

## "I Could Write a Book": Paul and Elizabeth Corey

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In his memoir "Lurching Toward Liberalism," Iowa novelist Paul Corey speaks of visiting his sister Elizabeth in South Dakota during the dustbowl years and also of re-reading, in his adulthood, the bundles of letters which Bess Corey had written home, learning (and re-learning) from them a good deal about the early history of his family.<sup>1</sup> Those letters, now to be published by The University of Iowa Press, do contain reams of data concerning the Corey family. And about rural one-room school teaching. And about the homesteading experience. But devotees of Paul Corey's Iowa novels will be particularly interested in the brother-sister relationship that emerges from these pages, and by the fact that the Coreys of Marne produced not one, but two writers of distinction.

Elizabeth Corey (1887-1954) was nearly sixteen years old by the time that Paul's birth in 1903 completed the family. Among the seven children, Bess was second-oldest, Paul by far the youngest, a gap of nearly six years existing between him and his nearest brother, Challenge. Understandably, crowding was endemic in the tiny four-room house that Edwin Corey had built on his farm northwest of Atlantic. "How my family managed to squeeze into [it] has always baffled me," says Paul in the foreword which he has provided for the Iowa edition of Bess's letters. However, as it was on so many early farms, the new home was an improvement upon the original, primitive accommodations, possessing the advantages, despite its tiny

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Corey, "Lurching Towards Liberalism: Political and Literary Reminiscences," *Books at Iowa*, 49 (November 1988), 35-71. Readers interested in Paul Corey's farm novels might look at Robert A. McCown, "Paul Corey's Mantz Trilogy," *Books at Iowa*, 17 (November 1972), 15-18, 23-26. This essay is based upon the letters of Elizabeth Corey 1904-1942, Paul Corey's novel *Three Miles Square*, various sources treating the history of Stanley County, South Dakota, and upon the author's interviews and correspondence with Paul Corey 1986-1990.

size, of being "new and substantial." Surrounding the home on the north stood an acre of apple trees, fragrant in May; to the east rolled a lawn on which maples, elms, catalpas, and assorted evergreens flourished. The *de rigueur* vegetable garden, full of every good thing for the table, was supplemented by a fruit garden which produced blackberries, raspberries, currants, strawberries, and grapes. Maples, willows, and box-elders formed an effective windbreak. Altogether, the farm embodied Edwin Corey's "proud dream," a solid accomplishment for a poor boy straying westward from Illinois in search of a place in the American sun.

Early in 1905, disaster struck. After a brief bout with pneumonia, Edwin Corey died, plunging his family into disarray. His widow, Margaret Morgan Brown Corey, was left with a growing family to support and a farm to run. The oldest son, Olney, was not in good health, but Fuller and Rob Corey were strapping teenagers, and "most of the farm work settled on [them]," admits Paul, who at age two was little more than an infant. "Neighbors helped. I remember stories that even Bess wore a pair of her brother's overalls and helped with the haying," and undoubtedly she did. Margaret Corey, too distraught on the one hand and too busy on the other, had little time to devote to Paul, whose care became the responsibility of his sisters, Bess and Ethel. Big and blonde, Bess took the lead. She was seventeen and full grown, old enough to be a mother herself (although she never would be). Happily, she served as a surrogate. "I was told that Bess used to put me to sleep by humming a Strauss waltz and waltzing me around the kitchen-dining room in her arms," says Paul. That concern of big sister for baby brother endured all through Bess Corey's life, in spite of the fact that for most of their years on earth the two were separated geographically and saw each other all too seldom. Her letters, fortuitously preserved, now serve (among other purposes) as the sole source for many details of Paul Corey's boyhood years which otherwise would be lost.

By the date of Edwin Corey's death, Elizabeth had already initiated her practice of letter-writing. Her earliest extant note is

dated 10 October 1904 and is written to assure her parents, temporarily absent from the farm, that all is well. The churning, baking, and ironing are on schedule; Bess is making pickles, the threshers are moving into the neighborhood, and the boys are doing "about as well as they can" with the plowing. Her letter closes with what would become a familiar refrain: "Could write enough to fill a book if I had time." Later that same autumn, Bess took eighth- and ninth- grade classes at the public school in Walnut, a hamlet about half a dozen miles west of the farm. She loved school dearly but missed her family and so (in those pre-commuting days) laid out a plan whereby she would mail a letter home every Friday, in the hope that her mother might somehow manage to find time on Sunday to post a response.

Bess was good at her studies and made the most of any opportunity to "shine." She wrote home somewhat gleefully on 30 November to report that her ninth-grade algebra teacher, not receiving an answer upon requesting a student to explain the term "division," gave "a little lecture" on the significance of one's having advanced all the way to the ninth grade only to draw a blank on such a fundamental point as mathematical division. "And then she asked if any one could tell and for a wonder I could and everyone in the room *turned to rubber*," says Bess. Even so, mathematics was not her strong suit, for she received a rather respectable, but not superior, 85 in Arithmetic on her report card, her scores in every other subject standing in the 90s. Had her father not perished at such a critical juncture, who can say what level of education Bess Corey might have reached? High School? College? Whatever her potential—and her great hunger for learning—it was not to be realized. For a semi-orphaned Iowa farm girl without funds in 1905, the odds were tremendous, continuation of her schooling by no means an automatic process.

As early as this, it was Bess Corey's ambition one day to preside over a classroom of her own, and by January of 1905 she was telling of her plan to study with a friend and then attempt the state examination for a teaching certificate. There

was one problem: the state allowed persons of eighteen and older to write the examination, while Bess was only seventeen. But she was a big seventeen, quite literally. She stood five-foot-seven, which placed her among the tallest Corey women, and her weight hovered close to two hundred pounds, at times exceeding that mark. Perhaps she could pass herself off for eighteen? Mrs. Copley, at whose home Bess boarded in Walnut, assured her that anyone would believe her to be twenty—or even twenty-two (“a compliment to my youth and beauty,” commented Bess somewhat dubiously, ever aware that she stood out from the norm). The moral dilemma persisted. She thought perhaps she might go ahead and take the examination, age requirement or no. This information was passed to her parents along with a qualification: “If you think it will be all right.” In February she did travel the short distance to Avoca for the exam, taking a train through heavy snowdrifts to do so, but once arrived on the site her nerve failed her. As she paid her requisite dollar fee, the examiner asked her age and Bess, confronted with the issue head-on, “didn’t have the grit to give [it] as eighteen.” In deference, perhaps, to her frankness—and surely to her apparent desire—the examiner held out to her the possibility that achieving good scores might make some kind of difference and that a temporary certificate might not be totally out of the question.

At almost this same time, Edwin Corey died and Bess, being needed at home, was obliged to cancel the balance of her school year in Walnut. But now her wish to teach heightened into necessity; somehow she had to support herself. By summer 1905 she was in Harlan, Iowa, taking a summer school program, attending Normal Institute, and completing her examinations. It was “hard work” to recite in class from seven-thirty in the morning until noon, then to study all afternoon and often after supper as well. In August she took the teachers examinations in arithmetic, grammar, history, geography, and other required “branches” of study. Apprehension set in immediately as results came back and it was rumored that of ninety candidates in arithmetic fifty-seven had failed. “I don’t

know yet whether I got through or not," she wrote home; "am quite sure I have failed in orthography." To end this suspense, Bess took the bull by the horns and point-blank asked the County Superintendent of Schools how many branches she had failed. When he jokingly replied that it must be "about fifty," her heart sank and she felt certain that, whatever the fact, she had failed. The Superintendent hastened then to reassure her: "No, Miss Corey, I think you did pretty well." And so she had, earning her temporary certificate and the right to teach until her eighteenth birthday, three months ahead.

That fall Bess Corey began her teaching career, tutoring twenty-three students, including a group of beginners and another group who wished to complete the eighth grade. The rest of the students were strung out among the intervening grades. Her schoolhouse was located about midway between Marne and Harlan, two miles out from the farm town of Tennant, but there being no road and no bridge over the intervening creek, the distance to town was more like six miles.

Circumstance had robbed Bess Corey of an older sister's privilege and joy in watching a baby brother grow and develop on a daily basis, but Paul was never very far from his sister's attention, a fact that is clear from the endless references to him in her letters home. Even while cramming for her summertime examinations in Harlan she had asked her mother to be sure and "tell Paul I'm going to pull his toes when I get home." And the family could say goodbye to their hired girl for a while, because sister Bess intended to take over. At the time, young Paul was ill, news that was kept from Bess until she learned it inadvertently from her Aunt Jennie Corey Dunlavy, who lived in Harlan and had the news from a relative. Then Bess chided her mother for overprotecting her. If Paul were sick enough to have required a doctor's attention, then she wanted to know about it! At Tennant Bess boarded with the Wever family, whose young son Lee she found to be "as much of a mimic as Paul," forever dogging her footsteps and aping whatever she did or said. Observing the antics of little Lee Wever allowed

Bess to participate vicariously in the growing up of brother Paul.

