

(Un)Document(ing)

MORGAN GRAYCE WILLOW

~ I ~

Northwest Quarter of Section 11, Township 97 North, Range 15 West of the 5th P.M.

My cousin owns this Iowa property today, except for the acreage where the farmstead stands. She rents the fields to a Mennonite family who live there and farm the fields. Before her, my parents owned this land. Before that, Mabel and P. H. Paulsen owned it. Before that, during the Great Depression, a succession of banks and insurance companies owned it. Before that, my great-uncle Alfred Kleckner and his wife, Rose, owned it. Before them, my great-grandfather Mathias Kleckner and his wife, Mary Ann, owned it. Before them, Lillie B. and J. T. Ayers owned it. Before them, A. Rex owned it. Before that, Willard and Emma Smith Woodward Farnham owned it. Before them, Edmund and Emma Smith Woodward owned it. Before that, it had been granted to Nancy Bruce, widow of Le Roy Bruce, as bounty for his service, and death, in the War of 1812. The records do not show whether she ever lived on the quarter section. Before all of them, it was in the Iowa Neutral Ground established by treaty in 1830. Before that treaty, Thomas

Jefferson bought it as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Before Jefferson, the French government owned it. Before that, and during the Seven Years' War (aka the French and Indian War), France transferred ownership to Spain to keep it out of the hands of the British. Before the Spaniards, Joliet and Marquette claimed it in 1673 for the French crown. Before any of them, and for thousands and thousands of years, woodland and plains peoples lived on, traveled, hunted, farmed, and drew their livelihood from the northwest quarter of section eleven, East Lincoln Township, Mitchell County.

~ II ~

Northwest Quarter of Section 11, Township 97 North, Range 15 West of the 5th P.M.

The land described by these parameters of the Rectangular Survey System (RSS) shows up on Google Earth tucked neatly into the intersection of Walnut Avenue and 3330th Street. A field is visible, through which a slough runs at a less than 45-degree angle from the very northwest corner all the way across the quarter section, angling toward the southeast. The slough branches before it reaches the eastern border of the property. Where the lower branch crosses the property line there is, I know from memory, a willow tree. Or at least there was.

When I lived on the farm, there were no street names, no avenues. Our address was simply Rural Route 1 (RR1), Orchard, Iowa. Now, using a Mitchell County geographic information site, I can zoom in and identify an address: 3275 Walnut Avenue. The shape and layout of the farmstead comes sharply into view on these satellite images. I compare them to a map I have of the farm, drawn in pencil from childhood memory. The house is in the same place. There's a new barn built on the foundation of the old one that blew down in a fierce storm. My cousin, who lived there at the time, claimed it was a tornado, though authorities from the weather service and the insurance company insisted it was straight-line winds. The double corncrib Dad built when we lived on the farm is still there. Many of the smaller outbuildings on my hand-drawn map are gone: the woodshed and chicken house, the Quonset-shaped brooder house, the granary and machine shed. Some have been replaced by aluminum and steel structures. Others are simply gone.

There's a grove of trees where I remember a grove of trees along the north edge of the homestead to block the north wind, although Google Earth now shows two more rows of standing pines. Some of the original pines may have been planted by my great-grandfather Mathias Kleckner. County histories and family lore report that he moved to the township in 1890. Documents show that he signed a bill of sale for section eleven on January 12, 1901, subject to a mortgage of \$2,800. Rural Free Delivery (RFD) was still in experimental stages in Iowa from 1895 to 1899. Mathias's address on the section would initially have been far less precise even than RR1.

~ III ~

The land goes back as far as the records can see. Yet the record can only see so far. The land goes back farther. Plat maps, section markers, range numbers, all these are a European imposition, concepts borrowed from navigation—longitude, latitude—imposed on land in the New World at the behest of Thomas Jefferson. To transform it from a network of living, breathing beings into a commodity, so it could be sold. Land was divided into township rectangles of thirty-six square miles, each then further subdivided into tracts of 640 acres, or one square mile. Each square mile was sold in quarters, or 160-acre plots, an amount deemed by law sufficient for supporting a homestead, i.e., a family farm. The minimum saleable parcel of land was forty acres.

I'm trying to make the lines on the map disappear, trying to erase Jefferson's grid lines from my soul. Trying to remove the "my" from my notion of the farm where I grew up, ownership from my concept of land. Yet that sentence feels like a betrayal, a betrayal of my father who farmed that land, of my great-grandfather who immigrated here, who purchased it, who made a new life for himself and his family. Who made a life, eventually, for me.

