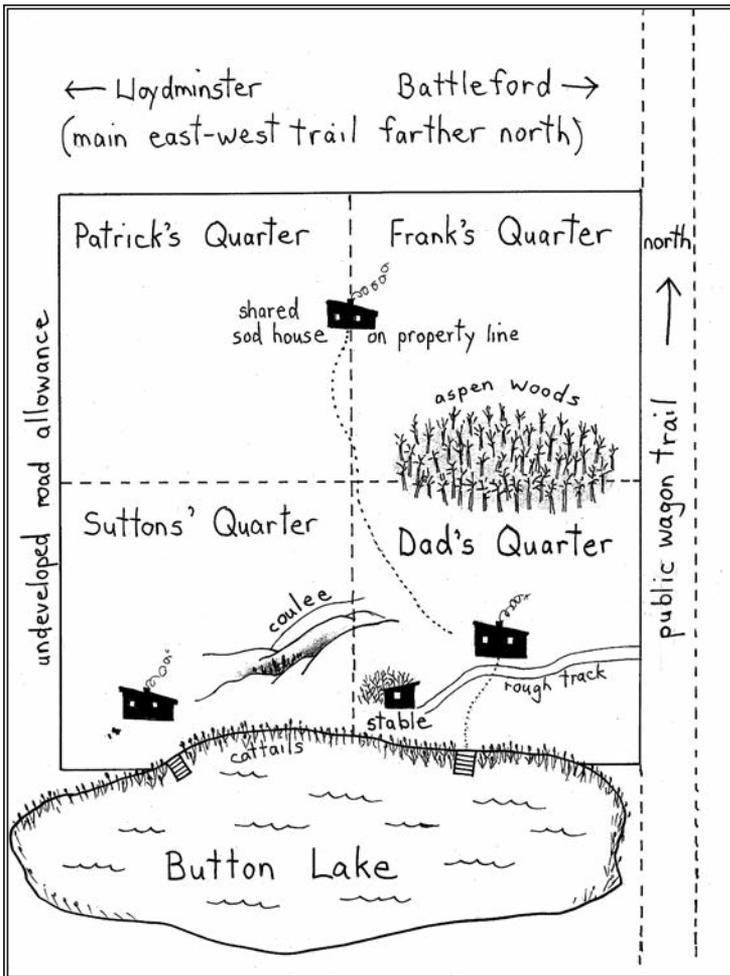


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# Author's Hand-drawn Map of the Homesteads



Dominion Government land surveyors divided western Canada into sections of land that measured one mile by one mile [1.6 kilometres by 1.6 kilometres]. Each section was subdivided into four quarter sections, marked by wooden posts. This map shows one section of land near Lloydminster, with the land reserved for road allowances on either side.

## North-West Territories, 1903

First Snow

Dorothy Bolton stormed out of the sod house with an empty bucket in each hand. Her mother's sharp voice rang in her ears. Angry thoughts rumbled through her head. *Why is it always my job to notice when the buckets are empty? Why can't Mam fetch her own water some of the time?* All the way to the dock she muttered to herself, kicking at tufts of dry grass.

For once the prairie wind was still and the small lake was smooth as glass. Dorothy stared at the ragged grey clouds reflected in the water. She raised her head to the sky and called aloud, "Please Lord, let something pleasant happen today."

Soon a downy white flake drifted onto her navy blue coat. "Hello," Dorothy greeted the delicate crystal. "You're the first."

Now another and another floated down. Dorothy stretched her arms as snowflakes sprinkled onto her coat sleeves. "Thanks for the star coat!" she cried to the sky. She twirled with her mouth open, feeling icy tingles on her tongue and face.

Finally Dorothy remembered her mission; her

mother needed water for tea.

She walked out on the rickety dock Dad had built through the border of cattails. Kneeling on the wobbly planks dappled with snow, she lowered the buckets into the water. Bits of twigs and leaves swirled in as well, but Dorothy wasn't bothered. Mam always strained and boiled the water as the homestead instructor had directed.

Dorothy lugged the buckets up the slope toward their sod house. Partway up, she set her burden on the dried grass and flexed her aching arms. *Why did Dad build our soddie so far from the water and uphill to boot?* She asked herself this same question every day.

Of course, she knew the answer: Mam wanted a view.

