

THE LITTLE HOUSE SYNDROME

Dawn Anderson—Department of English

When I first heard about the *big change*, I was serving up scrambled eggs to a bunch of cub scouts one morning. A neighbor rushed in with the news just as I was about to unload a spoonful of eggs onto a paper plate.

“Hey, I want more than that!” the kid with the plate demanded. His glasses magnified his eyes about seven times.

“Guess what, everybody,” beamed the neighbor. “Ricks College is going to become a four-year university!”

“That’s wonderful!” said a woman helping in the kitchen.

“I can’t believe it!” said another adult.

“I want more eggs!” said the kid with the thick glasses.

My response was to drop the spoon in the pan, spraying chunks of egg all over his blue uniform. It was an accident. Sort of.

It is human nature to resist change, and I am no exception. I like my town to be small, my local economy to be prosperous but contained, and my newspaper boy to be a kid I recognize. I don’t like changes that bring taller structures, heavier traffic, and more noise. But such idealism has little to do with the real world which, as Dr. Seuss notes in *The Lorax*, keeps *biggering* and *biggering*.

Change is the central theme of one of my favorite picture books, *The Little House*, written in the 1940’s by Virginia Lee Burton (author of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*). In circular strokes of bright crayon, Burton depicts the story of the Little House, built on a hillside and surrounded by apple trees and daisies. The personified house wonders what it must be like to live in the city, whose lights glimmer in the distance.

The little house
doesn’t have to
wonder what the
city is like
anymore—it has
come to her.

Seasons pass, children grow up and leave, changes envelope the countryside at a pace appreciated only by the time-lapse of turning pages. Soon new roads are built around the Little House. Then horseless carriages putter past, gas stations spring up, and so on as the city advances with its tenement housing and increasing traffic. Prefaced by chronological phrases like *pretty soon*, and *before long*, each page’s narrative tracks a changing landscape: the little house doesn’t have to wonder what the city is like anymore—it has come to her. “‘This must be living in the city,’ thought the Little House, and didn’t know whether she liked it or not.” Everything moved much faster now, and the Little House “only saw the sun at noon, and didn’t see the moon or stars at night at all because the lights of the city were too bright.”

I see the Little House Syndrome everywhere I go these days in residential and business construction. What happens to the Little House is happening

to our town and will only intensify as Ricks College develops into a larger university. But this is a good thing, right? We all benefit to some degree from an improved economy and tax base, to say nothing of the increased opportunities for our students who will find greater access to a Church-owned school.

But change has its price, as Burton reminds us with her Little House.

For me, there really is such a structure. Just north of town my grandma still lives in the same house where she has spent most of her adult life, tending the garden, hanging her laundry out on the clothes line, raking up the rolling mounds of leaves that fill her yard every autumn. Built in 1940 of logs, the house was eventually shored up with pinkish brick, just like the one in Burton's book. It even has a window on either side of the door and smiling steps. Like Burton's illustrations, this simple construction gives Grandma's home the semblance of a face.

When my brothers and I visited our grandparents, we called it a trip to the country. On the broad acreage of their property we found endless adventures—abandoned chicken coops, rusting machinery, thickets of alfalfa, the fleeting white bottoms of rabbit feet. Once I spotted a three pound trout swimming up the little ditch that bordered the lawn. The town of Rexburg seemed far away to us then. But growth and change were abstractions when we were young, and we didn't notice the city coming.

For the last twenty years, however, I've watched the steady erosion of farmland around my grandparent's house. The fishing trail my uncle and I once used to access the Teton River is buried under a broad black-top now, and I can find the way to my grandmother's by the neon glow of a fast food drive-thru. Sentimental attachments aside, I can't say I've suffered from this progress, for like everybody else in town, I take advantage of the commercial development. I buy my groceries and my milkshakes and my printer paper in big, bright buildings, knowing full well that the same development which brought me new shopping convenience has steadily consumed the sacred ground of my childhood.

Change is not always forward momentum at a gradual pace, as I learned from the Teton flood disaster. There we were, getting comfortable with the idea of continuous civic safety, and then a dam breaks. When a formidable, man-made structure fails catastrophically as the Teton Dam did in 1976, change becomes a verb, rushing head-on into your life. You don't have time to stop and consider why such things happen, you just grab what you can and get out.

Even so, as a child I remember a thrill of excitement when I heard the news. Wow, I thought. Our own real-life disaster! Crouching on the roof of a hillside home, a dozen or so of us kids watched the smoky distances and pestered the adults with questions: would there be twenty foot waves? Would our toys be safe? Could we go wading? When the

**The same
development which
brought me
new shopping
convenience has
steadily consumed
the sacred ground
of my childhood.**

first brown thread of water appeared on the horizon, we sucked in our breaths. Here it comes. But as the flood advanced, it became apparent that these were not towering waves. In fact, our very own disaster seemed to be no more than an agitated slurry, and I was a little disappointed. My parents viewed it differently as they watched the water move rapidly through Smith Park, boiling with brown foam and rounding up hard at the base of the Rexburg Bench. I'm certain they were distraught to see my neighbor's house, swept off its foundation and bobbed like a tugboat along 3rd East and around the corner to head down Main Street as if someone were standing at the kitchen window piloting it out to sea.

