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“MEN ALONE CANNOT SETTLE A COUNTRY”

DOMESTICATING NATURE IN THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA GRASSLANDS

CHAD MONTRIE

When she traveled to Kansas from New York in November 1875 to join a husband who had gone west six months earlier, Sarah Anthony faced bitter disappointment. Her daughter, who made the journey as well, remembered that her mother often cried during the first few months. “[T]hese pioneer women [were] so suddenly transplanted from homes of comfort in the eastern states,” wrote the daughter, “to these bare, treeless, wind swept, sun scorched prairies—with no conveniences—no comforts, not even a familiar face. Everything

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was so strange and so different from the life they had always known and with nothing to encourage them, but the thought of duty and that in proving faithful to its demands.” What caused Anthony’s discontent, at least in part, was an unfamiliar and alien landscape, as yet untouched by the hand of domesticity. With dedication and fortitude, however, the place could be remade.¹

By the early twentieth century, the initial struggle of settlement was becoming more a distant memory than a recent reality for the original pioneers and their children, and their opinion of the surrounding landscape was changing. After sixteen hard years on a Kansas farm, homesteader Anne Bingham lived out the rest of her life in town, and from there she described a place quite different from the one her family first confronted. “A ride out in the country,” she wrote in the 1920s, “shows the results of early days in the glory of the trees, the fine farm buildings, modern and beautiful, and near neighbors and schools, houses, country churches, orchards and paved roads to town and market.” The grassland was transformed and homesteads improved, making the land a more habitable place.²

For Sarah Anthony and Anne Bingham, as well as countless other women and men in the Kansas-Nebraska Plains, the tasks at hand were to survive and prosper, which in their minds required bringing the natural world around them under control. Because the first couple of years after settlement were often so dire and critical, these efforts to make a living from the land necessitated that all members of a family production unit be willing to do various types of work. Gender mattered less than it previously had when it came to dividing labor. Even then, the primary way women contributed to subduing nature was by imposing domesticity on it, and over time this became their exclusive form of interaction with it. Near the turn of the century, their confrontation with the landscape coincided with campaigns to promote "domestic economy" and "scientific housekeeping." These refined ideals distinguished homesteaders' work from the endeavors of previous American settlers, and because labor is an inextricable part of people's relationship with nature, the new ideals also shaped the way women used and thought about the environment.

At the start of their new life in the Plains, women homesteaders' attitude toward the land and its other inhabitants was usually antagonistic. Despite occasional recognition of beauty and expression of awe, they tended to think of nature as an impediment or willingly hostile adversary, something to overcome or tame through work. As the early years of settlement passed, the gendered division of labor became more rigid, and as their sphere was increasingly limited to the home and its surrounding area, women's relationship with the physical and organic environment changed. The passing of the critical beginning period on the farm, as well as the reassertion of more traditional gender roles, happened at the same time many women began to adopt contemporary domestic economy ideals and embrace modern household conveniences. Consequently, early-twentieth-century homesteader women and their daughters were physically and, in a different way from before, mentally separated from

nature. They regarded nature as something beyond the threshold of the farmhouse or in the distant countryside, and they were more inclined to see it through the rosy lens of romanticism.

Approaching the study of frontier women in this way draws on but also extends and deepens the work of various other scholars. More than two decades ago Sandra Myres addressed some of the aspects of Western women's lives covered in this essay. However, her work was primarily descriptive and took a less critical look at the interplay between gender and the environment. Julie Roy Jeffrey took a step in that direction to make the important point that gender affected the way women saw the Great Plains, although she gave only minimal attention to women's work as a factor in this. About the same time, Glenda Riley made an even more thoughtful analysis of the way women's duties and concerns were shaped by the harsh Plains environment, yet missed the dialectical relations between gender, labor, and nature. Recently, Andrea Radke has suggested a link between frontier women's aspirations toward "vernacular gentility" and a desire to separate themselves from the grassland environment. Unlike other articles and books on the subject, her study also gave considerable attention to the period when women began to live in frame houses, adopt domestic science advice and new technology, and make more concerted efforts to live "cultured" lives. But, like the previous scholarship, her work missed the complex interplay between changes in gender roles, labor inside and outside the home, and women's perceptions and use of nature. An assessment of that set of relationships, drawing on diaries, memoirs, shorter recollections, and correspondence, within the broad chronological frame of the period from frontier living to scientific housekeeping, is the concern of this essay.³

FROM SODDIE TO FRAME HOUSE

Toward the end of the Civil War, a combination of factors pulled an increasing number

of settlers to the mixed-grass region of the American Plains. A drought ended in 1861 with several consecutive well-watered years, the Homestead Act of 1862 offered cheap land, railroad lines made their way beyond eastern Kansas to create an integrated national market, and the Native American population was brutally exterminated or placed on ever-smaller reservations by force and the specter of starvation. These conditions enticed potential homesteaders beyond the more humid, wooded rim of the Illinois and Indiana prairie to a region once designated the Great American Desert. In most of Kansas and Nebraska they found generally flat land covered in mid- and short-grass species, as well as a diminishing number of trees with every step west. The fertile soil with few obstructions promised good farming, but the open landscape also made for volatile weather and, as many settlers complained, a comparably dull existence.⁴

