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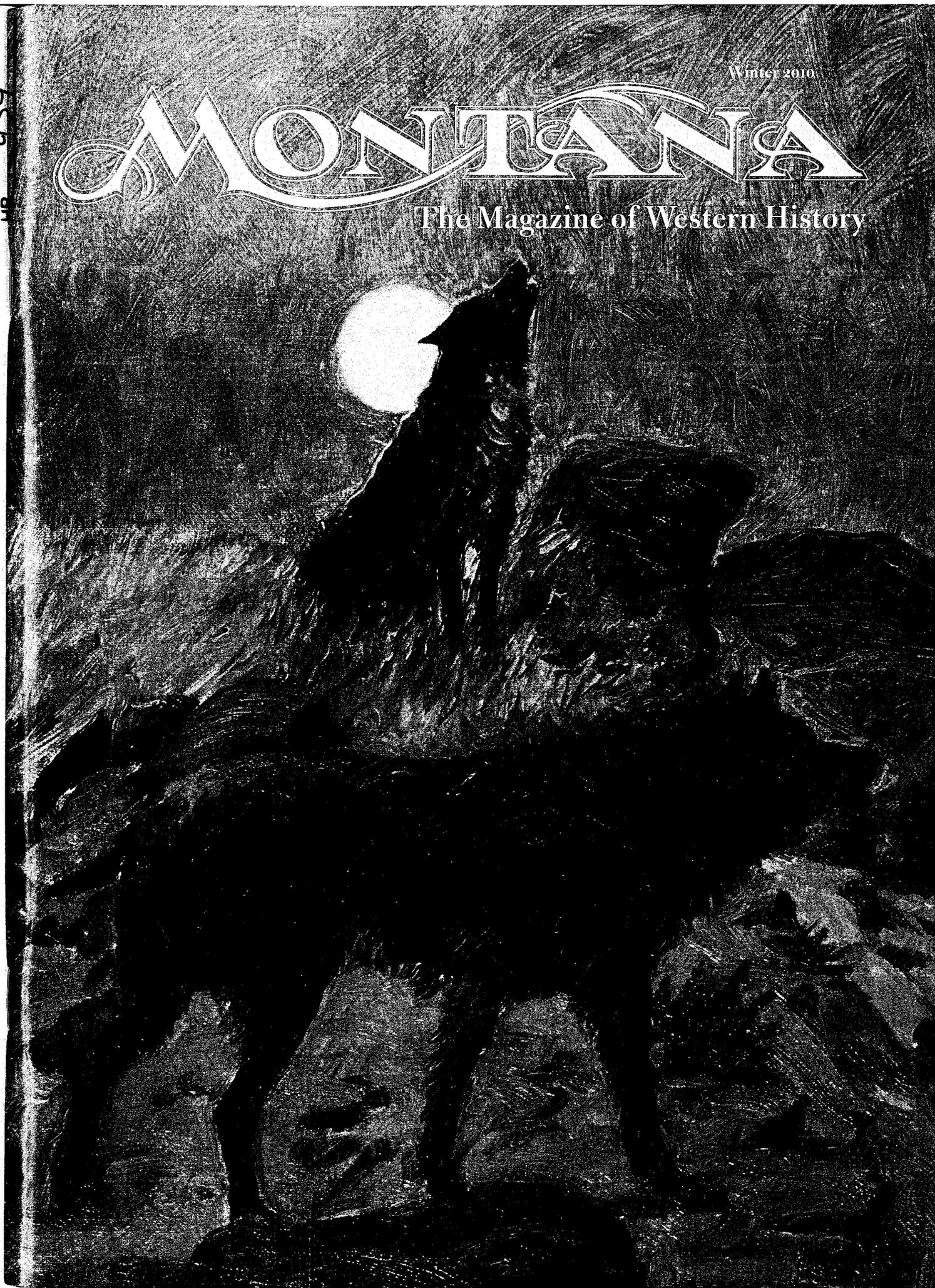
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The Magazine of Western History



