

# Washtub Over the Sun

by Julia Antoinette Losee Preston



*Editor's note:* Using her journals and diaries, Julia Antoinette Losee Preston (left) completed her memoirs in 1936, at the age of ninety-five. Her great-granddaughter, Barbara Bradfield, recently shared Chapter 19 of the unpublished memoirs with the *Palimpsest* staff. The following excerpts from that chapter (edited slightly for publication) begin in 1869, when Julia and Peter Preston decide to move to a farm near Fort Dodge, Iowa. (Illustrations are from late nineteenth-century advertisements, magazines, and books in the SHSI collections.)

Born in New York in 1841, Julia Preston lived in Canada, Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois before moving to Iowa. Preston's memoirs are brimming with detail and metaphor; everyday objects and events become symbols for personal struggles and victories as the family makes Iowa their home. As the excerpts reveal, in documenting her own life Preston created fascinating, sometimes intimate vignettes of life in north central Iowa in the 1870s.



**R**UMORS OF GOLDEN opportunities for farmers out West reached us daily, and to Peter they brought new hopes and new visions. Stories of cheap and fertile lands to be found in Iowa drew him like a magnet. One day we heard of a farm, right on the Des Moines River with a fine house and barn, and already under cultivation that could be had for reasonable rental. . . .

Inquiries revealed that the railroad ran to Webster City which was twenty miles from our destination and that a stage was operated between this town and Fort Dodge, a little village only four and a half miles from our farm. Peter decided to go ahead with our household belongings in the covered wagon and to have

[daughter] Carrie and me follow a month later on the train. . . .

. . . Peter gave the tall clock his father had brought to Illinois from New Jersey to two neighbor boys "to tinker with." I could not keep back the tears when he said we must sell the haircloth sofa, the lampstand, the table with the scalloped edge, and the big rocker, but I realized that [there] was no space for them. Into the wagon went two bedsteads, two stoves, a washtub, my small sewing rocker, six flagbottom chairs and a carpet. We put in some empty bedticks to be filled later with straw and corn husks, and also Mother's good feather bed, rolled with pillows and quilts and carefully baled. In addition we took tools, extra

harness, and provisions for us and for the horses.

At dawn one April morning in 1869 I watched Peter drive off on his heavily loaded wagon. . . .



**W**E KNEW IT WOULD take the better part of a month for Peter to drive those three hundred miles [from Altona, Illinois] to Fort Dodge. Although we had no word from him, on the last day of April we said goodbye to [sister] Esmerelda and [her husband] Nye and the good friends who had gathered at the station to see us off.

Travel in those days was not easy. The rails were not well laid and the roadbed was far from smooth. Wherever the steel rails were joined, the wheels hit with a clatter and bang. The cars swayed from side to side. The smoke and cinders kept us dirty and dusty. We had packed our food for the trip, and enjoyed the first meals but soon our lunch basket became uninteresting. Tiresome and uncomfortable as was our journey on this passenger train out of Altona, it was as nothing compared with that on the freight car to which we had to change at Iowa Falls.

We were a queer lot, the passengers in that car. Most of them were men, undoubtedly out to seek their fortune wherever the railway led them. There were four other women, all thin and haggard. We all had to sit on the floor on our baggage. The one dirty little window was nailed shut, and not a breath of fresh air was to be had. We bounced and swayed about until we were bruised and sore. [Three-year-old] Carrie was as good as gold, but Jane [my sister, who had decided with her husband, Wilson, to move to Iowa also] had a time with her five children, for little Adelia, her youngest, wasn't yet a year old, and cried a good deal.

The passengers did what they could to while away the time. The men played cards and

swore the air blue about their luck and the discomfort of the trip. In those days people who played cards were considered on the high road to perdition and it was probably because of the card playing that two of the women fell on their knees and prayed and wept. One poor soul who fell asleep looked so white with her eyes closed that we thought she had died.

At last we came to Webster City, the end of the railroad. We got off in the thickest, stickiest mud I had ever seen, just in the gray dawn, and waited for a stage to take us the rest of the way [to Fort Dodge]. . . .

After some difficulty, Wilson had succeeded in finding rooms for us in a miserable little one-horse hotel. Although we were three in a bed — on lumpy straw ticks — and the corded ropes, which in those days served for supports instead of the springs of modern beds, cut deep ridges into our bodies, we were so tired we could have slept anywhere, on anything.

