

Glenbow Archives, Wendelboe family fonds

Mary Lund's first letter home to her mother in Denmark, after coming to Canada (M-9684-9)
Translated by Clara Sparks June 29, 1990.

Blackfalds, Alta. 17-8-10 [August 17, 1910]

Dear Mother:

Now I will gather myself together and let you have proper information on how I am. The ticket was good to Stettler, because this Dt. for a few years has been terminal for the RR [railroad] that goes out in the eastern direction. The agent did not know that the Rail had last fall been extended to Castor so it was unfortunate that I landed in Stettler which is a little bit bigger than Thorso, from Tuesday 26 till Friday 29. Without money, without knowing the language or knowing a soul, I was in a tight spot. Now, I had 4 Dollars and with them I went and got a room at the first the best Hotel and then went out to see if I could find someone who could please speak either danish or german. Wandering round in the town I came to a church and though I did not believe there existed such a building, I soon saw that it was a Catholic church. The next day I happened on an old Danisker from the district between Aaldborg and Randers and he helped me by all means except with money.

The first day I came I had written a card to Notre Dame but I was stupid enough to put it on the train and thereby lost 4 days. Mail car out to Notre Dame goes from Stettler to Notre Dame Wednesday and Saturday, and if I had mailed the card at the post office then Pit [Pete]. Meyer would have got it Wed evening. Now this stupid card went to Castor on Wednesday and since there is only one train in each direction each day, it came back on Thursday and only went to Notre Dame on Saturday, so that I got it there myself there Saturday evening. It was real lucky that the agent in Copenhagen wrote to Pete and told him that my ticket on was good to Stettler. That letter Pete received Wednesday. [word missing] who went to Castor on Thursday, stabled horse and buggy, took the train Friday morning and so it went until I found him on the street, as I was going back to the RR to look for him. My shoes were so dreadfully dirty, so I got a pair of boots and a blouse that were so lovely, I thought. At 4 o'clock we entrained eastward to Castor, where we found his next youngest brother Martin and a neighbour who waited for us. Two hours later we were on our way home, the other 2 in a wagon, we two in the Buggy. 6 o'clock the train came in, 8 o'clock we drove out of Castor. I heard myself it is 4-5 Danish miles and we drove them in 2 hours.

The neighbour's wife was very glad to see me, she had been saying that she would not stay there if Pete did not get married. It was just at haying time and they were very busy. The house is made like most peasant houses – logs that are laid on top of each other with smaller logs pressed into and nailed into the cracks between them. On the roof, which is made the same way, is laid sod. The inside is much better than you'd think, a sort of heavy cardboard the same breadth and thinness as the heavy paper used in the country is nailed on wall and ceiling in the same way as hangs paper. The stove stands simply on the floor and the chimney is just a plain pipe of tin which goes right up through ceiling and roof. When I came there was nothing in the cabin but a

bed in which 3 slept and a trunk. In the time I lived there I slept at the neighbours. They were very hospitable, 30 years, childless, she was very clever (skilled) at cooking and baking but never in my life have I seen anyone so ragged (shabby). The day after I arrived Pete asked me if the understanding was that I would stay. I replied that I would stay but I wouldn't get married and without that there was absolutely no more discussion about the possibility of my staying here. If you could have heard him Mother, how he pleaded and asked and begged me to stay, not that day but later – how he talked to Brenhams (the neighbours) and they advised him this is what we should do. I should continue sleeping at Brenhams but we should cook our own meals. Thus it should go until the harvest was completed, then Pete would rent out his land and we would both go away from the place. He would then help me find a job, which is an easy matter in Alberta and then he would go to the States to work for the winter.

So we drove to Castor, bought [table and chairs] and such things and Marius drove up to Kris's place (he has rented his land out and works for our neighbour on the left) and got his stove and then everything went excellently. People bake and wash and churn their own butter, though we have not a cow but we could buy butter from a man who only lives 8 miles south for us. Brenhams have one cow but that was not enough to supply the milk let alone the butter. Margarine is not to be bought here. Butter can be got in Castor, but one never know where it is made so it is usually rancid and smells far off. Meanwhile for a few days it went real well but the people began to be busy [busybodies], they said nothing to us but to the neighbour and of course he passed it on to Pete. Many of Pete's friends came and congratulated him, or also asked him when the wedding would be, and when at first it got so bad I decided to move before my good name and reputation (and his too) was completely ruined.

