

Kennebec, South Dakota

August 21, 1931

Mr. Otis Preston

Huron, South Dakota

Dear Mr. Preston:

It's two weeks since you took the cattle away and so far I have not received the notes and papers you were to send me.

Suppose you have been busy or were you waiting for me to write you the letter you asked for?

Well, for a few days it felt as tho I didn't care whether I ever wrote another letter or not. Everything seemed to come at once but I am getting over it a little bit now. Sure miss the cows. Am afraid we will never have another bunch like them. We were years building that bunch up to where they were. Oh well, such is life. I guess we will live thru it. We have lived thru about everything now. And so that you may realize something of what we have went thru and won't think we were altogether to blame for the way things went I will tell you a few of the things we have had to put up with in the 23 years we have worked together here. Well, here it is. (I planted some more peas, cucumbers, radishes, lettuce, beets, etc. a week ago and they are all up now and look fine. Maybe we will get some

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garden yet). You asked for it. Here it is. If it isn't what you want throw it in the waste paper basket. If it is, you are welcome to it.

Many thanks for all you have done for us and remember your promise to visit us out on the coast. (If we ever get there). I'll have some strawberries and cream for you.

Your friend,

(signed) Mrs. W. J. Murphy

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In 1904 my husband came to Lyman County and filed on a homestead, 160 acres of land, (free land they called it), by the time you proved up on it, built all your buildings, fenced it, broke it up and got water on it, it was anything but free. In 1908 we were married. We had one room 12 x 16 with a lean-to shanty for a kitchen 8 x 10, and believe me, we thot we had a mansion and were so proud of it.

We had what we thot was a pretty good crop that year. Wheat made 19 bu. per acre, oats 33, and corn 40 bu. We hauled most of the corn to town (15 miles) and sold it for 25¢ per bu.

I went with my husband several trips. One morning we went in, it was 24 below zero. Then we hauled back a load of coal.

We also hauled all the wheat and oats too as we didn't

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have much to feed it to then, just four horses, one cow and a calf and a couple of pigs. The calf was the head of the herd that we afterwards raised. She was 7/8 shorthorn and we always bought thoroughbred sires so it wasn't long until we had some real cattle. So much for the first year. The second year was not so good. Wheat made 9 bu. and oats 19, corn about 25.

And then for about 5 years we had a run of dry years, each year worse than the other. Just got our seed back and couple of years and then 2 years didn't even thresh, just mowed it and stacked it for feed. Corn made about 12 to 18 bus., and another thing, we didn't have so many acres broke then either. Broke a few more acres each year.

The year Tripp County opened up we had pretty good corn and the homesteaders came right here to the place and hauled it all themselves. We got 60¢ per bu. that year.

The winter of 1913 in March we had a terrible blizzard. Snow banked as high as the house, no fences in sight, roads blocked for days, had to brake every foot of the road to town for groceries and fuel, then is when it was bad on horses and men too. They had to be tough to stand it. Well, we had a fair crop that year. On October 22, 1910, our oldest daughter was born. We had to go 5 miles to phone for a doctor and he had to come 15 miles with a team but it happened the weather was real good, also the roads.

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On March 26, 1914, our oldest boy was born but it was a stormy day and again the doctor had to come 15 miles. (same doctor).

They (doctors I mean) have hardships in these western countries just like the rest of us, nothing soft about it. It isn't quite so bad now when they have cars and graded roads but then it was fierce, no roads, just trails, snow cold, and a slow way of going.

In 1915 we had a bumper crop. Our barley made 50 bu. per acre, had 20 acres and got 1000 bu. and it was so heavy it went down and we had to cut it all one way and couldn't get it all. Corn made 50 bu. or better per acre, and from then until 1923 we had fair crops and got pretty fair prices for them but during the war it took all you made to live and for liberty bonds, Red Cross, and anything else they happened to call for and our children were small and not able to help any. My husband was trying to farm all he could besides milking 10 or 12 cows, so we had to hire some one to help and the kind of men you got then didn't earn their board. Yet we had to pay them from \$75 to \$100 per month and their board and then had to do most of the work ourselves. It's no wonder we got in debt. All this time we were trying to improve our place, planned on having a nice home some day, built a couple more rooms on our house, that that would do until we could afford to build a good house. (That day hasn't



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come so far. Will it ever come now? I wonder). Then we built a barn 40 x 42 with a big hay loft. My husband had his share of trying to keep stock in old straw roofed sheds. Every time it rained they were all mud and water and you had to stack all your hay outside and the wind blew half of it away after you had hauled it from 3 to 5 miles so he thought he could save the price of his barn with the hay that was wasted, also in the difference it made in the stock. He is a great stock man, would never eat himself until his stock was fed, he wanted good stock or none. Almost lived with his pigs and believe me, he raised some good ones. His only trouble was he couldn't get feed enough for them.

