

First Farm in the Valley:
Anna's Story

By Anne Pellowski



Illustrated by Roseanne Sharpe

BETHLEHEM BOOKS • IGNATIUS PRESS
Bathgate San Francisco

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the following for their assistance:

Trempealeau County Courthouse Officers and Staff; the Wisconsin State Historical Library; Rev. Edward Stanek, Sacred Heart Church, Pine Creek; Marie Marazzi and staff of the Genealogical Library, New York Branch; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; Marie Dorsch, Winona County Historical Society; Winona Public Library.



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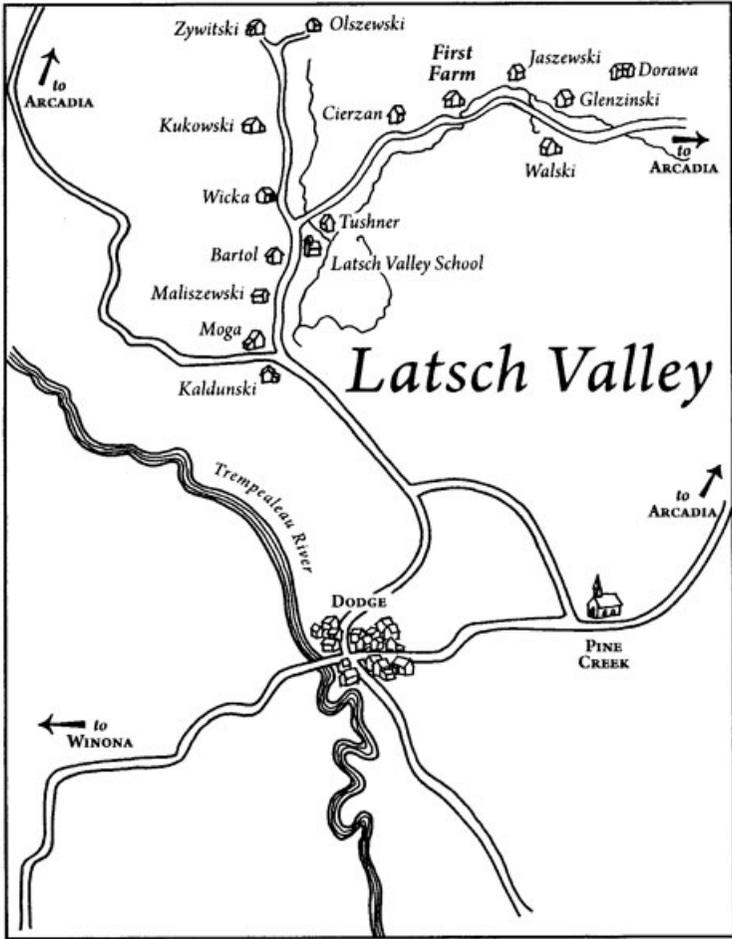
189 pages in the print book edition

First Bethlehem Books printing October, 2008

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

Illustrations © 2008 Roseanne Sharpe
Cover art © 2008 Teri Weidner
Cover design by Theodore Shluenderfritz

*To Victor Pellowski, son of Barney,
and to
Anne Farrell Lipinski, granddaughter of Anna,
with gratitude.*



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1. Anna's Family

ANNA WAS an American, although she did not know it. She was born in Wisconsin, but her family spoke Polish, as did most of the families that lived around her, so she thought of herself as Polish, even though she knew Poland was far, far away.

The valley she lived in was long and winding because the road followed a meandering creek that wove in and out along the edges of the low hills and ravines. Far back in the valley, at a spot where the road and creek turned sharply right, was the farm where Anna's parents had their homestead.

In spring or early summer the road was knee-deep with mud, because the rain and melting snow came rushing down from the hills, settling in low pockets and ruts. Eventually, the water drained off into the creek, or dried in the hot summer sunshine, but for a few months it stayed in the road bed, turning the dirt there into an oozing, squelchy strip of mud.