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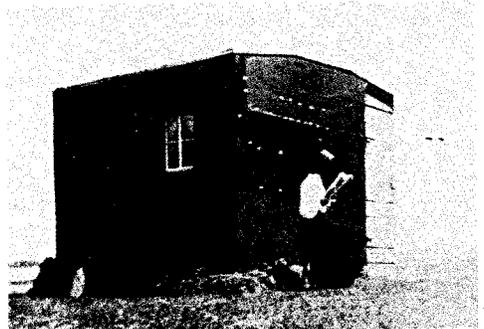
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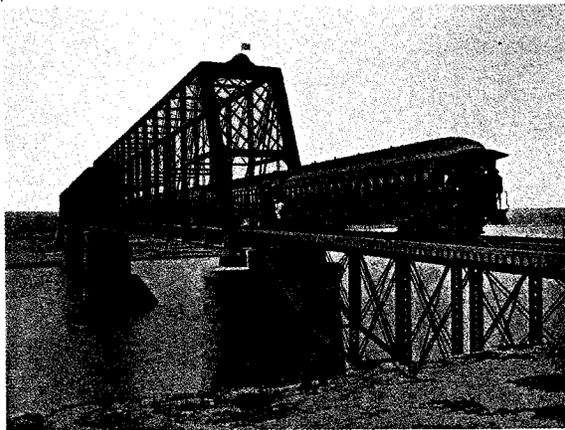
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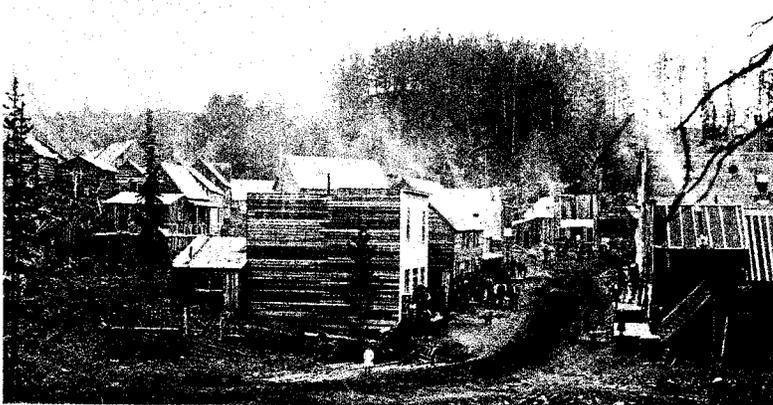
ON THE COVER On the front cover is *The Call*, by William Gollings (1910, oil on canvas, 14½" x 10½", courtesy JKM Collection®, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, Wyoming). Though Gollings was born in Idaho in 1878, his family moved frequently around the country. As a young man, he returned west to become a cowboy in what he referred to as the "vanishing west." Gollings found employment herding sheep, working cattle, and performing odd jobs in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Montana. At age twenty-five, heeding his love of art and wanting to portray a quickly disappearing way of life, he began painting and attended the Art Institute of Chicago. Later he established a studio in Sheridan, Wyoming, and focused on western and wildlife subjects. Gollings also studied with western artists Edward Borein, W. H. D. Koerner, Joseph Sharp, and Charles M. Russell, with Sharp and Russell having the greatest influence on his art. He signed his work with his last name, followed by a unique pony track insignia. Gollings died in 1932.

Montana's yearlong commemoration of Glacier National Park's 2010 centennial continues with John Fery's *Iceberg Lake, Glacier National Park* on the back cover (circa 1911-14, oil on canvas, 41" x 65¼", John Reddy, photographer, gift of the Anaconda Company, Montana Historical Society Museum, 1984.72.02). The Great Northern Railroad hired Fery and other artists to produce artworks displayed in depots and buildings across the nation to promote travel on the Great Northern. By 1914, Fery alone had painted some 350 paintings of Glacier Park. Although the Great Northern employed Fery again in 1914-15 and 1925-29, no record survives of the total number of park views he produced.