One crop of pigs paid for our barn, but of course while we were paying for those things there were other debts piling up.

We had to buy all our machinery to start farming with, also our horses and what few cattle we bought. We kept all our heifers and it wasn't long until we had quite a bunch and we had no money to start with so of course had to go in debt.

In 1919 we had 46 head of cattle, and if we had sold them then could have got \$100 a head for nearly all of them, but we were like everyone else, we didn't think they would go down all at once, so instead of selling them, we bought another

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quarter section of land and paid \$1,000 down on it, paid \$25 per acre for it and at that time it looked like a good buy; it cornered the place we had and we needed it for pasture. The bankers advised you to buy more land, they were doing it themselves, and it would have been alright too if things had turned out different but we used ours for pasture for a couple of years and by that time, cattle had gone away down in price and we had to sell them for about half what we could have got for them before. Then we broke the land up just in time to get a run of poor years again.

In 1919 we put down an artesian well which cost us \$1,500 but my husband had hauled water for 12 years and he thot it was time to do something different. In the summer it kept you busy hauling so the stock would have enough, and in the winter, your tank, trough and barrels would all freeze up and you had to chop them out every day and the cattle never had enough water, and you nearly perished yourself while you were doing it. So while it is a lot of money to put into a well, it is well worth it in the difference it makes in the stock. This water is hot, never freezes, and no matter how cold it is the cattle will go out twice a day and drink, and they don't require near as much feed as they do when they don't have enough water.

We also put down a big cistern for water for the house after having dug about 10 other wells that all turned out to

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be dry ones. We built a hog house, garage, and chicken house, fenced and cross-fenced the place, and believe me, when you do all that you have done something especially in this country where everything is so high.

We also put in about \$500 worth of trees, fruit and shade trees, and for a while we had one of the nicest little groves around here, but it only took the grasshoppers two years to undo what it took us 25 years to do. They are as bare now as they would be in winter and I'm afraid they will never come out again.

In 1923 the anthrax broke out. We vaccinated all our cattle so did not lose any but lost all of our calf crop, blamed the vaccination, and the year after that we lost 6 head with black leg, under two year olds. We have always vaccinated since then for black leg. And that is about all the cattle we have ever lost except maybe a calf or two.

In 1923 we sold \$999.00 worth, almost a thousand dollars worth, of cattle and \$500.00 (five hundred dollars) worth of hogs. We expected to keep enough to run us thro the winter for coal and supplies but when the banker who had a mortgage on our cattle came out to fix up the papers he said to turn it all in on our paper as they needed the money then, and then if we wanted some money later we could have it. So we turned it all over to him and fixed up our papers again, had something

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over 20 head of cattle left, about 14 horses, and I don't just remember how many hogs but quite a few, all our machinery (and it was worth something then), and he said he didn't have security enough, had to have a second mortgage on our farm. And we gave it to him. Easy, well I'll say we were. And that isn't the worst of it. When we went back to him a little later for money to get coal, he told us they weren't lending any money. Said he was sorry, we had his sympathy, but we couldn't keep very warm on that, so we had to borrow some money from a man in town to get coal with.

The next time we went to renew our paper it was more than it was before we paid the \$1,500 on the note. Oh! We have lived and learned but it was a pretty costly lesson. If I could only go back ten years and know what I know now, things would be different. But we have always tried to be honest and that everyone else was, trusted others too much. Maybe we are still doing it, I don't know.

Well, since 1923 you might say we haven't had a decent crop. We had lovely bunches of pigs and had to sell them unfinished. So we didn't make much on them. Could we have finished them out, we could have made quite a little and maybe paid something to those we were in debt to.

Then the bank closed its doors. "The First National Bank" of Kennebec, South Dakota, and it was the best thing that ever



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happened to us as the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and the Agricultural Credit Corporation held our paper. Had we been dealing with them years ago we would have been far better off.

The Federal Reserve sent their Representative out to see us. We had a nice bunch of pigs but no feed to feed them so he kindly advanced us the money to buy feed for them. Then there was no sale for them here, so my husband had to hire a truck and haul them down into Iowa. That was in 1929.