On the colored map you can see the way (route) I travelled. From Calgary you go northward to Lacombe, that lies where my pen marks off in the east. You can see Stettler on this map, but Castor is where my line ends. Then an 18-20 miles English northwest lies Notre Dame.

Now! Kris, he that is eldest after Pete, knows a Danish family in that little station town that lies between Red Deer and Lacombe. The husband is a smith and has a nice board house beside his smithy. The wife is a practical nurse and has learnt ladies tailoring and sewing. Kris wrote to them to see if they could have me a while until I learned the language and can take a place! Pete would really rather, when he realized that I (with risk of seeming ungrateful) never would marry him, have had me go home again but I don't want to do that; and now he has no more money. Wednesday the answer came but we didn't get it till Thursday for the whole week it has rained and thunderstormed each day. They will gladly give me shelter in Blackfalds as long as necessary and I packed my things (clothes) and planned on going to Castor on Saturday; but for the first the weather was so bad and for the second there was not train on Saturday. Then we decided to driver to Castor on Sunday, stay overnight there and then I would take the train 7 o'clock Monday morning and Pete and Martin, who wanted to go along would then take a little trip out to Martin's land and see if his wheat was ripe. He has a homestead, as they call it, 2 miles southeast of Castor, and has only been at Pete's some weeks to help him "cut" hay. This was an excellent "arrangement" but a man came on the road with a sled.

I have said that it thundered and rained each day but this is something no one takes any notice of unless it rains so much that it interferes with the work. It rained, however, so much that we did

not get to start in the forenoon and then – now comes the awful (part). Around 8 as we sat drinking coffee, the thunderstorm was suddenly overhead and after it had rained really hard about 15 minutes it began to hail small hailstones. This meant nothing; it never used to hail more than once a year and this it had already done and this so thoroughly that Kris's wheat was completely hailed into the ground together with most up in the vicinity of his place. But Pete and his neighbour's wheat stood straight and was ready to harvest and Pete had just bought a self binder for \$190 3 days ago and was just going to begin harvesting the day after. First there were some few hailstones between the rain, then nothing but hail, and at the last the hailstones were as big, yes average about the size of a 2 Ore. It hit so hard that water and earth (mud) into the air for 2 feet. Martin tried to go over to the neighbours but before he had gone 10 steps from our door his gray stiff felt hat, you know, one of the real cowboys hats, cracked so that it hung down over his eyes and had trouble finding his way back to the door, and still the next day he had small blue green bruises on hands and throat. 100 chickens were killed by the hail, they were old enough they should soon be laying. The horses stood in water over the knees and the pigs were practically swimming. But the worst of it all, however, is that all Pete's wheat was completely (smashed to the ground) knocked down. Alone this amounts to about \$1500. He was naturally blackly desperate: The first year there was no rain, Result: no harvest. Second year all his horses died. Now in the spring, first 2 horses died, then the cabin burnt down, then I came and wouldn't marry him, and then to crown it all, he gets hailed out and won't have any money to live on until next harvest, if he gets any wheat then.

You can understand that he is disappointed by the country, and sure he has worked all over America before he probably won't have any trouble finding work but he doesn't want to be a travelling man again. He and his neighbour, whose wife hates the country and who is mightily glad about the hail, are selling all their horses and renting their land out: with these funds they are going down to the States and starting a restaurant. He has had one before but got tired of it and is sure he can work up a good shop. When they have got set up or built and well started I will probably go to work for them there but until then I will stay here in Blackfalds with the Danish family I have told you about above. If I can get a job here in the town meanwhile I will take it because I can use the money even if Pete and Martin will give me whatever (as much as) I may ask for. Finally Martin would rather I stayed here over winter so that he can easily slip over here to see me occasionally and he probably thinks that before spring he will have persuaded me to marry him, but that will be a lie if my nose does not freeze off me in the winter.