~ IV ~

I step onto the document trail for section eleven and discover that Mom and Dad moved us to section eleven in 1950, around the time I was six months old. My folks

were, in a sense, reclaiming “our” farm. By then it was already known as “the Rose Kleckner place.”

Dad’s mother—my Grandma Pauline—was born on section eleven on April 24, 1891. She was the fourth child of Mathias and Mary Ann Gilles Kleckner. The certificate of their marriage reveals that they were wed on February 16, 1886, in the village of New Haven, Mitchell County, Iowa. Mathias must have met Mary Ann through his younger sister Anna, who’d married a Gilles from New Haven. After their wedding, Mathias and Mary Ann set out for Spink County, Dakota Territory, where Mathias had already homesteaded. Their first three children—including Alfred, their oldest son who would one day marry Rose—were born on the Dakota homestead. When they moved to East Lincoln Township, Mitchell County, Iowa, in 1890—to the farm where I would later grow up—they were probably welcomed by an established family network. They were also moving onto richer soil, into more rainfall, and away from the constant Dakota wind that Mary Ann reportedly hated.

When Mathias died in 1909, at fifty-five, Alfred and Rose inherited the farm. The obituary from the *Mitchell County Press* of September 1, 1909, states only that Mathias died “after a short illness.” His daughter Tillie (Grandma Pauline’s sister) reported in a 1992 family history that he’d probably had diabetes. Mary Ann would remain on the farm for three years after his death before she moved to New Haven. Alfred and Rose would farm the home place until the early 1930s.

There were a series of ownership transfers during and after the Great Depression, but the community still considered section eleven Kleckner land. So when Mom and Dad moved us there, they were bringing us “home.”

~ V ~

I have a photograph of Mathias Kleckner. A formal studio portrait, the image is striking for its four parallel asymmetries: the parting of his dark hair just off center with a short wave dipping to his right, while to his left, the hairline backs squarely off his forehead; his strong brow ridge, which arches higher over his left eye than his right; his full mustache, which sweeps and arches into the light over

his right cheek and curls away into the shadow side of the portrait where he's turned slightly toward the left; his bow tie, neatly knotted just below his Adam's apple, the end on the right side that has slipped from its place behind the bow while the end on the right remains neatly tucked in back. He's wearing a crisp white shirt that was probably well starched before it was ironed. His suit jacket reflects enough light in this old photograph that it may have been gray- or tan-checked, certainly not black. His exposed right ear is fully formed, its shape reminding me of my dad's ears. My eyes keep traveling back to Mathias's eyes, his most dominant feature, peering, as they do, off toward his left from soft shadows cast by sharp brows. His gaze intensifies the tidy, yet uneven, cut of his hair. He does not smile above the mild indentation of his chin.

~ VI ~

It's 1862. I imagine the eight-year-old Mathias running—and probably working—among the hills, woods, and streams of a farm in the southwestern province of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. The area isn't yet a part of the Prussian Empire, though it soon will be. Otto von Bismarck has just become prime minister of Prussia. He is about to unify the various German principalities into the German Empire and become its first chancellor. In the New World, the War between the States is in full swing. The war between the United States and the Dakota people of Minnesota will happen in August of this year.

The boy Mathias would like to grow up to become a farmer, like his father. However, he is the sixth child and third son in a family of eight. Since he cannot inherit the family farm, ownership in his homeland is not possible. Complicating Mathias's dim prospects is Bismarck's policy of compulsory military service. About to usher Prussia through a series of three wars and, ultimately, elevate Kaiser Wilhelm to the title of German emperor, Bismarck needs a massive, highly disciplined army. Universal conscription will make this happen. All males will be required to serve three years in the standing army, plus two additional years in reserves. Even at the age of eight, Mathias must know that he will be drafted.

There is a further complication: Mathias and his family are Catholic. When

Bismarck institutes his Kulturkampf policies, Catholic families will be directly targeted. Because of its push for greater democracy early in the reign of Emperor Wilhelm, the Catholic Center Party will be suppressed in laws passed by Bismarck beginning in 1871. Thus the rhetoric of recruiters from aid societies and US railroad companies would have been appealing to Mathias. When he becomes twenty-one, Mathias will leave for the United States. It will be 1875. The Indian Wars will be in full swing as he arrives. In the following year, Custer's 7th Cavalry will be defeated by the combined military might of the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho peoples in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

~ VII ~

Mathias doesn't come directly to Iowa on his arrival. Among the documents I have for him is receipt No. 1194 filed in the Receiver's Office at Huron, Dakota Territory, dated December 29, 1882. It records Mathias's payment of \$200 for 160 acres for "the North East quarter of Section No. 9, in Township No. 118, of Range No. 61." Mathias paid \$1.25 per acre, taking advantage of the six-month residency provision in the Homestead Act of 1862. The options under the law, passed while the Civil War raged, allowed homesteaders to claim 160 acres of land free and clear (plus a small registration fee) after five years of living on the land, constructing a dwelling on it, and cultivating it. The shorter-term option allowed for a six-month residency, improvements and cultivation, and the payment of \$1.25 per acre. Soldiers who served in the Union Army were permitted to deduct the length of their military service from the residency requirement.

