

DOCUMENT 15.4

Gro Svendsen | Letter from a Homesteader, 1863

Many of the settlers who moved to Minnesota and the Dakotas migrated from northern Europe. Most did not speak English, left behind family members, and experienced geographical and emotional isolation. Women played a significant role in running farms, as shown in the following letter that Gro Svendsen wrote to her family in Norway about her life as a homesteader in Minnesota in 1863. Svendsen offers a typical account of the challenges many settlers faced.

Explore

Dear Parents, Sisters, and Brothers (always in my thoughts):

I have often thought that I ought to tell you about life here in the New World. Everything is so totally different from what it was in our beloved Norway. You never will really know what it's like, although you no doubt try to imagine what it might be. Your pictures would be all wrong, just as mine were.

What emotions does Svendsen express about her life in America?

I only wish that I could be with you to tell you all about it. Even if I were to write you countless pages, I still could not tell you everything.

I remember I used to wonder when I heard that it would be impossible to keep the milk here as we did at home. Now I have learned that it is indeed impossible because of the heat here in the summertime. One can't make cheese out of the milk because of flies, bugs, and other insects. I don't know the names of all these insects, but this I do know: If one were to make cheese here in the summertime, the cheese itself would be alive with bugs. Toward late autumn it should be possible to keep the milk. The people who have more milk than they need simply feed it to the hogs.

What differences between life in Norway and life on the Great Plains does this letter indicate?

It's difficult, too, to preserve the butter. One must pour brine over it or salt it; otherwise it gets full of maggots. Therefore it is best, if one is not too far from town, to sell the butter at once. This summer we have been getting from eight to ten cents a pound. Not a great profit. For this reason people around here do not have many cows—just enough to supply the milk needed for the household. It's not wise to have more than enough milk, because the flies are everywhere. Even the bacon must be preserved in brine, and so there are different ways of doing everything. . . .

Why would Svendsen's relatives think she might be exaggerating?

I could tell you even more, but possibly many who read this letter may think I am exaggerating. I assure you that all that I have told you I have experienced myself. If they do not believe me, they should come over and find out for themselves.

Source: Gro Svendsen, *Frontier Mother: The Letters of Gro Svendsen*, ed. Pauline Farseth and Theodore Blegen (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1950), 39–40.

Put It in Context

What particular challenges did homesteaders who emigrated from other countries face?