these women are very different, we see in all of them some common traits.

Military Wives

Some of the women who found their way to the Great Plains came as military wives. They shared a very special set of problems and adventures. Sometimes their quarters were nothing but a tent and they suffered intensely from the heat and the cold. “Bumping” was a common policy. That is, even if their living quarters were relatively comfortable, when the wife of an officer with higher rank arrived she could “bump” the resident of the quarters she wanted.

“After one series of ‘ bumpings’ at Fort Clark, a young lieutenant and his bride, fresh from luxurious eastern homes, found themselves quartered in a hallway between two other families. The wife accepted her lot gracefully, but no sooner had she fixed the place up comfortably than her husband was notified that a superior officer wanted his hall. This was the final blow; the young lieutenant resigned in a huff and left the Army forever.” (G.T. p 46)

There might be only 5 women at a given post. That meant that each wife had 4 places to visit and they made the most of it. It was not unusual for a wife to arrive and discover

that every one of her dishes had broken in transit. Then the other wives would band together to share what they could to make her life more comfortable. The shared inconveniences and danger provided the basis for a deep camaraderie and many learned to love the wild land their husbands had come to pacify.

Here is a quote from *The Gentle Tamers*:

“On returning to western duty after a year’s assignment in the East, a lieutenant’s wife eloquently expressed what was probably in the hearts of most such women: ‘It all seemed so good to me. I was happy to see the soldiers again, the drivers and teamsters, and even the sleek government mules. The old blue uniforms made my heart glad. Every sound was familiar, even the rattling of the harness with its ivory rings and the harsh sound of the heavy brakes reinforced with old leather soles...I was back again in the army. I had cast my lot with a soldier, and where he was, was home to me.’” (G.T. p66)

Ladies of Easy Virtue

Wherever the miner communities developed or the cowboys gathered, a saloon or sporting house would soon appear and ladies of easy virtue would be available.

One such lady was Julia Bulette, who arrived in Virginia City, Nevada soon after the discovery of the rich Comstock Lode in 1859. For a while she was the only unattached female among hundreds of miners. Because of her beauty and the scarcity of her commodity her price soared to \$1,000 per evening. She soon was wealthy enough to build a fine rococo structure known as Julia’s Palace. Here she demanded gentlemanly behavior and served imported French wines and French cooking, which she taught her customers to appreciate. She dressed elegantly in the latest French fashions and even wore sable muffs and silk scarves. The miners adored her. She expanded her operation, importing refined girls from San Francisco. She was an honorary member of the Virginia City Fire Company and this gave her great delight. When the fire alarm sounded she would rush to the fire. If the fire engine passed her on the way it would slow down enough to bring her aboard. She helped with the hoses or brewed coffee for the firemen. On July 4, 1861 she was crowned Queen of the Independence Day Parade and rode Engine #1 wearing a fireman’s hat on her head and holding a bouquet of red roses. Julia stood by the miners in times of danger and misfortune and at one time when many became ill she turned the palace into a hospital and personally nursed them to health.

Gradually the town grew more conservative and respectable and she lost her status as queen. One night she was robbed and strangled to death. Thousands formed her funeral procession including the firemen in their blue dress uniforms and the Nevada militia band who played the funeral dirge. Respectable ladies in town drew their curtains to protect their eyes from the disgraceful sight of this procession. The memory of Julia Bulette lived on long after her demise. The Virginia & Truckee Railroad named one of its richly furnished club cars after her. This car was later purchased by a movie company and used in several western films. She became the prototype of the fancy women of the Old West, women who played a definite role in taming the West.

‘In the rough frontier camps, the saloon with its girls was the only real home the men knew. The brightly lit interiors contrasted sharply with the dismal hovels they had to live in. The glittering chandeliers, the costly mirrors wreathed with inspiring banners, the inviting arrays of decanters, the carved woods, the music, the striking though often lascivious paintings, the girls in their fine frilly clothes, lent a touch of gentility to an otherwise drab and harsh existence—altogether a civilizing influence whether the males were aware of it or not.’ (G.T. p.93)

There were entertainers, suffragists, schoolmarms and missionaries as well as business women who ran boardinghouses and inns. They all contributed to the development of the Great Plains.