Some of the pioneer women who came to the Kansas-Nebraska Plains in the postbellum period reported back to family and friends on the beauty and healthfulness of their new home. Most frequently, it seems, these were the ones who went to Nebraska. In 1887 a busy Sarah Gatch wrote to her sister's husband in Goshen, Ohio, from Wellsville, Nebraska, taking note of the good weather and sounding optimistic. "This is a beautiful country," she declared, and "all I ask is good health and good crops and I am sure I can make myself satisfied."⁵ Other homesteaders remembered the profusion of wildflowers and variety of bird life. "It was a wonderful country to me," recalled one early settler who had ventured to the Plains with her family as a little girl. "The most beautiful wild flowers bloomed and we school children wove great wreaths of them that reached clear around the room." Another, born and raised in a Nebraska dugout, recollected her pioneer life with great fondness. "So impressive were my childhood experiences," she explained, "that I have longed to return to the Muddy Valley once more to go fishing or wading, hunting wild roses, to the sandhills for choke cherries, or picking wild fruit along the

banks of the Muddy. In winter there was coasting, snowballing or sleigh riding."⁶

A great number of homesteader women, however, especially those who went to Kansas, found the grasslands depressing and their families' prospects bleak.⁷ Many of these settlers were not young girls when they arrived and were therefore more likely to have felt the full burden of survival at the time, or they recorded their experience before having the luxury to romanticize hardship. Viola Alexander could not help but feel discouraged in 1876, as she and her husband ventured to a new home near Milford, Kansas, with two small daughters in tow and the bluestem growing so high around the wagon that they could only see the horses heads bobbing up and down. Likewise, Norwegian immigrant Helen Anderson accompanied her new husband to the Plains and at least initially longed to return to her parents' more adequately wooded homestead in Illinois. "It just seemed that the first year we were out here," she recalled, "the wind blew a gale every single day from the South and Southwest." Swedish transplant Anna Berg was so distraught at first she fell apart, sat down on a stump, and wept. And Adela Orpen's governess, a former slave from their native Virginia, also cried on first sight of their new Plains home, "because there was nothing beautiful to look at: everything was hopelessly ugly. . . . The vast measureless prairie with nothing but grass, unending grass, green in spring, dry brownish-yellow in summer, and burnt and black in winter; no trees, no rocks, no skyline even, only a hazy wobble in hot weather."⁸

It was not only the tall grass, treeless expanse, unceasing wind, and heat waves that worked at the spirits of homesteader women. As they soon discovered, the grassland also harbored many real dangers, often unpredictable and some potentially life-threatening. The women seem to have lived in constant fear of one or another menace, from snakes and fleas to grasshopper clouds and prairie fires. Anna Olsson and her mother marveled at the beauty of "antelopes" running wild near their homestead, but they shuddered at the thought of

the other creatures inhabiting the grassland. "Mamma is so scared she will step on a snake," Anna wrote in a diary, while her grandmother "goes down in the cellar and kills all the snakes she sees because she gets so mad at them." Her mother was also scared of wolves, or what might have been coyotes, and Anna recorded several stories to justify this fear, including one lady who was bit on the arm, a neighbor who warned that wolves eat up little children, and an incident when the hired girl quickly slammed the door shut against a wolf trying to get inside.⁹

Pioneer women and girls had to be on guard against less ubiquitous but more dangerous, destructive, and unpredictable threats, too. Their diaries, letters, and memoirs, as many historians have pointed out, are litanies of land-parching drought, howling blizzards, grass fires, and locust invasions. "The hardest period of my life was the years of drought," recalled Custer County, Nebraska, settler Elizabeth Sargent. In the summer of 1894, she remembered, "there was practically nothing. Corn, pastures and everything dried up. My husband killed prairie chickens and shipped them east and in this way was able to buy food for ourselves and our two children." Yet a bone-dry summer was not the only harsh season in nature's hand. Widowed when her husband was killed by lightning, Mary Robinson's mother struggled to care for her four children during the winter of 1888. That year a blizzard swept across their part of the grasslands, and she tied a rope around her waist to go out and feed the stock. Some of the snowdrifts piled as high as the house and many cattle froze to death.¹⁰

On several occasions fires swept across the Plains, often consuming everything in their path and sometimes taking lives. Many of these were natural occurrences while others were due to carelessness. In one case, a fire possibly started by cattle ranchers trying to run farmers out nearly killed Baldwin Kruse's grandmother, recently arrived from Germany to Nebraska. Her husband had left to get supplies in Grand Island, and that afternoon a haze appeared on the southwest horizon. Grandmother quickly

gathered their cow and brought her to the lean-to, but the calf did not follow. By then, flames were shooting twenty to thirty feet in the air, forcing both homesteader and animal to stay in the shed. The calf was never seen again and the family's haystack was burnt to ashes, but these were meager losses compared to what other settlers in the area experienced. In more than a few instances, in fact, quick thinking and bravery by women saved their homes. Mrs. Henry Hanson's mother, a Swedish pioneer, confronted a blaze during her first autumn when, like Baldwin Kruse's grandmother, the man of the house was away. The land around the dugout had not been ploughed up so she started a backfire, burning away the grasses surrounding the home.¹¹

Although not posing the same danger to peoples' lives or their homes, grasshopper hordes could wipe out homesteading families' livelihood as well. Over and over again in memoirs, oral histories, and other sources, original settlers and their children tell about watching helplessly as a cloud of locusts filled the sky and chewed their way through field crops and garden plants, as well as anything else they could masticate with their scissor jaws. One visitation of grasshoppers in 1876 "injured the corn considerable," wrote Nebraska homesteader Mattie Oblinger, stripping the blades off, eating the silks, and nibbling the ends of the ears. "They were not so large nor did not eat near so fast as they did two years ago," she explained, so the local people would still see a small crop and escape complete destitution, but it "will not be near so good as it would have been." The ravenous insects also ate all of Mattie's cabbages.¹²