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Mina Westbye

- X Norwegian Immigrant
- X North Dakota Homesteader
- X Studio Photographer
- X "New Woman"



Mina Westbye, photographer, courtesy Glenn Durban

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed Americans and immigrants who declared their intent to become citizens the opportunity to lay claim to land in the public domain. In 1903, Mina Westbye and her cousins Marie and Olive Jensen were among the earliest homesteaders in what is now Divide County in northwestern North Dakota. Westbye and (presumably) one of the Jensen sisters pose outside Westbye's homestead shack circa 1904 in what Mina called the "wild west."

by Lori Ann Lahlum

In December 1904, Mina Westbye wrote to her future husband, Alfred Gundersen, that she “[c]ame to Mpls. from the wild west yesterday.”¹ A young, single Norwegian immigrant, Westbye and two American-born cousins, Olive and Marie Jensen, homesteaded on adjoining sections of windswept, gently rolling grasslands in present-day Divide County, North Dakota, southeast of Crosby.² Westbye, however, had not taken out her land in pursuit of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal of becoming a farmer. Like many other single women homesteaders (including the Jensen sisters), Westbye planned to sell her claim to provide capital for other pursuits. In many ways, Westbye was a part-time homesteader since well-developed rail lines facilitated her frequent movement between northwestern North Dakota and Minneapolis. Despite being one of the earliest homesteaders in the region, her story is largely forgotten because she did not stay on the land.

Mina Westbye, homesteader and Norwegian immigrant, embodies the spirit of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New Woman, characterized by Sylvia Hoffert as “single, well-educated, independent, self-sufficient, and strong-willed.”³ Between 1900 and 1908, the period when Westbye first lived in the United States, she resided much of the time in Minneapolis, where she earned her living as a domestic or a seamstress. An intelligent woman, Westbye quickly mastered English and read broadly. Indeed, she carried on botanical, theological, and sociological conversations with Gundersen in their correspondence. And Westbye took opportunities to enhance her economic well-being, whether by choosing to emigrate, claiming homestead land, or, later, by operating a photography studio in the Norwegian American community of Hanska, Minnesota. Westbye’s example is particularly interesting because historians have addressed single, women homesteaders as New Women but not typically through the lens of immigration.⁴ Moreover, most scholars situate the New Woman in urban areas.⁵

Westbye’s life not only illuminates this New Woman in the countryside, it also points to the New Woman in Norwegian American communities.⁶

Born in 1879, in Trysil, Norway, a mountainous, forested region near the Swedish border, Mina Westbye grew up in a family with seven siblings. Her father, Peder O. Westbye, emigrated in 1888 and left behind his family, including infant twins. He worked as a surveyor in Yellow Medicine County, Minnesota, and later settled in Minneapolis, where he worked as a map-maker. After Peder relocated to America, Mina’s mother, Anne Karine Olsdatter Brevig, took in boarders to help make ends meet. In Norway, adolescents typically entered adulthood when confirmed in the Lutheran Church (the state church) at fourteen or fifteen; Mina Westbye was confirmed in 1893 at the age of fourteen.⁷

During his absence, Peder Westbye kept in contact with his family, and from the mid-1890s he tried to get an elder daughter to emigrate and keep house for him. Women often kept house for single male relatives in the period, and it was one way for Norwegian women to secure passage to the United States. In 1900, twenty-one-year-old Mina Westbye,



Courtesy Glenn Durban

A venturesome young woman, Westbye (right, circa 1900) emigrated to Minneapolis, Minnesota. There she lived with conservative Lutheran relatives and worked as a domestic and a dressmaker or seamstress.