Looking backward, I realize, time is measured not by minutes and days but by what happens to us. Thus, the two events which stand out in my memory of those first Fort Dodge days are our arrival and Peter's coming. A week intervened between them, and I know now it must have been a long, tiresome, anxious one, but details have completely left me. I have a vague memory of rains, of poor food and miserable coffee, of wretched quarters, and of Wilson's discouraging search for work.

Then Peter came! I can see him now — standing at our door in the early dawn — his dear face haggard and worn, his clothes soggy and wet, and his arms outstretched to me. . . .

Wilson decided to stay in Fort Dodge to look for work, but I was thankful to be leaving the discomforts of the town for the pleasant home that I was sure awaited us out on our farm. . . .

Our road lay across the river and as we jogged along, I noticed that the ground, though rutted and caked from recent rains, seemed increasingly dry and unpromising. Last year's coarse, bristling grass covered the prairie like a brown garment. . . . When I realized we must have covered the four and a half miles from town, I began anxiously to search for the pretty white farmhouse of my dreams. The only sign of habitation was two old weather-beaten houses — one older, more deserted looking

than the other. Toward these Peter headed the horses. On that last stretch of road, nobody spoke. . . .



**I** THOUGHT OF THE OLD Preston Homestead [where we had lived, near Altona], with the big, white house, the shady yard, the fruit trees and the level well-tilled fields. How different from this forbidding hut, with its one downstairs room of rough logs, stained with water and smoke, and the low raftered attic above it. There wasn't a shelf or a closet, except for a few rough boards in a sort of cubbyhole of a buttery just inside the door. In the corner next to the crude stairway was a recess just big enough to hold a bedstead with a curtain in front of it. . . .

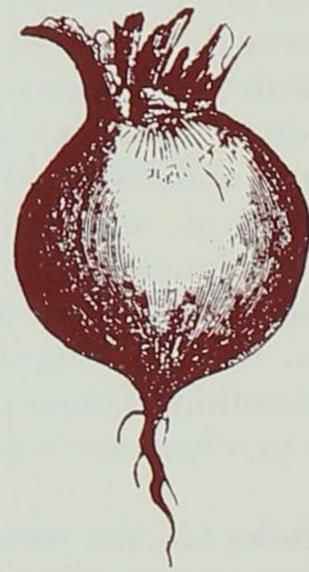
First, we got our bed up. Then we took our heavy carpet and laid it on the floor of the attic, which was too low for bedsteads and on this Jane put her straw ticks. Here she and her five children were to sleep. I folded my mother's feather bed double and laid it on the floor near our bed. It made a soft nest for little Carrie. . . .

In the early evening, as I went to call Peter to supper, big black clouds rolled up from the west. Through them the lightning flashed ominously. The wind died down and then rose again. Before we had finished our supper the storm was upon us. . . . Then the rain came down! It seemed to pour out of the sky in bucketfuls. Soon we found it was coming in along the ridgepole on Jane's beds upstairs. Standing on the top of the stairs I held the lamp above my head while Peter and Jane dragged the damp ticks to dry corners. The sound of the heavy drenching downpour was interrupted

only by the frequent roar of thunder.

Jane's children cried and Carrie crept up on her feather bed and hid her face. I think if the grownups had given way to their feelings, they would have joined in the children's wails. The long, strenuous journey and the work of unpacking and settling in the depressing hovel that was to be our home had completely exhausted us, and now the unexpected violence of the storm threatened to unnerve us all. Ready to drop in our tracks, we crawled into bed and lay there, too worn and spent to sleep. We rolled and tossed, scarcely able to breathe in the hot oppressive air.

Toward dawn the rain stopped and we fell asleep. Then came the mosquitoes! Buzzing about our ears, they drove us almost crazy with their stinging. Peter could see the funny side of things and made me laugh when I wanted to cry. I remember he said, "These pesky things are so strong they could poke their bills through an iron pot and clinch them on the other side."



**A** S SOON AS WE could get seeds into the ground, Peter planted enough oats and corn for winter feed for the horses, while Jane and I worked away at the tough grass roots, trying to make ourselves a vegetable garden. Green shoots began to peep up at last. The cucumbers thrived, so did the beans, but nothing else amounted to anything.

