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REFINING RURAL SPACES

WOMEN AND VERNACULAR GENTILITY

IN THE GREAT PLAINS, 1880-1920

ANDREA G. RADKE

In 1887 the Plains photographer Solomon Butcher met the David Hilton family in Custer County, Nebraska. Mrs. Hilton desired a photograph to send to relatives back East, but felt embarrassed by the family's sod dwelling. She insisted that Butcher not take a photo of the house, but asked the men to drag the Hiltons' beautiful new pump organ out into the field, where the family could pose around the instrument. The sod house remained outside the photograph, and after the session the men returned the organ to the house.¹ To Mrs. Hilton,

the organ became her personal symbol of aspirations to middle-class refinement in spite of harsh conditions. While the Hiltons certainly could not control the circumstances of living in a dirt home, Mrs. Hilton could control the public display of refinement in her rural Plains home. Women who settled in the Great Plains between 1880 and 1920 often encountered the harshest of conditions and yet still sought to achieve "gentility" through various civilizing processes. These included adaptations of domestic refinement, access to material goods and literary culture, and the performance of civilizing manners and behavior that represented "proper" Euro-American civilization.²

Rural Plains women—both European immigrants and American-born—participated in the vital feminine practice of refining the Great Plains in the decades around the turn of the century. Refinement, as it will be used here, suggests the improvement or elaboration of behavior, manners, and material culture toward the aspirations of gentility. The process of refinement includes removing any "rude, gross, or vulgar elements" and acquiring "fineness of feeling, taste, and thought," including the "elegance of manners, culture,

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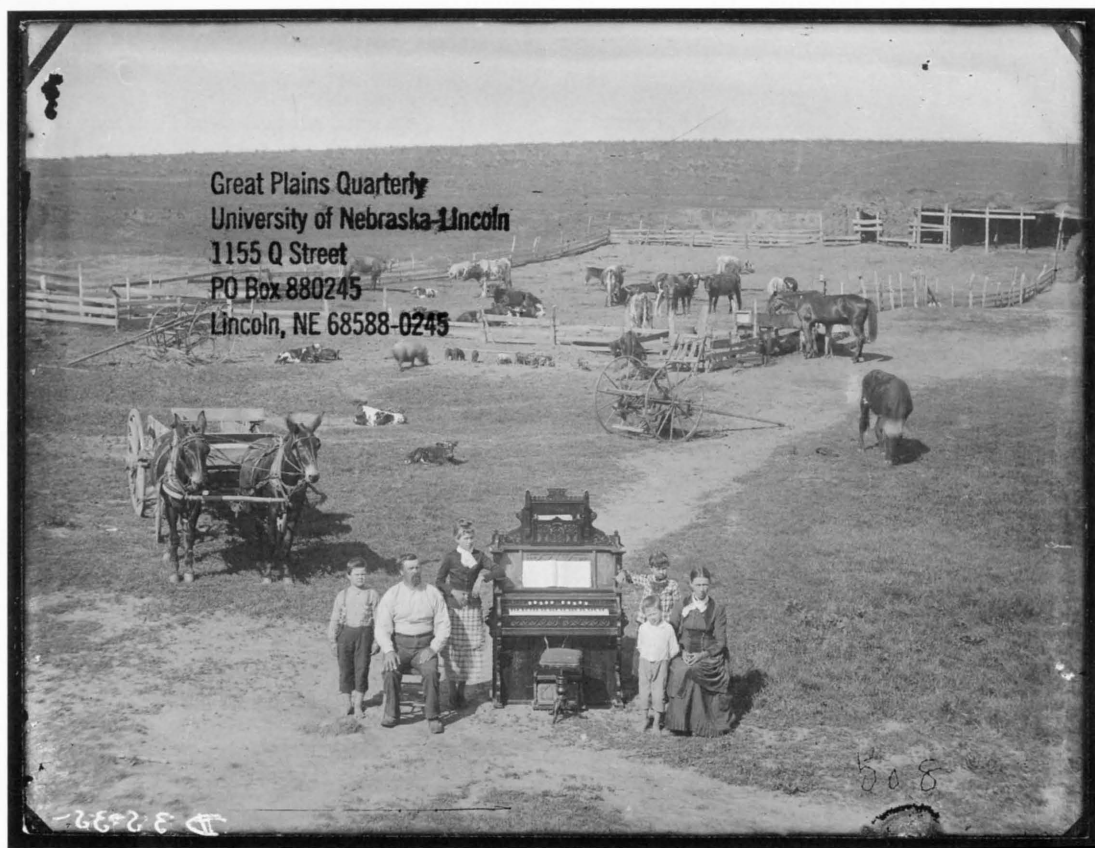


FIG. 1. *The David Hilton family with pump organ, Custer County, Nebraska, 1888.* Courtesy Solomon Butcher Collection (B 983-3535), Nebraska State Historical Society.

and polish.”³ Women homesteaders sought specific means of appropriating the notions of refined civilization to their difficult circumstances; and this they did in spite of extreme distances from urban or town centers, the harshness of the Plains climate, and a lack of material resources. Whereas some women and their families found themselves reduced to what many considered the animalistic levels of their new surroundings, most settlers brought with them already-existing ideals of civilization that they attempted to transplant into their new rural places. Men were not excluded from this process; although individual males sometimes presented challenges to their wives’ attempts at refinement, most couples jointly aspired to an ideal of middle-class re-

finement. Women took an especially active role in the process, particularly as caretakers of the private and domestic spheres of the rural homestead in the Great Plains.

The idea of “vernacular gentility” was first conceived by Richard Bushman to understand early Americans’ attempts to achieve simple refinement. “Vernacular gentility” can also explain how rural Plains women, with little or no material resources, were able to transplant the expectations of civilized American society by using simplified or “makeshift” versions of proper cultural symbols and upper-class refinement. Thus, rural farm families who lacked the financial resources to “erect mansions, send their children to academies, and dress in silk and fine woolens,” could find “less expensive

substitutes."⁴ Rural settlers imbedded their desires for culture and refinement within the survival process itself, and women especially wove together their desires for refinement with their survival instincts. For Plains women, refinement of one's sphere often meant appropriating light, space, and window coverings, and these simple necessities became elegant luxuries. By adapting their simplified forms of furnishings and architectural space, Great Plains homesteaders took on the characteristics of gentility and consciously turned themselves into "distant outposts" of cultured American civilization.⁵ Rural Plains women took an active role in this process, and through the performance of vernacular gentility, they helped to create a rural Great Plains culture as part of the larger American civilization.

WOMEN AS CIVILIZERS

Few historians of western women would dispute the civilizing role of female Plains settlers, especially as they transplanted the values, institutions, and material culture of American society to the rural West. Historians have examined the complexity of this civilizing role and women's varied reactions to their western experiences, especially by moving beyond any simplistic generalizations about feminine qualities of domesticity, gentleness, and goodness. As Robert Griswold has noted, women's civilizing effort

should not be confused with the influence of ethereal "madonnas in sunbonnets" or bloodless "gentle tamers" who allegedly worked wonders by the sheer force of their pious, self-sacrificing example. These images of western women are useless stereotypes that obscure the real relations between men and women and blind us to women's prolonged battle over the West."⁶

Julie Roy Jeffrey showed how women actively sought to reproduce the institutions and cultural forms of American civilization in the West, as a way of marking themselves and their

families against the harsh and difficult environment.⁷ Glenda Riley and Sandra Myres have built upon Jeffrey's scholarship, particularly by emphasizing that women often continued their civilizing efforts in spite of a lack of material resources. According to Riley, women "showed tremendous creativity in coping with their crude homes, frequently turning their interiors into comfortable dwelling places that sometimes even boasted a touch of elegance."⁸ And Myres has described women's efforts to achieve vernacular gentility as "making do" with simple materials; indeed, despite the "scarcity of materials," many women "added little touches to brighten their homes."⁹