Library of Congress, LC-D4-10855 R

In Minneapolis (above, circa 1900), Westbye joined the Norwegian Unitarian church and became friends with Unitarian minister Amandus Norman and his wife, Corinne. The Norman family would play an important role in Westbye's life in the next few years.

who, according to her son-in-law, Glenn Durban, was the more “adventurous daughter,” decided to emigrate, making her part of a large migration of single people from Norway. These labor migrants often emigrated to cities; Westbye settled in Minneapolis, although she did not live with her father, with whom she had a somewhat strained relationship. Instead, Westbye resided with her aunt, Petronella Jensen (her mother’s sister), and uncle, Erik Jensen, and their five children, Julius Theodore (b. 1871), Olive (b. 1872), Marie (b. 1876), Anna (b. 1882), and Ingeborg (b. 1884). When Westbye arrived in Minneapolis, her cousin Olive worked as a dressmaker and Marie attended school. Reverend Erik Jensen was a conservative, “orthodox” minister, according to Westbye, who adhered to the teachings of the Norwegian Synod of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. Westbye did not hold Reverend Jensen’s religious beliefs.⁸

Like many other young immigrant women, and especially Norwegian immigrant women, Westbye

worked as a domestic and a seamstress or dressmaker in Minneapolis. In spite of living with her conservative Lutheran relatives, Westbye became involved with the Norwegian Unitarian church in the city, the Nazareth Church.⁹ The relationship she developed with the minister, Amandus Norman, and his wife, Corrine, became an important facet of her life in America.

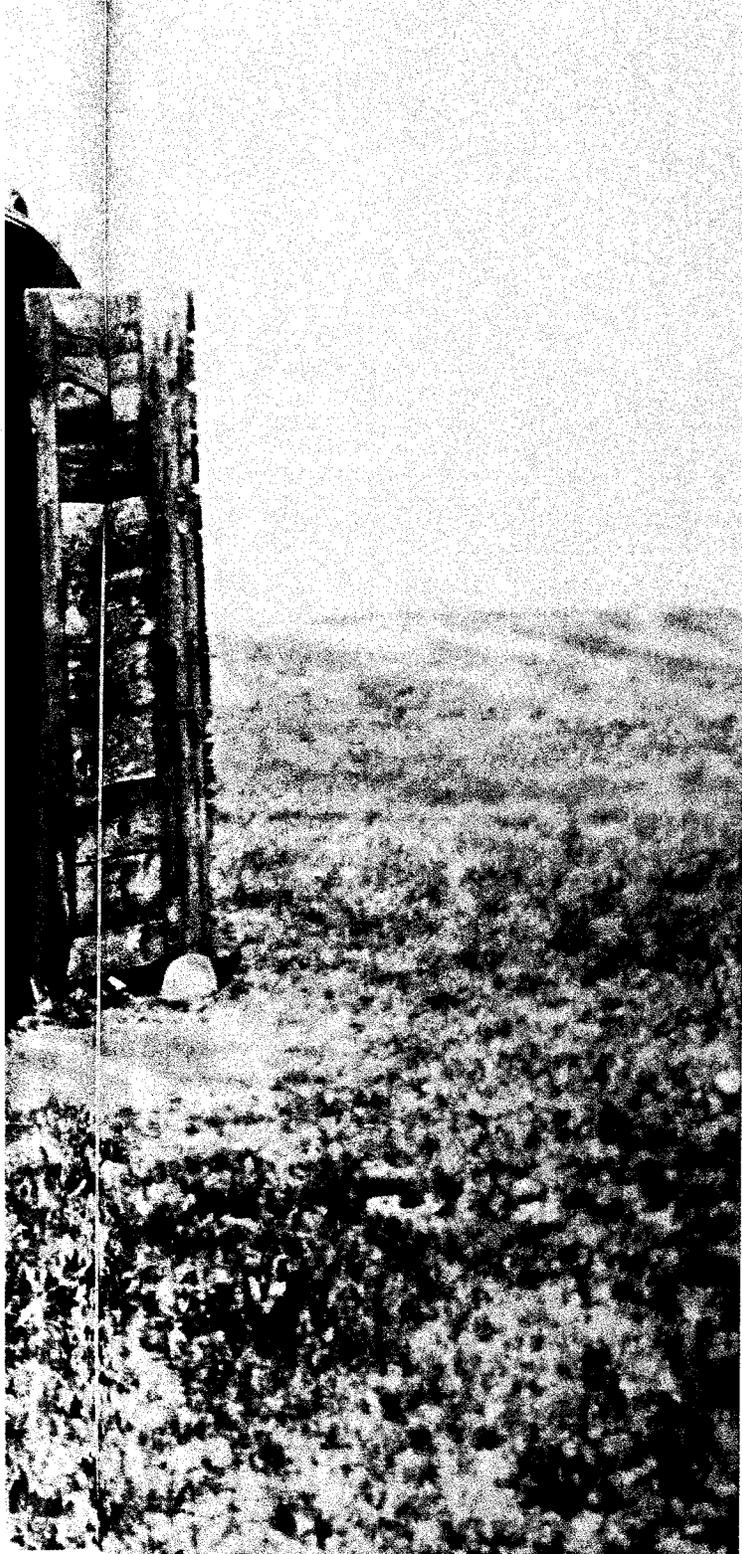
At some point while living in Minneapolis, Westbye and Marie and Olive Jensen decided to lay claim to land in northwestern North Dakota. This decision may have been made shortly before the young women set off for “the wild west.” In late August of 1903, Westbye filed her first naturalization papers, which was a necessary step before an immigrant could claim land under the Homestead Act. Later that day or early the next, Westbye and the Jensen sisters boarded a train headed for Minot, North Dakota. On August 27, 1903, all three women claimed land in Blooming Valley Township, Williams County (now Divide County).¹⁰ Westbye and the Jensen sisters were among the earliest settlers to take out homesteads in the region, yet