Infrequent messages from Wilson were not encouraging. He was always on the track of a job paying a good salary, but somehow he couldn't seem to catch up with it. . . . Though Jane had much to contend with, she was never

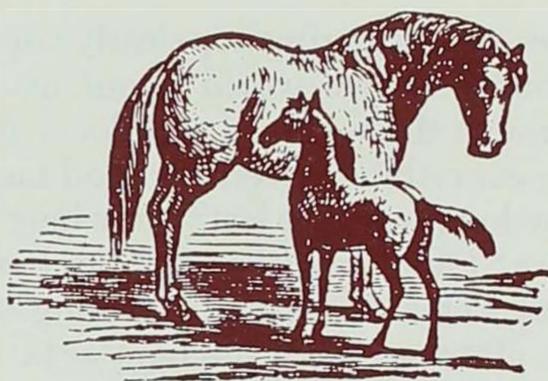
down long, for she had real character and courage. She had one habit, however, that Peter could not abide. She carried a snuff box. One day as she was snuffing for a good sneeze Peter said, "Jane, if you knew how that snuff will serve you, you'd never take another pinch. It is making a yellow old woman out of you."

Jane was proud of her looks and loved to be admired. Peter's criticism touched her most vulnerable spot. She stood tapping her snuff box for a minute without saying a word. Then she went to the door and threw it as far as she could into the tall grass. The habit was strong and we knew how hard it often was for her when the craving came, but she never took a pinch after that. Some days she would walk back and forth, back and forth, but she never gave in. The snuff box was never picked up from the prairie where she threw it.

At three o'clock one afternoon in August the sun began to cloud over. All around us there was a queer darkness different from twilight. The thought possessed me, "Is the world dying?" Peter drove the restless horses in from the fields when they neighed. It seemed as if a washtub was being slid over the sun. The stars came out. . . . Even [Peter] was truly awed as he assured us that it was a total eclipse of the sun, caused by the moon's passing between the earth and the sun, and that it would not last long. . . . We heard afterward that many people had been almost scared to death and that some had fallen on their faces praying for forgiveness for they believed the end of the world had surely come.

One day not long after this as Jane and I were finishing the midday dishes, Wilson Mentor came driving into the barnyard in a high-wheeled buggy. As dapper as ever, he greeted Jane with a fond embrace and said, "Pack your bag, my love, and call in the children. Prepare to be mistress in your own home. You see before you a successful man with a job!"

He spoke the truth! He really did have a job as depot agent, with comfortable living quarters over the station. And Jane! What a bustle as she packed her things and crowded the children hurriedly into the stylish buggy. Then off they went as happy as kings to be through with our old log house, leaving us three standing there looking after them.



**D**URING THE LATTER part of the summer two fine colts were born. Peter rejoiced over the sturdy little creatures, and Carrie and I enjoyed standing at the pasture fence and watching their awkward antics. The weather, too, became better, and I busied myself with wild fruit, the one redeeming thing about the whole place. . . .

At last the time came to harvest our garden stuff. Beans that year brought four dollars and a half a bushel. We had four bushels to sell. Our few cucumbers we put down in brine. After they had been in salt a few weeks, we looked at them and found them soft. We cut one open and there in the stem end was a fat, white worm, still alive in that strong brine. The cucumbers had looked so plump and perfect but every one of them had spoiled.

On Sunday, Peter always pastured his team out on the prairie, bringing them into the barn in the evening. One Monday morning he found one of the horses dead in its stall.

Without a team he could not carry on the farm work, nor could he earn anything for us during the winter as he had hoped to do. We talked it over and decided we must take the rest of our savings to get another horse. The mud on the road was hub-deep when Peter went off alone on horseback but in the evening he came home leading the new horse.

"He looks like a fine animal," I said cheerfully, for I saw Peter looked worried.

He shook his head sadly, "He cost a hundred dollars, Julie, I had only seventy-five, and, in order to get him, I had to mortgage both horses, the wagon, and harness."