Women's civilizing influence in the Great Plains has been addressed by historian Paula Nelson in his description of the activities of western townswomen between 1870 and 1920. However, since townswomen had easier access to material goods through railroads and shops, their experiences fail to capture the "vernacular gentility" of their rural sisters who encountered much harsher conditions.¹⁰ Angel Kwolek-Folland has more specifically examined how both urban and rural Kansas women, particularly those in sod houses, managed to refine their domestic space with the material possessions that represented middle-class elegance. Kwolek-Folland seeks to examine "women's *cultural* role on the frontier in relation to the *physical domestic space* which women occupied and the objects with which they surrounded themselves."¹¹

Beyond simply reproducing the institutions associated with American civilization, women first sought the refinement of domestic space and personal behavior. Kwolek-Folland has described how Plains women initially "'domesticated' the frontier, and linked it to other areas of the nation, by their awareness and use in the home of commonly-accepted cultural symbols."¹² Specific "cultural symbols" included domestic enhancements and material representations of refinement; it was primarily through these methods that women first sought to civilize their Plains environment. The attention to "created living spaces" helped

turn-of-the-century women in their "awareness of what it meant to be 'civilized.'" ¹³

Building on the scholarship of Kwolek-Folland, this article explores a connectedness among women in many Plains states between 1880 and 1920 by analyzing not just material culture, but also behaviors, manners, literary culture, and the importance of separate physical spaces within the home. Further, the women described herein are united by the shared experiences of extreme rural hardship, while still managing to reproduce their own versions of domestic "vernacular gentility." Beyond just the physical objects of refinement that have been highlighted by historians, other aspects of domestic refinement—unique to this essay—provide a more complete picture of women's influence. These include the symbolic and ethereal uses of light, spatial separation, the softening of hard surfaces, and also the representations of gentility that came through letter writing, polite conversation, and literary and musical culture.

This essay focuses primarily on Euro-American women who lived in extremely rural and difficult conditions in the Great Plains between 1880 and 1920. Included are mostly white, American-born women, but also Russian-Jewish immigrants and English homesteading ranchers in eastern Montana. ¹⁴ Among the female settlers cited here, the focus is on women who lived at least fifteen to twenty-five miles from the nearest town and were without steady contact with other humans or the amenities of town life. While it is impossible and perhaps even unnecessary to quantify the socioeconomic status of the women represented, it is more important to acknowledge their desires—apparent through their own behavior and words—to achieve the appearance of middle-class cultural refinement. Plains women were cognizant of middle-class expectations and actively sought to reproduce the physical and ideological symbols of refinement in their new environments. Most of the women cited here lived in simple dwellings made of sod or log homes for only a brief period of their early Plains living, and

then later moved into sturdier homes that represented greater affluence. Regardless of their country of origin and socioeconomic status, these Great Plains women were connected by their immediate desires for refinement and middle-class respectability in the midst of harsh Plains life. Further, the theory of vernacular gentility, as applied to rural Plains women's experiences, can be used to understand the specific influence of other rural women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. Women's desires for respectable gentility—through domestic improvements and civilizing behavior—became even more pronounced in the midst of harsh conditions, especially as they attempted to refine their rural places.

ENCOUNTERING THE RURAL AND PRIMITIVE

Historians have successfully demonstrated that women were *not* the passive, reluctant settlers to the Plains as has been stereotyped. Still, women often encountered circumstances that drew reactions of shock, horror, and indignation. Willingness to settle in the Plains did not always mean a willingness to accept the conditions that they encountered there, especially regarding the home space. While natural events like droughts, blizzards, hailstorms, and grasshopper epidemics were certainly beyond settlers' control, women expressed greater defiance when they encountered domestic living conditions that they considered base or vile. Glenda Riley has described how Plains women often "filled their diaries and journals with lamentations concerning the keeping of a 'proper' home environment in the crude housing that most of them were forced to cope with, at least during their first years on the Plains."¹⁵ The following anecdotes introduce how a few Plains women first encountered difficult rural conditions, and from there sought to "maintain certain standards" of refinement.

In 1895 a young mail-order bride, Rachel Bella Kahn, arrived in rural Ramsey County,

North Dakota, where she and her fiancé, Abraham Calof, prepared to homestead in north-central North Dakota. The Calof homestead was located twenty-five miles from the nearest town, Devils Lake. The Calofs were met at the railroad by his brothers and some nieces. Rachel's first response suggested the shock she felt upon encountering less-than-genteel conditions or ones that were beneath her standards of refinement. On meeting her nieces, "Doba and Sarah," Rachel remarked, "The appearance of these girls was truly shocking. They wore men's shoes and a rough looking garment. Only common peasants wore such clothes in Russia. I was dismayed to see such attire worn by Jewish women. It was indecent."¹⁶ According to Rachel's high ideals, poverty and distance should not preclude a person from behaving in a refined manner, or at least appearing refined. She scoffed that even her brothers-in-law were "dirty and unkempt," with "wild unshaven faces. Their skin was broken out in big pimples and they wore rags wrapped around their feet in place of shoes." In the family's simple attempt to put on a show of respectability for the new bride, "the women had no shoes at all but were wearing the men's shoes this day in my honor."¹⁷

To Rachel, financial achievement had little bearing upon one's ability to achieve respectability: "Poor as I had been all my life, I had always worn a dress like any self-respecting Jewish woman."¹⁸ In spite of this early idealism, Rachel now found herself in unique circumstances—in a distant and rural place, twenty-five miles from the nearest town, with little access to material comforts. Any shock she had felt at meeting her nieces was soon outdone by the horror of seeing her new homestead.

This was my first sight of what awaited me as a pioneer woman. The furniture consisted of a bed, a rough table made of wood slats, and two benches. The place was divided up into two sections, the other being the kitchen which held a stove and beside it a heap of dried cow dung. When I

inquired about this, I was told that this was the only fuel this household had. They had no firewood at all.¹⁹

Again, Rachel's idealism and indignation reacted to these meager circumstances with a solemn resolve that she would never live with these base conditions. "What a terrible way to live. I silently vowed that my home would be heated by firewood and that no animal waste would litter my floor." However, even respectable women, when faced with severe primitivism, had to begin at a basic survival level; Rachel's retrospective writings allowed her the privilege of hindsight: "How little I knew. How innocent I was."²⁰

Over the next few months and years, the Calofs' circumstances improved very little. Like many pioneer women, Rachel experienced the hardships of near-starvation and a harsh environment, plus the simplest furniture of wood slabs and straw mattresses, dirt floors, remote wells, uninsulated walls, and the worst imaginable conditions for giving birth. She likened the conditions of the Calof family to that of animals:

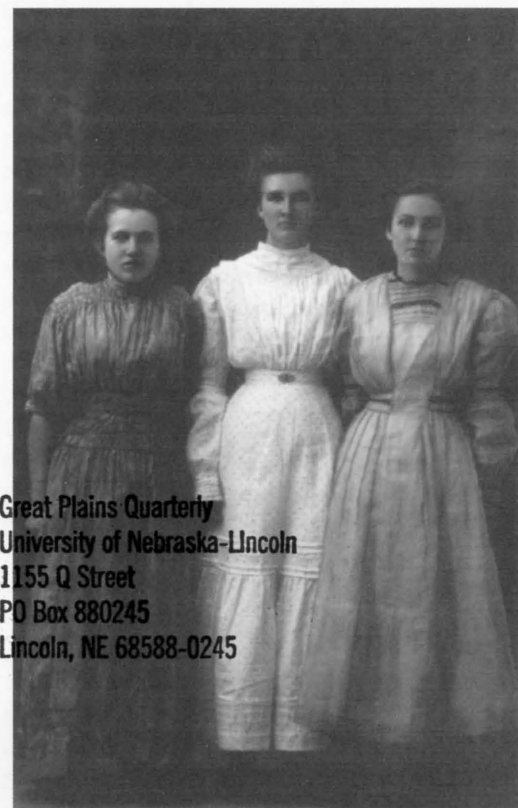
I surveyed my dreary surroundings. How could these people, unwashed, with little to eat, dressed in tatters, coarse and illiterate, escape the doom which already held them by the throat? The holes in the walls and roof of the place were stuffed with bits of paper in hopes of keeping some of the flies out. . . . There was no outhouse or latrine. Each one simply picked a place in the prairie grass.²¹

Rachel lamented that "I had tried so hard to raise myself to a decent life but my way seemed ever downward until now my existence was hardly above the level of an animal." Like many respectable women who moved to the rural Great Plains, Rachel found herself living in survival mode: "Our lives were uncomplicated. Our purpose was survival, and through survival the hope that somehow the future would treat us more kindly than had our past."²² This

bleakness was only exacerbated by the extreme isolation: "There were no other homes to be seen on the vast expanse of the great plain. Except for one family, the only people who lived within miles were the Calofs."²³ In those conditions, Rachel could hardly expect to achieve the refinement and gentility expected of a proper Jewish woman. However, she soon wasted little time in trying to improve her conditions to a respectable level, by attempting simple and vernacular forms of gentility on her rural homestead.