they (and others) are not listed as early settlers in the county history because compilers used the 1915 atlas plat map of landowners to construct the list.¹¹

The Homestead Act of 1862 allowed Americans and those who declared their intent to become citizens the opportunity to lay claim to land in the public domain. Men and women who met the require-

ment of twenty-one years of age and served as head of family could take out 160 acres of land for a filing fee of ten dollars (later fourteen dollars). Although this legislation excluded most married women, single women and widows could claim land. After living on the claim for five years and making improvements, the homesteader could “prove up” and receive title



Mina Westbye, photographer, courtesy Glenn Durban

Because the Homestead Act treated single women the same as men, the legislation challenged gender hierarchies, providing women, including immigrant women like Westbye, the opportunity to become landowners. Women homesteaders in northwestern North Dakota took land for a variety of reasons, although they fall into two general categories: those who intended to farm and “investment homesteaders,” who filed claims with the intention of selling the land once they had proved up. In this view, Westbye and one of her cousins enjoy coffee on the prairie circa 1904.

northern plains. Because single women were treated equally with men under the Homestead Act, the legislation ultimately challenged gender hierarchies by providing women, including immigrant women, the opportunity to benefit economically from the ownership of land.¹²

The Homestead Act also pushed the frontier westward. In the 1860s, Minnesota led the nation in the number of homestead entries filed. Twenty years later, during the “Great Dakota Land Boom” of the 1880s, settlers flocked to the territory; in 1883, Dakota Territory accounted for nearly 40 percent of all homestead claims in the United States, with more than 11 million acres taken. Congress created North and South Dakota in 1889, and by the early 1900s more settlers had moved to the Dakotas and eastern Montana. Because so many first-, second-, and third-generation Norwegian Americans took part in the process, the end result was the creation of Norwegian American communities across the northern Great Plains.