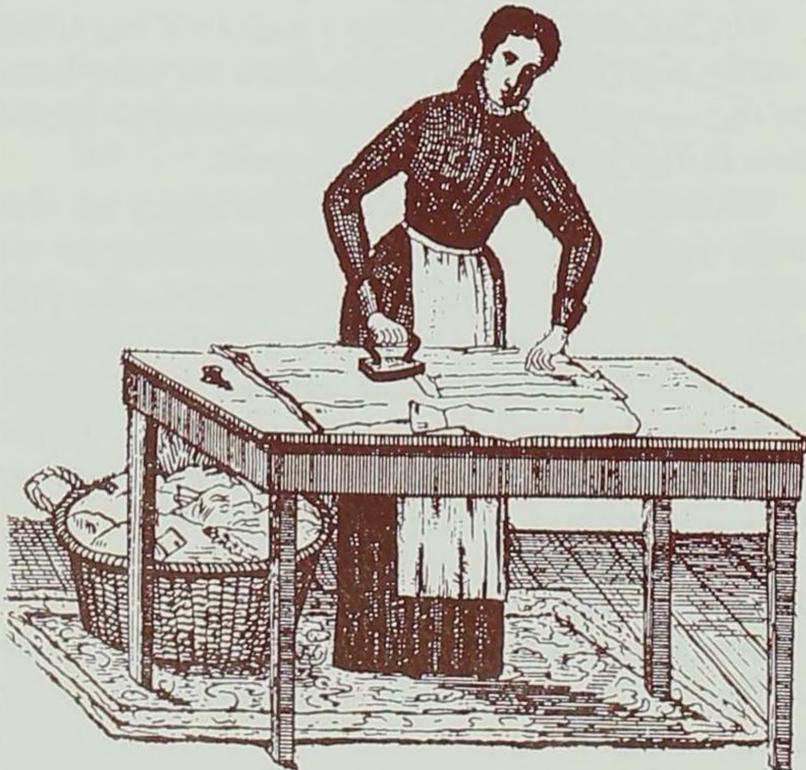
. . . In contrast to the wet summer, all through November, the weather was dry and cold. Dust storms raged over the prairie. Day after day, though he always tried, Peter could do nothing outdoors. He would come back to

the house, and sit staring hopelessly out at the impenetrable brown world about us. Dust sifted through the windows and doors and lay heavy on everything. Even our food tasted of grit. How long would it last? How long could we endure? I felt I was almost at the breaking point, but Peter broke first. Coming in one morning, after caring for the horses, he threw his hat on the table. "No more farming for me, Julie," he said. "We'll pack our few sticks and try our fortune in town. There's surely work there for a willing man to do."

Inwardly I felt a sense of relief but said, "Are you sure you really want to go? Maybe things will be better another year."

"No, I'm beaten, Julie. I can't go on."

I can't tell you how glad I was. We started right in loading the wagon. We had little enough stuff to move, but I was thankful for my old cane-seated rocker and my mother's good feather bed. Peter went with me to the loft to get the straw ticks and the carpet. When we lifted the carpet, it broke in pieces. Well, this was a pretty kettle of fish! It had been so often soaked and dried, and lately frozen, and dust filled, that the life of it was gone, though it had been made to last for years.



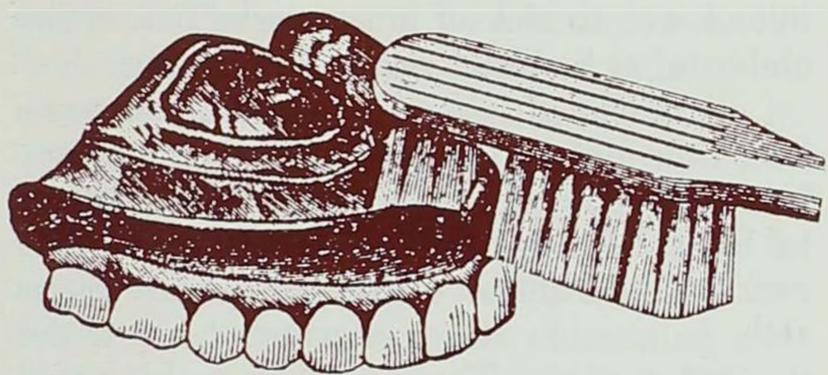
**T**HE LITTLE TOWN of Fort Dodge seemed far more inviting to me in November than it had in the spring. We found a three-story old brick house on the south side of town near the rail-

road tracks. I looked forward eagerly to a lot of space and a real home again. That year the Illinois Central Railroad was built through Fort Dodge. The town was so crowded with newcomers, hoping to find money on bushes, in the wake of the railroad, that anyone with an extra room had to rent it, and I found myself with but one room to call my own. In every room in the house was a separate family. The rent we received was small but sufficient to pay for the whole house. Sometimes, however, we were unable to collect in full, and then we had to make up the difference. In our one room we washed, ironed, cooked, and slept. . . .