Much like Paul would be at a later date, Bess Corey loved putting pen to paper. In many ways she was a "born" writer. So many odd and funny things were happening in her Tennant school that she voiced the wish for a decent book to keep a journal in. Lacking that, she used her regular letters home to "Ma and the Rest" for the purpose. Not always able to keep up the weekly epistle she aimed for, Bess wrote as often as possible. These were not mere notes but extended letters, pages and pages crammed with detail concerning her school and her social life, and always there was a barrage of questions-questions-questions concerning the family on the farm. The arrival of a new letter from Bess, says Paul Corey, became "a high point" of relief in the sometimes humdrum routine of daily farm routine. Corey farm was situated on a crossroads close to where Shelby County touched the northern boundary of Cass County, and at that crossing a wagon wheel had been driven into the soil vertically on its axle so that the wheel might revolve horizontally. To this wheel were fastened the mailboxes of the various neighbors and it was here, in the box marked COREY, that the RFD mailman deposited Bess's letters. As soon as Paul was old enough, his chores included the fetching of the mail. He and the entire family looked forward to his finding in the box a fat envelope from Bess. Invariably this was addressed to "Mrs. M. M. Corey," and only Margaret Corey herself was authorized to open it, a ritual which never took place immediately. The letter "lay on the table where she sat at mealtime and was opened and read after all the family was present and had finished eating." Only then did Margaret pick the envelope up from off the red-checked tablecloth, break its seal with deliberation, and begin to read aloud those "long, chatty, gossipy, amusing reports of [Bess's] experiences." At unpredictable intervals the mother might pause to delete what her children soon came to understand were passages too intimate or revelatory for their young ears to hear. There were

no moving picture shows and obviously no radio at Corey farm, and of course no one had even dreamed of a television soap opera. "But we had our own [TV] serial," says Paul, as he remembers, "and when my mother began to read one of Bess's letters she got complete attention from around the long dining table." And no little pitcher had bigger ears than young Paul himself.

During holiday visits and during summer vacations, Bess had opportunities to interact with her sisters and brothers, and during the 1908 summer, while Mrs. Corey was in Omaha recuperating from surgery, Bess was left in full charge. Her responsibilities covered a wide spectrum of farm and family concerns about which she took pains to write her mother just about daily. So much to do, so many things to keep on schedule and to synchronize. Haying kept the Corey boys busy until past mid-month, thirty-two racks altogether being lugged to the barn, the final load being as large as two ordinary loads. And Paul, not liking to be left out of the action, came up with an idea which Bess, in her typical style of reportage, dramatized for her mother:

Paulie has been haying also—can you not see him? Hickory shirt, blue patched overalls, and straw hat, hay poles and other haying machinery—stacking grass in the back yard. Can't you see him shove back his hat and scratch his little white head as he eyes critically a well finished stack or views a broken bit of machinery and exclaims, "Well, Gerusalem!"

What about those patched overalls? What about *all* of the boys' patched and re-patched overalls? Eighteen-year-old Fuller owned two pairs, both well worn; and brother Rob, four years younger, was down to a pair and a half, if that were possible. Even the two pairs that Paul had been wearing alternately seemed "pretty badly gone where all overalls go." At the end of such a letter, apparently feeling herself in somewhat beyond her depth, Bess would forgo the formality of her usual signature, "Elizabeth F. Corey," and sign instead with a regressive "Your Little Girl Bess." The chores were endless; some problems seemed irresolvable. Bess became a bit panicky as she

waited, hoping for her mother's timely return. Her sense of anticipation was infectious. It spread to Paul, her constant companion. Missing his mother more and more intensely, he occasionally would sit up, ear cocked in the direction of the road, and declare: "I believe I hear mamma coming home!"

Not much of this side of life at the farm, naturally, got into Bess's letters. Possessed of a nice sense of humor, she enjoyed amusing her convalescent mother with the daily comedy of errors—meaning, often, what little Paul was up to. One day she reported hearing Paul "howling bloody murder" and went out to the gate to see what might be the trouble: "Paul was coming up the plank rubbing his southeast ear and crying more because he was angry than hurt. I asked him what was the matter and he said, 'I fell down and of course Ethel had to come and fall on top of me.'" This mishap occurred on the day following Paul's fifth birthday, for which he received a "pretty postal" from Grandma Corey and from sister Ethel a hem-stitched handkerchief initialed in the corner. About ten o'clock Paul appeared at the house in disarray, "his clothes just plastered with mud." He had climbed the hogpen fence to perch on the top rail but had slipped and fallen off, landing in a mud puddle. "We were going to change his clothes," wrote Bess, "but found we had to scrape a good layer of mud off him to above his waist and then give him a bath for the mud was so thin that when he lit feet downward the mud went right up inside his clothes." Bess sat Paul on an overturned pail in the back kitchen while she finished dowsing him off, and after sitting in silent woe for a few minutes, he looked up at her and said, "I just knew I'd have some such luck as this on my birthday."

Following the mid-day meal that same day, Bess heard Paul hollering again and saw brother Fuller sprint to the barn to see what was up. Paul apparently had been "fooling about" the new colt of the Corey horse Nell and it had "kicked him twice and knocked the wind right out of him." When his brother Rob asked, incredulously, whether he hadn't known that a colt would kick, Paul responded, "Yes, I knew she'd kick me, but



I didn't spose 'em little feet could hurt anyone." A short while later, when Paul came into the house, Bess inquired as to the ruckus in the barn, and "he looked up at me an instant and then said, 'Bess, can't I blow soap bubbles?' That was all I ever got out of him about it."

While Margaret Corey recuperated in Omaha, Bess passed the news that the Copley family with whom she had boarded while attending Walnut Public School planned to leave "for the west" within days, selling most of their goods at public auction beforehand. This was not the first such announcement, for the westering spirit was still very much alive in the generation whose parents had migrated from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and other mid-region states. The burgeoning railroad systems, laying track as rapidly as possible into new territories, advertised far and wide, flamboyantly enticing settlers to new lands as they were opened. At this time particularly, South Dakota was a focus of lush prose. Here it was claimed that exceptionally fine and fertile farm acreages could be had free under the terms of the Homestead Act, a lovely quarter section to each qualified taker. As early as 1905 Bess had noted that "Mr. and Mrs. Backus are to start for Dakota tomorrow," and now that the Sioux Indians were being sequestered more and more rigidly on the shrinking reservation lands while tracts such as the Rosebud Reservation were being thrown open to homesteaders, the departures from Iowa were becoming more and more frequent.

Elizabeth Corey was listening attentively to all this talk of paradise west of the Missouri River, and at some point between 1905 and 1908 she herself caught the fever. But there was a catch. In order to qualify under the Homestead Act, one must be of legal age, and Bess would not observe her twenty-first birthday until mid-November 1908. There was no way of "fudging" the rule. Biding her time, Bess continued her rural schoolteaching in Iowa near Irwin, then taught closer to home, at a one-room school within commuting distance of Corey farm. November, the month of her turning twenty-one, was no time to be heading for the wilds of western Dakota, but in 1909

as winter softened into spring and school terms came to an end, Bess prepared to emigrate. A schoolma'am friend, Lida Smith of Harlan, was to accompany her: safety in numbers. Together they made plans to take the Chicago and Northwestern Railway out of Harlan, make their way to Pierre, the tiny South Dakota capital, where a new railway bridge spanned the Missouri, and from there to continue with the Northwestern along its new route through gigantic Stanley County to a spot which was fast becoming a major terminus on the homesteading trail: the boomtown of Midland. From Midland Bess and Lida planned to make their way north by stage past the new hamlet of Hayes to available lands formerly included in the Cheyenne Reservation near the post office of Lindsay where Lida's aunt Nora Scarborough and her family were ranching. The young teachers depended upon the Scarborroughs to put them up for a time and teach them the ropes of this new game they were entering.

