



Snelling's stories a double *Blessing* for Drayton residents

By Andrea Winkjer Collin

The dictionary defines a blessing as a special favor, mercy or benefit. For author Lauraine Snelling and the residents of Drayton, the word has taken on more than one of these meanings.

It's the name Snelling has given to the home of the Bjorklunds, the central family in her sweeping multi-volume saga of pioneer life. The Bjorklunds emigrated from Norway in 1880 and settled along the Red River in what is now north-eastern North Dakota. It is also the dream several Drayton residents have to further tell their story and continue to promote this fictional town that is so close to their hearts.

The pioneer experience of the Bjorklunds is similar to Snelling's mother's family. The Moe family came to Park River in 1910 to work for a relative, and some of them remain in the area today. Snelling was born in Chicago and lived there until she was four. From there, she moved to Bemidji, Minnesota, for six years. At age 10, her family relocated to a new farm in Washington State. Snelling and her husband, Wayne, a retired carpenter, have lived for the past nine years in Tehachapi, which is near Bakersfield in south central California.

As far back as high school, Snelling dreamed about writing, especially a series of horse books for girls. It wasn't until her three chil-

dren were teenagers that she attended her first writing workshop. She then began writing in earnest, publishing her first book in 1982. In recent years, Snelling has annually written one contemporary and two historical novels. Her body of work includes more than books – 21 Golden Filly and High Hurdles horse books, several novellas, a Civil War Series, contemporary novels and 15 novels centered in Dakota Territory. She also wrote a series of romances set in the 1910s in Park River, which were brought out in one volume called *Dakota*, and is now out of print.

The four books in the *Dakotah Treasures* series are centered in Medora around the lives of the title characters named Ruby, Pearl, Opal and Amethyst. There are six novels in her *Red River of the North* series, and the three in her *Return to Red River* series. Her newest series, *Daughters of Blessing*, will feature the title characters of Ellie, Sophie, Grace and Astrid. The first in this series, *A Promise for Ellie*, was published in August.

The third *Red River of the North* book, *A Land to Call Home*, is where the women of the community name their town Blessing in 1887. After it was published in 1997, some Drayton residents who were avid readers of these books began to muse about how similar this fictional town was to Drayton. It had nearly the same location on the Red River, with a similar history and people, except Blessing is on the Park River, south of Drayton.

One of these readers was Shirley Raney, who felt such a connection to Snelling and her stories that she tracked her down through her publisher and invited her to Drayton's annual July Riverfest celebration. Snelling accepted the invitation, and in 2001 she and Wayne made their first visit there. As part of the Riverfest activities she presented a seminar for regional writers and was presented with an honorary membership in the newly formed Ox Cart Trails Historical Society.

At that first meeting, they shared the idea of working together to promote Blessing. Snelling was supportive. "Many readers had asked me where they could find the town of Blessing. I started to tell them, 'I made it up, but if it were real it would be just south of Drayton.'" In the past six years, the Snellings have made several trips to Drayton, visiting with their newfound friends and some members of Lauraine's mother's family who still live in the area. There have been more writing seminars, Riverfest celebrations, and meetings with the Ox Cart Trails members and town leaders. Her most recent visit was in October following her sixth year of signing books at the Norsk Høstfest in Minot.

This year it began to take its first steps to officially recognize its Blessing connection. Raney recently told Snelling, "We want Drayton to be the home of Blessing. We want to do for you what the towns featured in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books did to preserve that story."

In April the City Council passed a resolution signed by Drayton Mayor Ardis Olson proclaiming Drayton as the site of the settlement of Blessing and "that the fictitious town of Blessing shall be within the City of Drayton."

A sign along Interstate 29, one-half mile south of Exit 180 and about seven miles south of Drayton, now acknowledges the presence of Blessing. And, Snelling has developed her own website about the town, which includes a "blog" by family matriarch Ingeborg Bjorklund, newspaper pages from *The Blessing Gazette*, and a request for recipes for a Blessing cookbook.

The latest Blessing project in Drayton is the construction of a sod house – a soddie – next to the Oxcart Trails Historical

Society museum. It was built with the same homemade tools like the ones used 200 years ago by area settlers. As they were completing it in the snow the end of October, Marlys Boll, president of the Ox Cart Trails Historical Society, said the weather put the whole experience in perspective.



Pictured at left are Oxcart Trails Historical Society volunteers Bob Merrill and Ron Boll in late October, using authentic tools to build the Blessing "soddie" – a sod cutter and a raker/leveler. Photos from Oxcart Trails Historical Society

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"It helped us understand what the settlers must have experienced as they struggled to build shelter for themselves before winter set in," Boll said.

More projects lie ahead, and neither Snelling nor her Drayton friends know where the blessings will end. They are talking about selling some products that carry the Blessing label, and some residents have refurbished a small houseboat with ideas for events on the Red River and a train replica to transport visitors to area activities. "We are doing a lot of brainstorming now," says Raney. "We may be starting small but we have dreams here for bigger things!"

Snelling describes this relationship well in the words on her Blessing, North Dakota, calling card –

Blessing is not Drayton and Drayton is not Blessing, but Blessing is in Drayton and We are blessed.

For more information on Snelling's Red River and Dakotah Treasures books contact Bethany House Publishers at 1-800-877-2665, www.bethanyhouse.com or www.laurainesnelling.com.

Snelling's Blessing website can be found at www.blessingnd.com and her email address is TLSnelling@yahoo.com.

Wayne and Lauraine Snelling and their dog, Chewy, camped with their bus at the Drayton Park during their most recent visit to the town in October.



This is the first of Snelling's *Daughters of Blessing* series, which was published in August. Above is a composite of photos of early Drayton, which are on Snelling's www.blessingnd.com website.