. . . Situated on the Des Moines River, originally [Fort Dodge] had been a fort, a true frontier outpost. [In 1853 the government had abandoned the fort, moved troops north to the Territory of Minnesota,] and sold the former site to Major Williams, the camp sutler. . . .

The old parade grounds had been left as they were in the days of the fort. Later, they became the town square, where farmers came to trade and where the town activities centered. Around the square were the few buildings of the early town: a blacksmith shop, a grocery, a shoeshop, a livery stable, and the town hotel, the Duncombe House. Since in those days, newspapers were rare, news, especially of the Civil War, was read from the steps of this hotel. Along the one street of the town were many nice residences, for most of the early settlers had brought means with them when they came.

Though life was not as hard as on the farm, it was not easy sledding in town. Peter hauled wood that first winter and did all sorts of jobs requiring a team. There were times when we could hardly keep the wolf from the door. Like most of the newcomers we suffered want and poverty, for money was scarce. Often after we had eaten our breakfast we did not know where our next meal was coming from, but it always came. Again and again Peter had to earn it before we could eat it. If he did make a decent day's wages, the grocer would charge ten prices for the food. But even so, our lot was not nearly as bad as that of many. Some, we heard, were forced to burn greased rags in saucers for light, or lacking grease, had to go to bed in the dark.



**M**Y TEETH, which had always been so good, began to go to pieces during the summer on the farm. Now they would hold out no longer and I had to have them pulled out. Here I was, just a young woman, and toothless as an old crone! I had to put my vanity in my pocket and be thankful that toothache wouldn't keep me awake whole nights at a time as it had for months. Fortunately even at that early time, dentists had learned to make teeth, and good ones, too. Doctor Slate made me a set for twenty dollars that has served me my entire life. How we managed to scrape that twenty dollars together, I do not know, but it was a case of using what we needed for real necessities, of "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Long before spring came Peter had scraped up the last of the feed in the bin, and knew the time had come when he must sell his team. A man, drawing good wages from the railroad, offered one hundred and seventy-five dollars for the whole outfit, to be paid in monthly installments. When Peter went to the holder of the mortgage, he refused the offer, demanding his twenty-five dollars at once, but the prospective buyer could not raise this amount, and so the old rascal sold our team to a man who paid him his twenty-five dollars down and gave Peter a note payable in three months, for the difference. Both Peter and I were simply sick when a little later the man who bought the team left town for parts unknown, robbing us of all hope of getting our just dues.

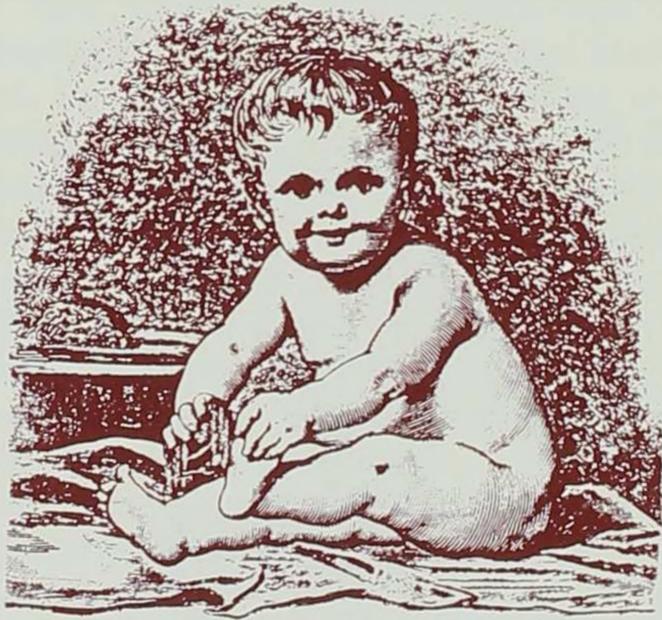


**W**ITHOUT A TEAM and [with] no job, the only thing for us to do was to move in with Jane. . . . Peter found enough work to enable us to contribute our share of the food. In less than a month he came home one night, happy and full of enthusiasm [announcing his new job as car inspector for the railroad, with a salary of thirty-five dollars a month].

. . . Once more we set up housekeeping by ourselves [in a four-room house up the hill from the depot]. The house was set on blocks of wood, and the wind swept under and through the floors, chilling our feet and, on cold winter days, freezing the drinking water in the pail, but there was no happier home in Fort Dodge than ours.