The friends left Harlan on 1 June 1909, steaming northward on the railroad toward Sioux City, Sioux Falls, Huron, and Pierre. Bess, besides the substantial traveling suit and straw sailor she was wearing, took a valise and a parasol, leaving her trunk and other odds and ends to be freighted to her later from the farm. Midland was reached in the wee hours of the morning of 3 June and later that same day Bess and Lida set out for Hayes as passengers on a jolting wagon that doubled as a stagecoach. At each step of the journey, however, Bess Corey had become less entranced with her companion, and at Scarborough Ranch she discovered that once Lida Smith had located a claim the Scarborough men appeared to lose interest in helping to find one for her. Bidding a silent farewell-forever to Lida, Bess withdrew to Fort Pierre, once the fur-trading center of the West and still the site of an annual Round Up following which thousands of head of cattle went to eastern markets. In Fort Pierre any number of "land locaters" had set up shop, but not locating the employment she needed in order to keep body and soul together while searching for a suitable homestead, Bess crossed the Missouri to Pierre, even then a

considerably larger town, and began working as a cook's helper in the kitchen of the Locke Hotel, then the capital city's most illustrious public establishment. Laid off at the Locke when business slackened, Bess crossed to Fort Pierre and found work with Mrs. George Gordon, who ran a boarding house. The two became fast friends, Bess often in later years staying at the Gordons when "in town," and on occasion helping out at the several businesses run by the entrepreneurial George Gordon, which included one of the first moving-picture shows in town.

Before the summer was out, Bess had located a "relinquishment," a tract being given up by a homesteader leaving the territory. He sold her the information concerning the date and time at which he would give up his claim at the land office so that she might be present, johnny-on-the-spot, to file her own claim on his 160-acre plot of ground. The land, now hers, lay along Bad River, a tributary of the Missouri, and was not far south of the river itself, about ten miles southwest of Fort Pierre. Like most of the tracts west of the river, and despite railroad propaganda, this land was marginal. Only sporadically did the soil receive sufficient rainfall to assure a profitable crop of wheat or rye or corn. But unlike many other homesteaders, Bess was not intending to attempt eastern-style farming here. She hoped instead to create a ranch where she could breed fine horses for riding and for pulling the nation's carriages. That the horse was on the verge of being rendered obsolete by the automobile, which by then had invaded even the homesteading lands of Stanley County, was not a point that Bess seemed to grasp—nor that she wished to acknowledge. A further—and quite practical—appeal of the Bad River area was that its population, most of it newly arrived, consisted of young families with school-age children. Teachers were in great demand, and the settlers surrounding Bess's new homestead were prepared to hire. In accepting that post at Speer School, Bess Corey was able to continue the promising career initiated in Iowa schoolrooms. At the same time, she might earn the money needed to hire work done on her claim, heavy projects that she could not undertake by herself, like building a shelter.

Promptly upon her arrival at Midland, during the hasty hours between train and stage, Bess had begun her letters home to the family in Marne. These continued to pour into the Coreys' crossroads mailbox, plump envelopes invariably post-marked *Fort Pierre*. Bess's letters had always been, as Paul has said, long, chatty, and gossipy, but now they were crammed also with eyewitness accounts which told almost on a day-by-day basis of the building of Bess's claim shack, the breaking of the virgin sod, the dredging of a dam across a convenient draw. To their horror, the family were invited to participate vicariously in their sister's discovery that her new homestead adjoined a rattlesnake den where thousands of writhing serpents kept a winter home. Venemous "buzzers" might be encountered anywhere; Bess dared not leave her shack after dark; she strayed nowhere without her snake stick. But never fear—she would slaughter any snakes she met and send their "trimmings" home to her brothers for souvenirs.

The homesteaders pouring into South Dakota automatically encroached on territories which formerly had been open range. In bygone days Stanley County had been one huge tract of unfenced pasture where ranchers without let or hindrance might fatten longhorn cattle on the native grasses and then, following the fall round-up, ship them out of Fort Pierre by the trainload to the Union Stockyards in Chicago. The coming of the settlers disrupted and was ultimately to destroy this time-honored practice. Tension filled the air. Sometimes, open or covert violence broke out. The Corey boys were allowed to share Bess's outrage when a maverick cowhand one night lassoed her "little mansion" (her euphemism for the outdoor privy on her claim) and spurred his mount to rip it from its meager foundation and drag it across the plains, tumbling and smashing as it went. The barren hills west of the Missouri were lonely places, but there were few dull moments in Bess Corey's life out there!

"It takes a strong character to make good here," she wrote to her family, explaining continually how she was running up against "something fierce," an example being demonstrated by

a conversation with old Mrs. Van Metre, the mother of a neighbor at Mathews School. Mrs. Van Metre was intent on telling Bess of a farmyard argument she had had with another settler, Mr. Parker. "I can't remember whether it was the butcher knife or hatchet" that she wielded, said Bess, but Mrs. Van Metre had, as the old lady had put it, chased Parker "around that wagin and round that wagin" until she tripped and fell down, picked herself up and went after him more heatedly than ever. One of the Parker children was standing nearby and Parker called out to his pursuer, "Don't you hurt my child!" to which she retorted, "It aint your child I want, it's you, you \_\_\_\_\_!" Then, said Bess, Mrs. Van Metre "just unwound a reel and a half of profanity that would make your hair raise and that creepy feeling go down your spine. I've heard men use cuss words but the way she used 'em made me catch my breath [but] I didn't remonstrate with her—I didn't want her to say 'em to me!" She had a question to put to the family: "How would you like to be where they fight with knives, hatchets, and guns, to say nothing of the rocks and clubs?"

People such as Mrs. Van Metre and Parker figured prominently in Bess's letters—a cast of characters piling into the "chapters" of her evolving story, these sections of her "autobiography," as she sometimes referred to the pages she mailed to Marne. There were, for instance, Grant and Mae Stone, who lived near Speer School, where Bess taught that fall of 1909, and who had four tiny children whom Bess at once dubbed "the pebbles." All six of the family—plus Bess—were cooped up together in a one-room shack for her first Dakota winter. Such a luxury as a bed of her own was undreamt of, and Bess's bedmate was young Weltha, the "littlest pebble," who was intrigued by everything about the new schoolma'am, including her generous proportions, and could not resist testing Bess's plump arm with a sharp pinch. This inspired Bess's retort: "Don't you think fat can feel?" The phrase had wider implications, of course.

Lack of privacy aside, scarcely a moment was free at Stones for Bess to concentrate on her letters. The crowding meant also that Bess could not avoid becoming intimately tangled up in the Stones' family life, the details of which were issued to Marne in regular and often hilarious bulletins. All of the Bad River neighbors were newcomers. Many were genuine foreigners: Danes, Germans, Czechs. The Brothers Bahr, Joseph and Julius, who homesteaded near Bess, were potential suitors, and spoke with extra-thick German accents which she, with her love of language, took joy in mimicking whenever she related her escapades with "Dose by yinks Dutchmen." And Prairie Chicken, an immense Sioux Indian who chose to live off the reservation, became one of Bess's best-liked neighbors; it was his distinction to be the sole human within miles who was indisputably larger than she—he weighed in at nearly four hundred pounds. Best of all, perhaps, because Bess, in quest of better conditions and higher pay, changed schools on a regular basis, often yearly, the Coreys of Marne each autumn were introduced to a new cast, a new locale, a new plot. Their big sister was a sharp observer, an astute judge of character. And having before his eyes and ears these regular examples of place and plot and a range of characters strung out across a broad spectrum from buffoon to hero—these continued "chapters" of the Stanley County story he has said was his family's TV serial 1910-style—with sister Bess's letters as continual models and object lessons, it should come as no surprise that Paul Corey as he passed from childhood into young manhood might get the notion that he, too, could shape some original artifact that would capture and communicate the essence of his family's adventures in Clay Township, Shelby County, Iowa.

West-of-the-River South Dakota in 1910 was tough country, man's country, where Bess was required constantly to battle for her rights, sometimes even for the paycheck that should have been hers without the need of tracking down recalcitrant School Directors every month. In the rough and tumble life on that last frontier no holds were barred, but Bess could take it on the chin, and when necessary she could dish it out, too. She

had to stand up to the tests, and it pleased her no end when she did measure up, even in so minor a matter as her apparel; a farm girl, she was quite prepared to don the heavy workshoes required for homesteading, and so she stood out from the uninitiated town-bred ladies whose impractical slippers were soon torn apart by the rough, hard soil. That these shoes drew the admiration of other homesteaders pleased her no end.

There also came times when Bess felt it necessary quite literally to "put on the gloves" and defend herself—times when being brought up in a family of boys paid dividends. While teaching at Mathews School along Bad River in 1915, Bess often was invited to the nearby home of a student, Peter Seieroe, sometimes to spend the night. Peter's older brother, Harry, who was bigger and taller than Fuller Corey (and Fuller stood six-feet-two), would not stop teasing her. As the bully became meaner and meaner, Bess at last exploded. Harry "just tormented me till I couldn't stand it any longer," she wrote, "and I just went for him and slapped him clear up to a peak." This, she said, became one of the occasions that gave her a neighborhood reputation "for quick motions." Harry Seieroe proved no match at all for her. "I'd make a feint and he'd throw up his arm to protect one side of his face, and I'd give him three on the other side before he could move." A crowd of neighbors happened to be gathered at Seieroes that night, including Ralph Mathews, father of another of Bess's students (and son-in-law of the vitriolic Mrs. Van Metre). "They can't get over it," Bess reported of her triumph over her tormenter; "Mr. Mathews, who is quite a boxer himself, is always saying he'd like to have me practice with mits just to see what I could do." She could do plenty.