We then sent the money for advances and the interest thereon to Mr. Preston amounting to \$305.40 but told him in the same letter we did not know how we were going to live thru the winter as those pigs were all we had to sell and asked them if they could advance us \$200.00.

Did they say they were sorry and we had their sympathy? No, they did not. They sent their Representative, Mr. Preston, out, and when he saw how conditions were they advanced us the \$200 to winter on. We will always be grateful to them for I don't know what we should have done without it.

The spring of 1930 we started out again "full of pep", to farm same as every spring. We had rented 320 acres more and that may be we would be lucky enough to raise a crop. That that surely we couldn't always have failures, and again the Federal Reserve helped us out advancing us \$75 to buy seed corn and

later in the summer \$100 more. We had in 70 acres of barley, 30 acres of flax, 200 acres of corn, and had a nice garden. Our barley was nice a field of barley as you ever would want to see, and on the 24th of June we got a hail storm and it just ruined our barley, never straightened up again. Our garden was like it had never been planted, but I planted it again and as we can water it we had a real good garden. In fact, we lived on what we grew in it and on our milk cows all last winter.

Our flax looked fine, that it would make 10 bu. per acre anyway, and it was almost ready to cut when the grasshoppers and crickets got in it, and they left nothing but the stocks. And they done the same with the corn. It was all silked out before they came but they got it anyway. Well, we thought that was bad enough, but there was worse to come. The cholera broke out and we lost 70 head of hogs. Didn't even have one left to butcher.

Then on September 6 we had to take our oldest daughter to the hospital for a major operation and for awhile did not know whether we would bring her back or not, but she pulled thro, thanks to a wonderful doctor, Dr. Delaney of Mitchell, and good nurses. Also our own doctor, the same one that we had when she was born, and I made up my mind then I would never complain again about crops and things like that as long as we saved her. Now she is getting strong and healthy and is married to a fine young

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man.

When you, Mr. Preston, came out last fall and wanted the cattle we asked for one more year as we didn't see how we could possibly make it if we lost our milk cows (and we couldn't have either if it hadn't been for them and our vegetables) and you agreed to give us one more year, but said if you came this fall and wanted a bill of sale we were to turn them over to you and no questions asked.

Well, we thot that surely we had all the hard luck last year that we could possibly have for awhile, thot it couldn't last forever so we went to work again this spring, put in 160 acres of wheat, 60 acres of barley, and 40 acres of flax, also 110 acres of corn. And no crops ever looked better than they did early this year. Corn looked lovely and so clean. Well, you saw what happened to everything this year.

The worst thing that ever hit this country or any other country of all the dry years we have ever had, nothing could compare with this year. Not a blade of grass left, not a leaf on the trees. Much less crops of any kind, they just stripped everything in their path. Grasshoppers, millions of them, and they are still hatching out new batches all the time. Other years we at least had hay; this year there is no hay, fodder or anything. We couldn't even raise a garden; they ate it off as fast as it came thru the ground. Those who haven't seen grass-

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hoppers at work have no idea what damage they can do. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it.

You could have a lovely corn field one day; the next day nothing but stocks left and hardly that.

Well, when you came this year for your cattle we done just as you asked; we turned them over and no questions asked. We felt terrible to have to lose them but felt that you people had treated us more than fair, much better in fact than any of our home men would have done. We expected you to take everything we had but instead you said you would leave us all the machinery, the four horses, and at the last one cow. We thot it was wonderful of you. Of course, I realize that machinery and especially horse machinery is worthless and there isn't much demand for horses and ours are pretty old, but we were real thankful for them just the same and the cow certainly means a lot to us and our babies. We have nine children now, 6 girls and 3 boys. One girl 21 in October (married), one boy 17, and the rest ranging from 11 years to 5 months. And if it wasn't for them we wouldn't be worrying now but it takes a lot to feed and clothe for that many little fellows, but if we could just get work even now we could do it, but it seems impossible to get any work of any kind. See by the papers where they have promised federal aid but I'm afraid the stock and people both will be starved to death before they have their program outlined.



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Well, our babies are lots of care now but some day they may be a great help to us.

I have tried to give you a rough outline of things that have happened in the last 25 years but I could tell you that much more but what's the use, you couldn't realize it anyway. You might, as you have been around a lot and saw for yourself how people live out here but so many people in the city cannot begin to realize what it is to be 16 miles from town with no modern conveniences in old shacks of houses, often so cold in winter that it is impossible to keep warm (if it hadn't been a lovely winter last winter we would have frozen as we had no money to buy coal), often the roads have been blocked with snow for weeks so you could not get to town for groceries. Usually we have our own meat but last year and this we haven't had any on account of losing all our hogs last year. We didn't have money enough to buy any more this spring and guess we were lucky at that as we wouldn't have raised any feed anyway.