Last summer her grown-up brother Frank had argued against Dad's location for the house. Dorothy could still hear Frank's frustrated plea: "Matthew Snow advised us to build low on the slope." But no, Mam wanted a view, so Dad ignored the experience of a prairie-born Canadian, paid by the government to assist the Barr Colony.

A week later Frank quoted Mr. Snow again, accusing Dad of framing the sod walls wrong. This time Dad lost his temper. "I'm tired of colonials bossing me around and I certainly won't have a young whippersnapper like you yapping at me." Oh, how these words clattered in Dorothy's head!

In a huff, Frank had marched away through the poplar brush to his own homestead a half mile north. Although he returned the next day to help, tension still lingered between Dorothy's two favourite men.

With a sigh she picked up the heavy buckets and plodded across the ploughed fireguard surrounding their tiny sod house. Pushing open the plank door, she inhaled the meaty aroma of rabbit stew. Her eyes strained to adjust to the dim light filtering through three small windows.

“Why hasn’t someone lit the lantern?”

“Shh!” said a shape bent before the cast-iron stove. Her older sister Lydia lifted two bread pans from the oven.

“Supper smells good! But I can hardly see in here. Why isn’t the lantern lit?”

“Lower your voice,” hissed Lydia. “Mam has a headache again and she’s resting.”

“Doesn’t she want the water for tea?” whispered Dorothy. *All that work for no reason*, she thought, setting the buckets down with a noisy clunk.

“I’ll talk to you outside.” Lydia pulled her shawl from a peg and unlatched the door. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, it’s started to snow and it’s only October!” She wrapped the shawl tightly around her shoulders, then strode away from the house.

“Yes, isn’t it wonderful!” Dorothy skipped ahead, catching floating stars in her mittens. She glimpsed her sister’s face and stopped abruptly. “Is something amiss?”

“While you were at the dock, Mam and Dad had another row. I heard them when I was coming back from the privy, so I waited outside.”

Dorothy’s joy fizzled into a knot in her belly. “Wh...what were they arguing about this time?”

“Mam said we don’t have enough money to get

through the winter.”

“But Dad brought plenty of money from England.”

“Apparently it’s gone. Mam said we scarcely have two pennies to rub together.” Lydia adjusted her shawl. “Finally I had to go inside to put the bread in the oven. Mam said not to light the lamp because we’re low on coal oil. And Dad stomped off toward the stable.”

Dorothy’s heart kicked against her chest. “That can’t be right. Our dad wouldn’t let us run out of money!” She sucked in a deep breath. “I’m going to ask him.”

Dorothy swivelled sideways but Lydia’s sharp tug pulled her back.

“No, let him settle. He was some vexed.”

“In that case, I’ll just get an armful of firewood.”

“Oh, all right. Don’t mention I heard their argument. Tell him supper is almost ready.”

Dorothy scurried downhill to the crude sod shack tucked beside a clump of wolf willow bushes. The heavy door grated on its hinges when she pushed it open. With only one small window, it was darker than the house and pungent with the odour of manure. Dad hadn’t even cleaned the stalls today!

The two horses, Prancer and Dancer, turned their heads and nickered. Dorothy wondered if it was her appearance or the fresh air that made them happy. Leaving the door open, she rubbed each nose in greeting. Then she squinted into the gloomy corners. “Dad?”

No answer.

She gave each horse a handful of hay and chose some split logs from the stack. Clutching the wood, she closed the stable door behind her. She was struggling to latch it

when a leather glove reached forward and clicked it shut.

“Dad!” What a relief to have her tall, strong father beside her.

“T’ snow’s fallin’ reet good, lass. Tha should nay be oot ’ere aloon.”

*Oh, oh, Dad’s talking broad Yorkshire. He only does that when he’s REALLY upset!* Raising her eyebrows, Dorothy stared at him. His black curly hair and his greatcoat were white with snow.

“I thought you were in the stable, Dad.”

“Nay, ah went fer a walk.”

“Lydia sent me to tell you supper’s almost ready.”

“Mmm.” Dad’s moustache jiggled as he kneaded his lips. “I’ll clean out the muck ’ere awhile. You ’oof it back to the ’ouse now, afore it’s dark.” He was speaking slower now and closer to the King’s English.