A glow of pride suffused those letters in which Bess gave details of her acceptance by the locals. By her first birthday away from Iowa, feeling suddenly quite alone and very homesick, she chased the blues with pen and stationery. "Will try to write another chapter," she announced as she opened her report of sharply colder weather, of progress made in erecting her shack on the claim, and of her plans for furnishing it with

more than the nail keg which presently served as her only "chair." To this account Bess added, clearly with a sense of elation: "Everybody makes such a toot about my nerve, pluck, push, grit and so on till it most makes my feet warm for so far it hasn't been half as hard as they seem to think it is; still, they'd most break their necks to do something for 'Miss Corey.' I was never so popular before and it makes me feel queer." *Queer* in this context meant that she was made to feel appreciated and very needed, raising emotions that had been absent from her life since the death of her beloved father, when it seemed to her that she was rather rudely being shoved out of the Corey nest and made to fend for herself, ready or not. "You said you could get along better without me than with me and there wasn't room for us all to home and that I could make out better than the rest could," she wrote her mother in a moment of bitter frankness within a month of her arrival in Dakota. That it may have been an absolute, albeit unfortunate, necessity for Bess to go out on her own at a tender age did not make it any easier for her in an affectional sense. She had felt lost and utterly bereft. But now the success of her new life on Bad River was beginning to heal her wounds.

Whatever resentments Bess Corey harbored against her mother—they were considerable and regularly became too powerful to be contained—she strove not to transfer those emotions to her brothers, who in her perception had been granted safe harbor at Corey farm even while she was being ousted. In particular, she took pains never to express ill feeling toward her beloved Paul. As the baby of the family, he was clearly innocent. She deeply regretted the fact that she had not had a satisfactory farewell from him and the other younger Coreys, even while knowing that her departure for the West must have been incomprehensible to such tender minds. During the summer of her departure, she allowed into a letter the sentence: "Paul wouldn't say good bye to me, so now I'll never come to see him or ask him to come to see me till he straightens things up." But that threat was made tongue-in-cheek, even while it expressed genuine hurt. How could a



six-year-old be expected to understand that his big sister was going to be gone away for a long, long time—gone for years perhaps—gone for what in recurrent dark moments seemed to her to be forever? She mentions again and again the single fleeting supposition: *If they had known, if they had realized, perhaps then the younger children would have kissed her and hugged and clung.* But Paul and Challenge and others were children, she an adult. Bess realized all of this, but still the heartache persisted.

From the beginning, Bess's fond concern for Paul threads its way through the pages of her homesteading letters. Working for the Gordons during that 1909 summer, no claim located yet, Bess was cheered by Mrs. Gordon's sister, who agreed with her that it did seem the fates might be arrayed against her but reminded her also that it was a long road that had no turning, and some day soon she was bound to have "a run of luck to make up for it." Although close to despondency as she wrote home, Bess rallied to include a Fort-Pierre vignette for her little brother regarding Ted E. Bear, the Gordons' dog:

You must tell Paul what happened to Ted E. Bear. A short time ago he got out and went up town. Some ornery cuss must have been waiting for him for he was back in less than twenty minutes and Mrs. Gordon didn't know him and what's worse the poor little scamp didn't know himself. The head third of him was painted coal black, the middle third was bright yellow, and the tail third was of the brightest red. Ted E. would look around at himself and of all the shying and running you ever saw, Ted E. reached the limit. They soaked him in turpentine and washed him through two or three waters. He looked pretty good then, except his eyes, but about that time the dope began to affect his skin and then he was a streak of double-gearred howl going about the place for most of a night and day.

There was a moral in this, of course: "Tell Paul not to let [his pet dog] Twigs stray off to the neighbors any more!"

Bess continued to edify and amuse her family via the mails. Sometimes she took a special delight in scaring them half to death with the risks she was taking, as in her repeated references to the rattlesnake menace: "Say! it's nothing to kill half a dozen in crossing [my claim]. You wouldn't catch me

anywhere near there without a snake stick." And there was always the weather, regularly going to extremes, sudden spring thaws and rains that caused uncontrolled flooding on Bad River or, as was more often the case, winters the severity of which no one in sheltered Iowa could even hope to imagine. February was likely to bring the worst that Nature could muster—but it also brought Bess, who in 1914 was driving a buggy daily from her claim to her school, another opportunity to say that she could take it:

It kept getting colder and colder till the night of the 4th, then we had a howling blizzard. It lasted all day the next day and the following day (Friday). I made it to school tho few did. The cold was intense. Grant [Stone] froze his nose and toes just going to the barn. I made my twelve miles that Friday and only frosted my feet. Saturday was a fright again but it moderated a little and I made it to school O. K. We had another howling storm all day Wed. so I staid at Donahues that night. Staid again Friday night in hopes that I could get to town yesterday with Mr. D. but it stormed to beat the cars yesterday and is at it today. They are out of groceries and coal so Mr. D. is going to try to make it in this afternoon and out tomorrow, but it's fierce.

There were other scary times, such as the winter day when she heard a heavy bumping and thumping against the frail outer walls of her wooden schoolhouse, and when she and her pupils ran to the windows to investigate they saw that the school was totally surrounded in a rumbling sea of buffalo, a remnant of the millions-plus herds that once had dominated the lushly-grassed plains. On another dark afternoon the eerie wail of wolves came through loud and clear, sending the children into a panic. Bess did her best to maintain her professional calm but, aware of the mounting panic in her youngsters' eyes, she, too, was on the verge of breaking when a quick-thinking older student snapped the tension by announcing to one and all that the younger children had nothing in the world to fear, it being well known that a wolf will turn up his nose at boys and girls when schoolma'am-supper is on the menu.

Bess advised her mother to keep her boys in Iowa if she valued their safety. Did fifteen-year-old Rob Corey think a trek

to Dakota would make for quite an adventure? Then he'd better forget it, and fast, because he'd be crawling back to Iowa within a week "with all the starch taken out of him. Why, he would look worse than a much chewed washrag by the time he got back" to the safety of Corey farm. And as for girls, this "rotten town," Fort Pierre, where Bess worked and lived during the 1909 summer and where she was compelled to do her business, this was no safe haven. "What would you think of a full length photograph of a naked woman falling out of a man's pocket?" she asked her mother in a question clearly designed to shock. And what did she think of girls the age of sister Ethel, then thirteen, with babies? No, it wasn't "safe for an unprotected woman outside the house hardly at night." But on the other hand, no one at the farm was to get overly heated up about the perils facing sister Bess. She could take care of herself and handle any situation. "My money is holding out all right so don't worry," she assured the family. "And I'm bein' good, just *awful good* [and] I don't want a cent of money from home but please ship my stuff right away quick."

Not every adventure was traumatic. Funny things happened all the time, and Bess was quick to see the humor in them and pass it along, sometimes in something as simple as a pun. Those pesky cowboys, for instance—were the boys interested in knowing how they proposed marriage? They would ride right up to the girl's door on their bronchos, "draw a six-shooter and say, 'Wilt thou?'—and she wilts." There were special "doings" such as Iowans of her generation had never witnessed, and never would. Bess was invited to an Indian pow-wow, where a big crowd of homesteader guests had gathered, including a couple of dozen young men—including every last one of the town's male high-school students—who drove overland from Fort Pierre in automobiles. Bess wore her best plush waist and black skirt and had, as she put it, "the time of my life." Young Frank Murphy, who clerked at the Range, a department store in Fort Pierre, suggested that he and she attempt to join the Indian dance. Bess needed no more inducement than that. A good dancer, she caught on to the

steps at once, "and the compliments I received were not a few. The squaws came and patted me, pointed to my feet." Mrs. Spotted Hawk, who knew some English, translated their words of praise. The Indians insisted on her continued participation:

I tried to drop out of the dance but Mr. Whirling Iron came after me twice and once a squaw danced with me. She put her arm around me and mine around her. They take hold of hands and dance around and around in a circle to the noise of a great big drum beaten by four Indians. The Indians dressed in their costumes and looked like real story book Indians. Oh, how I wish you could all have been there!