Have I not told you about the Dane I travelled with for 24 hrs? Since the time we parted and till I came to my destination he sent me 2 cards and a 4 page letter and in it he wrote that if the place or job at Pete's did not suit me I should just write to him and he would find me one. And if I did not have the money he would send me the ticket. When Pete found this out I thought he had gone crazy! When I had got that letter and the one from Ricard and one from Marius in Skanderborg and two from two travelling companions I was more determined not to marry him and when on the road home from the Post Office he asked me for the last time I told him off in no uncertain terms. The day after he and Martin went to Castor and Pete came home drunk. Was that a way to behave? Mother! I can't stand him, his manners, his walk, the way he talks, everything disgusts me. Even if he did not have red hair and was as ugly as original sin, I would not marry him. And even if he is comparatively courteous, he is basically absolutely uncouth. No never, then I would rather go down to my other Don down in Barons: my travel friend who was so polite to me! He

has a large hardware store there and a stud farm too. There was nothing Pete was more afraid of than that I should write down there. He was absolutely sure that a month after I went down there I would marry Wendelboe – that's his name. He is born in Godvad and his Uncle has a farmstead or land yet. Can you not in a discreet way find something out about his Uncle if you get up around there. His name is Niels Kjielsen or something like that.

Well, I can stay here as long as I want. There are three children, and we have both cows and pigs. The husband has his smithy up in the town but I will anyway try to write down there to find out if he really means what he says. He is probably about 30 years but doesn't look that old. He is big and brawny and reminds not a little of cousin Jens, and money he apparently has. You must not tell any of this panic to Father, this he will early enough find out. I only have to provide written permission from my Father in the case that I get married before I am 21, and so long I cannot manage to avoid menfolk. Here girls get married when they are 15-16 years most 17 years, but there is only one girl for each 4 men. The first Sunday I was at Pete's (over here they pronounce Pieter as Peter, Jorgen they can't say, they call him by his other given name Martin, Marius they call Morris) all the bachelors in the area (they are single farmers who cook their own food) invited themselves, just because they had heard that Pete's fiancée had arrived. There were 10 men in all with my own "boys", was that not terrible? But that is customary here. Fiancee.

I wish I hadn't got that new underwear with me, over here they all wear rather thin underwear, flannel they use much for shifts and then they have 2-3 of each kind. They wash every week, each Monday or Wednesday, on Tuesday they iron; to darn stockings or to mend something is not thought of, they wear it as long as it will hang on the body and then they buy new things. Hats and dresses are the same fashions as at home but people never polish their shoes and wear them till they are completely ruined.

It is quite warm in the daytime, I sit and sweat over this, but as soon as the sun is down it is cool. In the night it is often so cold in the summer as it can stand to be and not be freezing.

I think now I have said the most important things. If there still is something you want to know you will have to ask me. I was terribly sick a week ago, I had cooked apricots in a kettle, or rather in a casserole, for iron kettles are non-existent, where the enamel was chipped and I was feeling bad from Thursday noon till Friday noon, but there I was hoping to go to a dance. A neighbour lady gave me some fruit salts or something like that and I threw everything up as fast as I got it in me, then she gave me some port wine, then milk but nothing helped. Finally I got her to give me some water with lemon slices in it. That helped. But no Dane's stomach can stand up to the food they have here.

I shall just tell you how they eat. In the morning they have oatmeal porridge and meat and potatoes and coffee or tea and layer cake and another kind of cake and jam. Soup of any kind they never have or gruel. At noon they have meat and potatoes with no sauce and the meat is first sliced and browned in a pan, onion they use raw along with it, 3 or 4 kinds of jam and jelly, prunes or apples or apricots or plums, coffee or tea with pickles and at last something they call "pie" which resembles a prune tart. For coffee either layer or other cake if one doesn't care for crackers. In the evening meat and bread, coffee or tea, cookies or cake. And all these different things they eat and drink at the same time. But God how I laughed when I saw Martin eat meat,

potatoes, green peas, cake at once, the wash the last mouthful of pickles down with coffee. Maybe you think I am lying but you can come over sometime and see for yourself.