Land of the Burnt Thigh

This is the story of Ida Mary and Edith Ammons, two unmarried sisters in their 20’s who were looking for a wise investment in their futures when they made their initial homestead claim in 1907 near McClure, South Dakota. The need to improve their financial status attracted many women to the “wild adventure of homesteading.” Records in Lamar, Colorado, and Douglas, Wyoming, for example, indicate that in the years 1887, 1891, 1907, and 1908, an average of 11.9 percent of the homestead entrants were women. Furthermore, 42.4 percent of the women proved up their claims, while 37 percent of the men did. The Ammons sisters took over a relinquished homestead. A bachelor forfeited it after building a claim shack, because he could not endure the loneliness. The building they found on their claim was a 10’ x 12’, crudely built tarpaper shack with no source of water or shade. Their immediate reaction was to leave at the first opportunity, but they stayed in spite of themselves. When the neighbors learned that Ida Mary had previously taught school for a term or two, they hired her to teach at the nearby schoolhouse. In the meantime, Edith discovered that in nearby McClure there was a sort of newspaper being published. It was a final-proof sheet, a paper publishing the proof notices of the homesteaders. From these beginnings they went on to open a store and publish their own newspaper. Clever and determined, they found adventure and a means of livelihood on the prairie. (The big blizzard—p. 185 to 198)

This is just a sample to whet your appetite. Some women came because they had no other choice, but they all demonstrated a spirit of adventure, great endurance and much courage. Now let us turn to the story of Beret.

Beret Holm

Last month we heard a fine presentation by Pastor Dave Johnson on Beret, especially the Beret in *Giants in the Earth*. Here was a reluctant pioneer. From the early pages of the book her fears and reluctance are implied. The caravan is described, in words that must reflect Beret's perception, as 'miserably frail', 'poverty-stricken, unspeakably forlorn'. On page 15 we learn that Beret had had misgivings about this journey further to the west. When they arrive at their destination, while the others are celebrating the reunion of the party, Beret senses that 'here something was about to go wrong.' She dreads the silence, the desolation, the emptiness, the lack of anything to hide behind. She sees the prairie as not a place where life could flourish. She calls the prairie uncivilized, a place where children would grow up to be savages. She sees the desolation as something that calls forth all that is evil in human nature.

What is more, she is burdened with guilt. Their first child was conceived out of wedlock. Her parents had begged her not to marry Per, not to follow him to America. She viewed every misfortune as a punishment from God for their act of adultery and for breaking the law of filial obedience. Now, as she sank into depression, on top of her other sins, she was a hindrance to Per. Destiny had brought her to the prairie for punishment.

The itinerant pastor is able to provide her with some relief when he holds the worship service in their home, using the chest from Norway as an altar. Then Per Hansa demonstrates his confidence in her by keeping the young Peder in her care when others felt it might be too much for her to handle and the boy might be in danger. Finally, her strong sense of right and wrong causes her to ask her husband to go out in the raging blizzard to bring the minister to the dying Hans Olsa, who she believes needs confession for his sins. Consequently her husband, Per Hansa, loses his life. Here is where we left Beret at the close of *Giants in the Earth*. She was a reluctant pioneer who did not share her husband's vision of the great possibilities of the wide expanse of fertile land. She saw life on the prairie as a betrayal of all that she had held dear. Per Hansa saw the open prairie as unlimited opportunity, Beret saw it as wilderness in which people and principles became lost. The moral and natural limits that had held her life together in Norway were not present here. In Norway the mountains and the sea provided natural limits to the landscape, and societal conventions and laws gave guidance for behavior. Here even her own husband had taken the fundamental law of property ownership in his own hands when he pulled the land stakes of the Irish. The limitless prairie was all around them and with it limitless possibilities for danger and sin.

When *Giants in the Earth* ends, Beret whom we have seen suffering from deep feelings of guilt and severe depression resulting in emotional instability, now must face the fact of her husband's death for which she feels much responsibility. When *Peder Victorious* opens, it is clear that Beret's household is running smoothly and the farm is in good hands. We see early signs of conflict between Peder and his mother over the use of the Norwegian language, but clearly Beret is in charge in this home. How did she make this transition? We must wait until the middle of the book to learn what transpired between these two volumes. On page 159 in my edition we read,

‘That fatal winter, after her husband disappeared and she was left alone with all the responsibility resting on her, she felt at once how utterly helpless she was to cope with the situation. Difficulties, however, had a way of paying small heed to what she thought: They only continued to heap themselves up at her door, giving her little leisure to worry. Every day the boys, wanting to know what to do, besieged her with questions; and if she didn’t stand ready to answer on the spot, they would rush ahead, solving the problems in their own way—those fellows had no moments to waste! Ole, always impulsive, never had time to wait. Frequently things went wrong for the boys, so that she had to step in and take hold herself in order to prevent disaster.’