A patent record accompanies the receipt for the \$1.25 per acre Mathias paid. The document declares that the United States of America grants Mathias Kleckner and his heirs the specified quarter section (excepting, however, water and mineral rights) "to have and to hold . . . together with all the rights, privileges, and appurtenances . . . forever." The document is signed by representatives of President Grover Cleveland. Rights of ownership accruing to Mathias Kleckner included the right to sell.

My records don't describe how Mathias discovered land ownership potential

in the Dakota Territory. It's likely, however, that he saw advertisements in German newspapers placed by American railroad companies. The US government had granted huge tracts of land to the railroads for resale, lands ceded by Native peoples in treaties. Extravagant claims about the abundance of rich land would have appealed to him and other young men in his village. Quite possibly, talk in the village was lively, fueled by news from sons of other families who had already successfully emigrated. Hamlin Garland, whose pioneer family also acquired land in Mitchell County, describes the land rush ethos that caught fire in the 1870s and 1880s in his book *A Son of the Middle Border*. Garland's father, caught up in land rush fever, moved his family from Wisconsin to Iowa and on to Dakota Territory. Settlers conveyed vivid and detailed accounts to their struggling families back in the Old World, fanning the flames.

In any event, farmers follow crops and weather. Though South Dakota is dry plains country today, in the 1870s, there was a series of wet years. These made for abundant wheat harvests. Even without exaggeration, such reports would be tempting to young men like Mathias. And so, he homesteaded in what would become South Dakota just after the 1879 and 1880 crop disasters in Iowa when chinch bugs devoured the wheat. By contrast, wheat would do well in Dakota Territory until the hot, dry summer of 1888 followed by a massive blizzard that affected North America from Dakota Territory all the way to New York City. Mathias and Mary Ann would move to East Lincoln Township in Mitchell County, Iowa, just two years later.

~ VIII ~

Articles of a treaty made and concluded by William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and Willoughby Morgan, Col. of the United States 1st Regt. Infantry, Commissioners on behalf of the United States on the one part, and the undersigned Deputations of the Confederated Tribes of the Sacs and Foxes [Meskwaki]; the Medawah-Kanton, Wahpacoota, Wahpeton and Sissetong Bands or Tribes of Sioux; the Omahas, Ioways, Ottoes and Missourias on the other part.

The said Tribes . . . agree with the United States on the following Articles.

ARTICLE II.

The confederated Tribes of the Sacs and Foxes [Meskwaki], cede and relinquish to the United States forever, a tract of Country twenty miles in width, from the Mississippi to the Demoine; situate south, and adjoining the line between the said confederated Tribes of Sacs and Foxes, and the Sioux; as established by the second article of the Treaty of Prairie du Chien of the nineteenth of August one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five.

1830 Treaty of Prairie du Chien

~ IX ~

By 1854, the year my great-grandfather was born, the Meskwaki—known to the US government as the Sac and Fox—already had a long history on the lands in the middle of the American continent. Though their oral tradition takes them all the way back to the Atlantic coast, the Meskwaki had migrated westward into the eastern half of lower Michigan by 1600. By the time Mathias was born, the Meskwaki had come into conflict with the Ojibway and relocated along the Fox River in Wisconsin. King Louis XV had, in 1728, ordered the genocide of the Meskwaki. By 1734, the Meskwaki had been forced across the Mississippi into Iowa. By the time Mathias was born, the Meskwaki, along with the closely related Sauk, had endured the Blackhawk War of 1832. In an 1842 treaty, they had ceded their lands in what would become, four years later, the state of Iowa. They'd been evacuated to a reserve in Kansas, though many Meskwaki had refused to leave. Others had left, but returned, homesick and starving due to the lack of food in Kansas, where the hunting grounds assigned to them had already been depleted.

~ X ~

By order of Article III of the 1842 Treaty, the Sacs and Foxes were to remove from Iowa by October 11, 1845, to lands in Kansas assigned to them. The treaty terms allowed for a gradual relocation process of two steps taking place over a period of three years.

