

**VOICES OF DAKOTA PRAIRIE**

By Daniel Bielinski

Cast of Characters

Cast size is flexible: Anywhere from 8 to 25 actors/singers, including two children, ideally an 8 year-old boy and an 11 year-old girl.

Approximate Length

65 minutes

Time

c. 1883

Place

The Prairies of Dakota

## **DIRECTOR'S NOTES:**

First and foremost this play should be entertaining and exciting. It should engage the audience's imaginations and emotions—get their blood pumping—as all dramatic plays should. Audiences will certainly learn a good deal about the day-to-day lives of the first Dakotan settlers, but this show, emphatically, is not a dry historical lecture or a simple reader's theater presentation.

That said, the technical scale of the show can be adjusted based on the resources available for each particular production.

**\* This Symbol denotes a passage of Historical Text pulled from actual 1st hand accounts of early Dakota settlers.** Each passage is performed by a different actor, but we flow seamlessly between them as they speak. All historical text is to be delivered “dramatically” by the actors, with a strong sense of the emotion inherent in the passages.

Technical elements accompany the dramatic action of the show:

Each scene is accompanied by historical images and video projected onto screens/the canvas on the back of the set that give a visual sense for the spoken words.

There is sound design in many scenes. There is also a musical score (either live or pre recorded) that underlies the historical text, the poems, the songs, and the country dance.

All the source material contained herein resides in the Public Domain.

PROLOGUE

(Fade up slowly on two dapper RAILROAD AGENTS, splitting Center-Stage on pedestals. Their sales pitch begins slowly and oh-so-sincerely.)

AGENT 1

You're looking for hope. A new life for yourselves and for your children. Ladies and gentlemen, look no further.

AGENT 2

There's a land flowing with milk and money, where even mothers-in-law forget to scold.<sup>1</sup>

AGENT 1

The Northern Banana Belt of America, where the climate unites all that is bracing and inspiring. People who go there to die of consumption have lived to become glowing embodiments of soundness and strength, with throats like firemen's trumpets and lungs like blacksmiths' bellows!<sup>2</sup>

AGENT 2

This is a land fair enough to tempt the angels to wonder whether a new and better Eden has not been formed and roofed with sapphire skies!<sup>3</sup>

AGENT 1

Ladies and Gentlemen! The land we are speaking of is none other than—

AGENTS 1 & 2

***Dakota!***

(Honky-tonk piano music rolls in. The AGENTS ramp it up to a full-on, smarmy "Snake Oil Sale.")

AGENT 2

...*Aaaaand* prices are low enough to make you blush, folks! But before we get to that, let's review the facts, shall we?

AGENT 1

In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln commissioned the Northern Pacific Railroad and charged it with building a new railroad and telegraph line from Duluth, Minnesota, to the West Coast. By 1873, the railroad had reached Bismarck, and by 1883, the entire Northern Pacific Line was complete.

AGENT 2

As compensation for building railroads across the empty western territories, the U.S. government has awarded the Northern Pacific massive tracts of land on both sides of the tracks. Naturally, the Northern Pacific wants to populate these lands as soon as possible. Everything that you settlers

require to live, and everything you produce—livestock, grain, you name it—will have to be shipped via railroad.<sup>4</sup>

AGENT 1

That's where Railroad agents like us come in. Why, at one point, there were eight hundred of us scouring Europe for potential settlers like yourselves.

(AGENTS hop off their pedestals and do a slick “salesman dance”)

AGENT 2

But let's get to the good news, shall we? You have *three* options for getting some of that sweet, tropical, banana-belt land:

(Image Projection: Pre-Emption Paperwork)

AGENT 1

Number One! Pre-Emption: Uncle Sam will give you one hundred-sixty acres for a buck twenty-five (\$1.25) an acre after living on the land for a year.

(Image Projection: Homestead Act Document)

AGENT 2

Number Two! The Homestead Act: Uncle Sam will give you one hundred-sixty acres of free land, provided you live on the land, cultivate ten acres, and plant a crop. After five but less than seven years, you—

AGENTS 1 & 2

“Prove up”!!

AGENT 2

—that you've kept your end of the bargain, and the land is yours.

(Image Projection: Timber Culture Act Document)

AGENT 1

Number Three! The Tree Claim Act: Uncle Sam will let you claim up to one hundred-sixty acres in exchange for planting and maintaining ten acres of trees.<sup>5</sup>

AGENT 2

Of course, you can always buy it straight from the Railroad for two bucks an acre!