Father did not like it, because the horses and oxen could hardly pull the wagon or plow through the deep mud. Mother complained because it spattered and splashed on everyone's clothes, making extra work with her washing. But Anna loved it because in the warm days of

spring she was allowed to go barefoot again, and one of the first things she did was to go stomping and marching in the slippery, slidy, muddy road. She tried to hold up her skirts so they would not get splashed, but no matter how high she held them, she usually ended up with muddy spots and blotches along the hems of her dress and petticoats.

“Why must you always go fooling around in that mud?” asked Mother crossly.

Anna hung her head in shame. She didn’t want to make extra work for Mother, but she couldn’t stay away from the mud.

One morning, as she was helping Mother mold the butter that had just been churned, she tried to explain.

“That’s why I like it. It’s like butter between my toes.”

“What is?” Mother looked completely bewildered.

“The mud. It makes my feet and toes feel just like this.” With her fist Anna squeezed the lumps of butter to get out all the buttermilk, and it squished and squirted so satisfyingly that even Mother had to agree, with a laugh, that it felt good.

In summer the hot sun dried the mud, and the turning of heavy wagon wheels and trodding of many oxen and horses’ hoofs crushed it into a soft, pale gray powder. Then, walking on the shady parts of the road felt cool and soothing to Anna’s bare feet, but when she was forced to pass over the places where the sun beat down all day, she hopped and skipped as fast as she could because the sandy, powdery dirt stung and pinched as it touched the tender skin around her toes.

Pauline and Mary, Anna’s two older sisters, did not like going barefoot any more.

“It’s babyish,” said Mary. She was only nine but considered herself a young lady. Pauline was a year younger and copied everything Mary did.

“All the same, you have to put your shoes aside,” insisted Mother. “I don’t want you wearing them out. I’m hoping you can both start school next winter, and we can’t be buying you new shoes before then. The ones you have must last for another year.”

Anna’s brothers did not argue about going barefoot. One by one, they shucked off their shoes the moment Mother said it was safe: first, Julian, the baby, who was just learning to walk; then Anton, who was almost four and liked the mud as much as Anna; then seven-year-old Barney; and Franciszek, who at twelve was growing so fast his feet were always too big for his shoes. Even

Jacob, who was sixteen and already taller than Father, liked to leave his heavy hobnailed boots by the door and wiggle his toes in freedom as he trudged through the fields or worked in the barn.

In the high bank of the creek, where it made the sharp curve right, was the mouth of a spring. Throughout the year there was a steady flow of cool, sparkly water trickling down from the small hole. In the deep shadows it looked like a silvery snake coming out of its den. When the snow melted, the snaky trickle became a torrent, carrying everything with it, and filling the creek bed with its angry foam.

“Stay away from the creek for a few days,” Father warned the children when it was dangerous.

Above the spring and a little to the side was the old sod house. In winter, Father housed the pigs there to keep them snug and warm. But in summer it stood empty, and sometimes Anna and Pauline played there. It was always cool and they felt it was a nice, secret place to play pretend games.

“Did you really, truly live there?” Anna asked Mother one day. She could hardly imagine Father stooping down to fit in that small, low space.

“We did,” Mother assured her. “All by ourselves, the first year: your father, Jacob and I. There wasn’t another soul in the whole valley. Then Franciszek was born, and we had a good wheat crop, and your Father earned some money in the lumber mills, so we could put up this house. First we built the front part, and after Pauline was born, we added on the back.” Mother looked proudly around her, and Anna followed her glance.

“It is a nice house,” said Anna. “Just right for us.”

In the long front room was the kitchen, with the stove, a table and benches where they ate, and two rocking chairs with a small table in between, where Mother and Father sat in the evenings. Behind the long room were two bedrooms: one for her parents and one where she and her sisters slept. The boys all slept in the attic overhead, except for Julian. He still slept with Mother and Father.

“I don’t see where there’s room for anyone else,” Anna said to herself one day in August when they heard some surprising news.

All spring and summer that year Father had talked about his sister, Bridget. He had sent money so she could take the ship from Poland to America. Now, word had come that she had arrived in