Theoretically, the first move in 1843 was to be to the western part of the ceded land past a boundary called “Painted Rocks” or “Red Rocks,” and the second move was to be across the Iowa border into Kansas by the 1845 deadline. However, the actual removal process was not a smooth transition due to repeated treaty violations by the Meskwaki, who kept returning to old village sites in the eastern part of the state.

Jonathan L. Buffalo
Historical Preservation Director
Meskwaki Nation

Just two years before Mathias was born, the Meskwaki, whose migrations under pressure from other peoples' migrations brought them to Iowa in the first place, found themselves in direct conflict again, this time with indigenous Dakota peoples to the north and west. In the valley of the East Des Moines River, buffalo and other game were still plentiful in 1852. Dakota and Meskwaki hunters, both entering a neutral area set up by US government treaty to keep the warring nations apart, met up in their search for game. Sixteen Dakota and four Meskwaki died in battle. By 1856, when Mathias Kleckner was a two-year-old boy just beginning to walk in the fields of his family's farm in a southern province of the German Empire, most of the Meskwaki, homesick and ill, had returned to Iowa. In that year, sanctioned by the Iowa General Assembly, they purchased land along the Iowa River in central Iowa. The Meskwaki people live there still, on their own settlement, private property as distinct from a reservation.

~ XI ~

It is said my two grandfathers based the Settlement's location on a story, a *ji mo ni*, told by an ancient hunter who was once approached by two underworld goddesses informing him that people would one day make their homes on these hills. Declining the goddesses' offer of immortality, the hunter returned to the winter Mississippi River encampment and conveyed with astonishment what the Supernaturals had said.

Long before any name was bestowed to this fertile country, back when the soil was black, moist, and untainted, our grandparents many times previous were well acquainted with the trees and saplings that stood here in abundance. They were also aware of water transparent and sweet to the taste. As the strong summer wind rushed enchantingly over the adjoining prairies, making peaceful sounds, they remembered the ancient hunter's story, which they then gave to their grandchildren's grandchildren and beyond until it reached the ears of Bear King's grandfather.

Ray A. Young Bear
Remnants of the First Earth

~ XII ~

In a sense, the land is still in the family, though not owned by my immediate family. In 1966, Mom and Dad sold section eleven to a cousin on my mother's side and her husband. The Wright family had already begun advancements into agribusiness many years before with their large turkey operation in the section

immediately to our north. Wright land also included the southeast quarter of section fifteen, at the corner to the south, often referred to by my cousins as the home place. With its large white house and stand of sweeping pines lining the east and south sides of the property, Wright's corner was a landmark for generations. In 1877 the W. E. Wright family had painted a signpost listing fourteen different towns in the surrounding area and the distance in miles from the corner marking a crossroad between counties. As recently as 2007, 130 years later, the sign was still there, having been repainted a number of times. During its last repainting, someone added Lancaster, PA, 1,100 mi. SE, a nod to the burgeoning population of Mennonites whose families, out of land in Pennsylvania, had begun migrating westward.

~ XIII ~

The Mennonite family who rents the land from my cousin still farms a portion of the northwest quarter of section eleven, East Lincoln Township in Mitchell, County Iowa. They follow traditional crop rotation farming methods passed down from their Swiss and German forebears, dating back to the sixteenth century and beyond. The cycle begins in a given field with a legume crop like clover or alfalfa, which leaves deposits of nitrogen in the soil after harvest. Successive years after that, corn, soybeans, or oats may be planted. My great-grandfather Mathias Kleckner would have learned these same farming methods as a boy and brought them with him when he immigrated in 1875. He used them when he moved to Mitchell County in 1890. My father used these same methods when he farmed section eleven during the years I grew up on the farm.

In the years after our move from section eleven, farms all over Iowa and all over the Midwest embarked on a massive paradigm shift. Guided by agricultural policy from the Nixon and Ford administrations, and promulgated by the then secretary of agriculture Earl Butz, the new vision for American agriculture was dubbed "agribusiness." The farmer became known in Department of Agriculture documents as an "operator." Two catchphrases expressed the economic and historical sweep that would destroy many family farms. The first was to "get big or

get out.” Instead of 160 acres to support a family, the operator would need to invest in many hundreds of acres to make the business model of agriculture work. The second was to plant corn and other commodity crops “from fencerow to fencerow.” Commodity prices were high, and the policy of eliminating fences and the strips of grasses and wetlands growing along them (in which pheasants and red-winged blackbirds, among many other species, thrived) meant larger crop yields and larger profits for agribusiness operators. To get those larger yields, farmers needed to use far more chemical herbicides and fertilizers, especially anhydrous ammonia. They also needed to invest in larger and larger machinery to manage the cultivation of ever larger field acreage. The long-regarded practice of crop rotation fell by the way. Thousands of small family farms also fell by the way, victims of the “get big or get out” mentality.