**I remember my
mother gripping
the steering wheel,
white-knuckled
and sobbing as
we pulled up in
front of the
temporary shelter.**

When the flood receded enough for us to get into our house, we found a three foot water mark on the walls. The hour of sandbagging before the impact had been laughably inadequate. The damage was much worse than anyone had expected, for the water picked up everything on its way down the valley from many square miles of farming topsoil to swing sets and animal carcasses. Every item we hadn't had time to store upstairs was missing in the debris or completely ruined by a viscous, slate-colored mud that dried like cement and smelled like death. We spent all day pulling belongings out of the muck and tossing them into two piles: the salvageable and the unsalvageable.

I remember my mother gripping the steering wheel, white-knuckled and sobbing as we pulled up in front of the temporary shelter—which, in this case, happened to be the Ricks College dormitories. I sat in the back seat, looking glumly out the window, dimly aware that the excitement of having our own disaster was evaporating.

"Why are you crying?" I finally asked. It was an innocent question. A stupid one, too.

With some effort she lifted her head and sighed. Without looking at me, she said, "Because our lives will never be the same."

I never forgot that statement. It held such a simple, sweeping truth. And she was right.

We recovered. We cleaned and rebuilt our home and our lives. But this single event changed us, forced us to reconsider the comfortable parameters of our ordinary days. And, for awhile anyway, we learned to esteem the simple things we took for granted as Americans, such as access to clean water and reliable telephone service.

Many locals are proud of our transition from a federally-declared disaster area to a healthy, reconstructed community. The great flood of '76 may have exposed a careless complacency about sudden change. In the meantime, though, it has become an emblem of our resilience. What does not drown us makes us stronger.

Sudden, unexpected change can surge into our lives and then ebb out again, leaving us drained of resources and resolve. But even when

we see changes coming, as the Little House does, it doesn't make us feel any less vulnerable to them. For example, here at Ricks we've been expecting a number of physical transitions on our campus in conjunction with new educational goals. Still, even though we were given months to prepare for its demolition, it's been hard for some of us to let go of the Jacob Spori building, because it has been the one constant on an evolving campus landscape. Never mind that renovation was considered logistically and economically unfeasible. The Spori was a monument to Rexburg's past, erected by our stalwart founders—sturdy, practical, unglamorous, just as they were. It was the Little House around which the modern campus grew. We cherished it as a rock and mortar flashback to a simpler age predating the *before longs* and the *pretty soon*s. Its demolition is an unsettling reminder that things change.

The Spori was a monument to Rexburg's past, erected by our stalwart founders—sturdy, practical, unglamorous, just as they were.

I happened to be out running that dark morning after the Spori caught fire. I jogged up behind a small crowd of students whose faces reflected the amber-orange flames and stood there watching through the vapor of my own breath, a deep sense of loss settling over me. "It's almost beautiful," one of the students said. And it was. The fire fluttered and streamed out of the dark windows and off the roofless upper floor, as if someone were standing on the deck of a ship, waving flaming handkerchiefs, bidding farewell.

I thought of the Little House syndrome that morning. I lingered there in the cold predawn, feeling vulnerable and awed, remembering my mother's words.

Because we can never be assured of permanence in this lifetime, we learn to accept change on its own terms. We adapt because our lives never will and never *can* be the same.

The Little House remains the same, however, even though external forces complicate her existence. Surrounded by skyscrapers and elevated train tracks, Burton's illustrations make the house look impossibly enmeshed in the city infrastructure. But the Little House finally undergoes her own transition when a descendent of the original owner recognizes the shabby structure as the one where *her* grandmother grew up, "only *that* Little House was way out in the country on a hill covered with daisies and apple trees growing all around." The house is jacked up on a truck bed and relocated away from the city and onto a country hillside.

Our lives churn in a kaleidoscope of transition. Birth. Marriage. Children and others who come into our homes and leave us eventually. Changing jobs. Opportunities. Growth. Loss. And the ultimate rubric of mortal transition—death and resurrection.

Perhaps there is a settling between the give and take of change, for even as the Little House celebrates her new location in the country, the city lights loom inevitably in the distance. Nevertheless, she is content.

**If nothing else, the
paradox of change
delineates what
we value the most.**

If nothing else, the paradox of change delineates what we value the most—and what we are willing to give up for something better. As we experience the uneasy stretch of becoming a four-year university and all that that implies, it might be wise to remember the story of the Little House. “The stars twinkled above her,” concludes Burton. “A new moon was coming up. It was Spring... and all was quiet and peaceful in the country.”

Our transition as a college and a community will likely be just as complex and hopeful. Unquestionably, it will come with a price. But, with any luck, we’ll settle into our own peace. ☺