When Dorothy hesitated, Dad pulled her close for a hug. Startled by a sour smell on his breath, she recoiled slightly.

“Get goin’ now,” he said, pushing her away.

As she reached the soddie, she noticed Lydia peering out their precious glass window. One day last summer Dad had packed their quilts in the wagon and invited Dorothy to ride to the nearby village of Lloydminster. They returned with four glass panes wrapped in the quilts. A barge from Edmonton had shipped several crates and the storekeeper rationed them amongst the colonists who still had money. That day Dorothy had thought their family was rich!

Dorothy opened the door and dropped her logs into the wood box.

“Whatever took so long?” Lydia poured boiling water into the blue crockery teapot. “And where’s our dad? Everything’s ready.”

Dorothy stepped outside on the small stoop to shake the snow from her garments. After hanging up her coat, she finally answered, “He’s cleaning the stable. He’ll be here, uh...right sharp.”

She leaned into the deep window ledge and wiped moisture from the pane. All she saw was a mass of grey swirls. “Lydia, it’s still snowing and it’s getting dark. We must light the lantern for Dad!”

Not waiting for permission, Dorothy pulled the glass chimney off the lantern, struck a match and touched it to the wick. She set the glowing lamp in the window.

Lydia paced back and forth in the small room. Finally she exclaimed, “Everything’s ready! Where is he?” After a quick check out the door, she blustered, “I’m not waiting any longer.”

While Dorothy laid the table, Lydia called through the heavy curtain that marked one end of the sod house as their parents’ bedroom. “Tea’s on, Mam.”

Their mother emerged, smoothed down her rumpled skirt and sat at the table. Lydia scooped stew into three bowls and poured the tea. “Ah,” Mam said after her first sip, “perfectly steeped, Lydia.”

“And perfectly baked bread,” added Dorothy, helping herself to a slice. In truth the bread was dense and gummy; Lydia hadn’t mastered the art of baking in a cold house with an unreliable oven.

Lydia scowled at Dorothy. “Liar!”

Noting Lydia’s strained face, Dorothy swallowed her

retort. *Best not joke about bread today!* She knew the burden that fell on her sister whenever Mam was indisposed. She felt a pang of shame for dawdling at the lake when she should have been helping Lydia.

In the midst of supper Dad entered, stamping snow off his boots. He hung his snow-covered greatcoat on a peg.

“For heaven’s sake, Willy, shake it outside first,” said Mam. “The snow from your boots is already turning the floor to mud!”

Dorothy cringed. Their lack of a wood floor was a frightful bugbear with Mam. Even their working-class neighbours, the Suttons, had a wood floor. Mam had made the point several times that Mr. Sutton managed his money well. Each time, Dad protested that the general store had no more planed boards for sale.

Now Dorothy wondered if their family had run out of money to spend.

Dad hung up his snow-free coat and carried the lamp from the window ledge to the table. “Aggie,” he said, “I was mighty glad to see that light in the window.” And Dorothy was mighty relieved to hear Dad speaking educated English again.

“Don’t thank me,” said Mam. “That was Dodie’s idea.”

“I’m glad we’re all safe together.” Dorothy forced cheerfulness into her voice and turned to include Mam in her smile. Wrinkles etched Mam’s face and dark circles lined her eyes. The lamplight cast harsh shadows that made Mam look like one of the gargoyles on York Minster, that grand old cathedral back home.

Dorothy reached across the table and pulled the lantern closer to herself. Mam’s face softened in the more

diffuse light. *That's better*, Dorothy thought, *but now I probably look like a gargoyle*. She allowed herself a quiet giggle.

Lydia served Dad a bowl of hot stew. He ate heartily, clinking his spoon against the metal bowl. "By gum, that was tasty, Aggie. Where did you get the hare?"

"Don't ask me," said Mam. "Lydia made it."

Dorothy hastened to explain, "Victor Sutton brought it this morning, already skinned and gutted. He's practising to be the man of the house, because his pop and older brother have signed on to build the telegraph line from Fort Pitt to Lloydminster. They're leaving right soon."

"Are they then?" said Dad, stroking his moustache.

Feeling encouraged, Dorothy added, "Two months work at \$1.50 a day."

"The Suttons know how to find employment," Mam muttered into her teacup. The Bolton family finished their supper in silence.