In 1898 new bride Grace Fairchild also encountered similarly remote circumstances when she moved to the homestead of her husband, Shiloh Fairchild. Grace disembarked the train in Fort Pierre, South Dakota, where "the railroad ended." There she met "Shy," who waited to take her "to the new home ninety miles west, near the present town of Philip."²⁴ While Shy drove her to the homestead twenty-seven miles northwest of Philip, Grace encountered similar scenes as those met by Rachel Calof. "The sod shacks and log houses along the trail looked dismal, and I wondered if the women who lived in them had any happiness." To Grace, the distinction between the civilization they left behind and the bleakness they now entered was quite pronounced: "Here we were leaving settlements with frame houses, churches and good farm land going into a desolate unknown."²⁵

Grace also encountered settler families who had reduced themselves to the harshness of the Plains environment. Grace remembered that one family of ten "and their three dogs looked more like a bunch of mangy calves than human beings on the homestead frontier."²⁶ The Fairchilds' own cabin was simple, only "twelve by fourteen foot," and was "part logs and part frame," but Grace admired that the home was "airy and nice in the warm months." However, the winter caused the logs to "shrink and the chinking of mud and manure would fall away, leaving cracks big enough for a good blast of snow and freezing cold . . . to come through."²⁷ As desperate as the Fairchilds' situation, some of Grace's neighbors fared much



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FIG. 2. Bonnie, Muirl, and Faye Dorrough, Greene County, Indiana, 1910, around the time of their immigration to the Nebraska Sandhills. Courtesy of David E. Radke, Elizabeth, Illinois.

worse: "Life in a dugout was about as sorry a situation as a human could endure. It was snug in the winter, but when it rained, the water ran into the dugout and the floor was a mud puddle." One homesteader's bed was "a pile of straw in one corner which he shared with his dog." Regarding one neighbor family of "seven boys and one girl," Grace wondered "[h]ow they all lived in that little hole in the ground is a puzzle to me."²⁸

In the summer of 1910, Muirl Dorrough left Greene County, Indiana, with her family to settle in the Sandhills of west-central Nebraska. Muirl's father, William, claimed a 640-acre Kincaid parcel in rural southwestern Cherry County with his wife, Margaret, and their daughters, Muirl, Bonnie, Faye, and Allie.

Having lost most of their wealth in Indiana, the Dorroughs immediately moved into a "soddy" and found themselves trying to eke out a living on their remote homestead. Muirl quickly took up teaching at a rural school in order to supplement the family income. In her letters to her fiancé and future husband, Harry Shimmin—also from the Sandhills—Muirl often expressed her personal desires and attitudes for domestic refinement and civilized behavior, in spite of the extremely rural and difficult conditions of the Nebraska Sandhills. Like Rachel Calof and Grace Fairchild, Muirl Dorrough encountered an environment foreign and unwelcoming to her, but still she understood the values of middle-class American civilization and sought to reproduce the expectations of domestic refinement in the Great Plains.²⁹

CLEANING AND LIGHTING THE PHYSICAL SPACES

Beyond their attempts to seek respectable privacy, rural Plains women also sought to gentrify their domestic spaces so that even basic necessities became symbols of higher aspirations. Cleanliness, efficiency, and a healthy home were the first steps toward achieving this. One Iowa domestic science professor instructed her future farm-wife students that "[t]he ventilation must be provided for when the walls are going up. Better far dispense with a parlor, with carpets even, and fine furniture for a time, than neglect these. They are vital to your health."³⁰ Students were taught to first seek for healthy drainage, water, sanitation, light, and ventilation, because through cleanliness and order, young women could rise above the primitive difficulties of the rural agricultural setting. Only after a ranch or farm wife had made habits of efficient cleanliness could she then add refining touches to her simple home with plants, furniture, curtains, and carpets.

The adaptations necessary for Plains homesteading sometimes limited the possibilities of a clean environment. Long distances to wells

made collecting water difficult and time consuming. Constant wind, dust, dirt, and animals in close proximity to the house made cleanliness a daunting goal. And yet, sanitation became even more pronounced as a mark of refinement in these circumstances. As Muirl Dorrough's family began adapting to life in a "soddy" in the Nebraska Sandhills, Muirl's mother insisted that her four daughters wear gloves when collecting dried animal dung for fuel. This simple act showed how women tried to create distinct physical boundaries between themselves and the often vulgar conditions of Plains life. For most women, cleanliness also meant constant sweeping of the sod floors, chinking between the wall boards, and white-washing the interior board or sod walls for a smoother, cleaner look.

Nellie Perry first visited her bachelor brother George in 1888 at his Texas Panhandle homestead, and she expressed shock at the appearance of his sod house: "Although not expecting a palace, I was somewhat stunned by the picture of the home. . . . Strips of carpet taking the place of doors and windows made the outlook still more desolate."³¹ The place had much the feel of a bachelor pad, with "walls . . . festooned with ropes and harness" and piles of clothing and paper under the bed. George's furnishings were simple; Nellie noted that the "floor was of earth and in fact the evidences of luxury were few." She immediately went to work trying to clean the one-room, twelve-by-fourteen-foot "soddie," but "though I raised a great dust and stirred things up generally, after two or three hours of hard work no great change was visible."³²

For Rachel Calof in North Dakota, the first step toward raising the living standard in her homestead was to create light. Rachel showed creativity in her attempts to achieve this important aspect of refined space.

As night approached I told the old lady [Abraham's mother] that I . . . would try to bring light into the shack. I went outside to see what materials nature might provide for my project, and soon found some partly

dried mud which I molded into a narrow container. I shaped a wick out of a scrap of rag, smeared it with butter, placed it in the mud cup, and lit it and lo and behold, there was light. Everyone was delighted with my invention. Now we could retire at a more reasonable hour.

