

PRAIRIE SONG

A ballad of the Old West

After fifteen years as a hired hand German John decided he had taken his last order. It was time to move west. So he married the Wilks girl, who'd fallen out with her father's new wife, and the two of them set out for Texas to homestead a farm of their own.

They left Mississippi with two horses and an old wagon and bought a razorback sow along the way. Sometimes the sow rode in the wagon and sometimes it walked, but John and his new wife almost always walked, because otherwise the horses couldn't handle the wagon on the rutted trails.

When they finally crossed the Sabine into Texas, the first land they saw was good, but it was taken. So they continued west day after day until they crossed the Brazos. The farther they went, the drier and harder the land became, and the leaner the sow became until it looked more like a dog than a pig. It was a long way to walk for a hundred and sixty acres of raw land, but German John was determined to have a farm of his own, so they kept walking.

Eventually they came to a vacant place among some low broken hills that John said reminded him a little of his childhood in Bavaria. But it wasn't really like Bavaria. The few trees that grew there were twisted and small and the land itself was dry and bitter and everything that didn't have thorns had fangs, but the horses were spent and the wagon was worn out and his wife said she was tired of walking, and John knew it was as much like Bavaria as he would get, so they stopped.

There wasn't enough wood to build a house, so they made a dug-out – just a hole in the ground with short sod walls around it and a roof over the top – and they moved in the stove and John built a table and they stuffed a mattress with prairie grass. The dug-out was as dark as a cave and smelled of roots and rocks, but they agreed that it would do just fine, although secretly they each swore not to live like that for long. Then John began to clear the land, digging out the cactus and the yucca and putting up a rope corral for the horses and a pen for the hog.

When spring arrived he'd scraped a field as bare as a hardwood floor, and he took the seed-corn and the oats and the vegetable seeds he'd carried all the way from Mississippi and entrusted them to the scalped earth, knowing that from then till first harvest they would have nothing to live on but the wild grapes and plums that grew in the gully bottoms and whatever he could get by hunting.

He was a good shot though, and there was game to be had. The brush and the knots of dry grass were full of quail and dove. He would listen for them and then set out in the

direction of their calls. But frequently he was fooled by the mockingbirds, which seemed to be everywhere. He had seen mockingbirds before, but never so many. At first he and his wife enjoyed them and the way they could flawlessly imitate anything they heard. When John built the corral one of the birds began to imitate the sound of his hatchet. Soon others had picked it up, and for some time after that German John and his wife could sit in the evening by the dug-out door and listen to what sounded for all the world like an invisible army of pioneers building an invisible town.

Slowly spring gave way to a summer. Each day the sun was a blazing lamp with never a cloud to hide it. After a few weeks John could feel his precious seeds dying in the ground, but there was nothing he could do to save them. The only water to be found was in a spring at the head of a gully, and there was barely enough of it for drinking and washing. Not even weeds had come up in his empty field. Each night as he sat with his wife by the dug-out door they secretly sniffed the wind for rain.

Finally one day she said, John we'll have to go back. *(to be continued...)*