

Excerpt from The Kowalik Ranch

*This is a work of historical fiction about the immigration of my great-grandparents, Francis and Justyna Kowalik, from Rusocice, Poland to the United States in the late 1800s. I am placing my ancestors into a historical account of the area around The Dalles, Oregon on the Columbia River, specifically the land that is now known as the Dalles Mountain Ranch. In these chapters, Justyna, age 19, meets Harriet Gulick, a Wasco native who is married to Henry Gulick, a white fishman who works for Seufert Brothers Cannery. Together, they run the Indian Shaker Church and community (the buildings are still standing today near The Dalles Dam).*

## Chapter 3

### Harriet

On Saturday mornings at the ferry landing when the merchants would gather, Harriet was at the center of every conversation. She wore colorful skirts and a thick fur wrap in the winter. The braids of her dark hair were always pinned together on top of her head, adding five inches to her small frame. She would negotiate the price for the fish she had for sale with a serious tone, her dark eyes directed at the customer with barely an expression, speaking with a sense of authority to women and men alike. Once a deal had been made, her wide dark cheeks would suddenly give way and then her teeth would flash, a warm-hearted laugh at the ready.

She was a member of the Wasco Tribe and was well known in the area as the wife of Henry Gulick, who had a reputation as a skilled fisherman on the unpredictable and sometimes scary shores of the Columbia River. He was also the minister of a small Shaker Church that was built several years ago upriver from the city center. It was a place where members of the tribe and the immigrants would come together in peace for prayer rituals and as a sort of community center where support would be given for everyday problems.

My first job that spring was to plant a garden large enough to ensure plenty of food to get us through our first winter. I needed help and had an idea: Harriet.

I had only seen her from afar. That day, I finally had the courage to talk to her.

“Dzień dobry, good morning,” I said. As I took Harriet’s hand on that fateful spring day at the dock, we locked eyes. There was an instant connection, even though I was new to the area and still learning to speak English and she was so experienced and well-known. She reminded me of my aunt Marianna in Poland with her colorful scarves and bright beaded necklaces. I was

just nineteen years old and Harriet was a married woman with a young child, yet we had in common what every woman in the West had at their core – the courage to overcome the elements and survive.

“We welcome you to this place,” said Harriet smiling. She spoke English with a distinct accent, the influence of her native dialect – Kiksht – was apparent.

“My name is Justyna. Can you help me? I need to grow food. Over there.” I pointed across the river into the green hills in the distance.

“Yes, I know this place. The land is full of life,” she said, explaining that her family had camped there in the summers when she was young, describing how the area had good soil and drainage. She spoke with confidence and kindness.

“There are many good things to eat there already – roots, wild carrots, berries, nuts, and acorns,” she said warmly. She also said that the land was full of basalt rock that could hinder the plowing. Selecting the right location would be important.

“I brought seeds with me from Poland,” I said with a heavy heart knowing that so many years had passed. “I can show them to you.”

“We women will do this work together,” said Harriet.

I was so grateful that she spoke to me in such a caring way, even though we had just met. She was generous with her advice. I imagined that she had seen many hardships in the city, on the land, and at the Shaker Church, particularly for the women who had just arrived here. Perhaps Harriet could see something in me – my courage and willingness to work hard – that led her to agree to come to the homestead in three weeks to help with the planting. She said that she would bring with her some of the hardiest seeds to help me get started – corn, potatoes, beans, peppers, squash and pumpkins – once I had completed the weary and tedious task of preparing the land, just as we had done every spring in Poland. I needed at least an acre tilled and ready to go so there would be enough food to get us through the summer and winter.

It was exhausting work. But the two mules Francis and I had purchased from a neighbor were even-tempered and had proven themselves strong and compliant during those three weeks, even when they were startled after coming across a young rattlesnake in the grass. The land was ready and as each day grew warmer, my sense of urgency increased.

The day of Harriet’s visit arrived. To accomplish the task at hand, she would be staying two nights, bringing Jackson, her six-year-old son, with her. I woke early to the sound of sparrow

and thrush birdsong – a beautiful spring day – and started to prepare breakfast. The smell of the coffee and bacon rousted Francis out of bed.

“Kochanie, my love,” he said. The roughness of his cheek against mine was a comfort. “After breakfast, I’ll feed and water the mule for your trip.”

I took his hand in mine and kissed it, grateful for his care and the endless days of work to build our house and barns. I enjoyed our time together in the mornings and looked for ways to let Francis know of my love for him. Today, I had included his favorite jam – apricot – on the sandwich I had made for his lunch later in the day.

After he left for the paddock to continue construction of the barn, I hitched the mule to the simple wooden wagon and headed down the hillside. It felt like a next chapter was beginning for me in my life here. I was hoping that Harriet would become a friend.

I never tired of the view – the rolling smooth green hills undulated with textures and shapes, the mighty river below, the snow-capped mountain in the distance. The brown hulking shapes of the hills in winter had exploded into the brightest green I had ever seen. Sunlight streaked through a bank of pillow blue clouds and reflected in the surface of the river. The sky and the river were connected. The river was a bright silver ribbon winding its way through the bottom of the valley as far as the eye could see.

This land was so different from Poland. Here, the hills were almost part of the sky. I could see for miles. In Poland, our farm was one of many that created a flat and dull checkerboard. Facing East toward the route that Francis and I had taken from Chicago just eight months ago, I lifted my face to the sky and took a deep breath, remembering those early days together.

As I made my way on the two-hour ride to the waterfront, I savored my favorite spots along the route – the grove of locust trees shading a large warren of ground squirrels, the bend in the road through the rimrock giving way to the burbling sound of the creek, the irrigation tub full of holes that was a reminder of the pioneers who had abandoned their dreams for a new life here.