Then we learn how the snow had caused the roof of the shed to collapse one night, falling on a young calf and breaking both its front legs. The boys were ready to slaughter the animal, judging its situation hopeless. But Beret had the calf lifted onto a sled and hauled up to the kitchen where she put splints on the broken legs, just as she recalled had been done in Norway. The calf recovered and was allowed to remain in the kitchen until the snow disappeared. Here was Beret meeting a crisis with strength and ingenuity.

Five days after Per Hansa set out Hans Olsa died, without an attending minister which Beret had tried to provide. ‘God had not found pleasure in her ways after all, even though she had seen them so clearly.’ But even in her state of fear for Per Hansa and her bewilderment over God’s will she realized that someone must go to help Sorine. She donned men’s clothing and gave instructions. Ole would stay home and look after things, Anna Marie would get meals and take care of the baby and Store Hans would come with her. Ole did not like this arrangement, but she cuffed him on the ear and thus ended the argument. She followed Store Hans on Ole’s skis with great difficulty, feeling a sense of unreality until she finally gets near enough to hear Sorine’s cattle in the snowdrifts. This was reality. She finds her neighbor’s house cold and in great disarray. The corpse has not been tended, just a cloth thrown over his face, and Sorine and the two children have been immobilized by grief. The first thing they need is warmth. With Store Hans and Sofie’s help she gets a fire going. Then she tackles the kitchen, cleans it up, puts on the coffee pot and spreads bread for each one as if they were all her children, even Sorine. She sends Sorine and Store Hans out to care for the cattle and to spread the word that a death has occurred and help is needed. In particular, men are needed to sit with the corpse that night. No one resents or questions her orders because they recognize that what she demands is necessary. She herself takes care of preparing the body of the dead man. She washes him carefully and dresses his hair and beard. Listen to the description of how she cares for the body of Hans Olsa, her friend and neighbor.

‘She poured lukewarm water into a basin and washed him carefully with soap and water. That done, she went after a comb and dressed his hair and beard. Unable to get the hair to lie as she wanted it to, because it persisted in curling up at the temples, she found the scissors and trimmed it a bit. She took great pains with this work. Hans Olsa had been a handsome man, very cleanly and neat—they must not forget that, and now he was coming into the presence of God. . . . It seemed as though she couldn’t do enough for him, and so she found a hymn book which she placed between his hands. One eyelid

didn't close entirely; she put dead weights on both eyes. Finally, taking a clean sheet she covered the corpse with it, leaving the face bare. Now Hans Olsa was comely to look at. There he lay sleeping, the contentment of childhood resting upon his great, rugged countenance, making it appear almost as though he were ready to break into a smile. Beret looked at him. . . . God grant that you are as contented as you seem to be! She thought. A feeling akin to happiness stole over her at the thought of what she had been able to do for her old neighbor.'

Beret was certain in her own mind by this time that Per Hansa was dead, but she found herself able to comfort Sorine and, having faced Hans Olsa's death, found she was less disturbed by her own fears and slept soundly that night. Time and again as the winter dragged on and the blizzards continued she felt her situation had become impossible. Then, on the verge of giving up, some glimmer of an idea would emerge and she would see a way through to a plan she could try. During that difficult winter, fuel ran out, clothing wore out, food supplies dwindled dangerously low and worst of all the animals suffered as Beret and the boys struggled to find at least minimal feed for them in the snow. Every morning she went out with the boys to help with the work. In the evening she consulted with them, planning how to proceed with one thing or another. This helped clarify matters in her own mind.

For months she had instinctively known that her husband was dead. Nevertheless, when they brought his body home it was a terrible shock.

'For three whole days the minister sat with her. Gently and cautiously he tried to lead her, taking her by the hand, moving very slowly, coming back and going over the same road again and again. . . . In the wisdom and paternal care of Almighty God there were no accidents! When the clear light of Resurrection Morn dispelled the darkness of sorrow, she would see that all had been done in the goodness of love. The minister grappled with her as if she had been a man. And all to no purpose. For a while she would listen silently to his talk, only to become so disgusted with him that she walked away. . . . He simply did not fathom what she was struggling with!

The evening of the last night the minister was there, the children had already gone to bed and he sat by the table smoking his pipe. Beret came and took the place opposite him:

"Now I am going to explain the whole matter to you," she began, "so that you may know just how bad I am."