And following the dance, of course, came a great Indian feast. Here, wrote Bess without betraying even a bit of the tongue that was packed into her cheek, the main course had included dog sausage. How was it? "Delicious—beats all your pork and beef all to pieces." She couldn't wait for a repeat. How well Bess understood that the Corey brothers—like any American boys back in civilization—would groan with disgust, eye their beloved Twigs protectively, and cringe at the very notion of Twig-sausage ever being served up on the Corey dining table.

There were other dances, many of them, with music provided by a fiddle or an organ; these were Bess Corey's favorite entertainment. But she loved box socials, too, and was willing to spend any amount of time and ingenuity in decorating her box to attract the young man who would bid for it, win it, share the dinner it held, and spend the evening dancing with her. There were overnight visits with neighbors, sometimes involving taffy pulls or popcorn feasts. In good weather, picnics along Bad River drew the young crowd, and surprise parties were held on any and every occasion. Holidays brought Christmas-tree celebrations and Eastertime egg roasts, sometimes as fund-raisers for Bess's school or another country school. There were croquet and checkers and pitch, and old maid, and five hundred. There were amusements aplenty.

And if young Paul Corey should find his way out to Stanley County during his summer holiday ("Tell Paulie to come up

and spend [it] with me," Bess wrote her mother), they would do other things that were fun—find a nest of pack rats and tie strings to their tails and drown them in her cistern and use them for coyote bait. Boy stuff! There were lots of coyotes in Stanley County. "If we catch one," she wrote whimsically, "Paulie can tame it and take it home to catch rabbits for him next winter." Paul Corey was eight years old when Bess wrote this in 1911, and—as she well knew—there was not the slightest ghost of a chance that he would be coming out West. But her plan for catching a coyote was just the thing to start a young boy's heart drumming. Children of Paul's age always brought her brother to Bess's mind. She related especially to those whom she might mention in her letters as being "about Paul's age" or "as large as Paul," and the little pebble, Weltha Stone, fell into this category. As a result, Bess loved reporting on Weltha's sayings, probably to "prime the pump" and receive a cute saying of Paul's in the return mail from Marne. One day she stopped at Stones and was describing how bone-tired she was and predicting a deep, deep sleep that night. Weltha was all ears, and she said, "Yes, and when you fall into that deep sleep maybe the Lord will take one of your ribs and make a man of it for you." Bess asked Weltha if she thought maybe it was time that the Lord took pity on her and Weltha replied that she thought it was time *somebody* did. "How was that for the speech of an eight-year-old?" wrote Bess; "Isn't she 'the limit.'"

The Stones were not the only friends of Bess's who felt that her double burden of homesteading and teaching was too much and so volunteered as matchmakers; Mrs. Gordon in Fort Pierre had a habit of inviting Bess to dinner with eligible young men of the community, potential husbands for a livewire young schoolma'am. Bess was rather candid in writing home concerning her social life, suitors included. She had not been in South Dakota for a week when she reported being escorted to a settlers ball in Hayes by one of the handsomest young men in Stanley County, Clarence Coyne. Coyne, then a deputy sheriff, later became mayor of Fort Pierre, where he owned the

newspaper, then was elected Secretary of State of South Dakota, and ultimately Lieutenant Governor. But most of the homesteaders were married. Of those who were not, a good many were widowers in quest of surrogate mothers for a brood of children. That role did not appeal to Bess, who had plenty of "stepchildren" at school. But for the family's edification (as well as to quiet the family's queries concerning her future plans) she described her adventures with the many eligible settlers who paid court—most of them, in her estimation, not irresistible. On the subject of marriage she grew increasingly ambiguous, rather "like the Dutchman's son," as she described it, quoting, probably from one of the Dutch postal cards she loved to send and receive: "Hans he don't like the girls and one can not get married alone." She asked her mother's advice: "Which one? The Dutchman, the Swede, the Norwegian, the Scotch-Irish, or the Englishman? Financially, I suppose it would be best to take the old cuss who adores me, for he probably hasn't much longer to adore. Morally—the Norwegian would be the best choice. He's got lots of religion—I could notice it on him before I began to get acquainted with him." But all in all, Bess thought she would "prefer a president of some sort," alluding to the recent marriage of Woodrow Wilson to Edith Bolling Galt. She never did marry, as it turned out, and early on began signing her letters with the "Bachelor Bess" which became habitual. If the practice began in jest, it turned serious within a few years of her Dakota residence.

"Wish the kids would write to me," wrote Bess, and again, "Just have the kids write once in a while." Paul was too young to write, at first, but by 1911 Bess could report that "Ethel [then fifteen] writes dandy letters now," and before long Mrs. Corey was having Paul add notes to her own messages, then attempt his own brief communications: "Thank Paul for birthday card," wrote Bess in 1914, when her little brother was eleven. With Paul in school, Bess could relate to him more easily, young pupils being her chief company during the daytime: "Please tell Paulie I will send him some drawings as soon as I can get them ready and some other school work which I'd like to have him

notice." On the other hand, she could adopt a stern, school-ma'amish tone when she felt it essential, admonishing him for his neglect of correspondence: "Tell Paul to write often and to get a hustle on him. My third graders write better than he and use *ink*." But as Paul matured, his mind quite naturally was full of other topics than his far-off sister and sometimes, even on what was to her the most important day of the year, her birthday, his big sister failed to receive so much as a card. When Paul turned seventeen, her nagging resentment spilled over into sarcasm. "I thought of [Rob] on his birthday," she told her mother, "and of Paul on his, but as they never have time to answer my letters I thought it would be an imposition to write. Will send them each a book mark and wish them many happy returns"—but no hurry about doing so.

Perhaps Bess was miffed because during the previous winter, while Paul's next-oldest brother, Challenge, was visiting her in Stanley County, she had taken the time to write Paul, who had sent her a supply of Iowa popcorn for Christmas. Apparently she had received no response. The letter survives:

Dear Paul,

January 6, 1917

Many thanks for the popcorn. Had been hungry for some for quite a while. One evening I said that if you folks knew how hungry I was for some good popcorn I believed you'd send me some so Mrs. Moulton asked why I didn't write and tell you and I said I didn't like to. The popcorn we get here isn't so very nice. That was a cute collar you sent for [my dog] Scoop, but I'll wager you won't get any vote of thanks from him. It's too handy for Chall to grab ahold of when he goes to strap him. He is a mighty smart Scoop. One day during vacation I made some cookies. I went to the door and called "Hot Cookies" at Chall. He and Scoop were finishing the calfshead. Chall yelled, "Hot cookies, Scoop, Come on," and how they did *come on*. I don't approve of feeding cream cookies to a dog, but Chall said he didn't like the "rinds" and so he broke off the edges for the dog.

Last fall Chall told me about the bees in the crib, and I told Calvin [Moulton] about them. He asked me at least a dozen times afterward if they had taken the honey yet and how they did it. When he found that we got some honey for Christmas and I still knew nothing about how they got at it, he was quite disappointed.

The kids here were going coasting this morning and little Don [Moulton] said, "I slide on my belly and Calvin slides on his pants." We never know what he will say next.

Chall's chickens sure look fine. We'll have two dozen hens this next year. Well, I must close. Write some time.

Lovingly, your sister Bess

Bess believed in reciprocity and could become upset when her correspondents failed to measure up.

By the time of this letter to Paul, an important metamorphosis had occurred in Elizabeth Corey's ambitions, her original plan for establishing a horse-breeding ranch gradually collapsing in the face of societal realities and the precarious nature of life in Stanley County. As this dream faded, however, another came closer to realization. Among her fellow rural schoolteachers, Bess was establishing a reputation as a leader and innovator. Quick-witted, organized, dedicated, she stood out among the crowd at the teachers meetings and reading-circle groups held throughout the school year in one after another of the struggling towns strung along the railroad tracks which paralleled Bad River. Each summer the teachers were required to attend summer normal institute in Fort Pierre for a two-week session of study, lecture, and discussion presided over by the county superintendent of schools and staffed with "stars" from the educational world. Bess had begun well, impressing the county superintendent from her very first days as being a teacher with special talents. In 1909 the superintendent was Grace Reed Porter, like Bess an importation from Iowa. When Mrs. Porter came to Bess's school on one of the impromptu visits she was required to make, but afterwards did not, as expected, lecture Bess in areas where improvement was needed, Bess called upon her at her office in Fort Pierre. Why, she wished to know, had there been nothing but positive comments about her teaching? Surely there were areas in which she needed to brush up or improve? She was amazed when Mrs. Porter leaned forward and said that there had been no adverse criticism for the very simple reason that there was none to be made. Further, she wanted "Miss Corey" to know





Elizabeth Corey (top center), 1916, at the South Dakota Educational Assoc. Courtesy of Margaret Nelson and Jim Dusen.

that if there were any particular school in the county that she hankered for, she would use all of her influence in trying to get it for her. Bess left that office floating on air, feeling, as she told her family, that her hat had sprouted a feather a yard long.