My father railed against Earl Butz and his policies, predicting that “they”—the government—meant to drive farmers off the land. My cousin and her husband, in line with his family’s corporate farm, embraced this vision of American agriculture. For a time, section eleven became a part of this story. But the story would swing the other way. When my cousin’s husband died, she moved to town and began leasing the land to a Mennonite family who would restore crop rotation, a diversified crop and livestock mix, bringing at least some of the farm back to family-sized scale. They would return section eleven to Jefferson’s initial vision of a sustainable living on 160 acres. It’s another ironic twist of history that, though my father’s grandfather farmed and purchased section eleven, it was my mother’s people who were Mennonites when they first arrived in the New World. This, too, is a part of the story of section eleven.

~ XIV ~

Many of the earliest settlers in East Lincoln Township started out their New World lives in New York, then moved westward to Wisconsin and eventually Iowa. Others traveled through Pennsylvania to Indiana and to Iowa. Meanwhile, the movement of their predecessors, the earliest French trappers, had pressed the Meskwaki out of their eastern homelands toward the Great Lakes and Michigan.

There they encountered the Ojibway, who pressed the Meskwaki farther southward into Wisconsin and, finally, Iowa. Their arrival, likewise, pressed against even earlier arrivals on Iowa's prairies, the Dakota who had been forced from their early homelands on the continent along the headwaters of the Mississippi by the Ojibway.

We all, it seems, trespass on one another. One element in the Middle English origins of the word "trespass" is the concept "passage," making it apparent that any passage, any movement from one place to another, constitutes a trespass on someone else. We seem unable to pass from place to place, time to time without overstepping, without misdeed. And so the story of section eleven is inevitably to be a story of trespass.

~ XV ~

An account in the *Sioux City Journal* from 1896 describes the area in and around the Neutral Ground, established by treaty in 1830, as rich hunting ground even as late as when Mathias would begin farming section eleven. There were still some buffalo and elk; deer were plentiful. Beaver, mink, and numerous fish species populated the rivers and streams, including the Cedar that runs through East Lincoln Township. Tall prairie grasses provided habitat for an abundant variety of bird species including plover, pigeon, quail, and prairie chicken. Long before the first plow ever turned the sod of section eleven, Meskwaki would have hunted here, might have rested or camped along the creek in what would become the pasture where I would sit for hours and watch tadpoles and minnows. People with names like these from a 1910 annuity roll—Young Bear, Morgan, Leaves, Apple Tree, Kohana, Ke-wau-se-qua, Davenport, Black Cloud, Wild Cat—may have sat on a tussock of grass along the creek's banks right beside where I would later sit. They might have seen earlier generations of the red-winged blackbirds I saw. Later in the season, they might have seen the fluff of burst cattails and silk from opened milkweed pods drift on the breeze. They might have reached into the clear water of the creek and pulled out pebbles reddened from iron-rich water. They might have waded in an earlier version of the same creek.

~ XVI ~

Northwest Quarter of Section 11, Township 97 North, Range 15 West of the 5th P.M.

I wasn't there in 1803 when France sold 828,000 square miles of land west of the Mississippi River to President Thomas Jefferson and the young United States of America. I wasn't there in 1830 when William Clark, superintendent of Indian Affairs, and Col. Willoughby Morgan of the United States 1st Regt. Infantry presided over the signing of the Prairie du Chien Treaty. I wasn't there in 1862 when the Homestead Act was passed, devising a system for distributing land the US government appropriated from native peoples. I wasn't there in 1875 when Mathias Kleckner emigrated from what would soon be Prussia to avoid being drafted into Bismarck's army. I wasn't there in 1901 when Mathias Kleckner purchased section eleven.

But if Mathias Kleckner hadn't been there then, I wouldn't be here now. I am a beneficiary of land-grabbing, genocidal policies and broken treaties. I have benefited from legal definitions of land ownership, from the very concept that land can be owned. My identity has been shaped by being able to say "our farm." I have acquired this privilege from the mere fact that I am a descendant of Mathias Kleckner. This makes me, in some degree, culpable. A culprit.

Never mind that I don't own or live on section eleven now. Never mind that Mathias's intentions were entirely salutary. That he likely meant no harm, meant only to make a better life for himself, his family, his descendants. His better life came at the expense of other people's lives. My better life has come at the expense of other people's lives. This is my legacy. A legacy of benefit and culpability. And for this, *mea culpa*.

