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BOLD SPIRIT

HELGA ESTBY'S
FORGOTTEN WALK ACROSS
VICTORIAN AMERICA

Linda Lawrence Hunt





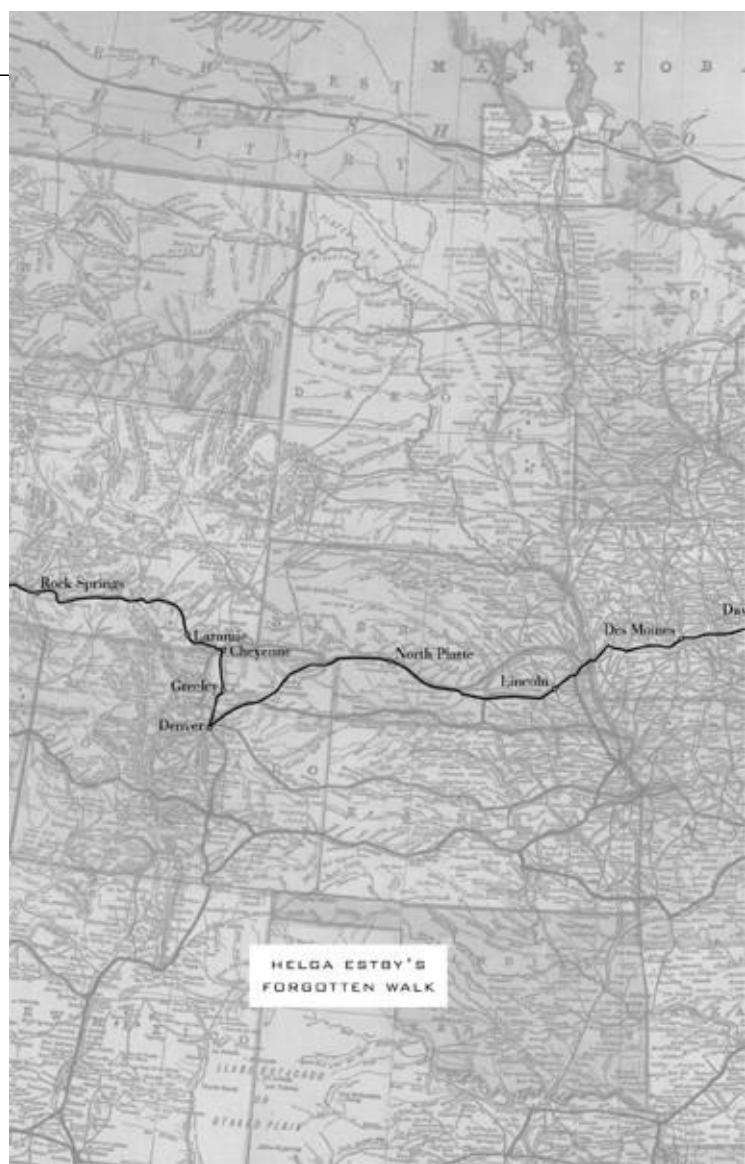
Linda Lawrence Hunt

BOLD SPIRIT

Linda Lawrence Hunt, a former associate professor of English at Whitworth College, now directs The Krista Foundation for Global Citizenship. An engaging speaker and award-winning freelance writer, Hunt traveled across America and to Norway to reconstruct the silenced story of Helga Estby's epic journey. *Bold Spirit* won the 2004 Willa Cather Literary Award for nonfiction, the Washington State Book Award, and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award. She lives in Spokane, Washington, with her husband Jim.