The importance of this invention for refining her space was not lost on Rachel. She proudly noted, "Now we were able to undress and prepare for bed in a civilized way. This accomplishment stands out in my mind as the first result of my effort to climb out of the mire which surrounded me."³³ In the process of refining rural domestic places, bringing light was of primary importance, particularly as "a sensory metaphor for genteel society, rivaling polish and smoothness."³⁴

SMOOTHING AND COVERING: SOFTENING THE ROUGH EDGES OF RURAL LIVING

First on many Plains women's lists for softening the interior environment was to cover the windows. Photographs of rural Plains families in eastern Montana, taken by famed Montana photographer Evelyn Cameron, show the importance of curtains to even the simplest structure. A German Russian woman's one-room wood home on the eastern Montana Plains showed white lace curtains distinctively contrasted against the simple, unpainted boards. Other Cameron photographs of rural Montana families often represented a vernacular refinement as simple dwellings were adorned with lace curtains, hammocks, and basic furnishings.³⁵ Glenda Riley has noted that "[o]ddly enough, curtains seemed to be a particular mark of civilization to thousands of plainswomen who took great pride in having them hanging at the few windows they had." When cotton or lace was lacking, women used simple materials like newspaper, cheesecloth, or recycled clothing and bedding, and one woman even used her "precious white cambric wedding petticoat" to dress her "soddie window."³⁶ Rachel Calof showed just such inge-

nuity when, only a short time after moving to North Dakota, she "made fine curtains for the windows from flour sacks."³⁷ With better materials available to her, Muirl Dorrough's marital preparations in 1913 included "green window sashes with fringe, White curtains, [and] sash curtains for the kitchen."³⁸

Next on many women's agenda for refining their physical space was to smooth the interior walls of the home and to provide a white-wash or wallpaper finish. Rachel Calof used the clayish mud—extracted from digging a new cellar under the house—to "fill the cracks in the walls and to make them smoother." Further, she hoped to "get some whitewash with which to paint the walls." These actions only added to Rachel's hopes for refined space: "My ambition soared. I could already visualize how clean and pretty my home would be."³⁹ With the help of her husband, Rachel mixed and kneaded a clay mixture, then "I worked the moistened clay onto the walls, between the slabs, making a smooth inner finish over the rough boards. Finishing, I surveyed the result. A miracle had taken place. *Our rude shanty had become a palace.*"⁴⁰ Whitewashing the walls had added a genteel softness to Rachel's home, symbolically raising her home from a "rude shanty" to a "palace."

Plains women also used simple forms of wallpaper for covering and smoothing the rough board walls of their homes. When trying to improve her South Dakota cabin, Grace Fairchild eventually "covered the logs with paper and siding and lined the kitchen walls with wall board."⁴¹ This was accomplished only over the objections of her husband, who always seemed reluctant to participate in domestic, internal improvements. Later, Grace helped a neighbor woman paper her home. She used "blue building paper" which she "tacked . . . down tight" over the older wall covering made of "old burlap," which also had to "be stretched tight and tacked down."⁴² Although done with simple materials, the process of papering rough walls added a softened look of refinement that Plains women desired. Smoothness of fabrics and other materials

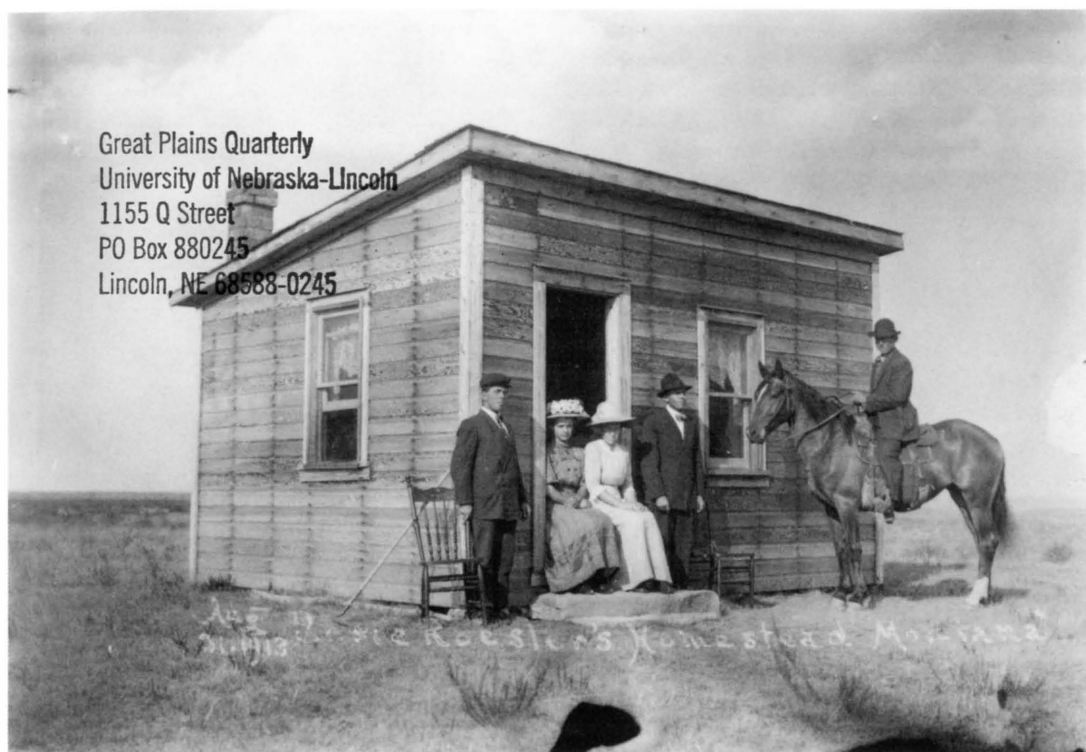


FIG. 3. Rosie Rosier's [Roessler] homestead, Montana, August 1913. Courtesy of the Evelyn Cameron Collection (PAC 90-87.68-1), Montana State Historical Society, Helena.

became a mark of genteel culture, particularly because the “feel of coarse cloth [or materials] was associated with the lower ranks of society and with rude personal traits. . . . By the same token, ‘polished’ and ‘polite’ linked smooth fabric with well-finished personal qualities.” Americans recognized smoothness as “an essential trait of all beautiful things,” and so Plains women sought to smooth the surfaces of their domestic space by wallpapering, white-washing, and covering with any available fabrics on hand.⁴³

Fabrics, window coverings, tablecloths and bedding—even when made from crude and local materials—were important additions to any vernacular refined home in the rural Great Plains. Nineteenth-century Americans used various strategies of décor for “heightening refinement,” which included “softening, cushioning, and harmonizing the parlor through the profuse use of fabrics—a material analogy

to the role of etiquette in smoothing away potential rudeness and angularity.”⁴⁴ Whereas most Plains families did not yet claim a “parlor” as part of the interior domestic space, women used fabrics and coverings to soften the roughness of “soddies,” cabins, and other simple homes. Even when elegant coverings remained unattainable for Plains families, women used any available resources to give the impressions of refined upholstery.

More commonly, however, women first sought to cover windows, tables, and beds with whatever materials lay at hand. For Rachel Calof, even the conditions of her childbirths improved from when she first delivered her babies on piles of straw; she later felt blessed to deliver on the table “with a clean cloth on top.” The addition of a clean cloth to her delivery bed was worth noting in her memoir, because it added a softening effect that she had not enjoyed in the early years of child-



FIG. 4. Ida Archdale in the sitting room of her ranch house, "Castle Archdale," Montana, c. 1907. Courtesy of the Evelyn Cameron Collection (PAC 90-87.95), Montana State Historical Society, Helena.

bearing under harsher conditions.⁴⁵ For most women, tablecloths also helped to soften the kitchen and eating environment, especially as many families ate on rough planks laid across stumps or even on the floor if no furniture was available. At her marriage to Abraham Calof, Rachel received a "red felt tablecloth with green flowers," used to cover the "rough table made of wood slats" that she encountered as one of the only pieces of furniture in her North Dakota homestead.⁴⁶

Plains women understood the importance of upholstering their coarse homes, and then helped others achieve refinement by giving gifts of embroideries, linens, and other cloth coverings. For helping with her neighbor's whitewashing, Grace Fairchild received a gift of two pillowcases, which she still had thirty years later.⁴⁷ In 1913 Muirl Dorrough made a cushion for her future mother-in-law, with a

"conventional design. The colors are shades of yellow and green."⁴⁸ Muirl acquired other types of fabric upholsteries as part of her wedding preparations in late 1913, including window coverings and a floor rug. Mari Sandoz, in her revealing biography of her father, *Old Jules*, remembered that in spite of the physical hardness and wear of Plains living endured by her mother in her early years of marriage, she still managed to appropriate small elements of refinement. Mrs. Mary Sandoz had "lost her teeth; her skin became leathery from field work, and her eyes paled and sun-squinted; her hands knotted, the veins of her arms like slack clothesline." Yet even in this unfeminine harshness, Mary "used clean linen tablecloths for Sunday and company, and had a fringed spread on her bed every day."⁴⁹

Some rural Plains women took the use of fabric and upholstery to the highest level of

Victorian gentrification. Evelyn Cameron's photograph of her British immigrant neighbor Ida Archdale, in her eastern Montana ranch home, showed the extent to which some Plains women sought to achieve upholstered gentility. Ida's home included fringed bedspreads, coverlets, pillows, door draperies (also with fringes), and numerous lace and embroidered pillows, chair drapes, and fabric frame covers for gilded portraits. The Archdales' home even claimed a bellpull "perhaps to remind them of a more civilized world where there would be a parlor maid to answer a ring."⁵⁰ As a further indication of Monty and Ida Archdale's expectations for gentrified living on the Montana Plains, they named their ranch "Castle Archdale."