Like Westbye and her cousins, some of these early homesteaders were women. In fact, North Dakota had a relatively high rate of women homesteaders, especially in the early twentieth century. The percentage of women claiming land in North Dakota varied by time and location, but typically it was between 5 and 18 percent, with a small number of locales reaching 30 percent. Divide County (the northern portion of Williams County in 1903) appeared on the high end. In H. Elaine Lindgren’s sampling for Divide County, women constituted between 17 and 18 percent of homesteaders.¹³ In her larger study of women homesteaders in North Dakota, Lindgren found that 24 percent of the women had been born in Norway and another 22 percent were the daughters

1 (patent) to the land after paying a title fee. Later, a
5 person had the option of acquiring title to a home-
1 stead after six months of residency by commuting
3 (purchasing) it for \$1.25 per acre. The dream of “free
1 land” provided by the Homestead Act, combined
5 with railroad, territorial, and state promotions,
3 brought hundreds of thousands of people to the

of immigrants.¹⁴ In Blooming Valley Township, where Westbye and the Jensen sisters claimed land, women accounted for 27 percent of all claimants who acquired title to their land. Additionally, the township's population was decidedly Norwegian American.¹⁵ By homesteading, Westbye and other immigrant women participated in an American process and had direct contact with American governmental institutions, but because so many settled in the same area, they often lived in communities in which language and cultural practices from Norway flourished. The interplay among Norwegian language and traditions and American society and institutions (including schools and the English language) created distinctive Norwegian American communities.

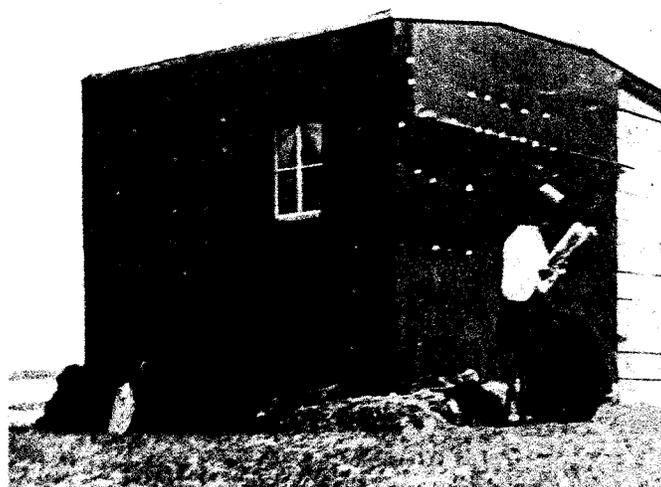
Although these Norwegian immigrant and Norwegian American women homesteaders took land for a variety of reasons, they fall into two general categories: those who acquired land for agricultural purposes (whether to farm it themselves, add it to the family's holdings, rent it to a farmer, or join it with a spouse's property) and those who filed a claim with the intention of selling the land once they proved up.¹⁶ Historian Dee Garceau refers to these latter women as "investment homesteaders." For them, acquiring title to the land became important because they could sell the land to generate income. For women like Mina Westbye, "economic independence" came when they found a buyer for their land—not from making the land agriculturally productive.¹⁷

Marie Jensen, Olive Jensen, and Mina Westbye claimed land on adjoining sections (14, 15, and 22) at the Minot land office in August of 1903. After filing the claim, they traveled to Blooming Valley Township and began the

process of meeting the legal requirements to acquire title, such as erecting a dwelling and living on the land for a portion of the year. Westbye appears to have stayed in the area until early December, when she returned to Minneapolis to "[earn] a living." She resided there until mid-March 1904, when she returned to her claim. That autumn, after meeting the six-month residency requirement, Westbye filled out the paperwork for final proof, which would give her title to the land, and ran her notice of final proof in the *Crosby Review*. Also in the fall of 1904, Westbye began corresponding with Alfred Gundersen, whom she most likely met through the Unitarian Church in Minneapolis. These letters provided Westbye and Gundersen, a Norwegian immigrant and graduate of Stanford University, with the opportunity to get to know each other. At least some of the letters have been preserved, and they richly document Westbye's homesteading experience.¹⁸