After clean-up Dorothy and Lydia visited the outhouse together. Dorothy held the lantern aloft while Lydia hurried inside the tiny wooden structure. When it was Dorothy's turn, she left the door wide open. Holding her breath, she adjusted her clothes to sit on the hole.

Back outside, Dorothy gasped for air. "The privy isn't a place to linger!" Usually the girls joked about the smell in the outdoor toilet, but tonight Lydia just headed toward the house.

Dorothy seized her sister's elbow. "Are we...in big trouble, Lydia?"

Lydia peered over her shoulder. "Big trouble?"

“I mean, how shall we survive the winter without money?”

“Don’t fret so, Dodie. Dad and Mam will sort it out.”

“Don’t treat me like a child!” Dorothy shrilled. She swallowed and tried more calmly, “Tell me the truth, Lydia.”

Lydia fussed with the knob on the lantern to adjust the wick. “The truth is: you ARE a child. You’re only ten years old.” The angle of light hid Lydia’s eyes in black holes but Dorothy still felt stabbed by her sister’s icy stare.

Lydia strode to the stoop and set the lamp down. Knocking the snow from her boots, she shook her coat and went inside.

“Almost eleven!” Dorothy sputtered to the closed door. “And what makes you so clever? You’re only sixteen!” She stayed alone in the gloom, staring at the grey-black sky. Snowflakes glimmered in the lamplight as they floated to the ground. She caught some in her mitten, but they quickly melted.

Soon the door opened and a voice snapped, “Come inside, you lumphead!” Lydia reached out with a broom and brushed off Dorothy’s coat. Picking up the lantern, Dorothy stepped inside.

The family was preparing for night. Dad stuffed logs into the stove’s firebox, then removed the four round covers on the cooking surface to let heat into the room. Lydia put the chamber pot under the table for night-time emergencies.

Even Mam was helping. She draped three flannel nightgowns over chairs pulled near the stove. “Come change over here, Dodie, where it’s warm.” Her voice

sounded almost inviting.

Dad ruffled Dorothy's hair and said, "Sleep tight, my pet." The stinky smell wasn't on his breath now. Dorothy nestled beside him for a moment, then Dad withdrew behind the curtain to give his girls privacy to change.

Dorothy yanked off her pullover, her corduroy dress and her petticoat. She tugged the nightie over her head, then shrugged into the heavy woollen jumper Gram had knit last winter. This sweater was so special, Dorothy didn't want to soil it with daily chores. She saved it for sleeping.

Mam held a clean pair of ankle-length underwear next to the stove. "You haven't changed your drawers for a week."

"Ah, not tonight, Mam." Dorothy hated stripping off her cosy under-layer and feeling cold air swirl up inside her skirt.

"Yes," snapped Mam. "I shall wash our underthings tomorrow. Hurry now, these are heated."

With a groan, Dorothy rolled down her warm woollen legs that felt like a second skin. She pulled up the clean underwear as fast as she could.

After dutifully kissing Mam's cheek, Dorothy climbed the ladder to her narrow bunk above her sister's. The bed wobbled as she crawled under her comforter. Dad had done his best building it from the rough lumber available in Lloydminster, but he was an office clerk not a carpenter.

Dorothy sorely missed her comfortable English bed with a real mattress, instead of this rough ticking stuffed with straw. At least she still had her cosy eiderdown. She pulled it up to her nose as Mam blew out the lamp.

## Trial by Winter

The tiny world of their soddie faded into eerie shapes back-lit by the four fiery eyes of the stove. After Mam disappeared behind the curtain, Lydia prepared for bed. She was too modest to undress by lamplight. Dorothy studied the curve of Lydia's corset outlined by the thin red glow.

Wondering if she would ever look like that, she felt her own flat chest. She didn't dare ask Mam or Lydia how their bodies had changed. She would just have to wait and see.

With a sigh, Dorothy closed her eyes. The events of the day drifted through her mind and she suddenly remembered a more pressing problem to worry about.

Did she dare ask Dad if they were really out of money?



Two boys haul blocks of sod to a partially constructed house. Each section of sod weighed about 50 pounds (22.7 kilograms). The boys would have to work together to lift one. *Glenbow Archives (NA-474-2)*