Then, too, there were the Indians, which many settlers, more often the women than the men, regarded as one more wild aspect of the unpredictable landscape. "My mother had always dreaded seeing Indians," recalled Berna Hunter Chrisman later, "and here they came one evening, when she was along with my sister and me." When the forty families, "squaws walking with papooses strapped to their backs, braves riding their spotted ponies," asked for

food rather than scalps, her mother was more than happy to oblige. Anna Olsson's mother was afraid of Indians as well, but mustered more courage to talk to them when her husband was there with her. He thought such visits were fun, a sentiment likely due in part to knowing how weakened and reduced the remaining tribes had become, through white encroachment, dwindling numbers of buffalo, and harassment by U.S. soldiers. Also, while Anna's father would have been no more able to defend the family against attack than his wife, her parents both drew on a long history of seeing men as protectors and buffers to perils beyond the home.¹³

Surveying the severe and threatening land around them, scorched by sun in summer, blasted by blizzard in winter, crawling with snakes and biting insects, subject to visits of ruinous locusts as well as devastating prairie fires, and populated by what they thought were murderous natives, women homesteaders could not help but feel overcome sometimes by nature. Still, just as men had an important role to play in protecting their families against dangers and transforming the grasslands, women were also critical to taming the Plains. "Men alone cannot settle a country," Adela Orpen insisted. "Therefore so soon as they have opened a way, however rough, the women and even little girls must follow quickly, else the way will soon choke up."¹⁴ What female settlers brought to the great expanse was an essential ingredient to making a homestead and community, the attitude and skills of domesticity, which they wielded and applied in much the same way their male counterparts broke the land with steel plows.

In the lean years of initial settlement, women's gendered role meant doing what they could to ensure their families' basic survival and make their first home more livable. For those pioneers who homesteaded in the relatively treeless grasslands, save for stands of mostly cottonwood trees along intermittent stream beds, at least for a while "home" was a structure literally of the earth, a rectangular "soddie" constructed from strips of matted

roots and soil. Pioneers stacked these grassland bricks one on top of the other, leveled a row with mud, and secured each wall with a pole through the center. They left space for a door in the south wall and windows that opened to the south and east. Roofs were more sod, laid on top of rafter poles, and floors were typically bare dirt, dusty at first but packed hard after repeated wetting and sweeping. The finished structure was not very big, perhaps between 10 x 12 and 14 x 26 feet, but it kept cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

One problem with the soddies, no matter how well constructed, was leaking roofs. After a weeklong rainy spell, many remembered, the earthen ceiling was saturated and dripped, or worse. The walls, roofs, and straw spread on the dirt floors also harbored bedbugs and fleas. Wilbur Speer and his wife moved to Custer County, Nebraska, from Wisconsin in 1889, moved into a soddie, and experienced this particular plague on the first night. The baby was fussy, his wife remembered, so she got up, lit the lamp, and discovered the place was infested with fleas.¹⁵ Even when pioneers lived in a variation on the soddie, however, in a dugout or log cabin with grass roof, or a true log cabin, there still were problems. Snakes were attracted to the rafters and often made a home there. "One time," remembered Berna Hunter Chrisman, "a large rattlesnake crawled through the roof of our dugout and fell behind the bed." She was only three or four years old at the time but the memory was vivid. "My mother snatched sister and me from the floor where we played, and put us on the table. Then she seized the spade and dispatched the snake before it realized what was happening."¹⁶

Unlike the frame houses homesteading families had grown accustomed to back east, soddies and the rarer log cabins tended to be austere places of work with few comforts. "Home," explains historian Julie Roy Jeffrey, "was not the quiet and cozy retreat that nineteenth-century culture envisioned, but a busy center of endless chores and economic ventures."¹⁷ When Melissa Genett Moore first arrived in Coffey County, Kansas, with her

mother and father during the 1860s, she was fortunate to move into a newly constructed log cabin. But the cabin was sparsely furnished, and immediate needs dictated greater concern with function over form. "A goods box was made into a table," she remembered, and lacking a stove they cooked at the fireplace, "baking bread in a skillet."¹⁸ Similarly, Adela Orpen's nearest neighbor in Kansas, Mrs. Weddell, "had reared her family of eight children quite successfully on the contents of one all-comprehending pot slung over an open wood fire." Once the family was fed, they left their one-room cabin for outdoors, where the children ran about and the mother puffed away at a corn cob pipe full of tobacco. "With the Weddells," Orpen wrote, "life was reduced to its primary factors."¹⁹ Much like their female relations in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and other settled states, pioneer women cooked and preserved food, washed and mended clothes, and performed countless other daily, weekly, and monthly tasks. They did it on the open plains, however, where household labor had even greater significance and required more fortitude, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. "Just as men struggled to learn new farming techniques and modified existing economic institutions to meet new conditions," Sandra Myres notes, "women had to devise new domestic techniques to meet the challenges of frontier living."²⁰

Disregarding traditional gender roles and spaces, both women and girls regularly went beyond their soddie or cabin thresholds to work, fetching water, tending a garden or orchard, foddering livestock, even planting and harvesting. Simply getting water for drinking, cooking, and washing could be an ordeal, one that required girls and women to shed any notion of being physically weak or irresolute. "In the morning," sixteen-year-old Martha Farnsworth penned in her diary, "Belle + I hitched up old Barney + Prince to the wagon and hauled two barrels of water, about 1/2 mile from a nice Spring." The whole family had moved to Republican County, Kansas, but the sisters had no brothers, Martha explained, so "we have to be Pa's 'boys,'" a role she seemed

to relish. That same day, after dinner, she went riding with a cousin, bareback, "for we [are] two 'tom-boys.'"²¹ Other activities initiated girls even younger than Martha into the necessary violence of farm life. Mattie Oblinger recalled in a letter how her young daughter pined to see her father kill an old sow, climbing to a window and never flinching at the sight. "I guess she would have stood right by him," Mattie wrote, "and I let her when I went to clean the entrails."²²