REFINEMENT THROUGH SPATIAL SEPARATION: SEEKING PRIVACY AND ORDER

For Rachel Calof, Grace Fairchild, and Muirl Dorrough, an interesting paradox of the unrefined Plains life occurred when people endured both remote isolation and also extreme overcrowding. When Rachel discovered that she would have to live all winter with Abraham's parents, brothers, and their families in a one-room shack, she loudly protested that "what I was seeing was probably the greatest hardship of pioneer life, the terrible crowding of many people into a small space."⁵¹ Grace Fairchild mocked the crowded living of her poorest neighbors, but applauded when one family later built an addition, because "for the first time [they] could sleep the family without stacking them up like cordwood."⁵² For Rachel, the starkest reality of overcrowded conditions was the restrictions on sexual intimacy with her husband.

I must confess that the one hardship which was always unacceptable to me through the formative years was the lack of privacy. For many months of each of those years Abe and I had to find our privacy on the open prairie, and even in later years we had to hold our personal conversations in the barn.

Rachel's greatest desire was for personal space, separated from the intrusions of her extended family. "In those precarious winters of the first years when so many people, and animals as well, huddled together in a tiny space, my yearning was not for a larger shack but rather for the dignity of privacy."⁵³

Nighttime privacy became a hallmark of nineteenth-century refinement, especially as Americans departed from the eighteenth-century practice of bedding many people in one bed or room. For instance, in order to create a separate and safer sleeping place for her baby daughter, Rachel Calof fashioned a makeshift hammock "from a flour sack which I suspended from the ceiling over our bed."⁵⁴ Whereas in this situation, a hammock helped to uncrowd the family's congested sleeping conditions, hammocks in the Plains were also used much as eastern Americans used them, for outdoor leisure and relaxation. Nellie Perry remarked upon seeing a hammock outside of one sod house "swung under a rudely made awning of cornstalks or sugar cane" that it "reminded her of civilization."⁵⁵ A hammock not only added separated sleeping space to overcrowded Plains homes, but also provided a spark of leisured culture to the rural environment.

Further, as nineteenth-century Americans sought to delineate their private spaces, "[e]ach space carried its own specific requirements of self-discipline and emotional management in accordance with the activities and roles to be performed, the intimate no less than the social. . . . [Americans] pursued sexuality within a context of moderation, self-control, and, above all, privacy."⁵⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, most Americans were successful in cordoning off various private spaces within the domestic sphere, and parents "increasingly slept apart from children . . . so that privacy could be protected."⁵⁷ Privacy and dignity were so important to Muirl Dorrough, that, in referring to the bedroom in the new two-room home built by her fiancé, she wouldn't even call it by name; instead, it was

"the room, not called the kitchen."⁵⁸ Since so many rural homesteading women could not afford the luxury of intimate spaces, they sought that level of refinement by seeking privacy in other places, like barns, outbuildings, and even the great outdoors.

For both efficiency and for refinement, the improvement of kitchen space was an important step in refinement of rural Plains homes. For the upper classes, a sideboard—or standing cupboard—"allowed the family to store and display the expanding array of silver and dishes."⁵⁹ To rural Plains settlers, any simple cupboard helped to properly exhibit tableware. Rachel Calof, rather than allowing her few dishes to be stacked on the floor or table, built a makeshift cupboard. She used what was available, by nailing "a newly acquired apple box to the wall to keep my dishes in."⁶⁰ Grace Fairchild also sought the efficiency and refinement of properly stored dishes. After years of waiting without results for her husband to improve the kitchen, Fairchild's fifteen-year-old son Jasper declared, "Mamma, if you will tell me what you want done, I will do it for you." Together, mother and son began a home construction project; they "moved the chimney from the middle of the room to the side of the house, then changed the stairway, *built in cupboards*, and made much more room."⁶¹ In 1913 the first item of furniture that Muirl Dorrough listed in her wish list for a new home was a "Kitchen cabinet—with top and places for dishes."⁶² Spatial organization allowed Plains women the feeling and appearance of order and sophistication.

Part of the improvements made on Grace Fairchild's house involved the expansion of the kitchen area to create a semi-separate dining space in the home. After a few years of marriage and childbearing, "the house was getting pretty crowded with our family. We needed to add some rooms. . . . We had enclosed part of the old porch earlier and this became a part of the kitchen, which *enlarged it into a kitchen-dining room combined*."⁶³ By partially separating the dining space from the main kitchen area, Grace Fairchild added a signifi-

cant element to the refinement of her home. John Kasson noted that "[b]ecause the act of dining bore such high ritual stakes among the middle classes, it needed to be performed in protected circumstances."⁶⁴ Indicating the expectations that Muirl Dorrough felt in achieving a proper home, she requested that Harry purchase a "dining table and chairs." And even though she worried about feeling "crowded" in the two-room house, Muirl expanded her wish list of necessary furnishings for respectable living, including a "wash stand, white iron bed, dresser and two rocking chairs."⁶⁵ It was in a family's best genteel interests to acquire a formal dining space, because according to one early architect, "It is the custom with some farmers to make a constant practice of taking all meals in the kitchen; but this habit marks a low state of civilization."⁶⁶

Many poorer Plains families could not afford the luxury of a completely separate dining space or extra rooms, but still managed to improve and add upon their homes as they acquired the resources to do so. When Nellie Perry arrived at her brother George's sod homestead in the rural Texas panhandle, they made a joint visit to his neighbors. Nellie remembered that "[o]n the inside the one huge room was divided into kitchen and sitting room combined with bedroom by means of a rag carpet upon the floor of the latter, the kitchen being carpeted with earth."⁶⁷ By separating off a faux "sitting room" in their sod house, the Bates had attempted to create an important space for Victorian refinement—the parlor. The nineteenth-century parlor allowed for genteel Americans to create a separate space designed for leisure and cultured activities.⁶⁸ True to its purpose, the Bates's "sitting room" contained comfortable furnishings and "bookcases, etc., sunk into the thick sod walls. . . . I was surprised to find that a sod house could be made so pleasant and homelike."⁶⁹ The delineation of physical domestic spaces helped rural Plains settlers to achieve privacy, efficiency, and the cultural refinement of purpose-specific rooms like parlors, separate bedrooms, and dining areas.