Such difficulties as washing with so much steam in the kitchen and thawing out the bread dough in the morning were not too hard to bear. The clothes, though they froze stiff as boards when I hung them on the line, always dried, and the bread would rise and bake perfectly. Nor did we greatly mind the frequent congregation of pigs and dogs which sought shelter under our house, though many a mid-

night Peter had to get up to drive them out with a long pole and send them squealing and howling down the hill.



**O**NE FEBRUARY night after we had gone to bed, we heard someone pounding on the door. When Peter answered, there stood Jane's oldest daughter, Nell.

"Ma wants you to come over right away, Uncle Peter. Adelia is sick and cries for you to hold her. I guess she ate something."

Peter dressed hurriedly, for little Adelia was the apple of his eye. I would have gone with him but Carrie had a cold and I did not dare take her out into the freezing night air. I was so worried that I never slept a wink.

Peter returned in the early morning with word that the baby seemed better.

"Jane's just about to pieces," he said. "You'd better hurry over as soon as you can."

When I arrived, I found Adelia up and dressed, but still not at all well. Jane, who was expecting a new arrival, seemed completely unnerved and incapable. During the days that followed I spent most of my time with her, and each evening Peter came directly from his work. When he came, Adelia would laugh and call him "My Wumple Peter" and beg to be lifted into his lap. She died in his arms.

Jane had been unstrung before, but now she was completely beside herself. She threw herself on the bed, moaning and writhing in agony of body and mind.

"It's God's judgment!" she wailed. "I was wicked. I didn't want Adelia. I didn't want to

live. I was so sick of housework, sick of the children, sick of life, sick of everything. . . ."

. . . Finally she became calm, but it was a long time before she could lift up her heart. Jane had managed to keep up a bold and cheerful front, but her troubles and difficulties had rankled and festered within her. There was so little in pioneer days on which to turn the thought outward. Those first years of married life — always expecting or nursing a baby — of disillusionment that comes when actuality proves so different from cherished dreams of love — had built a barrier between Jane and Wilson that time only made larger.

Though they were living in the same house, their mental worlds were as far apart as the North Pole is from the South.



**F**OUR YEARS moved swiftly by. . . . [Carrie was now eight, and her new brother Billee was eighteen months old. We had built a new, six-room house at the foot of the hill on Sixth Street.]

. . . By the middle of the summer, our yard blossomed with bright flowers and we were enjoying tender fresh vegetables of our own growing. Then, one afternoon, as I was putting Billee down for his nap, Carrie came in white-faced and frightened. "Ma, there's a terribly funny sound in the air, and something like a black dustcloud is coming in from the prairie."

As she spoke, I could hear a low hissing and whining that grew louder as, together, we ran out the door and down the path. Carrie pointed and there ahead was a great rolling black cloud. In fear we hurried back to the house. The whine and hiss now became a roar and just as we reached the porch the cloud descended and broke into millions of buzzing, hurtling grass-

hoppers. The impact of their bodies stung like hail. Inside of the house, the door tightly shut, we stood panting with fear! In terror we listened to the clatter and pounding upon the house, and above it the continued rumble and roar of beating wings. We made our way to the windows, but before we reached them, they became sheeted with a mass of hopping gray-green things that shut out the light and all the view. Time dragged slowly by. There seemed nothing to do but wait and listen — listen to that ceaseless droning and rattle and din.

At train time, we heard the engine slide to a stop, with a skidding, grating sound. If Peter would only come! At last he did, bringing word that he was helping sand the tracks. "The crushed grasshoppers have made the rails slick as grease," he said. "I'll have to go back before the next train is due."

The scourge lasted until one o'clock the next afternoon, and then rose in a cloud which again hid the sun. Long after it passed, we could still hear the sound of beating wings.

We went out into the garden and stood, Carrie and I. "Oh, Ma, our flowers — our pretty, pretty flowers!" Carrie sobbed.

There wasn't even a shoot of green. Our little crabapple tree was stripped of leaves and bark. The trunk stood bare and scarred with the sticky sap still flowing. Our clothesline had been eaten away — not a shred was left. The house corners were worn round, and the fence posts gnawed and chewed bare of paint.

The prairie, which before had been green with grass and patches of tender young corn, now lay stripped, and brown as in winter.