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M A P
EXHIBITING THE SEVERAL
PACIFIC RAILROADS

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FOREWORD BY SUE ARMITAGE



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To
THELMA PORTCH
AND
DOROTHY, DARYLL, DARILLYN, AND DOUG BAHR,
WHO BECAME KEEPERS OF THIS FAMILY STORY
AND TO
EVELYN CHRISTENSEN
ANOTHER ORDINARY WOMAN WHO
LIVES AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE



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Foreword

The amazing story of Helga Estby's walk across America, which you will read in the following pages, was almost lost from history. Even now, after all of Linda Hunt's diligent research and imaginative retelling, there are aspects of Helga's story that remain mysterious. Although some readers may be frustrated by these lingering mysteries, I suggest that they give us opportunities to think about what we call "history." The historical record tells us about how people acted in the past but it often does not tell us why. It is the job of professional historians to provide plausible reasons for the actions of the past. But the truth is that even the most famous and well-documented historical personages contain pockets of mystery and take actions that we do not fully understand. If this is true for the great and famous, think how much more likely it is to be true for an immigrant woman like Helga Estby. Think also about how many life stories of ordinary people have been lost to history because there are no surviving records. The truly amazing thing about Helga Estby is that she did something extraordinary, and her story still remained unknown—until now. Her erasure should prompt us all to think about how little of the past we really know and encourage us to think about how to preserve more of our present-day lives and concerns (tomorrow's historical record).

Every day we make decisions about which events are important and which are not. In fact, our historical record begins right now in the present with this daily process of inclusion and omission. In her conclusion to Helga Estby's story, Linda Hunt invites us to think about the different kinds of omission she calls silencing. In that contemplation are some hard lessons that bear directly on our sense of history. Several lessons occur to me; doubtless each of you can add to the list. First, we expect the already great and famous to do great things, but we easily overlook the achievements of the more humble among us. Second, we prefer predictable stories with easily understood motivations. Unexpected actions undertaken for uncertain reasons make us uncomfortable. Third, people who are too far from their expected norms are embarrassments to those around them. How much truer is this likely to be when the historical actor is poor and female?

Throughout history, silencing has been the fate of most women. Thanks to Linda Hunt's interest and extraordinary persistence, Helga Estby has escaped that common fate. Finally then, this is not just Helga Estby's story but Linda Hunt's as well, for in the following pages she shows us just how much silenced history can be recovered when we really want to know.

—Sue Armitage, Washington State University

Preface

It was late one evening in 1984 when I read eighth-grader Doug Bahr's seven-page essay entered in the Washington State History Day Contest. This farm son from Wilbur, through the encouragement of his mother, Dorothy, and older sister, Darillyn, told a stunning story in "Grandmother's Walks from Coast to Coast." This brief family story of a mother and daughter's walk captivated my imagination and curiosity. Who was this Norwegian immigrant, Helga Estby? Whatever gave Helga and her daughter Clara the courage to attempt such a journey? I recently had read Peter Jenkins' observations and experiences on his contemporary cross-continent trek in *A Walk Across America*, a story that attracted immense national interest. I felt certain a mother and daughter's observations and experiences across an unsettled continent almost one hundred years earlier would prove compelling. Was there more to the story?

In subsequent investigation, I found that little was known about Helga's audacious gamble to earn the \$10,000 wager offered by unknown sponsors for completion of the journey. Behind on paying taxes and the mortgage, she was desperate to save the 160-acre Mica Creek farm and home built by her husband, Ole, for their family of nine children. Hers was a woman's story, and like most ordinary mothers of her era, her active participation in life was not valued as part of America's historical record. Even more telling, Helga's choice to leave home, and the subsequent tragedy of loss, led to such anger in the family that they did not value her remarkable story either. Her walk across the United States with her daughter Clara remained a silenced topic within the family for over seven years.

Because of this lack of recognition, the most difficult aspect of rediscovering Helga Estby's life was the paucity of primary resources. For example, no diaries, letters, or art sketches remain from Helga and Clara's trip, although Helga wrote many letters and kept a diary. Nor do the hundreds of manuscript pages she wrote still exist. Her children are all dead. Furthermore, the children's lifelong condemnation of their mother's actions led to fateful choices about her memoirs. It was unfathomable to them that Helga's writings might contribute significantly to a fuller picture of American history. Like the history of most women at the end of the nineteenth century, her life story became silenced, partially by what I call "negation through neglect." But it was silenced also by intention.