AGENT 1

Paradise awaits, friends! Think about your children—

AGENT 2

Your grandchildren!

AGENT 1

Your nieces!

AGENT 2

Your nephews!

AGENT 1

The milkman!

AGENT 2

Uncle Josephat!

AGENT 1

What can you offer them here? Can you give them the opportunities they deserve? Dakota Territory is your chance for new life, and it's *their* chance for new life as well. What are you waiting for?!

AGENTS 1 & 2

**DAKOTA IS WAITING FOR YOU!!!**

BLACKOUT

I: A PROVERB

(Sound FX: A Strong Wind whipping over the Prairies)

(A mist drifts across the stage. A low musical drone begins. Spotlights slowly fade up on three ghostly FIGURES, including a young BOY.)

BOY

There is an old proverb: "For the first generation there is death."

FIGURE 2

(In German)

Der Erste hat den Tod.

FIGURE 3

(In Norwegian)

For den første generasjonen er det død.

BOY

"For the second generation there is want."

FIGURE 2

(In German)

Zweite hat die Not.

FIGURE 3

(In Norwegian)

For det andre er det lyst.

BOY

"Only for the third is there bread."

FIGURE 2

(In German)

Der Dritte erst hat Brot.

FIGURE 3

(In Norwegian)

Bare for den tredje er det brød.

BOY

(Repeating)

“Only for the third is there bread.”<sup>6</sup>

FADEOUT music with lights



## II: EXODUS

- \* From the time I was old enough to think for myself, I had always wanted to go to America.
- \* America was a land of opportunities and a free country, where a person was at liberty to do as he liked: free schools, free religion, free government lands for anyone of legal age.<sup>7</sup>

(Image Projections: Miserable Living Conditions in late 19th Century Europe.)

- \* At that time the Russian government drafted all young men to serve a three-year term in the army. The wage was low, the training hard, and German soldiers in the Russian army were treated like animals. Before I came of age, my father decided the entire family would flee to America.<sup>8</sup>
- \* My husband and I each had poor health. The doctor said, “There is no treatment for you here in Michigan; if you care to live, a change of climate might help you.”<sup>9</sup>
- \* We realized that there were far better opportunities in America than in Ireland. I disliked leaving grandmother, but being a girl of seventeen years, I naturally wished to see more of the world.<sup>10</sup>
- \* There was an economic crisis in Norway in the beginning of the 1880’s. All ways for work were closed. The only way out of destitution was to set my course westward...to America.<sup>11</sup>

POEM: The Backwoodsman  
by James Kirke Paulding

*'Twas said that o'er the hills, and far away,  
Towards the setting sun, a land there lay,  
Whose unexhausted energies of soil  
Nobly repaid the hardy lab'rer's toil;  
Where men were worth full twice their weight in gold,  
And goodly farms for almost nought were sold;  
Prairies of flowers, and grass meads abound,  
And rivers everywhere meander round.*

## SCENE

(A YOUNG MAN is scrubbing the barn-floor. A YOUNG WOMAN, his sister, enters running, holding a Dakota Land Sale Poster in her hand.)

WOMAN

Hans! Hans!

MAN

What is it?

WOMAN

They're going to America!

MAN

Who?

WOMAN

Uncle Anders, Aunt Anette, and their children!

MAN

*America?*

WOMAN

They're leaving next month on a steamship. They're going to a place called "Dakota."

MAN

(Back to work)

Good for them.

WOMAN

They said if I am able to come up with fifty kroners...I can go with them.

(He stares at her. She falters.)

WOMAN

I want to go.

MAN

You don't know the first thing about America—

WOMAN

I know—

MAN

You think a journey like that is easy?

WOMAN

What's holding me here, Hans? This place has been nothing but suffering for me *and for you* since Mother and Father died.

MAN

That is beside the point.

WOMAN  
America is bound to be better!

MAN  
This is your *home*!

WOMAN  
Not anymore, it's not!  
(Pauses)  
I think it'll be fun, Hans. I think I will be *happy*.

(He looks at her for a long moment. Then he pulls money from his pocket, puts it in her hand, and goes back to work. She puts her hand on his—)

WOMAN  
Come with us.

MAN  
(Softening)  
Be careful... in Dakota.

## III: THE JOURNEY

(Sound FX: Music starts to fade in: “Shores of America.”)