You told us to get out of this country, go any place away from here. Well, that's what we would do if we could but we can't walk out with our family. There are too many doing that now. But it does seem useless to stay here any longer. We have put in 25 years, the best years of our lives, my husband longer that that, and what have we accomplished? Just worked like slaves and believe me, we did work from early morning until

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10 or 11 o'clock at night and then get nothing, one certainly gets discouraged. I never felt that way until the last couple of years, that maybe we could make it here yet, hated to give up, but guess we will have to now.

If we could have raised crops every year and not had so many failures we would not be in debt now and would have had our home but so few crops and so many failures. And that was another thing the bankers told us to do, pay them and let our interest go on our land, and of course if you let it go one year in this country you never will get caught up again so of course we lost our land too.

I tho't when we lost it that that was the worst thing that could ever happen but I guess it was the best because you can rent it cheaper than the taxes and interest were, but one hates to lose their home.

Seems funny some people have lovely homes, fine clothes, everything they want to eat and all kinds of enjoyment and still they are not satisfied, and if I had a nice little home for my kiddies where they could go to a good school and didn't owe anybody anything and my health, I wouldn't ask for anything else and would be perfectly happy.

And that was one reason I have never kicked on this country until now. We have all been pretty healthy. Outside of the times our babies were born, we have only had to call the doctor

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five times in 23 years.

Last year when we took our daughter to the hospital, once when the flu was so bad during the war, and one winter my husband had pneumonia we had to call him three times. And he was terrible bad too. The doctor surely saved his life. And he also saves mine two or three times at least. We think an awful lot of him. He brot all our children into the world. Well, you will probably be tired reading all this but I wanted you to know something of what we went thru, altho this isn't the half of it.

Had a letter from an old neighbor who used to live here. He lives in Washington, now says it's the most wonderful place, says we could go out there and go right to work, that there is always work there, and that's what we want as there are none of us afraid of work but how are we going to get out there? I'd go tomorrow if I could altho I have never wanted to go before.

One thing we have here, and that is the most wonderful people. You will never find any like them any place else. That's all I'd hate about leaving here.

But if we were in Washington where we could raise our own vegetables and fruit and you can get a good price for poultry, eggs, and cream. We surely could make a living after living here this long on, you might say, nothing. We never have had enough fruit here and now what few fruit trees we had are killed by the grasshoppers, and I'd hate to have to wait for more trees

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to grow in this country. Don't know whether we could stand it another 23 years or not. Am afraid we couldn't. For one thing we are not as young and strong as we used to be nor have we the ambition we used to have. Anyone can work pretty hard if they get anything for their labor, but if it's for nothing all the time you soon lose your "pep."

Well, that's enough hard luck stuff. Don't want you to think we have had no pleasures at all because we have had.

For one thing we have our children. Would not trade one smile of my babies for all the money in the world nor the feel of their little arms around me and if we can just bring them up to be good honest men and women who are not afraid to work, then we will not have lived in vain. Maybe, who knows, someday they may be famous. Men and women that the world will be proud of. Anyway, we love them and would not part with them for any money.

Now we want to thank you once more for all you have done for us. And we will certainly be glad to get our notes back as you promised as that will mean a lot to us.

I would not feel so bad if you had been able to realize what you advanced us out of the cattle but don't suppose you did. Hate to have you out the money you let us have to work on, but I'm sure you know that it was thru no fault of ours. It was just that everything went against us, and we just couldn't help it; things have gone from bad to worse, for at least six



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years, longer I guess. But if we get your debt cancelled and could get out of here, maybe we could make good yet.

If I'm living in ten years, will write you another chapter and let you know how we are getting along.

But whatever we do or wherever we go we want you to know that we are very grateful for all you have done for us. Had we had the same kind of treatment from our home men we might not be in the circumstances we are now. Oh! well, we made our mistakes, may make more, but they won't be the same ones. I know one thing, no one on earth, no matter how well they are doing can pay 10% interest and come out on top, and we had to pay 12% for awhile.

Well, we worked 23 years, started at the bottom without anything, for awhile we thought we were climbing, but we never reached the top. Now we are at the bottom again. Will we have the energy and ambition to climb again? Well, time will tell. If we ever reach the top will let you know and with the help of God we will do it yet.

Mrs. Wm. J. Murphy,

Kennebec, South Dakota.