A short poem from a Scottish psychologist, R.D. Laing, in *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, addresses the neglect and the failure to recognize the importance of family stories of *all* people, not just the culturally privileged. It speaks also to the truth that, until recently, academia ignored the history of most women in the American story. The poem states:

*The range of what we think and do
is limited by what we fail to notice
And because we fail to notice
that we fail to notice
there is little we can do
to change
until we notice
how failing to notice
shapes our thoughts and deeds*

Because Helga's immediate family "failed to notice" the importance of her endeavor, they did not

keep any letters from the trip, or pass her stories orally through the family. Even more distressing, ~~they destroyed the hundreds of pages of her first-person account.~~ The necessity for creative historical detective work to unearth her life inaugurated years of research.

I call this approach to the reconstruction of Helga Estby's life a "rag-rug history." In Scandinavia, resourceful women historically collected the discards and remnants of previously used fabrics from all possible sources. From these worn castoffs, often considered of little value to others, they wove together a weft of rags to create incredibly strong and durable artistic rugs. In contrast, early American women usually made quilts from good-quality remnants intentionally saved and treasured. Frugal immigrants continued to create rag rugs to warm their pioneer homes. Contemporary rag-rug weavers still go on hunting expeditions to search for the fabrics from ordinary lives, such as torn and tattered chenille bedspreads, blue jeans, corduroy, and calico. Often weavers will alert their friends and family to help discover old fabrics that others rarely find useful. From these they collect the textures and colors that provide the beauty and interest for today's creations. The weaver takes the piles of ripped rags, packs the strips tightly together to prevent unraveling, and then, using a beater bar on a loom with warping thread, creates a durable, useful family rug.

My search to find as many remnants of her story as possible led to my own trips across America and to Norway to learn about Helga's childhood. Scraps of information gathered from our nation's rich resources in local historical societies, community and university libraries, and museums became the fabrics of her story. The strong golden thread that wove the rag-rug remnants together came from newspaper accounts of Helga's visits with reporters along the railroad routes. These eyewitness accounts verified her itinerary and provided a general timetable. More important, they offered a rich vein of stories, although admittedly, they were limited by what a reporter asked and by what Helga and Clara chose to report. Little existed in these accounts of the ordinary daily challenges the women faced in meeting basic survival needs, such as finding food, water, and shelter during the long distances between towns in the West. Nor do reporters show how they coped with the life-threatening extremes of cold and heat, sore muscles and feet, women's hygiene, electric storms, or dangerous wildlife. Nor do we read of the many specific human kindnesses they say eased the journey, or of the ways nature sometimes refreshed their spirits. However, the varied tone and observations within the reporter's accounts did provide insights into the attitudes the writers held about the two women, "globetrotters." The tenor of a newspaper, whether primarily interested in international and national issues or local and human-interest stories, affected the coverage. Whether scant or lengthy articles, newspaper errors sometimes emerged. It is also impossible to know if Helga or Clara embellished their adventures. The consistencies of their accounts throughout the newspaper coverage, however, suggest genuine experiences. If anything, their reporting of the travails seem understated.

Whenever people heard portions of Helga's bold trek, they worked eagerly to help me find additional rag remnants of this nearly discarded life story. The generous gifts of memory and artifacts from the remaining Estby family, a family that does "notice" the importance of Helga's achievement, augmented these institutional resources.

During this research I discovered a refreshing image that symbolizes the new scholarship emerging on previously neglected women. When Norwegian artist Aasta Hansteen came to America, she was enchanted with the sunflower image that some early American feminists used as a symbol of a woman's claim to light, and air, and an optimistic spirit. She introduced this symbol on her return to Norway, and the Norwegian Feminist Society adopted it as their official symbol right about the time of Helga's walk. Helga's courageous story, once shrouded in silence, now can be linked with other women's stories emerging in a new American history, a history open to giving light and air to the many voices in our land. My hope is that *Bold Spirit* contributes an enduring remnant that reflects the

irrepressible spirit, intelligence, and abundant love for family and America that Helga Estby's adventurous life illuminates.

