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Alvena Bieri

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Watching the Clouds

by Alvena Bieri

My little brother and I used to love watching a blue norther coming in over the plains from the northwest. Maybe we'll get some real snow, we prayed, enough for rolling in, enough to make a snowman. Growing up in Kiowa County on a wheat farm near Hobart, we seldom did. We were like children in *To Kill A Mockingbird* who had to plump out their snowpeople with rocks and dirt. We had other weird weather experiences too, like watching the spring tornado that touched down at our neighbor's house and struck him just as he was going to his mailbox and the killer hailstorm that hit our farm one Easter Sunday afternoon, coming out of sickly green clouds, demolishing our hen house, and killing several of our hens.

But "watching the clouds" for rain on a late afternoon in spring is the most enduring of weather memories. I don't mean watching the clouds to discover funny shapes in them, like big, fluffy Santa Clauses or buffaloes blowing smoke rings. We anxiously peered up into the storm

clouds from our south porch where the cistern was, hoping we would get a really good rain on the wheat. My dad didn't worry much about the scarcity of snow. It was rain he watched for, hoping for a soaker, or a gully washer. Even a rain of half an inch he called "a cotton shower" would help.

A clap of thunder, and if we were lucky, those first big, heavy raindrops would land in the dusty grass to be followed by the wonderfully steady sound of more rain falling. And from the porch my dad would know how much it rained without even going out and checking the rain gauge.

When the rain stopped, my brother and I would go out to play near what we called "the baffle," a tiny dam built by the CCC boys to check soil erosion through the west wheat field. Rain brightened the whole world. Real water flowed through the ditch and even cascaded in little, tiny waves over the baffle. Bullfrogs croaked, crawdads crawled. Rain was a comfort, like a good supper on a cold winter night, or the comforting smell of the excellent straw in the homemade air conditioner in summer. Rain meant life could go on.