Marius has no job and has had none since he came over and if he wasn't ashamed to then would write to the old folks for money to go home again. The last 3 or 4 years have been unlucky harvest years all over America. Even if we get a good harvest the next year, there won't be much chance to earn much money for luxuries for a couple of years. Men can't get free land anymore and it is the only thing one can find to earn some shillings in about 3 years but though it is held in grudging esteem at home a man is glad to get work on the railway, where if it is held in less esteem here but it does pay fairly well and many ordinary people work at it. (that's for Henry). Pete and Martin had decided that they would return to the old country as they call it, in the winter and see if they can find a wife to bring back. They had written to the agent but luckily had not sent the letter before the hail came and even if Martin's crop came to no harm he would not go without Pete. Now a week ago he got a letter from a girl he had kept company with in Sjaelland inviting him to come home and take her back here. If I won't have him it could happen that he actually will go home and marry her.

20 August 1910

I have received a splendid glowing letter from Martin. His wheat is unharmed and had no hail so he will make much money this year (should I take him?)

I sent the rough copy of my travel letter along with this. The travel letter is intended mostly for Henry. If you meet the Jensens out in Gronnegade will you please tell Mrs. Jensen how I am getting along. The rough copy do not show to anyone else, but you can read it yourselves first as I don't feel like copying it off. A person gets terribly lazy in this climate and so it is a good thing that women only get paid half as much for work as they do at home. But newcomers should beware of Danes because they take advantage of their hired girls and men just as they are accustomed to at home.

Well, I must stop as it is near suppertime and I am also half melted from the heat. I also have to begin sewing a new cotton dress for myself. Pete gave me the cloth for one when he thought he could afford to be generous. I want to take advantage of the chance to have Mrs. Riis, her name is Mary too, cut it out and then I can sew it up on her treadle machine. I will, of course, be writing to Ricard, I have his address, it is Aalborg P.O. Do you really think he means anything by that? I don't really think so, he is apparently quite a put-on (actor) and half hysterical at times. I've told him that often. But don't tell him I said that, I could be mistaken. I gave his ring to that dear sweet 7 steward which I have written to Stensa about, but there is none, you know.

Say hello especially to the sisters and the Pastor and tell them that Canada is so Catholic that even in a small place like Castor they had a dedication of a new church on Sunday and it was bigger than the chapel at home. There is a church in Stettler and one in Red Deer. Even out in the country where Pete lived, where there even is no town and where there usually is miles between homes, there is a cabin where Mass is read each 14 days or 3 weeks. There are so many French here that it is like that all over here in Alberta.

Greeting to Stensa. She can prepare herself to come over here next spring if all goes well. But she does not have to go out and learn housekeeping or anything like that. The only thing she lacks would be tailoring and over here they get everything ready-made delivered right to the door, just as nice as if one had made it oneself.

You will no doubt write me in time for my birthday. I had my photograph taken in my buggy the first Sunday I was in Notre Dame. I don't know how long it will be before I get the pictures but I will send you some as soon as I get some. I wish I could ride as well as I can drive (horses) but when I try this you will probably hear that I have broken my neck because they are really strong as I have found when I hold the reins myself. I wish I had brought my bicycle. The roads are excellent here, a person can go miles without seeing a stone and without a hill. Martin would gladly provide me with a horse, but I would have to buy feed and that takes money which the bicycle does not.

Now – finished – now no more, etc. Greet Charles and tell him he should be first over here to see how the cowboys tussle with the wild horses, every time I see something like that I wish you were here, Charles. Now if you have it as well as I, then I can't wish you anything better.

Mary

Greet Valdemar and Henry and Anne and John and Dagny.

I went to confession in Esljerg. I forgot to write this but you have of course thought of this long before now.

20 August 1910

The day after I had written all this a man came who wanted me for hired girl. His wife is going to have a baby. It is the fifth and I am to have \$12 a month to start. Very likely this would be O.K. for now, but I have word from some wealthy farmer folk, 8-10 miles from here, about a position for winter. I can maybe not get such high pay, but I will live well. They are older folk who have just one son, about 20, at home. Probably I will look into this for winter. My address meanwhile is

Miss Mary Lund
Blackfalds, Alberta
Canada, America

There are no postmen here. You go for your own mail, so only the town name is important. I have sewn myself a cotton dress and 3 large aprons in the last two days.