—Linda Lawrence Hu



INTRODUCTION

Eight-year-old Thelma Estby, bewildered by the sudden death of her father from meningitis, moved to her Grandma Helga Estby's home in Spokane, Washington, in 1924. Living with her beloved grandma was the one comfort in her new life as she adjusted to a strange school and unfamiliar neighborhood. The child sensed that her grandma understood how much she missed her dad. Sometimes Thelma and her grandma Helga rocked on the porch swing that her grandpa Ole built. Then, grandma told stories of what Thelma's father, Arthur, was like as a young boy living on the Estby's farm at Mica Creek, southeast of Spokane, Washington. Thelma loved hearing these stories and their lively memories easing the empty loss she felt. But more often the grandmother and grandchild sat in companionable silence as little Thelma grieved the loss of her dad, and Helga grieved the death of her fifth son. They found warmth and joy in each other, drawn together to relieve the sorrow surrounding them both. Even the scent of her grandmother's Azure of Roses perfume comforted her.

Thelma thrived on the special attention her grandmother gave her. Even at sixty-four years, with a crippled knee, Helga Estby loved to be on the go. When her small widow's pension arrived each month from Ole's trade union death benefit, Helga took Thelma on a trolley ride over the Spokane River to downtown. Often they watched Spokane Falls tumble over the basalt rocks, enchanted with its beauty and power, and then paused at the water's edge to feed scraps of stale bread to the ducks. Usually they stopped at the stately Crescent department store where Helga found colorful fabric threads, ribbons, and buttons to make special clothes for Thelma and her dolls. Sometimes they strolled uptown past the twin towers of Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral, which Ole helped build, and continued down through the stately tree-lined streets of Browne's Addition. Here the turn-of-the-century mansions and formal gardens spoke of a world of wealth unfamiliar to the farm child more at home with wheat fields and sunflowers. To Thelma's surprise, many fashionably dressed women in this prestigious neighborhood seemed to know her grandmother and spoke to her with respect. They were obviously interested in Helga's thoughts and friendship, something Thelma also noticed among Norwegian-American women in their own middle-class neighborhood on Mallon Street.² On summer days, they joined the throngs of people riding the carousel at Natatorium Park or rode the train east to Lake Coeur d'Alene where Helga visited a friend from her earlier work in the women's suffrage movement.



Thelma Estby, mid-1920s, Spokane, Washington.

Courtesy Portch/Bahr Family Photograph Collection. Detail of this photograph on page xxiv.

If daytime gave Thelma fun adventures with her grandma, nighttime gave her an abiding sense of security in her grandma Helga's faith. Helga loved to read, and Thelma liked climbing under the quilt in her grandma's pine bed while grandma read to her from one of her favorite books, *The Lamplighter*, over and over. Second only in popularity to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this popular religious novel showed how suffering, self-discipline, and devotion can form a person's character in positive ways. The main character, Gerty, was also an unhappy eight-year-old girl who had lost her parents. Neglected and abused, she developed into a troublesome orphan with an explosive temper. Eventually, a loving blind woman adopted Gerty and taught two truths to the little girl. First, that "The world is full of trials and everyone gets a share," and second, "Even in the midst of our distress, we can look to God in faith and love." Thelma loved the reassurance of hearing how the sad, fatherless child grew into a strong, happy woman.³

Helga told Thelma how she also suddenly lost her own father when she was just two years old, and she seemed to understand her granddaughter's loss. Born in Christiania (now Oslo), Norway, on May 30 in 1860, Helga knew her parents enjoyed a union of genuine love because she saw how their unexpected loss left her mother grief-stricken for years.⁴ But she told Thelma that good experiences still came after their family's distress, especially when her mother remarried a merchant when Helga

