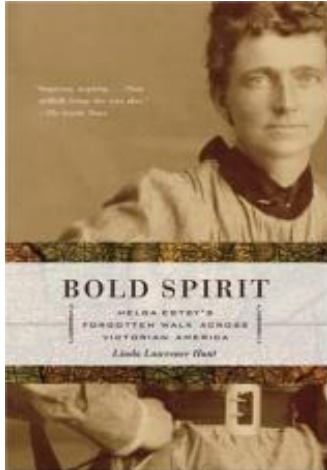


# Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America

by Linda Lawrence Hunt

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## About the Book

In 1896, a Norwegian immigrant and mother of eight children named Helga Estby was behind on taxes and the mortgage when she learned that a mysterious sponsor would pay \$10,000 to a woman who walked across America.

Hoping to win the wager and save her family's farm, Helga and her teenaged daughter Clara, armed with little more than a compass, red-pepper spray, a revolver, and Clara's curling iron, set out on foot from Eastern Washington. Their route would pass through 14 states, but they were not allowed to carry more than five dollars each. As they visited Indian reservations, Western boomtowns, remote ranches and local civic leaders, they confronted snowstorms, hunger, thieves and mountain lions with equal aplomb.

Their treacherous and inspirational journey to New York challenged contemporary notions of femininity and captured the public imagination. But their trip had such devastating consequences that the Estby women's achievement was blanketed in silence until, nearly a century later, Linda Lawrence Hunt encountered their extraordinary story.

## Discussion Guide

1. Why has Hunt titled her book **Bold Spirit**? How does Helga demonstrate qualities of boldness? In what ways does she defy the expectations of her time and culture?
2. Raised in a cultured environment in Norway, Helga was bilingual, while her husband Ole was never fully comfortable with English. When the young family lived in an isolated sod house on the Minnesota prairie, only Norwegian was spoken because of Ole. How did Helga's higher level of education and ease with both written and spoken English affect her position in her family?

3. Hunt had to rely on a great deal of imagination and speculation to write this story, as firsthand evidence is now so sparse. But rather than try to smooth over this problem, she makes it an important part of the story. Is this strategy effective?

4. Two of Ole and Helga's children died of diphtheria during her absence as she walked across the country with Clara. Hunt emphasizes that doctors did not know the cause of the disease, which added to the general fear and the tendency to assign blame. 'Although doctors' experiences showed that even the very neatest families living in commodious homes could suffer as much as those in small squalid hovels, the general perception prevailed that poor housekeeping contributed to a family's tragedy" [p. 36]. What kind of pressure would this have placed on women and especially on mothers? How did such perceptions contribute to Helga's family's inability to ever forgive her for what happened while she was gone?

5. Helga and Ole decide to move to Spokane as a result of early marketing campaigns designed to draw people to that area. Hunt writes, 'One brochure particularly addressed the quality of educated people who lived in Spokane Falls and the educational opportunities for children, a topic that would have drawn Helga's attention" [p. 41]. And later, when Helga decides to walk across the country on a wager, in order to win money to save their home from foreclosure, she is part of a marketing campaign to sell the new bicycle skirts for the 'new woman.'" What significance does advertising have in this story and in the westward expansion of a young nation?

6. In 1888 Helga sued the city of Spokane Falls after slipping on a city street. 'Her refusal to remain invisible and silent on the effects of a public event on her private domestic life clearly countered prevailing custom. It was so unusual for women to testify in court, that their public presence often caused a sensation" [pp. 50-51]. What does this event reveal about Helga's character? How might this experience have influenced her later decision to take the mysterious wager?

7. In 1888 Helga sued the city of Spokane Falls after slipping on a city street. 'Her refusal to remain invisible and silent on the effects of a public event on her private domestic life clearly countered prevailing custom. It was so unusual for women to testify in court, that their public presence often caused a sensation" [pp. 50-51]. What does this event reveal about Helga's character? How might this experience have influenced her later decision to take the mysterious wager?

8. Hunt recounts a story that Helga told to her children, about how she as a child questioned the story of Jonah and the whale, telling her religion teacher that it did not seem realistic or possible. Her teacher's reply, 'Don't you know, Helga, that anything and everything is possible with God?" [p. 81] became a 'life-motto" for Helga. What is the significance of this story? What does it reveal about Helga? What effect might such a belief have had in the face of fire, disease, deaths of children, and economic hardship?

9. One of the issues in the culture of Helga's time was a belief in the physical inadequacy of women. How did this idea shape women's roles in the family? How would someone like Helga, with her self-reliant mind and physical stamina, have seen herself in relation to this idea of women's fragility?

**10.** Helga was a lifelong reader who understood the power of stories. She knew how to gather and hold the attention of local newspapers as she and Clara walked across the country, and she wrote a book about her adventures. Why did her daughters find it necessary to erase this story? Why did her children find it impossible to forgive their mother for what happened in her absence? What sort of cultural beliefs, or family dynamics, kept them from seeing their mother's story as something to treasure?

**11.** When questioned by family, friends, and reporters about her reasons for undertaking the journey, Helga always replied that her motive was to make money to save the family farm from the threatened foreclosure. Did she have other motives as well?

**12.** Although the issue of women's skirts might seem trivial today, in the late nineteenth century it was linked with the most basic civil rights, such as women's right to the vote. Hunt quotes one advocate of dress reform as saying, 'Until a woman is allowed to have ankles, there is no hope for her brains' [p. 119]. Is there any comparable issue with women's clothing in today's American society?

**13.** Clara plays an important part in this adventure, but there is very little surviving evidence of who she was. The reader learns that she was 'sick of the trip' [p. 164], that she disagreed with her mother politically, and that she later distanced herself from her family and changed her name. Is it possible from the evidence Hunt includes to get much of sense of what kind of person Clara was and what effect this journey might have had on her?

**14.** Hunt writes, 'When an experience seems incomprehensible to others, it can contribute to the silencing of stories. None of Helga's neighbors could imagine what she encountered because such an endeavor existed outside their own knowledge' [p. 248]. In spite of the tragedy in her life, Helga's is in many ways a story of the power of imagination. What cultural forces of Helga's time worked against such acts of imagination for women and for men? And how did seemingly 'reckless' choices, such as Helga's, affect the culture in turn? Are there similar risky choices, or acts of imagination, in the world for women today?

**15.** In the concluding chapter, Hunt presents six threads that contributed to the silencing of Helga's story. Do they accurately characterize the silencing of stories in other families and cultures? How widespread is such a practice?

**16.** How do family stories, passed down from generation to generation, both enhance and influence larger histories of a given place or time?

## Author Bio

## Critical Praise

"Allows us to follow Helga Estby not only across the physical landscape of 1896 America . . . but across the country's social, political, economic, and cultural landscape as well. . . . Fascinating."

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