\* After a long period of saving, it was finally possible. Happy was the day when we got together and summed things up and found that we could all go.<sup>12</sup>

\* In the spring of 1874, Father took his two sons and daughters and only personal belongings and departed from Braatz, Switzerland to Hamburg, where we boarded a steam boat for New York City.<sup>13</sup>

\* At last we were on our way to that great country about which we had all heard so much good. All about me on the steamship stood men, women, and children shouting, “We are going; we are on our way to America!”<sup>14</sup>

(A young immigrant boy and girl begin the song, then are joined by their parents. Different groups of immigrants take the 2nd Stanza, and the entire chorus sings the 3rd Stanza.)

## SONG: Shores of America

*I'm bidding farewell to the land of my youth  
and the home I loved so well  
and the mountains so grand in my own native land  
I'm bidding them all farewell  
with an aching heart I'll bid them adieu  
for tomorrow I'll sail far away  
Over the raging foam for to seek a home  
on the Shores of America*

*It's not for the want of employment I'm going  
it's not for the want of fame  
that fortune bright might shine over me  
and give me a glorious name  
no it's not for the want of employment I'm going  
Over the weary and stormy sea  
but to seek a home for my own true love  
on the Shores of America*

*And when I am bidding my last farewell  
the tears like rain will blind  
to think of my friends in my own native land  
and the home I'm leaving behind  
But if I should die on a foreign land  
and be buried so far, far away*

*no fond mother's tears will be shed o'er my grave  
on the Shores of America.*

(Sound FX: Foghorn, Seagulls, the Ocean)

(Image Projections: Crowded Steamships and Ocean-liners filled with Immigrants)

\* It did not take very long for each passenger to make a number of friends on the ship. All in all, it was a very jovial setting. However, we soon felt the pits of our stomachs rotating. Before we got very far, it was on me. I was a seasick man.<sup>15</sup>

\* Most of us became seasick, as the crossing was very rough. The only word I can find to describe the feeling is this: "rotten."<sup>16</sup>

\* (*Boy*) I loved every minute of it. I love the ocean!<sup>17</sup>

\* During the trip there were many bad storms. Food became scarce. Twenty-two people died, and many others were ill. Funerals were held every Sunday.<sup>18</sup>

\* Our youngest child Arnie was but four months old. The sea voyage was too much for him. He died shortly after we landed.<sup>19</sup>

(Fadeout Ocean Sound FX)

## IV: ARRIVAL

\* We arrived in New York with one dollar cash. That was all we had to live on for the five days it took us to get to Dakota. We would get two small loaves of bread a day and divide them among the six of us.<sup>20</sup>

\* The confusion was so great because the language was one I could not understand, and everything was so strange. It took me a long time to find the right train.<sup>21</sup>

(Sound FX: Train traveling on tracks)

(Image Projections: Crowded Train Travel)

\* Passengers for the west were put into a special train for Chicago. The coaches were old and dirty, and they were locked all the time so nobody would get lost. The passengers were so dirty and unkempt and carried such a burden of odors that it was almost suffocating.<sup>22</sup>

\* We didn't care. We were on our way to Dakota!

(Upbeat music underscores)

\* I wondered what the land would look like at close quarters. I had heard so much about the wild, wide, unsettled country that had open arms of welcome to all comers. Day and night on the fast train, we sped through countless large cities, each one larger than the last—smoking chimneys, skyscrapers. I could not understand how this could be the open land of the homesteader.<sup>23</sup>

\* Finally, our train arrived in Dakota in the night.<sup>24</sup>

(Sound FX: Train Squeals to Halt. Music fades.)

(Image Projections: Snow everywhere. A train trapped between two walls of snow.)

\* When the sun came up, I looked about and said to myself, “My Garsh—is this the North Pole?”<sup>25</sup>

\* We arrived in Devil's Lake. We found the entire town buried. All that was visible was the chimneys. The train came in between two walls of snow.<sup>26</sup>

(Image Projection: Endless Prairies)

\* In the spring of 1886 we arrived in Ellendale, Dakota Territory with three cents in our pockets. The town was nicknamed the “End of the World” because it was at the end of the railroad tracks.<sup>27</sup>

\* My first impression on alighting from the train was that I couldn't see a single tree. It was a dreary sight indeed, particularly for one used to the luxuriant growth of Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

\* It was the one time I saw my wife lose her courage. She stood, looking very downcast. She pointed to the temporary shack I had put up and said.<sup>29</sup>

SCENE

WOMAN

Look at this. Look at what people have to live in! If we had money, I'd go back home to Norway right away.