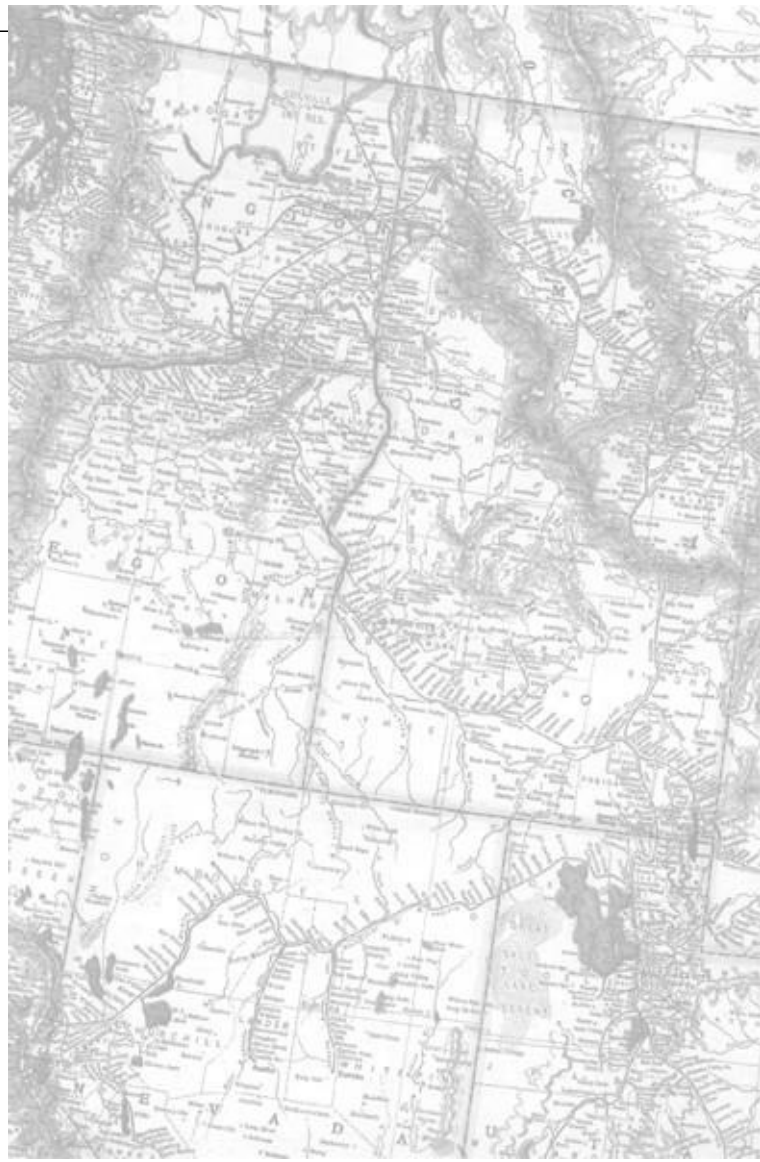
was seven years old. Because her stepfather, Mr. Haug, had money, the family sent Helga to a private school in Norway that included instruction in English, science, and religion.⁵ Coming to America when she was eleven was another wonderful surprise in Helga's life that happened because of her mother's remarriage.

Every evening, even if their meal seemed quite simple, Helga set the table with white linen, china dishes, silver napkin rings, and whatever flowers were blooming in their garden. The family loved music, often listening to classical music on the radio. Although they could not afford a piano, Aunt Ida played the harmonica, Uncle Bill enjoyed the violin, and grandma loved to sing, even if off-key. For their festive Norwegian Christmas Eve celebration, Helga always made lefse, sour-cream pudding with almonds and lingonberries, and homemade wine from the backyard cherry tree.⁶

Although much in her grandmother's home gave Thelma comfort and pleasure, she sensed something was not quite right in the family. To the young child, it felt as though a cloud hovered over her grandmother inside the house. Whenever Helga wanted to talk politics, Thelma noticed that the family either ignored her or just cut her off rudely. It upset Thelma when her aunts or uncles said mean things to their mother. This seemed to happen most if Helga wanted to talk about women's rights and the recent suffrage laws allowing women to vote, something that Helga's daughter resolutely refused to do.⁷ She wondered why her grandma never talked back, seeming instead to slip into a silent, unreachable world of her own. Thelma noticed that when this happened, Grandma Helga's face became melancholy. Was this why she rarely laughed? She seemed to be treated so differently outside their home. Yet, Thelma never heard her grandma say anything judgmental about her family or other people.