During the months they lived in Blooming Valley Township, Westbye and the Jensen sisters made homes and began transforming the prairie into agricultural cropland, or "improving" the land, under provisions of the Homestead Act. Marie and Olive Jensen set up shanties in close proximity to each other, but Westbye's claim shack, or "villa," as she once described it, lay a bit farther away from her cousins' dwellings, though still close enough for frequent visits. No shade trees stood on Westbye's claim. According to homestead records, a frame house "painted on the outside and papered inside, car shaped roof, door and window, and very nicely

Homestead records describe Westbye's frame house (right, circa 1904) as "painted on the outside and papered inside, car shaped roof, door and window, and very nicely furnished inside." When Westbye described her "claim shanty," she indicated that it was tarpapered to keep out the elements, which kept the home "cozy." She put in ten acres of wheat and flax, grew a garden, and had a well on her claim.



Mina Westbye, photographer, courtesy Glenn Durban

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When posing for the homestead photographs, Westbye and the Jensen sisters revealed typical middle-class conventions: wearing proper clothing, doing embroidery, having coffee, wearing sunbonnets to protect their faces from the sun, writing letters, reading, picking flowers, having curtains on the windows, and using table linens. Yet, at the same time, their homesteading challenged conventional roles. Here, Westbye is on the right. The two homestead shacks in the distance are presumed to be those of the Jensen sisters.



Mina Westbye, photographer, courtesy Glenn Durban

furnished inside” stood on her land. When Westbye described her “claim shanty,” however, she indicated that it was tar-papered to keep out the elements, which kept the home “cozy.” The claim had ten acres of wheat and flax, a garden, and a well in 1905. Westbye most likely hired the sod breaking done in 1904, and in 1905 she hired neighbor Adolph Holte (a Norwegian American from Minnesota) to seed the acreage in flax, a particularly good crop for newly broken ground. In the summer of 1905, Westbye began work on a cellar and discussed the possibility of “building a sod house next to [her] shanty,” which suggests that she at least briefly considered staying in North Dakota beyond her acquisition of the land.¹⁹ On the claim, Westbye read voraciously and visited her cousins and neighbors. She gardened, and in addition to the half-acre vegetable garden, she had a small flower garden that she tended with care. In Norway, farms have permanent place names, and many immigrants continued this tradition in the United States. Westbye embraced this custom and called her “farm,” as she referred to her claim, “Trysil,” after her home community in Norway.²⁰

Mina Westbye was also an amateur photographer, and she documented her homesteading experience with exquisite photographs, most likely taken in 1904. Six of these photographs are in the family’s collection; four, donated by Westbye’s daughter, Sylvia Durban, can be found at the Norwegian Emigrant Museum in Ottestad.²¹ As geographer Christina Dando has noted: “By taking and keeping photographs of this

process [homemaking on the Great Plains], the photographers are claiming as their own this landscape and acknowledging their roles as creators and shapers of landscape.” Moreover, these “Plains settlers would attempt to capture the new landscape as it appeared to them.”²²

In photographs, Westbye positioned herself right in the center of the landscape and documented her role in the homesteading process. In many ways, her images point to the domestication of the northern plains landscape and reflect the creation of a female and domestic space.²³ The photographs also exude middle-class proscriptions on the proper roles for women and reflect how Westbye and the Jensen sisters wanted to be portrayed: wearing proper clothing, doing embroidery, having coffee outdoors while wearing sunbonnets to protect their faces from the sun, writing letters, reading, picking flowers, hanging curtains on the windows, and using table linens. Yet, at the same time, the images challenge those proscriptions because Westbye and her cousins independently took land and participated in a largely male activity of claiming land for themselves.

The vast expanse of grasslands stood in stark contrast to the mountainous, forested region where Westbye grew up. Westbye embraced this landscape and clearly articulated a romantic aesthetic of the northern plains; this land-view is evident in both photographs and in letters. She “often [found] herself out on the prairie,” and she wrote about the “wide prairies” and the beauty of nature, especially the wildflowers.

