

Nebraska in Winter!

(Out of sympathy for our fellow citizens east of the Sierra)

*The first snowfall came early in December. I remember how the world looked from our window as I dressed behind the stove that morning. The low sky was like a sheet of metal; the blond cornfields had faded out into a ghostliness at last; the little pond was frozen under its stiff willow bushes. Big white flakes were whirling over everything. Winter on the still wild prairie of Nebraska in the 1890's as seen by a boy named Jim Burden in Willa Cather's *My Antonia!**

Jim lived with his grandparents who with two hired hands, Otto and Jake, managed a farm on what seemed to Jim to be the outer rim of the known world. All summer and fall the family and hands worked hard cultivating, harvesting, caring for livestock, storing up for winter. And now it had arrived, the snow so deep at times that no one could exit their half underground homestead except to see to the stabled horses and cows. *The basement kitchen seemed heavenly safe and warm in those days - like a tight little boat in a winter sea. Next to getting warm and keeping warm, dinner and supper were the most interesting things to think about. Our lives centered around warmth and food.* In the evening they would sometimes pop corn and make taffy and Otto would sing "O Bury Me Not On the Lone Prairie". On other bitter nights as they sat around the stove they could hear coyotes down by the corral and then Otto and Jake would tell chilling stories about wolves, bears and outlaws - and funny tales as well.

Christmas was an especially welcome time. Unable to get to town, the family made its own presents and put up a cedar tree which grandmother and Otto decorated with gingerbread animals, strings of popcorn, bits of candle and some old German paper figures - a heart, the three wise men, a baby in a manger - so that the tree became "the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nested like birds in its branches." Then on Christmas day grandfather would read solemnly from Matthew's story of the birth of Christ and lead them in prayer. He led them in prayer too one day at the burial of a neighbor . . . while Otto led the mourners through that old hymn: *Jesus, lover of my soul / Let me to thy bosom fly / While the nearer waters role / While the tempest still is high.* Nebraska in winter! But was that all Willa Cather had in mind when she wrote her story? I think maybe she had in mind us, too, who live beneath the transparent ceiling of this homestead we call Earth, situated in the midst of that other cold and boundless prairie called the Universe. We too live in awe of the forces of nature.

But Willa Cather makes it clear that food and fire were not all the Burdens depended on to survive. It was their stories, legends, songs, prayers, festivals that kept them alive in a truly human sense - and not like stabled cows and horses! And so it is with us as we ride this planet from whence to who knows where. It is our stories, our Gospels, our festivals of Christmas and Easter, our hymns that keep us sane, that nurture our sense of finite worth and yet our conviction that we shall live forever! Take away those stories, those images, the spiritual nourishment of celebrations like the Eucharist and, no matter how full our larder may be, you take away our lives and humanity.