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Notes from the Great American Desert

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In the good old days, the state that is Nebraska was identified as part of the Great American Desert. In many ways, in climate and terrain, it still bears a resemblance to a desert. As a frontier or a land of pioneers, it deserves recognition.

Invisibility may be one of the greatest challenges women face. One of the great flaws in the writing of U.S. history has been the omission of the role or presence of women from the written record—women are invisible.

In terms of women leaders, consider the women homesteaders of the Great Plains. The Homestead Act of 1862, according to Senator William Borah was, “The government bets 160 acres against the entry fee of \$14 that the settler can’t live on the land for five years without starving to death” (Robbins, 1962, p. 375). During the duration of the Homestead Act, 1862-1934, hundreds of millions of acres of land were claimed. Thousands of the homesteaders were women, a hidden force on the agricultural frontier (Patterson-Black & Patterson-Black, 1978, p. 16) According to Bartley and Loxton (1991), 10 % of the homesteaders were single women. Patterson-Black & Patterson-Black (1978) examined a sample of homestead records and found that an average of 11.9% of homestead entrants were single women, the percentages varied from 4.8% in 1891 to 18.2% in 1907. Final ownership of the land could be established through a cash payment after six months’ residence or through meeting the five-year residence requirement. In the sample examined by Patterson-Black & Patterson-Black (1978), 37% of the men, and 42 % of the women succeeded in making final claim to the land. Success was linked to “the vicissitudes of terrain, aridity, weather, and hostility of area cattlemen” (Patterson-Black & Patterson-Black, 1978, p. 16). Women were a major segment of the frontier population, whether as single women, wives, or daughters. Because the written record of these women’s accomplishments is limited to letters or diaries, women’s contributions to the homesteading story are invisible.

Fortunately, three women authors of Nebraska have chronicled settlement stories in their writings. Willa Cather (1873-1947) moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska at age 10. She graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1895, one of few women at that time to achieve a college

education. The subjects of the books she wrote were the Scandinavian, Bohemian, and French immigrants who attempted to cultivate the obstinate land of Nebraska. Cather wrote of women homestead heroines; Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* and Antonia in *My Antonia*. She wrote of the American pioneer experience. In 1922, she received a Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*.

Bess Streeter Aldrich (1881-1954) graduated from Iowa State Normal School, now known as the University of Northern Iowa, in 1901. In 1925, Aldrich was widowed. She was a single mother with four children to raise. She supported her family by writing stories of the joys and struggles of pioneering. She published over one hundred short stories and articles, nine novels, one novella, two books of short stories, and one omnibus. The women in Aldrich's work reflect the strength of pioneer women and the roles they played in the settlement of Eastern Nebraska.

Mari Sandoz (1896-1966), "Nebraska's Story Catcher," was born on a homestead in Western Nebraska to Swiss immigrants. She studied at what is now Chadron State College and at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She won national fame in 1935 when her biography of her father, *Old Jules*, was published after it had been rejected 13 times. She was described as the best Western writer of all especially when she wrote about the struggles of "her people." She wrote 23 books about the life and settlement of the Great Plains. Her books reflect the wide variety of women who populated the homesteads.

Cather, Aldrich, and Sandoz preserved, through their writings, the presence, work, and contributions of women during the homesteading, pioneer, and early settlement years in Nebraska. Their efforts are a fine antidote to women's invisibility. May you also write so that you help reduce the invisibility of women leaders.

References

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Proposals for presentations at the *19th Annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference* are being accepted! The conference will be October 9-10, 2005, in Lincoln, Nebraska. For information about the conference or proposal guidelines contact Marilyn Grady at mgrady1@unl.edu