Although many settlers encountered brief periods of rough conditions in soddies, lean-tos, or shanties, most settlers who aspired to middle-class refinement and comfort eventually built entirely new structures, complete with additional rooms and space for new furniture. According to Glenda Riley, this transition usually occurred within the first year, after which additions were added or families built entirely new structures. As Muirl Dorrough prepared for her marriage to Harry Shimmin, she dreamed out loud: "Do you think a three room house would be all right for us? And a front porch too?"⁷⁰ A new frame home was within the realm of wishful aspirations for the young couple, but they eventually settled for a two-room home, with no porch. Muirl's wishes for a "front porch" showed her desires for that important extension of domestic refined space. A porch could serve as "an outdoor parlor with furniture for supporting conversation." For Plains farmers and ranchers, a porch could also demarcate the space between the civilized domestic space and the farm and animal areas. "The porch and fenced yard extended the refined space outward from the parlor while fixing a boundary between the genteel portions of the house and the working barnyard to the rear."⁷¹ Plains women extended their domestic refinement outward from the central home space by adding hammocks, bird cages, hanging flowers, potted plants, and flowerbeds close to the house as exterior expressions of refinement. Besides planting vegetables, Grace Fairchild always "planted flowers in the garden so we could cut them and brighten up the house with them."⁷²

A frame home was an important objective for far-reaching Plains settlers. With lumber that he had acquired on credit, Abraham Calof built a new frame home for Rachel, thus allowing them the luxury of private space—separate from their extended family. So excited were they to have their own space that they moved in before the home's completion, and Rachel again invoked the language of gentility to describe her new surroundings: "Even though it only had a few boards for a ceiling,

to me it was the loveliest palace in the world."⁷³ Further, with more space and expanded finances, the Calofs furnished their new home with furniture purchased "in town" and Rachel marveled that "[f]or a long time I felt I must be dreaming to actually have real furniture." The importance of this achievement spoke specifically to the Calofs' desires for gentrification in their rural sphere, for Rachel noted that "[e]ven though we still endured many hardships and disadvantages, in other ways we were progressing toward a more civilized life."⁷⁴ By 1910 Rachel was able to brag that the "farm was prosperous and many times the size of the original claims. . . . We were now prominent and respected throughout North Dakota."⁷⁵ After moving into a frame home, many Plains families could eventually achieve full status by building homes in the respectable architectural styles of the day, as when Harry Shimmin's family first built a sod house on their Sandhills ranch, then replaced it with a two-story Victorian Queen Anne frame, and finally built a solid modern bungalow, which still stands on the Dunwell Ranch.

ACHIEVING REFINEMENT THROUGH MATERIAL CULTURE

The process of gentrifying rural Plains homes was further facilitated by the availability of mass-produced goods through the expanding mail-order catalog system of the late nineteenth century. Two major companies dominated the market for mail-order goods—Montgomery Ward, pioneered in 1872, and Sears and Roebuck, established in 1886. After first marketing to cities and towns that were accessible by mail delivery in the 1880s and 1890s, both companies expanded their business to rural farm areas.⁷⁶ For Great Plains settlers in the early years, material goods were only available through railroad access to towns, often at far distances from the settlers' homes.

Grace Fairchild and Rachel Calof saw railroad access arrive late; in their early homesteading years, they had to travel great distances just to purchase any manufactured

goods necessary for home refinement. Still, when the railroad finally arrived closer to the Fairchilds, Grace rejoiced that "[t]he rails now connected me with everything I knew before I went West—my sisters, my parents, and store goods—and some of the lonesomeness began to go away."⁷⁷ Harry Shimmin remembered that his mother once went for six years without traveling into town—either Mullen, Nebraska, twenty-five miles north of the Dunwell Ranch, or Tryon, fifteen miles south. Although by 1890 more than three-fourths of Americans still "had to go to the nearest post office to get their mail," the catalog-ordering system helped to reduce this isolation.⁷⁸ In spite of the inconvenience of waiting for purchased goods to arrive in the West, Grace Fairchild remembered that "[w]hen you live ninety miles from a town, a Montgomery Ward or Sears Roebuck catalogue gets read more than the Bible or Shakespeare."⁷⁹ Fairchild's symbolic placement of material culture above religious or literary culture showed the importance of purchased goods to a Plains woman's sense of refinement and connectedness to the larger American society. One Wyoming ranch wife subscribed to the Montgomery Ward catalog for years, beginning in 1885, and remarked "that it was 'impossible to exaggerate the importance of the part played by this book of wonder' . . . [for] her family."⁸⁰

After 1893 the mail-order catalog business became more effective in bringing middle-class American culture to the doorsteps of rural Plains ranchers and farmers. Since Chicago was the hub of rail activity, the Sears and Roebuck Company moved there in 1893, thus making catalog goods available in any Plains town that had a rail stop. Additionally, the company's ability to reach out to distant housewives was accelerated by the founding of the rural free delivery (RFD) system in 1893. RFD offered government-subsidized rural mail delivery to remote homesteads, although in the beginning RFD delivered only mail and not packages. So settlers could read and order from the catalog they had received through RFD, but still had to go to the nearest post office to

collect their packages, or perhaps benefit from neighbors' generosity in bringing ordered goods around to farms. Not until 1913 and the addition of parcel post delivery to the RFD system could women have their packages actually delivered to them at home.

Further, catalog companies made ordering faster and cheaper by adding regional warehouses, which served as hubs of economic exchange in a system of disseminating middle-class gentility to rural women throughout the Great Plains. So when Muirl Dorrrough announced in 1913 that the items she had ordered for her new home would "come from Kansas City," she gave a nod to Montgomery Ward's large Kansas City warehouses, the first completed in 1904, and a "nine-story plant . . . erected in 1907."⁸¹ During these important years of US Postal Service expansion, catalog companies capitalized on the new markets, and rural consumers in turn benefited from the greater availability of home and farm commodities. These goods added ease and efficiency to farmers' lives, but more importantly brought the materials of American refinement to rural homes. According to Lorin Sorenson,

Isolated homesteaders on the prairies of the mid-West would become the mainstay of early Sears, Roebuck business . . . [which] provided household goods and sod-busting implements that helped raise their standard of living.⁸²

The commodification of gentility through mail-order catalogs successfully brought middle-class refinement to the doorsteps of average Plains settlers. Through these catalogs, men and women could improve their homes, add material luxuries, and even expand their physical space by ordering lumber, more rooms, and even entire houses.

Dishes, china, and silverware became important marks of gentrification in Great Plains homes that otherwise suffered from simplicity and shortages. Silver, serving dishes, and dining-room furniture were necessities for rural housewives, because "such furnishings became

tokens of status and refinement to strive for by those on the lower rungs of the middle class.”⁸³ For her marriage in February of 1914, Muirl Dorrough received “1/2 dozen tea towels and a lovely Japanese cake plate” and a silver sugar bowl and creamer. Muirl planned to fit other elegant household items into the couple’s two-room home, including “silver ware French gray pattern, white set of dinner dishes trimmed in gold bands, Blue and white kitchen ware.”⁸⁴ Grace Fairchild described how one neighbor claimed he would only lock the house because his wife had “quite a bit of silverware which she thinks ought to be protected from people who don’t live around in this country.”⁸⁵ Even among poor or middle-class Plains settlers, silverware was a necessary possession for a family’s personal sense of refinement, because since the early part of the nineteenth century, “silver flatware had gone from being a luxury associated with the nobility to a ubiquitous necessity among the middle class.”⁸⁶

The use of china and silver in creating an elegant dining space was paramount to refining the simple dwellings of female Plains settlers; so when Nellie Perry visited the neighbors’ sod home with her brother, Perry paid particular attention to the simple western meal of pork and beans served “on pretty blue and white china.”⁸⁷ One Kansas newlywed, recently moved to a sod home in 1887, enjoyed dinner at a neighbor’s soddy and noted that “the table was really elegant with nice linen and silverware.”⁸⁸ For many rural women, often the only mark of refinement they could claim was a fine set of china or silverware, perhaps gifted, inherited, or purchased. While packing for a move to the Plains, one couple disagreed over the inclusion of the wife’s Haviland china among the items to be packed. The wife “clung to the china with despair and heartbreak in her face.” Finally, the husband relented and the china came with the family, significant to the mother because the “dishes were more even than beauty; they were ‘a tangible link’ to the refinements of civilized living that would be difficult to re-create in the ‘rugged frontier condition’ that so attracted her father.”⁸⁹ Truly, civilization found

its place on Plains dinner tables, because “Brutes feed, the best barbarian only eats. Only the cultured man can dine.”⁹⁰