She also wondered if this was why her grandma often retreated upstairs where she created in a room of her own. In this upper room, Helga painted with oils, pastels, and watercolors and worked on writing a book. Helga considered this her private space, so Thelma felt quite special when Grandma invited her up. One morning, when the Indian-summer sun was pouring through the north window, she saw that her grandma was leafing through hundreds of pages of yellow foolscap paper. When Helga saw Thelma, she hugged the child into the folds of her long Victorian skirt and said, "Honey, be sure to take care of this story for me." But Thelma had no idea what "story" she was talking about.⁸

Forty-five years elapsed before Thelma discovered just what she had been asked to treasure. She was appalled to learn that this story had been so silenced by the entire family that it was almost lost forever. Nor had her grandma, who loved to read adventure stories to her at bedtime, ever breathed a word of her own grand adventure. When Thelma learned the truth, she vowed to fulfill her grandmother's request and became the story keeper, passing the legacy of Helga's courageous spirit to her own children and grandchildren. *Bold Spirit* emerged because Thelma believed in the power and value of preserving her family stories.



1 ON FOOT TO NEW YORK

Should they survive the trip their reminiscences will undoubtedly attract great attention.

—DAILY CHRONICLE
SPOKANE, WASHINGTON, MAY 4, 1896

Helga Estby, a thirty-six-year-old Norwegian immigrant, woke early on a mid-June morning in 1896 and slipped on her full-length gray Victorian skirt, simple wool jacket, and new leather shoes. She was eager to leave Boise, Idaho, before 6 A.M. to avoid walking during the scorching midday sun in southern Idaho, a hazard she had failed to consider earlier. Her daughter Clara, an artistic, intelligent, and pretty eighteen year old, helped fill their small satchels with emergency necessities: a Smith-and-Wesson revolver and a red-pepper spray gun to thwart dangerous highwaymen or wild animals, a compass and map, a few medical supplies, a lantern for night walking, photographs of themselves to sell, and a curling iron for Clara's soft hair.¹

Even when carrying a little food, their bundles weighed less than eight pounds. Wanting to travel light, neither brought a change of clothes, but Helga packed a notebook and pen to record their experiences, and Clara brought materials for sketching.² Perhaps more important, they carried a document from Mayor Belt of their hometown of Spokane, Washington, that introduced Helga as “a lady of good character and reputation” and commending her and her daughter to “the kind consideration of all persons with whom they may have contact.”³ As vital as a calling card to open doors, this introduction was especially useful with people in politics and the media.

They left Boise grateful for the kind considerations shown to them in Idaho's new capital city. The *Idaho Daily Statesman* had alerted readers of the mother and daughter's arrival and of their brave quest across America. Unlike a small Washington town whose residents refused to let them buy food or find shelter because people suspected the women were “undeserving vagrants,” Boise residents showed respect for their “positive spirits and physical energy.” They offered the women opportunities to clean and cook and bought their photographs to restore their depleted funds.⁴

For thirty days, the unaccompanied women had successfully traversed by foot more than 450 miles during the wettest spring in thirty-three years. Having left Spokane on May 5, they followed the rare route south through Washington and Oregon, then trudged east through the spring snows and thaw over the Blue Mountain range, and on through the swollen river waters threatening the Boise valley. There had been only three days without rain since they started, and they arrived in Boise on June 4 with the city in alarm as the raging Boise River reached flood stage. Their journey astonished people, especially that “the women did not seem discouraged.”⁵