The farmers had no harvest in Fort Dodge that year. . . .

## OPERA HOUSE.

**F**ORT DODGE was fast becoming quite a town. Gradually the center of business moved away from the old square. Gates' Dry Goods Store.

. . . occupied the first brick building, as I remember it. On the second floor was the Opera House, very up-to-date in those days. I remember the plays given there, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," and "Box and Cox," and others.

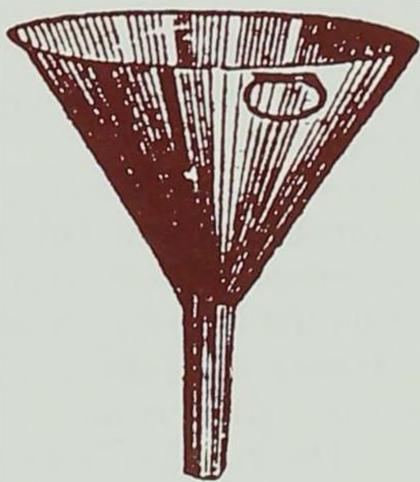
I'll never forget when Mr. Gates equipped his store with cash boxes which ran on wires to the cashier's desk. These were indeed a novelty and a great drawing card. Every time I think of them the picture of the little "umbrella lady," as we called her, comes to my mind. At all times during the summer, the "umbrella lady" carried a tiny parasol of ruffled lace, which she did not close when she came into the store. One day she carried her miniature sunshade a bit too high over her head for it caught on the cash box wires. The clerks and other customers had a hard time concealing their amusement while Mr. Gates found a step-ladder and released the parasol for the diminutive lady who sputtered loudly about his new-fangled contraptions.

. . . With the new growth in population and business, educational and cultural opportunities were offered. How happy we were when the town established a library in a room donated by Bassett and Johnston, Attorneys. Peter and I were great readers and already subscribed for *The Youth's Companion*, *Century Magazine*, which was something like *The Atlantic Monthly*, and two newspapers, *The Chicago Record* and *The Fort Dodge Messenger*. The continued stories in the newspapers and magazines were so fascinating we could scarcely wait for the next installment. I wonder why such captivating tales are no longer written! When the opportunity came to get real books, we were overjoyed and every week Peter and I walked up to the library together and came home with a book apiece to read by the living room lamp after the children were in bed. . . .

. . . The most disagreeable part of Peter's work was the irregularity of hours and the fact that often night found him far from home. He was called out in every kind of weather, at all times of the day and night, but wherever he was, he tried to get back at night. Knowing that he would come if he possibly could, I always waited up for him, with a good fire and a hot

meal. Once in the early winter of 1881, he and two others walked from Manson, which was twenty miles. All trace of the road had been obliterated by a deep snow and they walked along on the thick icy crust, guided only by the telegraph poles. When they came to trestles and bridges, they had to crawl on their hands and knees for fear a single misstep would cost them their lives.

There were many days and nights like that in Peter's life as a railroad man. At one time in the middle of the night, Peter was called to go out to a place in the country where a terrible collision had occurred. The engineer, a dear friend of Peter's, had been killed. Peter alone, of all the men gathered there, had the courage to pick up the mangled bits of body and carry it back to town.



**T**HE FALL that Carrie turned fifteen, Billee and I went to visit Esmerelda. I had seen her only once since we moved from Altona, when she had brought her two babies, Janette and Nell, to visit us in Fort Dodge. . . .

. . . Soon after my arrival I was told to go into the pantry to look at a large tin funnel fastened upon the wall.

"Put your ear up to it, Julie," Esmerelda said.

Remembering my youngest sister's mischievousness of yore, I feared a trick, and refused.

"Go on, Aunt Julie," urged the children, who stood looking on suppressing eager, excited giggles. "It won't hurt you — honest!"

I could not resist their earnest appeals. Esmerelda put her mouth to the funnel and called, "Ready, Nyrum," and then thrust my

ear against it. To my amazement, I heard — plain as day — Nye's voice come back: "Is that you, Julie?"

"Tell him yes," Mary, Esmerelda's oldest daughter, prompted.

Esmerelda twisted my mouth to the funnel. "Yes, it's Julie," I managed to say. "Where are you?"

"Down at the shop," came his words. His shop, I knew, was a number of blocks away, and I could not believe him.

"Quit your tomfoolery," I scoffed. "I'll warrant you're down in the cellar."