Yet even when girls' and women's labor violated gender norms, it was usually directed toward a domestic end or toward establishing a semblance of domestic order. Having followed her father to a Custer County, Nebraska, homestead, for example, Frances Reeder had put aside her books "and helped to dig into the sod and fashion fields in the new land." But she understood the point of all this work, beyond producing a marketable crop. "We plowed the sod for corn, planted an orchard and made the garden with a strawberry patch within," she recalled, "and tried, to the best of our ability, to transplant to central Nebraska the comforts and home environment of Iowa."²³ Likewise, most girls grew up and shed their tomboy ways, and nearly all women reasserted Victorian ideals they had partly discarded in their homestead's more difficult days. "Even though frontier conditions forced them into manly pursuits and led them to modify some of their standards," Julie Roy Jeffrey argues, "they hardly pressed for a liberation from female norms and culture."²⁴ That sort of freedom came as the dubious freedom to work harder, and they turned their eyes instead toward a time when they had only traditional female tasks, fewer in number perhaps and lightened by improvements like a windmill that drew water or a labor-saving sewing machine. The end toward which they labored, then, was also a partial retreat from the natural world into an increasingly well furnished and well equipped home.

Killing snakes, although demanding the conquest of fears more commonly associated with women of the nineteenth century, was

one of many ways that homesteading mothers and wives paradoxically stepped outside traditional gender roles to make a more tranquil domestic sphere. Snakes were slithery embodiments of evil for the Judeo-Christian settlers, and when snakes found their way into soddies and cabins, roosting in the rafters or sluggishly resting in a cellar, they represented what needed to be changed about the Plains to make a proper home there. Other wildlife posed a similar threat, often when men were away in the fields or on a trip to town, requiring decisive action on the women's part. "A skunk got into the milk room one day," recalled Mary Balcomb, "and mother grabbed it by the tail, carried it out, and killed it, but she would not advise another to try it." Another day, her mother "walked up to the den of a wildcat and watched it until her husband could go for a gun and shoot it." Similarly, Nebraska homestead Berna Hunter Chrisman remembered how her mother chased down wild cats as they carried off chickens. She kept a club handy and on hearing a commotion would run outside to throw it at the cat, which released its prey in haste to escape. This was usually followed by a chicken dinner.²⁵

While survival on the plains sometimes required women to kill snakes and skunks, or chase down wild cats, women and girls engaged and changed aspects of the Plains environment in countless number of ways, some of which over time fit more easily into the cultural framework pioneers brought across the 100th meridian. With few exceptions, from the outset of settlement all women kept a garden, a plot of land near the home, worked sometimes by men but regarded as primarily women's domain and responsibility. This was in keeping with a long-practiced gendered division of labor, one that divided a farm into male and female spheres. In letters back home, for example, Kansas homesteader Mattie Oblinger made it clear simply by her pronouns that the outlying fields were her husband's sphere and the garden was primarily within her sphere. In 1874, with a year in the grasslands behind them, she wrote about how "Uriah got *his* Wheat & Flax sowed

and considerable plowed corn" while "I have quite a nice lot of horse raddish & sage roots and Rhibarb [*sic*]" (my emphasis).²⁶

Yet the gendering of labor, and of the land where members of the family production unit did their activities, did not necessarily lessen women's workload. Both the size of the gardens and the variety of plants women cultivated suggests garden plots demanded a great deal of their time and attention. Even when they lacked chairs to sit on, Adela Orpen remembered, they had a large garden. "There were rows upon rows," she said, "of peas, Lima beans, tomatoes, sweet corn, sweet potatoes, squashes, pumpkins, and melons—both sweet-scented and water-melons—by the quarter acre." Mattie Oblinger had a very similar mix of plants in her garden, including cucumbers, squashes, melons, beans, potatoes, cabbages, beets, and tomatoes. Having just arrived in 1873, however, she put the family's potatoes as well as their 130 cabbages in a neighbor's garden, because those did not fare as well in unturned sod.²⁷ Her plots, like the thousands of others scattered across the Plains in the first decades of settlement, were not meant for dabbling, outlets for expression of a hobbyist's "green thumb."

Such large gardens required not only intensive labor but also a considerable amount of accumulated knowledge for planting, cultivating, and harvesting. Oblinger knew enough to plant her beans on a particular Friday, for example, and waited for the twins of Gemini to appear in the sky to plant her peas. She seemed less aware of the ways her polyculture method protected against the ravages of pests, yet was heartened nevertheless when a "striped bug" ruined only a few squashes and left her "vines" alone. Later, in the family's third year homesteading, she was surprised by winter's lingering into mid-April. She wrote back to her family in Indiana explaining that she had not "made any garden yet" but wanted to if it did not snow all week, and hoping "we will have settled weather after this for the spring is very backward here."²⁸ Over time, Oblinger had to adjust some of her beliefs and practices

as a gardener to better suit the land and climate of Nebraska. This learning process, one that other women also experienced, kept her closely connected to the natural world.