Then she told the minister how she had driven Per Hansa to his death. She told it carefully and completely, not omitting any detail about the angry words between them, the nagging on her part, and the terrible temper in which he had left. As she told her story she saw the incident in its bare awfulness. She defended her actions explaining that she had seen terror in the eyes of Hans Olsa when he contemplated his death and she felt it was essential that someone seek out the minister so that Hans Olsa could die in peace. The minister reassured her saying that God alone determines when a life will end, that both these men were of such fine character that they would find their way to God's

kingdom and that she needed forgiveness, not for being responsible for Per Hansa's death but for having permitted a great sin to blind her sight. (The title of this chapter is "The Eyes That Did Not See.") The minister continues, 'Your worst sin. . . lies in your discontent with God's special creatures, with your fellow men. . . That is a grievous sin, Beret Holm!' He then says this to her, 'It is you who must carry on the great work which your husband has begun out here—it is yours to do with as you will. But one thing you must keep in mind—if you are to prosper and all is to go well with you, you must learn to find the good in your fellow man.' So what is Beret's great sin? That she fails to find the presence of God on the prairie? That she fails to find the goodness of God within herself? Is the minister foretelling her inability to sense the spirit of God in her Irish neighbors? We do know this: She chooses to remain on the prairie after briefly considering returning to Norway, and she takes comfort in her neighbors' kind help in the months that follow. She also looks on her children with great love and appreciation at that time. Still, she senses that being able to see the good is a vision that comes and goes for her and sometimes disappears completely.

Peder Victorious opens with the issue of language. Peder describes the three rooms in which he lived his childhood. In the first one he welcomed new experiences and dreamed of the future. In this room he lived everything in English. Here he was comfortable and happy, anticipating the great adventures his life would hold. The second room he shared with his family. It all seemed so ordinary, and he was impatient with his siblings who didn't seem to share his zest for life or his ambitions. But his mother was worse than the others.

'Look at all the years she had lived in this country, and she couldn't even talk decent English yet. . . . "Talk Norwegian!" she would burst out all of a sudden whenever any of them talked English at home. She would even say it right out before people who didn't understand Norwegian so that Peder was often ashamed when strangers came. If only Mother had been different, this second room might not have been so bad. . . . In this room he lived everything in Norwegian.' (PV p. 3)

The third room is a shadowy place into which only God and he could come. In this room Peder struggles with the spiritual aspect of his life.

The Norwegian/English language conflict is a major one in *Peder Victorious*. As Beret views this conflict she wonders how people can maintain their sense of identity and remember their roots if they lose the use of their native language. The struggle extends throughout the book as she realizes her children are moving further and further into a world where English is their chosen language and where she is excluded. When she realizes the extent to which this is happening, she takes Peder out of the English school and insists that he attends the Tallackson school where Norwegian is the chief language. Peder soon loses interest in his school work. Peder is pleased when Rev. Gabrielson gives him an English Bible. The significance is not lost on Beret when she sees that Peder places it on top of his Norwegian one. Beret is dismayed when the minister predicts that in 20 years the churches will use only the English language. Even though

the horses grazed on the same field as the cows they did not begin to bellow! Surely humans could do as well. It was a shock to Beret to hear Peder read aloud in English before the whole crowd at the church meeting.

A schism develops in St. Luke's Church. Nils Nilsen wants to leave the congregation and begin a new church with his followers. There is a stormy meeting at which he is denied permission to withdraw. Ole, the only member of the family with the right to vote, sided with the majority. Even after the voting took place the debate began to rage again. In the midst of this heated argument, Beret rose and asked for permission to speak. The members were shocked that a woman would speak in this public forum. Her view was not the view of the majority. She thought they should let Nils Nilsen go. If his group did well the community would benefit, if Nils and his followers did poorly then the congregation would be better off without them. Ole and Store Hans were angry and embarrassed and thought perhaps she was 'crazy again' as Ole said. But this was Beret, a woman of conviction who was not afraid to speak out.

We see another aspect of Beret during the Oline incident. The minister, who is now Rev. Isaacson, an insensitive dolt, has determined that Oline, the young girl accused of bearing a child and leaving it to die, must be placed under church discipline. The minister has prepared a document for her to read but she is unable to read it and collapses in front of the congregation. Beret Holm is the first to come forward and quietly express the need for help for Oline.