He was not in the cellar, but really in his shop, as I afterward learned. This contraption was a sort of telephone that Nye himself had made. Always interested in mechanical things, he had read about the telephone invented by Alexander Bell a few years before and already being used some in the East. Guided by the information he could get about it, Nye had made and set up an instrument of his own between his shop and Esmerelda's pantry. At each end was a large tin funnel which served both as a mouthpiece and as a receiver. These funnels were connected by wires. It was through this homemade instrument that I had my very first experience with the telephone and many another person received his first introduction to this convenience in Esmerelda's pantry or at Nye's workbench, for people came from far and wide to see and marvel at it.

. . . I soon began to long for Peter and for Carrie, and planned to return to them sooner than I had anticipated. In spite of repeated urgings to remain, I made ready to go and was really glad to be on my way home. My trip had taught me one thing. Ever since leaving the old Preston homestead, I had cherished the idea that there was no place in the world like Altona, never so true a home as that dear old farmhouse. Now I knew that home is not in any one house, not in any one place, but always and ever, home is where loved ones live together in piece and contentment. My home was with my children and with Peter and toward them I was happily speeding. □

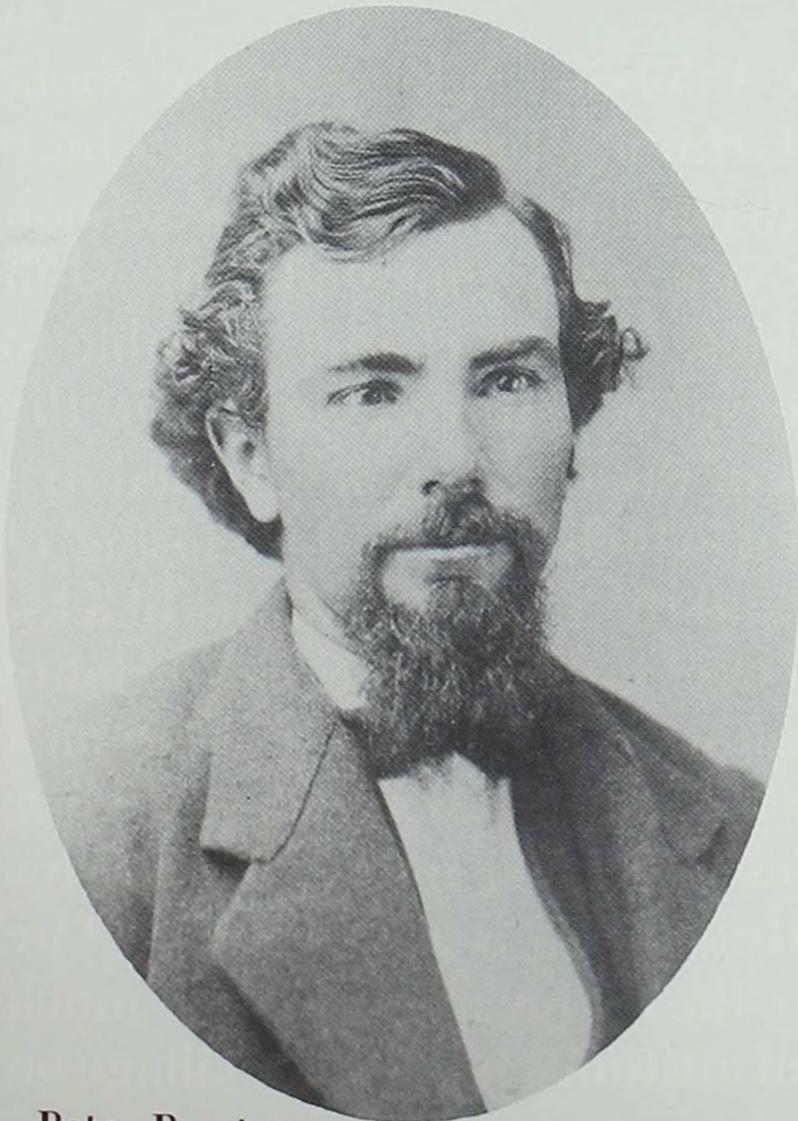
A Preston family album on next page.

# Family Album



Billee Preston

Left: Julia Preston (far left) and her sisters, Jane and Esmerelda



Peter Preston



Carrie Preston

COURTESY BETTY RUE KREITINGER