Growing flowers around the house and yard demanded a refined understanding of what and how to plant as well. This activity in particular was unambiguously women's work and an important aspect of domesticating the Plains. "In their efforts to make their surroundings homelike," Julie Roy Jeffrey points out, "women tried to soften what was often a sharp contrast between the world of nature and the world of family." While some women took a certain delight in the local flora and planted seeds they gathered from nearby, when it came to flowers, shrubs, and ornamental trees, they tended toward alien varieties. On a visit to distant neighbors, Mattie Oblinger got "a lot of Cottonwood and Willow cuttings to put out this spring," but she took some rose bushes, white and purple lilacs, and mountain currant, too. This she added to the "forest shrubbery," peonies, "pinroes," and "dialetre" she had already planted two years before. And her family back in Indiana had sent wine plant, which she "divided in to five buds" and was "comeing on nicely." Later, even as the family moved around, Mattie's daughter developed a winter ritual not unfamiliar to twenty-first-century gardeners, flipping through her "2 catalogues from Buckbees' seed house" to prepare for spring planting, and other women were similarly enticed to import new flowers and shrubs to their respective corners of the grasslands.²⁹ They planted these seeds and slips along the exterior walls of their homes, on the borders of their vegetable gardens, and even in specially designated flower plots. One Belgian woman, though busy with her family and midwifery duties, kept a flower garden on her Nebraska homestead, protected against "the hot prairie winds" by a wall. "Once inside," a neighbor later recalled, "its bright blossoms, curving walks and shade trees were a treat indeed to a beauty-starved pioneer."³⁰

Yet beauty was not the only tangible product of women's efforts to domesticate the land.

From their gardens as well as orchards they often helped plant and care for, they gathered delectables to preserve for the rest of the year. This labor, both the gathering as well as the canning, brought a level of control over nature to the Plains, ensuring a family's survival by bending the environment to the women's will. Baldwin Kruse's grandparents planted a variety of fruit trees on their Nebraska homestead in the Loup Valley, and by the time he was a little boy the produce from these trees demanded a significant amount of attention during summer and fall. "The women of the household spent many days peeling and cutting up apples for canning and drying," he remembered, which they did in a covered box on the roof. His sisters covered the box with mosquito bar, took the ladder down to keep the cats away, and crawled out from the upstairs windows to bring the boxes in when it looked like rain.³¹ Likewise, women boiled syrup out of pumpkins and squashes, made "a fine butter" out of the same, turned cabbage into sauerkraut and cucumbers into pickles, and got juices, jams, and jellies from grapes, wild plums, chokecherries, and currants gathered "in the hills" as well as "buckberries" that grew along river banks.³²

Complementing the domestic labor that women did outdoors on their homesteads, building and furnishing a new home was another sure sign of transition to more refined, settled lives as well as the reassertion of more traditional gender roles. A family's move from soddie or log cabin to frame house indicated that the pioneer days had passed, the land was under at least a measurable degree of human manipulation, and some semblance of the cultural order men and women had known back east was reestablished there in the West. These houses were also not so obviously of the earth, which was part of what made them appealing. From building materials to furnishings to the way people lived inside them, they introduced a new form of separation from the physical environment beyond the threshold. This was a large part of the "vernacular gentility" that, Andrea Radke argues, rural Plains women used "to mark themselves against their harsh environments

and thus reproduce the physical and ideological symbols of Euro-American civilization in the rural Great Plains." The homes and the more modern home life they represented were integral parts of a general shift toward a more alienated experience with nature.³³

At least for some time, however, after the move from a temporary to more permanent dwelling, much of the old life prevailed. This gradual change is nicely captured in Olive Capper's diary, a Lincoln County, Kansas, homesteader. In the first part of 1895 she helped her family ready their new frame house, putting down carpets, moving the "millinery goods" over, and the like. As was the custom at the time, Olive also frequently visited relations and friends, sometimes staying over through the night, and she was being courted by a young man who gave her a ring in proposal of marriage in early April. Sometimes she went with him, and other times she went alone, to church, literary meetings, skating parties, and dances. Yet moving into a frame house and participating in various social activities did not necessarily represent a sharp break with a life organized around working the land. Olive did the typical tasks of a young girl her age in the grasslands, according to the day of the week and season, including washing and ironing, baking bread and making soap, as well as patching and sewing. From January to August she recorded various other activities as well, some of which required a direct, close relationship with the natural world outside the home.

As the weather warmed in the spring of 1895, Olive was busy helping plant the family's garden, and she was faithful about making note of the new season's arrival. On April 2 she worked with her mother to put out most of the onion sets, about a week later she worked with both parents to "burn off the slough and cane patch," and toward the end of the month she helped not only her own family but also neighbors with more planting. When the apple and peach trees were in full bloom, Olive recorded it, and when she went to gather daises or other flowers with her sister or girlfriends, she made a point to include those excursions in the diary,

too. "Myrtle & I gathered flowers," Olive wrote on May 29, "and I fixed my house plants & pulled weeds for pigs in afternoon." Later in the summer, entries noted when the family picked the first radishes, peas, sweet potatoes, or other garden vegetables for dinner.³⁴

In nearly every diary entry for 1895 Olive also recorded the weather, and as the seasons changed and farm labor changed with them, she recorded when planting started, what crops her father planted, as well as what tools neighbors came to borrow. She paid particular attention to the direction and strength of the wind ("the wind blew tolerably chilly from W:."), but sun as well as rain or snow were also worthy of remarks. One early April day started out "lovely," but a west wind began at noon, it turned to the south around noon, and by afternoon it was "a regular dust storm."³⁵ This sort of close observation, noting even the time when winds changed direction, was complemented by a sophisticated understanding of farm work and the tools required for various tasks. The same day Olive helped her mother with the onion sets, her sister went to a neighbor's place for a rake, her brother went to another neighbor's homestead to return a "jack-screw," and still another neighbor stopped by the Cappers' for the "feed rack." A month later, in early May, her father replanted the corn, something Olive's mother helped with, and he finished putting in the sorghum.³⁶

DOMESTIC ECONOMY AND ROMANTIC NATURE

Although the shift from homesteading pioneers to settled farm family did not happen abruptly in the grasslands, even after the move from soddie to frame house, it did eventually happen, and a new home was an important part of that change. This shift was shaped in part by the concurrent spread of two advocacy movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one focused on "scientific farming" and another that promoted "domestic economy." These efforts to promote new ideas and practices were in essence born of primarily

urban preoccupations, namely, greater concern for productivity and efficiency that an industrial transformation of the American economy entailed. As sections of the Plains began to fill up, farmers consolidated their holdings, railroads made even more inroads, and market agriculture expanded. Urban-industrial concerns increasingly became farmers' concerns as well. Likewise, home extension agents, farm journals, magazines, and mail-order catalogs encouraged the girls and women of homesteader households to adopt new, contemporary attitudes toward routine domestic chores and to embrace various modern household conveniences. When they did, it changed women's work, more sharply defined the gendered division of labor they performed, and altered their relationship with nature.

