

Prologue:

When Clyde awoke on that early autumn day, he sensed the smell of smoke in the air. By now he had been on the prairie long enough to have heard about the dangers of prairie fires. Following the alert his senses gave him, he quickly went outside to scan the horizon. To the southwest he saw a plume of smoke rising from above the land. It was the Lucas Johansen place. Lightning from the early morning storm must have ignited the fire.

Clyde wasted no time. He quickly dressed, grabbed an old blanket from his home, stepped into his boots and put on his hat, then high tailed it down the two-track from his place to the Johansen's. He jogged more than walked the ½ mile to their farm and saw on his arrival that the fire lay south beyond the homestead and barn lot.

Thankfully, Lucas and his brothers had already harvested the wheat crop earlier in the season, but the fire was making it's way through the wheat stubble, threatening to move into the portion of the farm where the buildings stood.

Clyde took his place alongside the others, Lucas and Mrs. Johansen; Karl and Hans; Magnus and Marit. He dipped his blanket into the bucket of water that had been hauled out to the field and commenced to fight back the flames where there was a gap in the line. Soon he was joined by his neighbor and good friend, Thomas O'Brien, who had also seen and smelled the smoke, and come to help.

The danger of prairie fires was something that had been expressed to both Clyde and O'Brien upon their arrival in the region. Sadie Svennson had been the first to school them on this phenomenon once when they had seen evidence of such a fire off in the distance from Arnegard.

The arid nature of the climate, prevalence of wind, ample availability of surface fuel and ignition caused by lightning from summer storms often came together as a perfect storm for this particular disaster. Too many homesteaders had been driven to ruin by such a prairie fire in the past, meaning that everyone came to the fore when such an event

sparked nearby. You never knew if you, your family and your farm might be the next victim.

So, in the best sense of the tradition behind the name "Dakota", you went to help your "friends". You became an "ally" on the prairie, looking to assist in any way you could to get the fire under control, or to at least protect the farmer's home and farm buildings, livestock and equipment.

After a grueling couple of hours fighting back the flames, the crew working against the Lucas' Johansen prairie fire got the upper hand. Assisted by the decline of the wind and consummation of the available fuel, the fire began to play out. The fact that Karl and Hans had taken their work horses and plowed firebreaks into the field was likely the ultimate difference between winning and losing that day.

Clyde was grateful he had been able to lend a hand. But the event gave him pause. Once again, he was mindful of just how difficult this life on the northern prairie could be. There were so many challenges that could arise – insects, fire, wind, storms, drought. He knew with winter on the horizon that some of the most challenging days were still to come.

"Come to de house for a drink of vater, Clyde Cash", called Mrs. Johansen. "Ve vant to thank ye for coming to our aid today."

So, Clyde joined the others to quench his thirst. Mrs. Johansen brought out some sour dough bread with jam, as well. And the soot covered homesteaders, from oldest to youngest paused to give thanks for God's protection and deliverance that day.

This was Lucas' Johansen's prayer:

"Ve tank dee Lord God for die deliverance. Yee brought us friends and family to fight back de flames and save our home. Indeed, as your Good Book says, 'de flame sal not consume you'."

As he went back home to pick up the chores of the day on his own homestead, Clyde continued to marvel at his neighbor's demeanor.

The devout Lutheran Norwegian was something of an enigma to Clyde. He could be gruff, blunt and even standoffish. But other times his true metal and character, including his faith, shone about as bright as anything Clyde had experienced.

Thinking then of the others who were part of that morning's fire fighting crew, Clyde smiled to himself about the diverse cast of characters he had met on the North Dakota prairie. He knew he had another story to write to Anna about in his next letter.