ACHIEVING REFINEMENT THROUGH MUSICAL CULTURE

Besides kitchen possessions, other material goods for the home added to the image of rural refinement. Possessions might be imported from previous residences as visible remnants of a former, civilized life. Grace Fairchild noted that “[m]y mother had bought an Estey organ when I was ten years old, and when she broke up housekeeping the year I married Shy, she gave it to me.” Grace’s elegant organ remained an important symbol for her personal appropriation of gentility: “It was the only touch of elegance that we had on our ranch and I loved it for what it was, something beyond just making a living.”⁹¹ When Solomon Butcher photographed families in front of sod dwellings in Nebraska in the 1880s, most photo subjects brought out their domestic possessions for inclusion in the photos, in order to represent their middle-class culture to friends and neighbors who might view the images. The props were often purposefully included to suggest a family’s material and cultural success—in spite of the roughness of sod house living. Possessions included birdcages, lace tablecloths, vases, china, potted flowers, and ornate framed portraits, but for many Plains settlers, the most universal symbol of cultured existence was a musical instrument, particularly an organ or piano. So when Mrs. Hilton posed her family with her elegant pump organ away from the sod house, she succeeded in displaying one of the most important symbols of refinement to her eastern relatives, in spite of embarrassing living conditions.⁹²

Mail-order catalogs played a vital role in bringing musical accomplishment to rural homes. The availability of inexpensive pianos and organs especially served the refining intentions of rural homes, because “[t]o the housewife, the piano was a symbol of the East she had left; it stood for home and security,

the good life she hoped to build in the West. A lot of wives would junk other treasured possessions when the going got rough and the wagon bogged down, but they hung on to the piano."⁹³ To the Plains dwellers, a piano served as the center of the parlor, or it represented the central focus of a proper home, even if the home only had two rooms. But for those who could not afford one of the many piano and organ models offered by the catalog companies, both Montgomery Ward and Sears began selling smaller instruments such as violins, harmonicas, flutes, guitars, banjos, and "jew's harps" so that even the simplest dwelling had access to musical culture. Still the finest acquisition for any proper middle-class home was a keyboard instrument, and few would argue the worth of a piano or organ to Plains settlers, described by Angel Kwolek-Folland as "one of the signals which communicated culture and refinement, whether one lived in a dugout, a frame house, or . . . in a rented room in Junction City [Kansas]."⁹⁴

Musical knowledge, talent, and the instruments themselves, whether brought from eastern homes or purchased and delivered through the mail, suggested an elevated level of cultured living for rural Plains dwellers. Muirl Dorrough remarked to Harry Shimmin in one letter that she and her sister would make a visit to Mrs. Charles Hoyt to see a new piano; "It just came in," she announced. Muirl's own school organ was the center of jovial social interaction, as one day "at the close of school . . . the ladies all came and brought such a nice lot of dinner. Then Mrs. Hansen played the organ and we all sang, about a dozen songs." Muirl's neighbors, the Doyles, were popular for social activity because their son Bruce could "play the piano and the violin."⁹⁵ Musical engagements were important marks of cultural gentility to rural settlers; they were to be shared with neighbors and often served as the centerpiece of social gatherings. The exchange of musical experiences helped to soften the edges of rural Plains life. In the western Sandhills of Nebraska, Henriette Sandoz, the third wife of Old Jules, brought a sense of refinement to

Jules's rural home. One day, when a rainstorm hit the simple house and the roof leaked, Henriette "sat on the wet straw tick all the next day with a purple umbrella over her head, crying noiselessly while Jules raged that there was no fuel." However, after a while of listening to the rain "bound off the umbrella," Henriette "laughed aloud" and declared, "It is like Chopin—'The Raindrop,' and she hummed a bit of it."⁹⁶ Jules appreciated the musical reference, and Henriette's cultural awareness brought a moment of civility to a difficult situation.

As Plains settlers gradually began to add to their material gentility, they were able to order fancier furnishings, dishes, musical instruments, and more elegant modes of transportation from eastern urban centers. Grace Fairchild bragged about her family's acquisition of a fringed surrey, which they had ordered by mail from Elkhart, Indiana. When it arrived, "it was a nifty affair with a fringe around the top and with side curtains. Such a beautiful thing couldn't be left out in the weather, so we built a machine shed and carriage house south of the house."⁹⁷ The material possessions of refined living—pianos, china, silver, and tablecloths—not only brought greater comfort to Plains women and their families, but also "told the world that a cultivated woman was present, one who understood and could communicate her cultural womanhood."⁹⁸

CIVILITY, MANNERS, AND LITERARY CULTURE

Besides the outward symbols of refinement—material culture and purchased goods—rural Plains settlers also subscribed to larger expectations of civil behavior and manners as part of nineteenth-century determinants of refinement. Poor or middle-class Plains settlers could not afford the luxuries of elite American society, but they could still mark themselves with an assumed gentility by adopting the proper manners and behavior associated with the upper classes. Polite

behavior included such activities as letter writing, the use of proper addresses in communication, conversational and visiting etiquette, and the appropriation of literary culture.

Historians have examined the importance of educational institutions and literary societies to early rural Plains settlers. But even before the literary institutions and associations had been created, Plains settlers first sought cultured refinement in their homes by exhibiting, ordering, and reading their books—either purchased or brought from eastern homes. The presence of books in any home “remained . . . a badge of the gentry just as did refined manners and mode of dress; a large personal library testified to the gentry’s ability to . . . possess the education and leisure necessary to read widely.”⁹⁹ As printed materials became cheaper and more available to average Americans by the end of the nineteenth century, literacy and book ownership remained a mark of cultured education. Nellie Perry’s visit to the neighbors’ sod house showed that they had built bookshelves into the sod walls, and Muirl Dorrough took advantage of catalog ordering to acquire the latest books, including *Ben Hur*, *The Virginian*, George Eliot’s novels, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poetry. The appearance of literacy was an important staple for rural Plains settlers, and many sought improvement of their station through access to the latest reading materials.

Beyond just educational and narrative reading, rural Plains residents subscribed to larger notions of civilization by reading how-to manuals and etiquette books that offered suggestions for proper behavior. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw a prolific outpouring of these books, especially “among customers aspiring to gentility. [Publishers] complied or commissioned books wherein etiquette advice flowed over into tips on housekeeping, medical care, letter writing, child raising, business and legal forms, lessons in elocution and public speaking and miscellaneous matters.”¹⁰⁰ So when Muirl (after her marriage to Harry) ordered a copy of *How to Take Care of the Baby* from the Sears and Roe-

buck catalog, she not only sought practical information on childcare, but also aspired to grander expectations for the proper and civilized rearing of a family. Again, the impact of rural delivery and catalog ordering was immeasurable, as rural Plains women saw the ideals of American civilization delivered to their distant homes.

Through education and reading, rural settlers could absorb the larger expectations of American civilization. But in the extreme distances of the Great Plains, settlers worked to spread civilization through letter writing, which also showed their need for polite and civil correspondence. Letter writing maintained communication between distant ranches and farms, but most importantly perpetuated the language and manners of civilized American society. For early Americans, “letters served to enhance friendship and family ties . . . [but also] presented a refined spirit in the act of revealing its sensibility, its vivacity, and its delicacy.”¹⁰¹ By the end of the nineteenth century, letter writing was still an important medium for the exchange of polite, educated, and literary language. Letters also helped to disseminate the ideals of American civilization, expectations, and behavior. In the rural Plains, letter writing was a vital form of communication, as phone lines were expensive and impractical. Ranches served as local postal offices, and as in other middle-class communities throughout the United States, Plains residents exchanged letters, greeting cards, postcards, Valentines, and invitations to dinners and box socials. Letter writing helped to temper some of the lonesomeness that came with living in remote isolation, and symbolically reduced the distances between rural places. Muirl admitted, “It seems pretty lonely up here. I am so glad to get the letters and cards.”¹⁰²