Beret has taken seriously the commission the minister left her with—to carry on the work of her husband. Building the barn was an important part of Per Hansa's dream and when Ole comes upon a picture in the farm paper of a barn that looks just like the barn Per had described to his sons before he left on his fateful trip, Beret cuts it out and studies it often. The innovative feature was a ridgepole equipped with track and carrier to haul the hay into the loft and dump it wherever it was convenient. Some time before Store Hans had come home from the lumberyard with a leaflet advertising a wonderful invention, a windmill. These ideas Beret kept in her head, mulling them over frequently. One day a peddler came by and told her of a farmer near Brookings who had a remarkable structure on his land that pumped cool water, a windmill. Beret took Store Hans with her to view this marvel and built one in the spring. Then the dairy was constructed and now the barn. At the close of the day when the roof was shingled, Tonseten, who had provided the punch as well as the ceremonious whiskey for wetting the ridgepole, drank a toast to Beret, 'the greatest farmer in the town of Spring Creek, who though only a woman, had outdistanced the others by many leagues.'

We see a less flattering side of Beret that very evening as she is unable to celebrate with her good friend, when Sorine shares the happy news that she plans to marry Tambur-Ola. Are her eyes not able to see the good in Tambur-Ola, or is she a bit jealous? Beret recovers by the next morning and seeks Sorine out to confirm her friend's plans. Then she adds a gentle warning to be careful—not all can handle Tambur-Ola.

Now that we have looked at Beret in both of these books, we have a more complete picture of this woman. How can we characterize her? She is a woman of great *intelligence*. We see evidence of this as she takes charge of the farm and brings to fruition her husband's dreams of productive farming and innovative building. She grapples with problems directly and comes to her own conclusions, which she is not afraid to express even in public places.

She has a *strong sense of identity*. She knows where her roots lie. She knows she is Norwegian. Here there was no doubt. Her thoughts often carried her back to Norway even though she had not written letters to her family there. The great chest that they had carried with them to America was the centerpiece in her home. And the language, of course, she clung to with fierce tenacity. She was also Lutheran. Her loyalty to the church was strong. And she was the wife/widow of Per Hansa.

She is a *moral person*. She has a very strong sense of right and wrong. She was shocked when she realized her husband had pulled the land stakes of the Irish. She did not hesitate to show compassion to Oline.

She was *loyal* to her friends, often showing concern for Kjersti and Sorinne. Remember how carefully she prepared the body of Hans Olsa.

She was deeply *religious*. She saw the world through spiritual eyes, always coloring events and actions as good or evil, troubled by guilt, standing in need of God's grace and forgiveness. It was the itinerant minister in *Giants* who consecrated the sod house by holding a service there and by using the old trunk for an altar. This allowed Beret to move forward at that point in her life. It was the same minister who heard her confession after Per Hansa's death and challenged her to live out her husband's dream, here on the prairie. It was not physical or mental strength that she was in need of, but spiritual guidance.

In a book by Harold P. Simonson, entitled *Prairies Within; The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rolvaag*, the author expresses his view that Beret's sensitivity to former ties is not a sign of weakness, 'but rather a sense of belonging to what gives life wholeness and consecration.' Beret recognizes the false claims of self-sufficiency. I quote from Simonson, 'The issue is not that Beret was weak but that she recognized the psychological danger of uprooting oneself from the soil of one's origin. In her, Rolvaag pictured a person sensitive to the danger of what he called the "transplantation of human souls.'" "Some people get out of patience with her," he wrote in 1929, "and I in turn with them because of their lack of understanding." What the novelist wanted understood was that Beret was fighting for values synonymous with life. In *Peder Victorious* her antagonism toward the American ways of her son Peder was not, Rolvaag insisted, a case of stubbornness but a fight for life itself. The cleavage separating her and Peder sharpened the pain she had earlier suffered in being cut off from her Norwegian past and, most poignantly, from her own mother left behind. Now Beret is the mother, unable to reach the mind of her son. Lacking the password that would unlock his American world, she cannot follow him. "Can you not feel her dark apprehension?" Rolvaag asks. This

same apprehension in turn will visit Peder, unable to unlock his mother's Norwegian world, "a man having no traditions, having no background"—in short, a man cut off from his past, an Americanized Ishmael whose freedom is another kind of terror.'

So we have looked at several pioneer women who have grappled with the challenge of the prairie. They all showed great courage, endurance and an adventuresome spirit. But what sets Beret apart seems to be the depth of her struggle which results in eventual tragedy in spite of her many victories along the way. She was an immigrant and was aware of and paid the price that life in a new land incurred.

Women of the Prairie Bibliography

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