In truth, it was deep discouragement and near despair that set Helga on this dangerous path to solve her family's desperate financial plight. Since the devastating economic depression of 1893, and her husband's accidents, they simply could not pay the mortgage or taxes on their home and farmland near Spokane. Foreclosure loomed during the spring of 1896, sending Helga into a state of fear compounded by sorrow as she also grieved the loss of her beloved twelve-year-old son, Henry, who

had died in January.⁶

When she learned of a \$10,000 wager offered by “eastern parties” connected to the fashion industry to a woman who would walk across America, Helga decided to try.⁷ She could not bear seeing her eight remaining children become homeless and thrown into destitution. She explained to her family and friends, who considered her decision outrageous, that she simply had “to make a stake some way for she did not want to lose the farm. This was the only way she could see to save it. Most of her neighbors in the Norwegian enclave of farms in Mica Creek considered her choice both impossible and immoral, “not something women do.”⁸

The sponsors wanted to prove the physical endurance of women, at a time when many still considered it fashionable to be dependent and weak. Helga accepted certain stipulations within the contract, even agreeing to wear the “reform costume,” a bicycle skirt that sponsors wanted her to advertise once she got to Salt Lake City. She and Clara were allowed to leave with only \$5 a piece and then had to earn their way across; were to visit the state capitals in the west; and were to get the signatures of important political persons along the way.⁹ When she visited Idaho’s Governor William J. McConnell at the State House, a friend of Mayor Belt’s, his expression of interest in their walk and his personal note on their introductory document increased her awareness of the importance of the attempt.¹⁰

As she left Boise with her resolve fortified, and their supplies replenished, Helga began to worry about meeting another stipulation of the contract: The deadline for their walk required they be in New York City within seven months. The rains slowed their earlier days, and it took several days of working in Boise to earn enough money to continue. They needed to arrive in early December, but the sponsors did allow additional days if they became ill.¹¹ Because getting lost in America’s vast continent in the west was one of the dangers, Helga and Clara had planned to follow the railroad routes, including the Union Pacific to Denver.



Helga and Clara planned to follow the railroad routes to avoid getting lost and to find places with food and shelter.
Courtesy Library of Congress. LC Railroad Maps, 64; digital Id g3701p rr000640. Detail of this photograph on [this page](#).

Although enduring drenching rains and wading through hip-deep flood waters in Idaho failed to souse Helga's spirits, it did make her receptive to advice on short cuts. Outside of Shoshone they apparently decided to leave the rails, probably hoping to find a shortcut route that had been used by pioneers seeking a faster way from Pocatello to Boise during the Oregon Trail and gold rush days. For three days Helga and Clara wandered "without a mouthful to eat," eventually becoming lost in the Snake River lava beds of southern Idaho, a treacherous maze of cracked lava, crevices, and sagebrush. Jagged rocks tore up their thin leather shoes and temperatures in the mid-eighties smothered them in their long Victorian dresses. Even more troubling, the fear of rattlesnakes hovered around every step in this barren moonscape land.

During these days of gnawing hunger, intense heat, and disorientation, when all the vocal criticisms of the folly of their venture looked frighteningly true, Helga may have faced her own fears over the real and present dangers of this odyssey. Her Scandinavian neighbors saw her as a "determined woman who achieves what "she makes up her mind" to do, and Helga's actions often reflected her inner confidence and quiet faith.¹³ She had struggled earlier with anxieties, especially during pivotal challenges, such as the time of a debilitating accident or during prairie fires and tornadoes on the Minnesota prairie. Her belief since childhood in the power of God undoubtedly led her to pray for Divine help as she and Clara grew weaker, seemingly helpless in their own ability to decipher how

get out of this strange land.

But the stark danger of their present situation could have caused her to wonder if she naive underestimated the risks she placed Clara and herself in, and too blithely dismissed the fears of those who counseled her to stay home with her husband, Ole, and their children. This life-threatening detour was a mistake so costly that Clara and she risked leaving their bleached bones on the lava beds as the sole surviving remnant of their courageous venture. Helga knew, because they no longer were near the rails, that if they died her husband and children might never know what happened to them, a fear she had not considered with all the other warnings. As the moon rose over the eerie land on their third night lost among the lava rocks, Helga pondered and prayed. Her hope and faith intermingled with alarm at a seemingly impossible situation that her resourcefulness might not be able to solve.



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