MAN

It's not so bad...

WOMAN

Not so bad?! Don't forget where I come from. What would my father say if he saw me now, living in the dirt like an animal?

MAN

Well, he'd probably say—

WOMAN

I'll tell you what he would say! Nothing! He would pick up the biggest Norwegian stick he could find and beat you over the head with it! I'd beat you over the head myself right now if I could even find a stick! Where are the *trees*?

MAN

I don't think they have trees here.

WOMAN

How do we build a house? What are we supposed to live in? A hole in the ground?

MAN

(He holds up a shovel)

Well...yes.

WOMAN

Sweet Saint Olaf....

(A GIRL, their daughter, walks on stage)

MAN

Can we talk about this later, when the girl is not around?

WOMAN

Oh, now you're thinking about the girl! You should have thought about her when you came up with this crack-brained scheme six months ago! America! The land of opportunity! The land flowing with milk and money! What about our daughter? What kind of opportunity will she have in this desert?...

GIRL

I found some flowers.

(She holds out a bouquet of beautiful tiger-lilies. Her parents stare at her silently.)

GIRL

What kind of flowers are these?

MAN

I think they are called tiger lilies.

(Timidly to his wife)

Isn't that right, dear?

(The GIRL offers the flowers to the WOMAN)

GIRL

Please mama.

(The WOMAN looks in her daughter's eyes, softens, and takes the flowers. She glares at her husband.)

END SCENE

\* Mother begged father to return to the east where we had come from. She even told him she would go back alone if he didn't get us, their children, out of such a land.<sup>30</sup>

\* Time and again they moaned, "Why, oh why, did we leave our good home to come out here and be dumped in a SNOW BANK?!"<sup>31</sup>



## V: SOD AND PLASTER

(Sound FX: Upbeat Americana music begins)

\* There is a German saying: “Arbeit macht das Leben süss”: *Work makes life sweet*. Even if Dakota was not the paradise we had dreamed it would be, we did not waste time....

\* *All Men*: WE GOT TO WORK!

\* Those who settled along the Red River or the Goose River or the Missouri River—they were lucky. They had an abundance of timber with which to build their log cabins. What did we have? Sod! And plenty of it.

(Image Projections: Sod Houses)

\* (*Man*) Before you build your sod house, though, you have to make sure your family has a place to stay in the meantime. During the first week we lived under our wagon box. After a space the size of the wagon box and four feet deep was dug, the end gate of the wagon was taken out and the vehicle was tipped upside down over the dugout space.<sup>32</sup> It was a bit tight...

(Music stops)

\* (*Woman, with thick German accent*) We had *NINE CHILDREN*.

(Music starts again)

\* (*Man*) To build a sod house, the first thing to do is to find your location and dig it out. The first sod house I made for my family was ten feet square. I dug out an area ten feet by ten feet, about two feet down.<sup>33</sup>

(Image Projections: Sod Houses on the Prairie)

\* Then it's on to the bricks. First thing is to find the right grass. *Buffalo grass* served our purposes, because it has densely packed roots that hold the soil together into bricks.

\* The next task is to cut the bricks. If you *weren't* lucky, you had to cut them by hand with a spade. If you *were* lucky, you had a breaking plow to put behind your ox or horse, and it turned over the sod real nicely into strips twelve inches wide and four inches thick. Then you cut the strips into bricks about two feet long.

\* The walls were built of these sod pieces laid in brick-like fashion, grass-side down, until we had made a six-foot high wall on one side and an eight-foot wall on the other, so as to make a slant roof.<sup>34</sup>

\* Our fourteen by twenty-eight-foot house was divided into two compartments, one where we lived, ate and slept; the other for the stock—two oxen and a cow. The building had only two windows, one in each room, and three doors. The floor in both parts was of the solid earth. The roof boards, stringers, windows and doors were of lumber purchased and hauled with ox team and wagon from Carrington.<sup>35</sup>

\* Of course, lumber costs money in Dakota. I went to town and asked Mr. Nelson how much he wanted for the lumber. He told me five dollars. I told him I had no money, but I did have a tobacco pipe that was worth that amount. We made the deal; I got the lumber and a pair of overalls; and he got the pipe. We were both well satisfied!<sup>36</sup>

(Music ends)