That was not all. At the summer normal institute of 1914 Bess received recognition beyond her dreams. The principal "star" that year was Professor W. F. Jones of the University of South Dakota, who came to Fort Pierre brandishing a new Ph.D. from Columbia University (and before long would be called to Los Angeles to head the School of Education at the University of Southern California). Bess was confounded when, after the preliminary days of the meeting, Prof. Jones singled her out from among the large assemblage of county teachers. Explaining to the gathering that while there was a thing known as "teaching ability" of which they were all aware, there was another, superior quality which was much rarer. This he labeled "wonderful teaching genius," and as he spoke he let the entire room understand that the example he had in mind was Elizabeth Corey. She became an instant celebrity. She

overheard another instructor comment, as he approached a knotty problem, "Where's Miss Corey? She's a good authority on this." Another teacher remarked, "Let's ask Miss Corey . . .," and "Miss Corey says. . ." As for "Miss Corey" herself, she glowed with a fulfillment that was dimmed only by seeing herself hauled out of the blessed anonymity of the crowd and made so extremely conspicuous, the focus of every eye. It could be unnerving. As she wrote her mother—"I'm so darned big anyway!"

One by one, as they matured, Bess's siblings journeyed west to experience for themselves the world of Stanley County, South Dakota. First to arrive was Fuller, who turned twenty-one in 1910. He filed a claim near Bess but found the life of a homesteader far too lonely and so stayed only until he could "prove up." The moment his claim was legally his own, he departed for greener pastures, leaving his land in Bess's charge. Then came Chall, again on an extended but abortive visit. Rob, intent on becoming a farmer and being essential to the continued operation of Corey farm, did not come west, but sister Ethel arrived for a summer visit, liking the adventure sufficiently to delay her departure again and again. Bess was eager for her mother to see the life she had made for herself and awaited a visit rather impatiently, hopeful that Margaret Corey would bring Paul on the train with her. In the small railroad town of Wendte, upriver from her claim, Bess had become acquainted with the family of Charles M. Corey who, like her, had emigrated from Iowa. She attempted in vain to locate a kinship with these Coreys and never quite relinquished the notion that they must somehow be related. That the Charles Coreys had a son named Paul only served to intensify Bess's passion for bringing them and her mother into closer proximity. "I hope to have Mrs. C. M. Corey and son Paul of Wendte down to meet Mrs. M. M. Corey and son Paul of Marne," she wrote in 1916 when it seemed at last that her mother might make the trip. "We have several invitations out already and would like to go up the river while you are here for plums, grapes, buffalo berries and chokecherries. We might get to see

the buffalo [on a preserve north of Fort Pierre] also. Today I had an invitation from Mrs. L. Bahr of Pierre to take a ride [up there] with them in their new boat." Mrs. Corey did come west in 1916, but not for an extended stay, needing to hustle back to Iowa to prepare for Ethel Corey's wedding. But to Bess's great disappointment, Paul stayed behind in Marne. "When is Paul coming?" wrote Bess. "Mrs. Corey has invited us down there [to Wendte] for a visit."

The family circle on the farm—Bess's epistolary audience—was dwindling. Her oldest sibling, Olney, had died in 1913. Fuller, out on his own since 1910, was nabbed by the military draft as America entered the World War. Ethel and her new husband, Arthur Erickson, went to live in Winthrop, Minnesota. For the time being, however, Bess continued to write as if the group were intact, never tiring of relating the terrors and the thrills of life in west-of-the-river country. Ten years after establishing her homestead on Bad River, she had spent a week visiting in Iowa and another week attending summer normal institute in Fort Pierre. Meanwhile, the chickens she was attempting to raise had been fed only once a day, by neighbors, "and the owls, snakes, and hawks [had] made havoc among them." The predators had carried off more than eighty chicks, leaving no more than forty-three. She possessed a small-bore rifle but found it of little use in protecting her flock. "When I was at Institute," she wrote, "the men killed a big rattler in the box by the door, which they said had been eating baby chicks. I killed one in the chicken yard before that. This morning I heard a chicken squall out by the barn. I ran out there in my bedroom slippers and there was a big rattler, coiled, and a few feet from it lay one of my nice young chickens, in convulsions seemingly. Believe me! That snake was soon a deader." The hawks were even bolder. One day when Bess rode up on her horse, "one sat out here eating a chicken. I tried my toy cannon, but couldn't even jar a feather loose. I used to shoo 'em away with the dish towel, but now I throw clods or a pipe wrench or just anything."

By now, with Rob Corey ready and eager to assume proprietorship of the farm, Mrs. Corey and Paul were changing their residence. They moved into Atlantic, to a cottage at 1101 Birch Street. In Atlantic Paul could complete his four years of high school and then—the first of his family to go further—enroll for college work at The University of Iowa. Bess's regular letter-writing had somewhat run its natural course, but she kept in touch. Paul and his mother moved to Iowa City in 1921, renting housekeeping rooms while Paul pursued his education. During Mrs. Corey's final illness in 1925, Bess shared Paul's grief, traveling from South Dakota to tend her mother on her Iowa City deathbed. Then she accompanied the body back to the farm and burial beside her husband in the graveyard adjoining the rural Monroe Township Methodist Church where the family in bygone days had worshipped together.

The death of Margaret Corey meant—as it must—that the family would scatter more and more. The small legacy being divided among the children, Paul soon married the poet Ruth Lechlitner, whom he had met in Iowa City, and went off to live for a year in France, a latecoming expatriate to the paradise of favorable exchange rates. On her part, Bess, forever one jump ahead of increasingly stringent regulations governing qualifications for renewal of teaching certificates, swallowed her pride and at the age of thirty-nine enrolled in Fort Pierre High School, earning the requisite diploma in 1927. She was a visitor in Iowa in 1928, stopping for a time with her Aunt Jennie Corey Dunlavy in Harlan, from where she had set out on her Dakota adventure nearly twenty years before. Aunt Jennie had received a "nice long letter from Paul," now 5000 miles away in France with Ruth, both of them dreaming of careers as writers, she as a poet, he as novelist. "They have very pleasant apartments," Bess wrote her sister, Ethel, now located near the family farm at Marne. In Bandoe-sur-mer on the Mediterranean, they had found that their daily expenses for meals approximated "ninety cents a day in our money." Bess could only gulp: "M'gosh! I'm goin' over!"



Margaret Morgan Brown Corey and Paul Corey, about 1918, after their move to Atlantic, Iowa. Courtesy of Margaret Nelson and Jim Dusen.

She could not go anywhere of the sort. As close to penury as ever, she needed to hustle back to South Dakota and locate a position at which she might earn her daily bread. It was there that Paul found her in 1935, when he hitch-hiked west on the advice of a good friend, Buel Beems, who urged him to go back and see for himself what havoc the prolonged drought had wrought in the midwest of his boyhood. On Corey farm, Paul saw that many old familiar trees had failed to survive the extended lack of rain, but these "drought scars" were nothing to what he was to witness in western South Dakota. The stock-market Crash of 1929 had plunged the entire nation into a deep economic depression, and in South Dakota this meant that the prices offered for farm products had plummeted. As if the economic blow were not enough, climatic conditions grew dreadful, then worsened. Bess Corey had lived through periods of drought before—had sailed through the extremely dry year of 1911 with scarcely a comment on it—but never in her experience had she known anything to compare with the failure of rain during the early 1930s. By 1934 all hope was gone of making a living at ranching or farming in Stanley County. By that summer nothing green was left to sustain cattle, and the skin-and-bone beasts were shipped by the trainload to areas less hard hit. During that same year the great dust storms struck, shrieking winds picking up topsoil left loose and powdery by the plow and sending it eastward in immense, choking clouds. The black blizzards spurred a new exodus from South Dakota, family after family bailing out as best they could, at times abandoning everything they had toiled to build and fleeing westward toward the dubious promise of California. On such experiences was founded John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Thirty-two-year-old Paul Corey found his sister in the capital city, Pierre, where even the dependable Missouri was threatening to evaporate into mud flats. She was, Paul says, on relief. That would be neither unusual nor surprising, given the times and conditions; the economy had turned belly up. In Fort Pierre Paul met Bess's good friend Mrs. Gordon, and venturing

a bit further west along what was left of Bad River and of Bess's dream of a thriving ranch, he found only desolation; the wind in places had piled up drifts that came to the tops of fence posts, even to the eaves of barns. The land was swiftly reverting to desert. Even so, for Bess Corey to have gone on relief would have been a last-ditch measure, a hateful and shameful thing, for, as Paul so accurately describes her, his sister was "determined to make it on her own." Like many, perhaps most, traditional midwesterners, the Coreys had always been a "stiff-upper-lip family, and relief was charity, and accepting charity was to be avoided" at all cost, not even to be considered unless one were *in extremis* and life literally depended upon accepting public aid. Whatever the case, Bess did not remain dependent upon a county handout for long before finding herself another teaching job. Then compelled again to upgrade her credentials, she traveled to Aberdeen and enrolled in "The Normal" for summertime college-level work in order not to be driven out of her chosen profession. When she taught for poverty-stricken school districts during those dustbowl years, Bess earned scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. At times she camped out in the ill-equipped school-houses in order to economize or, in some instances, because that shelter was offered to her in lieu of salary.

