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# Letter: Ida M. Tarbell to Nettie Grumbine, August 14, 1934

Tarbell, Ida M.

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August 14, 1934

Dear Nettie Grumbine:

I have been so occupied with things that had to be done that it has been impossible for me to give time, or what was more important thought to the letter I suggested, and I think promised, to write for your evening on Pioneer Women of the Oil Region.

Nothing that has come my way in connection with the jubilee has interested me as much as this. It is a real subject and one that so far as I know has been almost entirely neglected by those who have left records of those early days, as well as by those who have tried to reproduce them. It would not be difficult to prove I am convinced that the rapid civilizing of certain oil farms was due mainly to the women who came into the new settlements with their husbands and children and saw at once that if families were to be protected, the communities made possible for the rearing of children it was they who must take the lead.

I know from my Mother the situation which confronted a woman who came as early as she did into a community which had been quickly thrown together by the striking of oil.

My Father had come early soon after Drake made his discovery - a visit of curiosity to see what all the excitement was about. It had reached him in Waterford Erie County where the family was then living and preparing to migrate soon to Iowa.

Father saw the necessity of better receptacles for holding oil and made a model of a wooden tank which he believed could be built to hold from two hundred to six hundred barrels. He showed it to men drilling on the Rouse farm. At once he received an order. Setting up a shop and ordering lumber he went back to bring us down. I was in my

third year then; my brother, Will, a baby in arms. The trip to Rouseville was made over the hills in a rough lumber wagon and the only tradition that I have of my own connection with it was a story Mother always told when after we moved to Titusville we drove out up Perry Street hill. "This is the hill," she would always say, "we came down when we moved into the oil region." And here you made your only comment on the trip, that it was a "dwefully rough road."

Father had set up shop on the bank of that <sup>oil</sup> creek which was the only transportation for incoming and outgoing supplies. Beside the shop he had built what I suppose we would call today a shanty. As I remember it it was a snug little place, one big living room with an alcove with curtains. It always seemed to me very grand as it was kept for company. The family bedroom was off this room, also the kitchen, and very important in my childhood a passage into the shop. I have never had playthings as wonderful as those long curly shavings.

There was of course no organized community though crowds of men were flooding in on foot and on horse back and frequently with teams, for the teamster was an important part of the economic order. My father soon acquired teams but curiously enough I have no recollection of where they were kept but they were somewhere near by. It was not until we moved to the hill that I remember the barn and the horses.

To bring up children in this spot had dangers, as well as its many obvious difficulties. Across the Run there was a field of pits built for storing oil. Mother always had to have a watchful eye on me, possessed as I was to explore the place. It meant crossing the stream on a footbridge and it might mean my drowning in oil! The first and only switching I remember Mother to have given me was for running away to look over that to me strange and fascinating exhibit.

There was a nearby oil derrick in front of the house. My Mother going to the door one day saw my brother, still in dresses, almost at the top. The temptation to scream must have been great, but she had learned control. "Keep still."

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said the driller and when the child stopped to rest smiled down on them. "Better come down now Willie," he said quietly and Willie taking his time came safely down. You can see what a constant menace that derrick and those oil pits were to her peace of mind. She knew she must watch constantly to keep us out of dangers into which our mischievous, adventurous natures constantly took us.

Mother took her part in the great tragedy of that settlement, the burning of the Rouse well - the first experience I believe that the oil region had with the danger of gas spreading from a flowing well. The clouds were low; the gas had spread until it reached a shanty where a woman had lighted a lamp. There was a frightful explosion. I recall - I have no notes beside me - nineteen men were burned to death in that fire and numbers frightfully injured. One of these injured men, his head and body swollen beyond recognition made his way to my Mother's door. He became the occupant of the bed in the alcove and for three months she attended him.

Other pioneer women in that community were doing the same. They were self-elected nurses in every accident and every illness.

It was not long before my father realized that Rouseville was more than an oil farm. It was an oil town. One of his first moves when he saw that this was to be something more than a stopping place on his way to Iowa, was to build on one of the lovely hills above the valley. The house still stands, much neglected I am afraid, but I never go down the valley on the train that I do not hang out of the window to look at it. It brings back memories of so many things - that old house.

By this time a few of the women were busy developing those institutions which the American pioneer women in all parts of the country have always considered as important as their homes. The first thing was the church and on the hill

across the valley from where we lived a community church was built. It became the Methodist church only because there happened to be more Methodists among the incoming families than of any other denomination. My father and mother became Methodists though they had belonged to the Presbyterians. It was a pleasant building, something of New England about it, and I remember it was the pride of the church to always keep it painted a dazzling white. Here my Mother saw to it that we went to every service; she, herself, taught in the Sunday School. She worked in the relief society which was almost immediately started and in a foreign Mission Society. The Institutional Church of the day was soon in full blast.

It was sometime I remember before a school house was built, but in the meantime one of the best teachers that I ever had, a Mrs. Rice, had agreed with the leading women of the settlement that the children must go to school and in her own house she had opened a school. Here my brother and I went. How long I cannot tell. If I ever went to a public school, and they soon had one of course, I have no recollection of it. The next teacher I remember was Mary French in Titusville - a woman to whom I owe a great deal.

In the six or seven years we lived in Rouseville it changed from a huddle of shanties on a muddy, disorderly flat to an orderly town with shops, a bank, a hotel, a square, homes, schools scattered over the hills. That it was what it was was due to the fact that my Mother and her friends had taken an active and intelligently directed part in seeing that the community into which they had been so accidentally dropped was a fit place to bring up children, a fit place for self-respecting families.

It could have been so easily something else; it certainly would have been if they had not so resolutely held their men to establishing churches, schools, and to fighting the disorderly elements which naturally invade a pioneer community so exclusively male. It might have been another

Petroleum Center where almost every other building on the one long street was a saloon or a gambling place. No women had fought them from the first day they set foot as had been done in Rouseville. "Let them go to Petroleum Center" was one of the phrases that I heard my Mother mutter often through set lips when gossip told of an attempt to establish a saloon or a questionable house. And the men had to see to it that they did go to Petroleum Center or at least leave Rouseville.

There was a good deal that was militant in this effort to make a decent community. My Mother had it in her to be a first class crusader.

I take it that every oil farm that developed an orderly, sober, pleasant community life owed it to a few women who taking hold from the start insisted what they considered corrupting influences be cast out and that they be offset by those things which to their minds made for good.

It is a fine study, this of the pioneer women of the oil regions. I hope one day that the story will be written.

Here is all I can do in the time at my disposal, dear Nettie. I do not know that it will fit at all into your plans. About all it will do, I fear, is to show my interest in your gathering, be an expression of my hope that what you are starting will go on to some fine fruition.

Affectionately

Mrs. Nettie Grumbine  
Titusville, Pa.