

I meant Sadie no harm. She arrived from Britain without much orientation! So don't blame me. I simply do what I've always done. If people stick their houses up like sore thumbs, they're going to get hurt! I'll mess with their stuff. Drive them to madness. The devil incarnate, you'll declare. And yet tomorrow I'll sneak up carrying the freshest of aromas, and you'll declare me as your lover.

Early settlers knew me all too well. Especially the families who established farmsteads on the open prairie. It takes a good 30-40 years to benefit from the maple, pine and cottonwood shelterbelts folks planted around their yards. But even once sheltering trees are set in place, I'll find ways to howl around, mercilessly foiling their measly efforts.

I don't pick favourites, but if I did, Sadie Benton would've been easy to choose. She married Joe, a thoughtful local farmer. Had two children. And contented herself as indispensable to her pioneer community. Baking for one charity or another and always tending to the health of those with a bit less fortune. Their house, like most, stood square, defiant, weathered.

Sadie, though, had dark places she'd reveal only under candlelight. Like this piece of journal scrawled then sucked through a bedroom window and stuck to a willow bunch in a nearby hollow.

*"Dust in clouds go past my door, and winds that  
scream past the house at night,  
Whispering things they have no right, even to think of,  
much less say.  
I hate the wind with its evil spite, and it hates me as  
well with a hate as deep.  
It hisses and jeers when I try to sleep. As it seizes the  
window frames,  
Raving, cursing and calling them names, Cruel as only  
the wind can be,  
It isn't the windows it's shaking. It's me."*

Sadie, sadly, went mad from the drought that killed her flowers, the loneliness from lack of money to visit home, from the constant tasks and finally, from the wind I brought her way. In those days, when someone fell into prairie madness, the neighbours would say, "she went a little bit queer". It was common enough. Especially with women, separated as they were by open spaces.

Sadie didn't see the madness coming. So busy she was with chores and generousities. Until the day she stuffed a store toy into her bag. Got lost wandering the streets. Was found in the park, staring without a

thought for her family. Sadie was fortunate though. She'd so attentively cared for a community that now rallied around. Offered a holiday in the city. Tended by a lady doctor. Who calmed Sadie's self-hate. Reassuring her of approaching mental health.

Prairie madness was well known to settler communities in the Canadian and American west. But when authors like Laura Ingalls Wilder in the Little House on the Prairie gave us the knife-wielding Mrs. Brewster and our own Nellie McClung wrote about Sadie's madness, their publishers argued against such negative stories. Our authors persevered. We're stronger for it.

Sadie's a character in the Nellie McClung short story, "The Neutral Fuse". Nellie grew up on a farm along the Souris River where she observed her community both struggle and persevere. She later went on to lead the woman's movement in Manitoba, eventually winning the right for women to vote across Canada.

Learn about Turtle Mountain Souris Plains Heritage Association at [vantagepoints.ca](http://vantagepoints.ca). Other stories in this series can be found there.

See ya later.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cn6gwk.13>  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/326529477/Prairie-Madness>  
<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/prairie-madness-study-site-nce-great-plains>