Scientific farming advocacy was ongoing throughout the nineteenth century, but it gathered considerable momentum in the 1890s. By various means and mediums farmers were advised to try different seed, alter crop rotation systems, improve livestock strains, and mechanize much of their arduous work, whether they were planting corn, harvesting wheat, or milking cows. Agricultural extension agents, farm journal editors, and others also promoted the idea that farm families were capitalists, and as such needed to rationalize not only production but also marketing and distribution. These notions had a corollary in homemaker education, with its origins in the "scientific housekeeping" program of people such as Ellen Swallow Richards, designed to direct women toward various practices and conveniences that purportedly added to home life. "By rethinking basic work habits and learning to manage time and environment," Marilyn Holt explains, "women would be more effective and exert greater control over their labor and expenditure of energy."³⁷

Domestic economy instruction was first provided to women through farmers' institutes like the one organized by the Kansas State Agricultural College in 1906, probably the first such meeting in the state. An "experiment will be made this year in many counties," the

organizers announced, "of having a separate meeting of women at the same time that the men are discussing some topic not of special interest to women." Later, with passage of the Smith-Lever Act, this kind of extension work was formalized and institutionalized. But, as Marilyn Holt explains, even more influential than the few extension agents promoting new ideas and practices in domestic science were farm-based media, women's magazines, government publications, and eventually radio programs. In time, women also formed clubs to disseminate information about making their rural home lives more modern.³⁸

When farm institutes, magazines, and radio programs promoted scientific housekeeping or domestic economy, part of what they communicated was the need to adopt and use modern conveniences, new technology that supposedly would lessen women's labor and even help them do a better job. Besides giving greater importance to values like efficiency and productivity, industrialization, along with the evolution of an integrated national market, also had more practical consequences. Factories produced and railroads distributed new products that had the potential to change the way that domestic work was done. In some cases, such as canned soup, industrial production simply absorbed labor that had been done in the home, leaving an opening for women to do other things or perhaps adding new importance to the work that remained. In other cases the products transformed a familiar and routine task.

This infusion of new products and technology was certainly happening in Kansas and Nebraska in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the domestic economy movement reinforced their appeal and impact. Coffey County, Kansas, pioneer Melissa Genett Moore recalled visiting her brother-in-law's home in 1876, the impression the screened doors and windows made on her husband, and their decision to do the same to their home. Before this, flies had been a horrible nuisance, blackening the ceilings in the evenings and starting up a loud buzzing early in the mornings. "But," she declared, "the fly

has been conquered." As bad as things got, Moore insisted, there was gradual improvement, marked in part by the purchase of sewing machines, washing machines, electric irons, and the like. "How many conveniences the young bride of today has that we of 1860 never dreamed of," she wrote in her 1924 memoir, "and as each new help came to us, it was an added joy."³⁹ After the Rebsch family built a cistern to catch rainwater and built a wash-house over it, for example, they purchased a gasoline-powered washing machine, ending the need for someone to manually turn the washer or wringer. Young Myrtle, born in 1902, was given the job of timekeeper in the wash-house, making sure each cycle went for fifteen minutes, work she did not mind. "I could keep reading material to fill in the waiting time," she remembered, "and there was ample place to practice dance steps."⁴⁰

Yet it was not always true that new, so-called conveniences necessarily lessened or eased girls' or women's labor. Sometimes it only changed the way work was done, and there was not always the required infrastructure to realize the full potential of the latest technology. With limited access to electricity, city water, and sewerage until the 1920s and 1930s, rural dwellers were often several steps behind urban dwellers and the domestic economy program. New consumer goods and modern technology did find their way into Kansas and Nebraska farm homes, however, and in any case the transformation of their labor did have an impact on various aspects of their daily lives. For one thing, scientific housekeeping and the modern conveniences that went with it encouraged the retreat back to more traditional gender roles, away from fluid roles buttressed by the less rigid gendered division of labor of early settlement. Circumscribing women's lives, defining them more closely with the home, and inserting manufactured goods and technology between them and the world beyond the threshold also inevitably contributed to changing women's relationship with nature. Increasingly, the physical and organic environment was something "out there"; more often than before, it

was known distantly or in the abstract as a place to find beauty and the sublime.