Weeks ago, when Francis and I were moving onto our land, I made many trips on my own in this wagon between the waterfront and the homestead. On one of those trips, I created two secret shrines. Here was the first: a small metal religious charm nailed to a young maple tree with a beautiful bark texture growing at the edge of the road. I had felt compelled to mark this spot in some way as a sign of my commitment and hope for our future here. It wasn’t visible

from the road, but I knew it was there – the Virgin Mary who would protect and care for Francis and me and the family we would have. Passing by, I made the sign of the cross.

Traveling further down the hill, I came upon the second shrine: a white stone placed on small waterfall coming through the basalt rock very close to the road. I had found the stone on the bank of the Columbia River and had carried it in my pocket for many weeks. It fit perfectly in the palm of my hand, a comfort and a reminder of the strength it would take to be successful here. I placed the stone on the waterfall with a decision to let the grief and strife of my life with my father and sister go. Today, I glanced at the waterfall, so beautiful with the moss starting to show small white flowers, and saw the rock there. I smiled. The sting of those hard days in Poland was starting to soften.

I arrived at the waterfront in time to see the ferry departing from the south side to Rockland. There was no wind. The water was calm.

“Dzień dobry, good morning,” I said to Olaf, the dockmaster.

“Guten Morgen, Justyna,” he replied with great enthusiasm. His wife had given birth to their first child, a son, last week. Olaf glowed with pride when I congratulated him.

I looked out at the ferry as it made its way across the divide. The deck was sparse, with few people and supplies. And then I saw Harriet. She was standing proudly at the helm of the ferry. Her colorful skirt was flapping in the breeze, her shoulders were covered with a vibrant hood and scarf, and her face was shining in the morning sunlight. Her shoulders were square to the land and the hills. Her expression was one of peace and determination without a sense of urgency or any distraction. Her brown cheeks were set.

When the ferry arrived at the dock, Olaf grabbed the ropes, and the bustle of unloading began. Harriet disembarked carrying a large satchel, her son Jackson following closely behind. I stepped forward to greet her. Harriet looked serious. She set her bag down and took both of my hands in hers and leaned forward so that we were touching forehead to forehead saying in both her native tongue and then English, “Let us honor those that came before us in all that we do.” And then her expression changed, a wide smile appeared, and she laughed. “And now we get to work!”

## Chapter 4

### The Garden

Harriet and I sat next to each other on the bench of the wagon as we made our way to the ranch, with Jackson at her side. We swayed back and forth in sync with each step that the mule took, winding our way up the green hillside, rounding the corners through the rock formations. The sun was warm on our shoulders and the conversation was easy. Harriet talked about her family and the church community and told me the names of some of the landmarks and areas along the river that were sacred to her tribe.

We arrived and unloaded Harriet's sack. Jackson jumped down from the wagon. He was the perfect combination of his mother and father. He had the respectful mannerisms and connection to the land from his mother's native ways and was at the same time so similar to the other boys in Dalles City with his modern clothes and interests. He gave the mule a quick rub on his nose, and then skipped toward the creek with the chicken coop nearby.

"The weather is good," I said nervously. "Your bed is in the barn. Francis put in a stove to keep warm. I made bread this morning and soup. I want to show you the creek..."

Harriet took my hand and said, "Sister, come and sit. We will talk."

I was surprised. We had so much to do.

But we sat in the two simple pine rung chairs just inside the doorway of the mud brick home. Sunlight streamed in, piercing through the gloom. The vibrant blue sky was a sharp contrast to the musty earthen air inside.

Harriet was so serious. I felt like I was in a confessional in my home church in Poland and became anxious again.

"First, we will prepare for our work. We will speak the words that need to be spoken," Harriet said. She closed her eyes and softly said a few words in Kiksht, her native language. The rhythm of the words was reminiscent of other languages I had heard but with throaty and clicking sounds. When she was done, Harriet sat still and silent with her eyes closed.

I closed my eyes, too, and came to stillness. I didn't need to confess to Harriet what was really on my heart – the constant longing to return to Poland even though I knew that there was nothing there for me, a deep sense of anxiousness that over time Francis would turn rough and

coarse like the other men in the area, the sorrow over the loss of the baby and a fear that my dream of having a family would never happen. But I wanted Harriet to be my friend. I wanted to show Harriet that I was capable.

Of course, we needed to pray before beginning our work, I thought. “Our Father, who art in heaven,” I started. When I was done, I made the sign of the cross and opened my eyes.

“Who is your father?” Harriet asked.

I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“God?” I asked.

“Tell me about your father, from when you were a child,” said Harriet.

I didn’t want to talk about this. And then I relented.

“His name is Kazimierz Hajto,” I said. “He was a good man… no, he was a bad man. He tried to be good but there was so much work to do. And then mother died. He was so mad,” I said, starting to wring my hands. “My brothers were not helping. We had a hard life. I had to leave.”

Harriet took my hands in hers and smiled.

“The Great Spirit is in all things. He is the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father. The Earth is our Mother,” said Harriet.

I started to cry.

Harriet sat still and silent for a few moments, and then she went on, speaking softly in her native tongue, this time looking directly at me.

I stopped crying and look deeply into Harriet’s eyes, accepting everything she had to offer.

“The Great Spirit is our Father,” I said softly, feeling nervous. Was this an affront to my faith? To my family? And yet it felt good. “The Earth is our Mother.” We smiled at each other.

“We are ready now to plant,” said Harriet gently and she stood up. I rose to my feet and we embraced. Holding hands, we stepped across the threshold into the bright day.

*Lisa Orkisz Scardina  
June 2025*