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Review of Addie of the Flint Hills: A Prairie Child During the Depression (1915-1935) by Adaline Sorace

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In her early nineties, decades after she had left the Kansas Flint Hills, Adaline Beedle Sorace sat down with her daughter to write her memoirs. With extraordinarily vivid recall, she evokes the place and the people of her youth, weaving the strands of a family and personal saga that stretches from the 1860s to the 1930s.

"Addie" Sorace's maternal forebears, the pioneering Rogler family, were German immigrants who settled in Chase County, Kansas, in the 1860s. Over the decades, the Roglers acquired thousands of acres of rolling grassland and became one of the wealthiest and most influential cattle ranching families in the Great Plains.

Addie's mother (also Adaline), daughter of the youngest and perhaps least successful Rogler brother, had a college education and was about to embark on a career in New York when she fell in love with a Chase County neighbor, Carl Beedle. Adaline became a farm wife, left alone in the little town of Matfield Green for months at a time with the care of three children, a farmstead, and her widowed, alcoholic father, while her husband, who farmed and ranched only in the summer, spent the winters trying to make a living in the Oklahoma oilfields.

Sorace's story is full of affection for her large, extended family and her home, but her honesty has not permitted her to romanticize either the poverty and hard work of her childhood, or her struggles with her mother, who appears to have suffered from severe depression, which she took out on her eldest daughter. Interestingly, Sorace chooses to let us see the beauty of the Flint Hills and her own passionate attachment to its landscape, most often through the eyes of her mother:

Chase County is "big sky" country; you see the sky—you see it most. And it is a shifting, chang-
thing, like the sea for a sailor. It fills the field of vision. . . . Mother always kept the sun shining through the windows in our house. . . . She loved to see the endless views of the Flint Hills and the sky, her garden and the iridescent hummingbirds darting in her hollyhocks. . . . Fate would draw us away from Matfield in the years to come, and each time Mother was heartbreakingly homesick.

Farm prices dropped in the 1920s and many rural banks closed. Even the Roglers lost land for a time. Prime cattle worth $400 a head sold at auction for $40. In 1928, Addie’s father moved the family to Utah and then Nevada, where he worked in a series of mines, until those, too, gave out. In 1932, despite the worsening Depression, the family returned to the Matfield Green farm where Addie had been raised. In 1934, drought and dust storms hit Chase County as they did almost everywhere in Kansas, but, says Sorace, “We were lucky. The Flint Hills had grass that firmly locked the soil in place; even during the worst of the drought our soil held.”

The book ends with Addie’s 1935 departure for a nursing career, a story Sorace is planning to tell in a subsequent book. Scholars and general readers interested in American rural childhood, mother-daughter relationships, Great Plains cattle culture, and the personal and economic toll of the Great Depression will find much to value in this honest, unsentimental memoir of the early twentieth century.

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