Even when girls and women moved to a nearby town, they continued to experience nature directly, particularly through work in their yards and gardens, and they persistently gave close attention to the weather as well as planting and harvesting cycles. Despite being a widow and living on the outskirts of town, nearly all the entries in Emma Drew's diary for 1918 begin with a record of the high and low temperatures as well as general climate conditions, usually followed by a report of the work she did that day. On March 13, for example, it was 83 and 61 degrees, warm enough to make raking and trimming bushes in the yard a chore. Later in the afternoon she went inside and did some sewing and reading. Yet as spring approached and Drew planted a garden, it was more luxury than necessity, supplementing the groceries she purchased from a store in town, where she also went every month to pay gas, water, electric, coal, and phone bills. This was life without the ordeal of carrying water from a distant stream, cleaning clothes outdoors on a washboard, lighting a soddie with candles, or cultivating a garden to ward off starvation through the next winter.⁴¹

By the early twentieth century, both farm and town living, with various modern amenities and a measure of security, allowed original homesteader women to remember the early pioneer years with a considerable amount of romantic nostalgia. To one Kansas settler writing in the 1920s, the claim near Westerville that she came to with her parents in 1884 "was a wonderful country," colored by wild flowers that school children wove into great wreaths. In those pioneer days, she recollected, there were "dewy summer mornings, millions of prairie flowers everywhere, frogs croaking, prairie chickens booming and ducks quacking in that, their own country."⁴² Other women, perhaps more likely to be the ones who did not go west as children, were somewhat ambiguous about the grasslands they first encountered, although they were more certain about the merits of the landscape's transformation in later years. Rather

than the “vast prairie” and “unsettled country” she came to in the 1880s, Viola Alexander insisted that “we now have beautiful homes throughout the country and a beautiful city with all its modern homes and every accommodation for its citizens.” These improvements, she said, were “well worth all the hardships we ‘Pioneer Women’ had to endure to develop this vast and beautiful country of Clay County in ‘Sunny Kansas.’” Taking a somewhat different view, Mrs. James Eddy remembered coming to Nebraska with her father at the turn of the century, recalling fondly how she used to pick raspberries and listen to songbirds on walks in the nearby canyons. Yet she recognized that it was in spite of, rather than because of, “the hardships and troubles our parents lived through and the depressions and drouths we have gone through” that Custer County was such a special place to live.⁴³

Still others, even more distant from the pioneer experience, seem to have deeply imbibed romantic notions of the Plains. Mrs. Oliver Mitchell Staadt, for example, was born at the turn of the century and grew up on a farm in Franklin County, Kansas. After marrying in 1919, she kept busy raising a family, working as a bookkeeper and secretary for their seed farm, participating in home extension efforts, and serving various organizations, including the Garden Club, 4-H, and the Franklin Historical Society. Later, in her regular columns for the *Ottawa Times*, Staadt recalled the first decade of the century with hope that “the love of nature and the feeling of communion with the Almighty which was instilled into my soul as a child might be wakened to life in the reader.” She wrote about the “gentle air of peace and tranquility” and “quiet beauty” among the haymow in their old barn, the slow horse-drawn ride into town that allowed enjoyment of wildflowers and birdsong along the way, as well as transcendent walks around the farm and its environs. “Going forth on a Sunday morning stroll through the orchard,” she said, “the peace and quiet of the day would sink deep into the soul of a small child and bring those feelings of knowledge of a Creator who

cared for His children.” Undoubtedly, some of this carefree experience of the sublime, and her writing about it decades later, had to do with early literary influences, like reading John Greenleaf Whittier in school. But it was also a product of her family’s settled, contemporary life. While her youth spanned the end of “the real horsepower age,” Staadt also remembered various modern conveniences, from an egg incubator and cream separator to a gravity-flow water system powered by a windmill and a water heater connected to their large Majestic kitchen range. In fact, she never knew a time when their home did not have hot and cold running water in the bathroom and kitchen. Such amenities not only made work and daily rituals on the farm easier, at least ostensibly, but also enabled Staadt to take notice of transcendent qualities in nature.⁴⁴

For those who lived in town or had moved to a big city, the makings of a sublime sensibility were sometimes even more evident. Harriet Adams’s parents had come to Kansas in 1856, caught up in the developing battle over slavery, and they first lived in a log cabin four miles outside Leavenworth. By 1875, however, when Harriet was fifteen, they had moved to Topeka. She received an advanced education there, and this training along with the estrangement she felt from nature as an urban dweller are both evident in remarks she wrote about the Kansas countryside in 1908. “To us who love the field, the hillside and the woods and the sweep of the endless prairie,” she began, “the recurring springs which clothe them as of old and yet anew, and the beauties of the flowers found in each are a source of perennial delight.” Some of her earliest and most vivid memories, Adams claimed, were of “wind-swept prairie, and the odors of the earliest spring flowers, and of a little strip of wood every foot of which I knew, and a stream by whose banks I walked.”⁴⁵

Women like Harriet Adams and Oliver Mitchell Staadt occupied a distinct place in a long history of Kansas-Nebraska grasslands settlement, one that fits in the history of evolving gender roles and changing work as well as the history of people’s shifting relationship

with the physical and organic environment. In fact, those narratives are inextricably linked. The women's foremothers moved to the region with a domesticating project in mind, later aided by a scientific housekeeping movement and the introduction of innovative home technology. By the turn of the century and the decades that followed, families that remained were measurably successful in transforming the Plains into farms, changing some of the more alien aspects of the grasslands landscape, and making civilized havens from the heartless world. This inevitably affected the way girls and women used and thought about nature, abetting adoption of more romantic notions about birds, flowers, streams, and even native grasses.

NOTES

1. Mrs. Sarah Lindsay Anthony, 1-2, vol. 1, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka. Anthony was born in New York in 1847, moved with her family to Kansas, married in 1870, and died in 1924. This recollection was written by her daughter.

2. Anne E. Bingham, 4-5, vol. 1, Monroe Collection. Bingham lived on a Kansas farm from 1870 to 1886.

3. Sandra Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Julie Roy Jeffrey, "There is Some Splendid Scenery: Women's Responses to the Great Plains Landscape," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1988): 69-78, and *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Glenda Riley, "Women's Responses to the Challenges of Plains Living," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1989): 174-84, and *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Andrea G. Radke, "Refining Rural Spaces: Women and Vernacular Gentility in the Great Plains, 1880-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly* 24 (Fall 2004): 227-48.