Despite the constantly blowing wind, Westbye saw beauty in the gloriously sunny days and the clear, starry nights. The stunning photographs belie the fact that the North Dakota plains could challenge Euro-American settlers' landscape sensibility.²⁴

Like most Norwegian immigrant women, Westbye also viewed the land in terms of its agricultural potential. In a 1905 letter, for example, she described the "rolling prairie" in Divide County as "extra good farmland," and that transformation of the prairie to an agrarian landscape is visible in the background of some of her photographs. She also described herself as "happy" on the prairie, but gendered assumptions of who could farm influenced how she viewed her opportunities. At one point, she wistfully wrote: "I am certain that if I had been a man I would have been a farmer."²⁵ Other Norwegian immigrant women, however, saw themselves as farmers. For example, Anna Guttormsen homesteaded near Malta, Montana, in 1916 and actively worked the land, though she, too, spent winters in town working.²⁶

Although there is a clear sense of open space and distance in the letters and photographs (Westbye wrote that she was often "alone" and lacked neighbors), Blooming Valley Township actually became populated quite quickly. Because she was such an early homesteader, she traversed some distance in the course of her daily life. Not owning a horse, she initially had to walk sixteen miles to the closest post office and "store," and she made a ten-mile trek round-trip to get milk. She walked half a mile over uneven prairie land to haul water from her well. With pluck, Westbye wrote that she "walked 5 miles daily in addition to working in the garden, so got enough exercise."²⁷

Although she noted that she went "for days without seeing another person," Westbye's letters indicate she recognized that the area was, in fact, dotted with claim shacks, sod houses, and farmhouses. During the time Westbye lived on her claim, the sections close to her had also been homesteaded. When it came time for Westbye and Olive Jensen to prove up on their claims, they served as witnesses for each other, which was common; many of their other witnesses lived in close proximity to the women. By this time, Norwegian Americans in the area had established two Lutheran churches (one Synod and one Haugean) and hosted social events. While it is unlikely West-

bye attended Lutheran church services, she may have attended some of the literary and debate society meetings, parties, and dances.²⁸

Westbye's "wild west" was also not really very "wild." Historian Carlos Schwantes explains that the "railroads took the 'wild' out of West" because they linked the region with the rest of the country. In North Dakota, the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railroad, better known as the Soo Line, extended to Portal, along the Canadian border, when Westbye arrived in the region.²⁹ The Soo Line brought settlers and supplies to northwestern North Dakota, and it shortened the distance between the area and more settled regions to the east. In fact, the railroad lay some thirty-five miles from Westbye's claim and became central to her story. Like many women who homesteaded, Mina Westbye had a job off the homestead—in Minneapolis. The railroad allowed her to live in Minneapolis and "civilization" for a portion of year. Westbye's work (as a seamstress or dressmaker and domestic) during the periods she spent away from her homestead also points to the fact that single women homesteaders often had nonagricultural jobs, although perhaps not many worked such a distance from their claim.³⁰

During her time in Minneapolis in 1905, Westbye lived with Unitarian minister Amandus Norman, his wife, and their foster son. It seems likely that she assisted Corrine Norman in the house in addition to her work as a seamstress.³¹ She needed to "earn a living" because she had to support herself and, in part, because she paid to have the land broken, the flax planted, and the well dug. How much of the money Westbye earned went toward the costs associated with homesteading is not clear since it appears that Westbye borrowed money to pay for these costs with the intention of selling the homestead and using those proceeds to pay off her debt.³²

Westbye made her final proof in November 1904, but the General Land Office halted the process to investigate whether she was indeed an actual settler. Olive Jensen, who made her final proof at the same time as Westbye, also had her application stopped pending an investigation. With the patent not forthcoming, Jensen first contacted the Land Office in October 1905 to inquire why the process was taking so long. Jensen also did not understand why there was "so much trouble about [her] proof especially