Paul, following his western visit, returned to Cold Spring-on-Hudson, New York, and to an idea he had for a fictional treatment of his life in an Iowa farm family during the early decades of the twentieth century. The two eldest Corey siblings are omitted from Paul's fictional treatment, Olney because his death in 1913 removed him from the family circle, and Elizabeth because she had been gone from home since 1909 when Paul was only six, and what he knew of her did not fit the Iowa story he wished to tell. However—intentionally or not—in his depiction of Virney Mantz, Paul Corey created the portrait of a girl of seventeen at odds with her mother, which fit Bess's situation just prior to her departure for Stanley County. On the other hand, and more importantly, Paul depicts the maturing Virney as a foil for Bess, as a girl who has no time for the

schooling that Bess hungered for and fought to obtain, a girl who cannot bear "her mother's constant nagging about her finishing school, teaching for a couple of years, then going away to college." Would that Elizabeth Corey had had that opportunity, rather than being obliged to pick up stray fragments of an education when and where she could find and afford them. Once installed in a local country school, Virney Mantz loathes her work and cannot wait to escape both home and school via elopement with an itinerant construction worker, thereby directly reversing both Bess's love of teaching and her ultimate choice of profession over wedlock.

As the locale for his story, Paul Corey invented a fictional tract of farmland in southwest Iowa and placed it within the county of *Moss*, which name combines the first two letters of Monroe Township and the final two letters of Cass County, the districts which adjoin the eastern and southern borders of Clay Township, Shelby County, site of Corey farm. I have called Moss County fictional, and surely it is, yet many points of resemblance tie it to the Shelby County neighborhoods which Paul and Bess knew as children and afterward. The plat map printed on the endpapers of *Three Miles Square* is divided by mile-line roads running east-west and north-south to create a gridiron which tallies closely with the layout of Clay Township. That fictional gridiron is portioned off into acreages of varying shapes and sizes, and the owners' names correspond to a remarkable extent with those of actual landowners in Shelby County. Certain names, in fact, straddle the fine line between fiction and fact: the farm of Elmer Schief suggests a real-life parallel, the farm of Fritz Sheef; the Parsen farm resembles the Parsons farm; the Hans Carsen farm brings to mind the Hans Koehrsen place. Certain family names, such as Murphy and Harris (both families were neighbors of the Coreys), are retained intact. Aside from these parallels, this portion of Paul's Moss County is peppered with names which accurately convey a sense of the mingled English, Irish, German, and Scandinavian population of the Corey-farm neighborhood: Bradley and Carter; O'Toole and Farrel; Baumgarten and Stubach; Olsen,



Jensen, and Clausen. Between 1910 and 1920 Corey farm stood amidst the fields of the Pinneys and the Browns, the McMans and the Lanigans, the Hesses and the Langes, as well as an army of Carstensens, Gjodesens, Sorensens, Pedersens, and Hansens, whose -en surnames reflect their Danish origin.

The family at the center of *Three Miles Square* is that of Chris Mantz, and if the plat of his farm is lifted from the map of Moss County and set down again on the map of Shelby County, it will be found to correspond rather precisely with the actual farm established during the 1880s by Edwin Corey. For instance, the southern boundaries of both farms extend along an east-west road and are bisected by a north-south road which leaves eighty acres to the east of the road and another forty acres to the west. In each case, a final forty-acre tract, called in the novel and in life the "back forty," adjoins the western acreage only at its northwest tip and except where two corners touch is isolated from the 120 acres constituting the rest of the farm. Both farms are crossed by a pair of streams. One creek runs through the western segments, another through the eastern segment. And if we consider the Mantz farm as a locus, other landmarks fall into place just where one would find them in Clay Township. One mile east and two miles north of Mantzes is the tiny hamlet of Rohrbach, corresponding to the crossroads settlement of Rorbeck. Two miles west and one mile north of Mantzes stands the rural Moss County Church, very nearly on the spot where the Monroe Township Church is located (a traveler from Corey farm needing to cross a township line to reach it). Taking the road north from Mantzes will lead the traveler to the town of Buffalo Horn, which corresponds to the Danish settlement of Elk Horn, while a southerly route will lead to Elm, situated where Atlantic, Iowa, stands, and representing also, apparently, the smaller town of Walnut.

Set down in Paul's Moss County, Elizabeth Corey would have experienced little sense of disorientation. And she must have been one of the very few readers of the novel to recognize, with a chuckle of acknowledgment, a personal and essentially private tip-of-the-hat to her and her Dakota adventure. While

the stream running across Mantz land northwest to southeast is named Squaw Creek (after the actual Squaw Creek in the Corey neighborhood), the stream flowing north to south and known in real life as Indian Creek is here renamed the Little Bad River. And Bess's heart could not have helped but respond to the opening paragraphs of Paul's novel, which begins with the burial of Chris Mantz, at age forty dead from pneumonia. Paul Corey, in these first pages, looks back upon a "vivid memory of the open grave, the muddy clay, people crowding. . . . his uncles and aunts crying, the impassive face of his mother, an oblong box of new boards—an oblong box—but there was nothing real for his mind to grasp." In 1905 Paul was not yet two years old, but sister Elizabeth had passed her seventeenth birthday and, for her, such a passage would raise poignant, even bitter memories of that winter day when so much that was nearest and dearest to her had been laid in the barren graveyard adjoining Monroe Township Methodist Church. And Bess would have been quick to notice that brother Paul had borrowed her own name (usually in its "Bessie" form) to designate the widow Mantz, a woman who, like Margaret Corey, had been a schoolteacher prior to her marriage. On the day of Chris Mantz's burial, we are told, every farmer in the region can "remember when [Chris] was goin' with Bessie Bohning, the schoolteacher."

That Elizabeth Mantz is left with a farm to run and a family to raise mirrors the dire straits in which Margaret Corey found herself in 1905. The parallels continue, the Mantz children suggesting certain of Paul and Elizabeth Corey's siblings. Andrew Mantz corresponds here to brother Fuller, Wolmar to Challenge, their sister Virney to Ethel Corey, and young Otto to Robert (with a nice measure of Paul himself thrown in, Otto being a baby when the father perishes). Even so, Paul's depiction of Virney, as I have suggested, in certain passages brings to mind not the slenderness of Ethel, but the plumpness of Bess: "Her pudgy cheeks were fresh and blooming from the cold and she pursed her heavy lips as she rubbed her chubby hands, fingers thick at their base and tapering almost to

points." That could be Bess in her letters, relating the day she braved a Dakota blizzard—or Bess bursting into the Corey home on a surprise Christmas visit to Marne. The Bess of the letters is suggested further in *Three Miles Square* by Mrs. Mantz's friendship with the local schoolteacher, Agnes Larch, who entertains the family by "describing the amusing incidents that had happened at school, knowing that the widow liked to hear about them."

Virney Mantz, like Bess Corey, begins teaching prior to reaching age eighteen, but the girl's thoughts as she signs her first teaching contract are that "she hadn't much enthusiasm for her prospective job; she didn't want to be an old maid schoolteacher." These thoughts are reiterated: "To be a schoolteacher, an old maid. Ugh!"—the very notion repels her. By way of contrast, Bess wrote home continually in praise of her adventures in the classroom, her unshakable optimism displayed in her annual feeling that the coming year would be a good one. She cherished the boost in self esteem that her professional recognition had won for her. Marriage was another thing. A 1912 letter posed the question directly: "What would you say if I was to get married?" But after describing her newest suitor as a German farmer on the "sunny side of sixty" and after repeating the adage which says that it is better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave, Bess declares, "I believe I'd prefer being a darned old maid to being either," and signs off with a promise: "Will try not to do anything rash," surely nothing so rash as the elopement of Virney Mantz.