4. Carol Fairbanks and Sara Brooks Sundberg, *Farm Women on the Prairie Frontier: A Sourcebook for Canada and the United States* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 4-5, 23, 49.

5. Sarah Gatch to John Holmes, March 20, 1887, in *Families of the Pioneer: Early Settlers of Scotts Bluff, Morrill, and Banner Counties of Western Nebraska* (Scottsbluff, NE: Rebecca Winters Genealogical Society, 1985), 129.

6. Mrs. Floyd Leach Cannon, "Custer in the Early '80s," and Mrs. Grace Jeffery Martin, "Childhood Days in Custer County," in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska* (Broken Bow, NE: E. R. Purcell, 1936), 85-86, 91-92. See also Otie Eubank Luce, "In the Wilds of Nebraska," 58, and Mrs. Cora Leech Lowder, "My Girlhood Days in Custer County," 59.

7. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 52-53, 77-78.

8. Mrs. Viola Catherine Alexander, 2-3, vol. 1, Monroe Collection; Helen Nelson Anderson, n.p., vol. 1, Monroe Collection; Mrs. Anna Pearson Berg, n.p., vol. 1, Monroe Collection; Adela Orpen, *Memories of the Old Emigrant Days in Kansas, 1862-1865* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 49-50. See also Myres, *Westering Women*, 12-36, for her chapter "The Pleasing Awfulness: Women's Views of Wilderness," and Jeffrey, "There is Some Splendid Scenery," 73-74.

9. Anna Olsson, *A Child of the Prairie*, trans. Martha Winblad and ed. Elizabeth Jaderborg (Lindsborg, KS: privately printed, 1978), 1, 3.

10. Elizabeth Sargent and Mrs. Mary Taylor Robinson in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 10, 25.

11. Baldwin F. Kruse, *Paradise on the Prairie: Nebraska Settlers Stories* (Lincoln, NE: Paradise Publishers, 1986), 32-33; Mrs. Henry Hanson in Albert Strom, ed., *Swedish Pioneers in Saunders County, Nebraska: A Collection of Family Histories of Early Settlers in Nebraska* (Pittsburgh, 1972), 22.

12. Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, September 10, 1876, Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, Library of Congress/Nebraska State Historical Society, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html>.

13. Berna Hunter Chrisman in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 144-45; Anna Olsson, *Child of the Prairie*, 7.

14. Orpen, *Memories of Old Emigrant Days*, 4.

15. Kruse, *Paradise on the Prairie*, 27; Mrs. Wilbur Speer in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 46.

16. Chrisman in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 144; Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 53-54.

17. *Frontier Women*, 4, 60-61.

18. Melissa Genett Moore, *The Story of a Kansas Pioneer, Being the Autobiography of Melissa Genett Anderson* (Mount Vernon, OH: Manufacturing Printers Co., 1924), 25.

19. Orpen, *Memories of Old Emigrant Days*, 15-16.

20. Myres, *Westering Women*, 146, and see the rest of her chapter, "New Home—Who'll Follow?: Women and Frontier Homemaking," 141-66.

21. Martha Farnsworth, March 2, 1884, Martha Farnsworth Diaries, 1882-1922, vol. 1, Collection 28, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

22. Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, November 24, 1874, Oblinger Collection.

23. Mrs. Frances Reeder Eddy in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 51.

24. Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 72-73.
25. Lydia Emily Goodno Balcomb, 1-2, vol. 1, Monroe Collection; Chrisman, *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 144.
26. Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, April 25, 1874, Oblinger Collection.
27. Orpen, *Memories of Old Emigrant Days*, 19; Mattie V. Oblinger to George Thomas, Grizzie B. Thomas, and Wheeler Thomas Family, June 16, 1873, Oblinger Collection.
28. Oblinger to Thomas Family, April 25, 1874; June 16, 1873; Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, April 16, 1876, Oblinger Collection.
29. Mattie V. Oblinger to Thomas Family, April 25, 1874; April 16, 1876; Laura I. Oblinger to Uriah W. Oblinger, January 22, 1894, Oblinger Collection.
30. Jeffrey, "There is Some Splendid Scenery," 75; Elizabeth C. Sargent in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 10.
31. Kruse, *Paradise on the Prairie*, 136-37.
32. Moore, *Story of a Kansas Pioneer*, 29; Wilhelmina Young Brown in *Families of the Pioneer: Early Settlers of Scotts Bluff, Morrill, and Banner Counties of Western Nebraska* (Scottsbluff, NE: Rebecca Winters Genealogical Society, 1985), 16.
33. Radke, "Refining Rural Space," 246.
34. Olive Capper, April 11, 14, 18, 19, and 21, 1895, and May 29, 1895, Olive Capper Diary, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
35. Capper Diary, January 2, 1895.
36. Capper Diary, April 2, 1895, and May 6, 1895.
37. Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 24, 40.
38. *Ibid.*, 43, 58, 67.
39. Moore, *Story of a Kansas Pioneer*, 44-45.
40. Myrtle Brunkow Rebsch, *Coming of Age in 1920's Kansas* (Universal Biorhythm Company, 1993), 1-2; see also Laura I. Oblinger to Uriah W. Oblinger, July 24, 1887.
41. Emma Drew, March 13, 1918, Emma Drew Diaries, 1918-1924, Collection 332, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.
42. Cannon, "Custer in the Early '80s," 85-86.
43. Mrs. Viola Catherine Alexander, 7, vol. 1, Monroe Collection; Mrs. James W. Eddy in *Pioneer Stories of Custer County*, 79.
44. Olive Mitchell Staadt, *Gentle Memories: Kansas, 1900-1910* (n.p., n.d.), 2-3, 6, 41-42, 93.
45. Harriet Adams, n.p., vol. 1, Monroe Collection.