Now, in possession of her homesteading letters written from Stanley County, we realize that Bess Corey, although absent from home for so many years, in another sense never left the family circle. The U. S. mails were kept busy in helping her to remain abreast of Corey happenings. Letters sailed back and forth between Iowa and South Dakota on any number of family topics taken up in *Three Miles Square*. These include the possibility of a remarriage for the widow Corey/Mantz, who finds it difficult to assume the sole responsibility for her

children and also for the farm "with its land mortgage only one-third paid and the chattel mortgage placed on the stock to cover improvements yet to be answered for." While not actively opposing a remarriage for her mother, Bess was skeptical. In the novel, it is the children at home who are opposed and who influence the widow not to bring a new husband into the house. On the other hand, the eventual remodeling of the Corey farmhouse, which involved raising the original roof and adding three upstairs rooms, was a project which Bess approved of and supported via the mails. All things being relative, the Mantz family's earlier move into the farmhouse they occupied prior to the remodeling had once seemed the height of luxury, removing them from the squalor of their first shelter, "the little house down the hill," as Mrs. Mantz recalls it, which was "so full of bedbugs that it almost crawled." Reflecting upon those earlier times, Mrs. Mantz is reminded of the pleasure she had experienced in leaving at last "that cramped and filthy place" for a "new place shining with fresh paint." This fictional move duplicates the Coreys' move to a new home built by Edwin Corey and which, even if a bit small, at least was bug-free. The pervasiveness of bedbugs comes into Bess's letters regarding her travels, the nightly attacks even in the "best" of hotels, and the grand surprise, encountered all too seldom, of a house without these pests. And Paul has written of his mother's terror that somehow one of the Corey children might, by carelessness perhaps, transport bedbugs from the original cabin to their new home.

An important plot element in *Three Miles Square* revolves around the straightening of the Little Bad River, which crosses the eastern portion of Mantz farm. It is a project which puts the widow Mantz at odds with her nearest neighbors, whom she suspects (rightly) of hoping somehow to take over her farm and incorporate it into their own holdings. Paul Corey summarizes the problem rather succinctly in his story:

The dredge-ditch situation stood something like this; Jensen had three forties along the river valley to the north; then came the Mantz family's one forty and across the road south lay three forties owned

by Stubach. The surveyors had run the course of the ditch to the east side of Jensen's land to give him a bigger plot on the west side; then Stubach got them to run the ditch to the west of his land to make his large field on the east side. That made the ditch course run cornerwise of the Mantz forty, cutting it into two three-cornered pieces, practically ruining the forty as farm land.

In 1913 Margaret Corey faced an identical predicament and it appears that she wrote to Bess regarding the unsatisfactory land survey for the new channel being proposed for Indian Creek. What she wrote probably paralleled the widow Mantz's suspicion that her neighbors "had bribed the surveyors to stake out the new channel where they wanted it," where it favored and improved their fields, never mind that it spoiled the Corey west forty. On 8 October Bess responded with the somewhat overly optimistic, "It's too bad about that survey. How did it turn out? All right, I hope." Bess then recounted her own misadventures with certain nearby homesteaders who were attempting to have their grown children file claims on the tracts contiguous to her land, tracts which she had long hoped might be claimed by members of the Corey family and out of which her dreamed-of horse ranch might then be created. "Gee! such neighbors—equal to yours," was Bess's terse comment, one whose sentiment and phraseology were echoed in *Three Miles Square* by thresher Tom Fell's comment to Mrs. Mantz: "Well, missus, hear you've some fine neighbors around here!"

Mrs. Corey's protest against the survey was joined by the Harris family, whose fields to the south of Corey farm would also be adversely affected by the proposed channel of Indian Creek. In her fight to obtain justice, Margaret Corey had the full support of Bess, who wrote again to encourage her, adding, "Hope you're kicking hard enough." Bess had talked the whole situation over with her homesteader neighbor and confidant, Grant Stone, and he was appalled, she said, feeling that Mrs. Corey was not demanding sufficient damages: "Grant thinks [your claim] should have been \$3500 or \$5000 to make sure of what you want." The upshot of Mrs. Corey's protest, says Paul, "was that the survey was done over and the angle of [of Indian Creek through our land] considerably

reduced. The channel still angled across our land but not as sharply. It was much better for the Harrises' land." A condition of the eventual settlement, apparently, was that the subsequent digging of a new ditch that would straighten the channel of the minor stream emptying into Indian Creek on Corey property would involve employing those of the Corey boys who wished to work on it. In 1915 Bess Corey had problems of her own, finding herself stranded by one of the worst floods ever on Bad River (which itself could use a good bit of straightening). She escaped by climbing a makeshift ladder to a railroad bridge, but she was still interested sufficiently in homeplace problems to inquire of her mother, "Did the boys get the job of digging that ditch?" It is Paul's recollection that the ditch was worked on by, at least, Rob Corey, who before long would become sole proprietor of Corey farm. In *Three Miles Square* the dredging scenes along The Little Bad River form an impressive part of the concluding action, and it is with a member of this crew that the pregnant Virney Mantz elopes.

The publication of *Three Miles Square* in 1939 coincided with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe; and by the time that *The Road Returns* (1940) and *County Seat* (1941) appeared, completing Paul Corey's Mantz trilogy, Pearl Harbor was imminent. Bess Corey remained in South Dakota, where the terrors of the dustbowl were giving way at last to seasons of more plentiful rain and decent crops. During World War I, Bess had volunteered her services to go anywhere, to do whatever she was called upon to do; but the Armistice of 1918 obviated the need for such workers, and she was never called up. By the time of America's entry into the Second war, Bess had reached the age of fifty-four, somewhat "over the hill" so far as worldwide service might be concerned. But she could be of help on the local scene, and during the summer of 1942 she wrote Paul from Pierre—her first communication since their 1941 exchange of holiday cards—to tell him of her work with the local sugar-rationing program. Her job involved registering the public for their allotments. Many of the families were Indian



Elizabeth Corey, about 1947. Courtesy of Margaret Nelson and Jim Dusen.

and she cited their names: Brave Big Head, New Holy, Little Thunder, Little Cloud, Weasel Bear. All but one, to her relief, understood English.

The rains had come with a vengeance, washing out bridges and roads, and forcing Bess's school term to be extended until June 10th rather than closing as anticipated on May 15th. She was certain that Paul—whose 1935 visit to her chosen home had coincided with the worst of times—would never recognize Stanley County now. Could he believe that her homestead on Bad River now stood “in a land of lakes” and that to reach it she must follow the line of hills and ridgetops that rose above the waters? Where not flooded, the land was green and on her

claim (which she now called her "ranch") Bess found the native wheat grasses had made a comeback, taking possession of her yard with strong, tall blades, some of them exceeding forty-three inches in height. She promised to enclose some proof, and when Paul opened her letter, the dried grassheads came pouring out upon his lap. Still a rural teacher, Bess had been offered a 10% raise in salary if she would return to the school she had taught in 1941-42 but, as always, she had found it impossible to keep abreast of her obligations and, being offered a school sixteen miles out from Pierre which would pay her twenty dollars a month more, she expected to "sign on the dotted line" before the offer flew away.

Bess Corey never did catch up with her obligations, and so she continued her professionally-gratifying but somewhat hand-to-mouth existence, presiding over one high-plains school after another as her history of one-year stands perpetuated itself. Her dream of a commercially viable horse ranch along Bad River died slowly but surely, yet Bess clung to her homestead acreage until 1947 when she sold out her holdings for \$2000.00. The proceeds were invested in a tiny home on the very outskirts of Pierre (though by an appropriate coincidence on Elizabeth Street). In May 1954 Bess died of cancer in Pierre. At her bedside were Rob Corey's widow, Lilah, and her new husband, Leonard Morris, who brought her body home to Iowa for burial beside her parents in the country graveyard at Monroe Church. Most of her siblings were gone now: Olney, Rob, Ethel and, in the year preceding her own death, Fuller. Challenge Corey remained, and Paul, who had moved to a mountaintop home south of Sonoma, California, and could not return to Marne for the funeral.

Through the years, Paul had held the neat bundles of letters bearing the postmark *Fort Pierre*, hoping and intending some day to use them as the basis for fiction, a new novel perhaps. This aim failing, Paul during the mid 1970s mined Bess's letters for a lengthy tribute composed of meaty excerpts joined and interpreted by his own running commentary, the whole called "Bachelor Bess: My Sister" and published in 1975 in the



thirty-seventh annual volume of *South Dakota Historical Collections*. Afterwards, Paul deposited his sister's South Dakota letters in the archives of the state historical society, where they have been accessible to scholars interested in the homesteading era and early-day rural schoolteaching. Publication of the letters by The University of Iowa Press now makes them more widely available, not only to scholars and historians, but to the general public, who will discover in Elizabeth Corey an exciting new writer, fully the equal of her brother Paul, an intrepid woman who not only felt that she "could" write a book but who, as now it turns out, did so.