Letters also brought settlers together with a shared language of cultural identity, even if people lived miles from each other and the nearest town. Muirl Dorrough’s role as a letter writer showed the importance of what historians have called “epistolary community,”

or the transfer of ideas, cultural attitudes, and personal relations through letter writing. "Epistolary community" among rural Plains settlers served as a medium for transferring the elements of American civilization, especially manners, civility, and proper community interaction.¹⁰³ For instance, Muirl abided by the expectations of polite society by consistently using appropriate titles for neighbors and friends. While she did refer to children, peers, and relatives by first names, she more commonly addressed superiors, acquaintance, and other associations with polite titles of "Mr.," "Miss," and "Mrs." Muirl maintained a dignified respect for couples with whom she lived while she taught school; she held to the consistent use of titles such as "Mrs. Evans," "Mrs. Neal," and "Mrs. Upton," even if women were close to her own age. She also politely referred to her father's hired man as "Mr. Ballard." In the Texas Panhandle, Nellie Perry addressed neighbors, acquaintances, and new settlers as "Messrs. Bates and Whippo" and "Messrs. Stevens and Nelson of Missouri."¹⁰⁴ The use of respectful titles when addressing neighbors and acquaintances certainly held to the standards espoused in one nineteenth-century etiquette manual to never "lay aside the habit of addressing your friend as 'Mr. so-and-so,' and never to permit it to be laid aside by him. It will temper at all times the warmth of undue approach, and will enable you to check an occasional freedom by the immediate interposition of a shield."¹⁰⁵

Muirl Dorrough's use of formal conversational discourse in her letters exposes a broader transplantation of gentility through language. In writing to her husband-to-be, Muirl often portrayed an affectionate familiarity; however, when she referred to troubling or uncomfortable situations, she remained dignified and emotionally self-controlling. On occasions when Harry's mother acted rudely toward her future daughter-in-law, Muirl managed to conserve a sense of decorum in the face of contention. After one particularly egregious accusation, Muirl simply complained to Harry that "I never had anything hurt me so before. . . . I could

not believe that she ever said any thing about us." And when Harry was attacked by a couple of ruffians, Muirl exhibited only a bit more excited protest: "I hope that those men get punished as they deserve. The cowardly fellows I should say to attack you in such an unfair way!"¹⁰⁶ Self-restraint was an important quality of civilized refinement, because "[o]f all emotions, anger most violently betrayed a loss of self-possession and irreparably shattered the spirit of civility."¹⁰⁷ So, instead of allowing the Plains environment to dictate greater informality or casual rudeness in personal relations, Muirl Dorrough and other women sought to perpetuate civil behavior and polite formality through conversation and letter writing. Muirl once reminded Harry, "I am very polite, I think." Through the discourses of letter writing and public behavior, Plains settlers helped to apply the civilized qualities of morality, polite behavior, and order to their rural places.

Plains settlers communicated through appropriate postal correspondence, which also served as a medium for initiating other social gatherings. Settlers sent and received invitations to dances, box socials, dinners, and other events. Plains women participated in the genteel social activity of "calling," as when Muirl reported that "Mrs. Upton and Mabel were to call on Mrs. Neal this afternoon." Muirl often attended dances and box socials, and of course, enjoyed dinners and visits with her fiancé, usually under the chaperoning gaze of her parents and sisters. Departing from her usual affectionate familiarity with Harry, Muirl once referred to his visit with a mock tone of superpolite discourse associated with interactions of earlier decades: "My dear sir, I will be quite honored to have you visit me."¹⁰⁸ On another occasion Muirl wrote, "Mamma and we girls were to a dinner party given for two ladies from Kansas. There were twenty-five ladies there and I don't know how many children."¹⁰⁹ These gatherings had to meet the standards for acceptable decorum. On one of Nellie Perry's trips to visit her brother George in Texas, they "went visiting" on a Sunday, which

Nellie marveled was “according to native custom.” Nellie showed some disapproval at this breach of etiquette, and “though I questioned the propriety of Sunday visiting, I made few objections, and as early as we could dispatch breakfast and the little necessary work, we started for George’s nearest neighbor.” Nellie understood the significance of her own refining influence on her brother, and regretted that the “invitation had been received and accepted by George before I was consulted.”¹¹⁰

ASPIRATIONS: THE LANGUAGE OF REFINEMENT

Rural Plains women aspired to genteel refinement of their physical spaces, even when harsh conditions restricted that process. Vernacular refinement remained so important to women settlers that the process of moving from simple to elegant caused women to create a genteel self-awareness in their own minds, or what Angel Kwolek-Folland has described as “an awareness on their part that the home could symbolize economic status.” For example, after women had succeeded in refining their domestic space, they often “made allusion to themselves as aristocrats or ‘queens.’”¹¹¹ As conditions improved and women achieved refinement, they described these successes by invoking the language of nobility and royalty. One Kansas homesteader in 1898, upon laying two carpets brought from New York in her rural Kansas “cottonwood shack,” felt “quite aristocratic” for the elegant additions to her rude living space.¹¹²

At Rachel Calof’s marriage to Abe, the prepared food was simple but, in her mind, still deserving of the title “feast.” Following her son’s bris (circumcision) ceremony, the supper was not merely a meal, but a “truly magnificent banquet.”¹¹³ Any improvements on the Calofs’ home caused Rachel to put forth particularly lofty descriptions of her conditions: thus, the “rude shanty” became a “palace.” And although the Calofs’ second home “only had a few boards for a ceiling,” to Rachel it was “the loveliest palace in the world. I was

overwhelmed with joy at the prospect of bringing my family into such spacious quarters.”¹¹⁴ Rachel’s son Jacob remembered his mother with the dignity and refinement she had sought all of her life: “The most vivid memory I treasure of her was the lovely picture she presented wearing her immaculate white apron over her best dress in her warm, spotless house, making her blessing over the Sabbath candles each Friday evening. *How noble and regal she looked.*”¹¹⁵ Muirl Dorrough also suggested a noble self-identity, when after receiving a bracelet from Harry, she gushed, “I certainly like my bracelet. *I wear it only on state occasions.* So you see I am trying to take proper care of it.”¹¹⁶ By implementing the language of nobility when describing their domestic successes, Plains women suggested the importance of refinement—however simple—in producing American civilization in the rural environment.

Perhaps Nellie Perry aptly described the civilizing aspirations of Plains settlers best when she bragged that

[i]t goes without saying that the people of the Texas Panhandle are not only as honest and as industrious, but that *they possess culture and education equal to the average American citizen.*¹¹⁷

CONCLUSION

As women moved with their husbands and families into the hard environment of the Great Plains between 1880 and 1920, they sought refinement of their physical space—not after they had first achieved survival, but as an intricate and interwoven part of that survival process. Refinement meant that women created physical, behavioral, and cultural expressions of gentility and cultured living. Women’s refining actions became a part of what Allen Pred has called “human geography.” In local and regional transformation, “women and men make histories and produce places, not under circumstances of their own choosing, but in the context of already existing social and spatial

relations which both enable and constrain the purposeful conduct of life." Thus, Muir Dorrough, Rachel Calof, Grace Fairchild, and Nellie Perry made their own histories, but within the structure of larger social, economic, and demographic connections. These women lived within the civilizing forces and institutions placed upon them, but also acted within those forces to perpetuate a sense of refined civilization particularly adapted to their Plains communities. This was significant: "[T]he daily reproduction of these institutionalized forms of sociability resulted in the personal accumulation of common knowledge, or in a deepening collective consciousness."¹¹⁸

The refining behavior and attitudes of Plains women became part of a "collective consciousness" of American civilization that extended beyond their isolated ranches. Through the processes of beautification, acculturation, and civilization that Plains women used to achieve refinement in their rural places, they "linked themselves to other women across the nation."¹¹⁹ Between 1880 and 1920, rural Plains women adapted the forms of acceptable refinement—domestic enhancements, material culture, genteel behavior, manners, and spatial organization—in order to mark themselves against their harsh environments and thus reproduce the physical and ideological symbols of Euro-American civilization in the rural Great Plains.

NOTES

1. David Hilton Family, Solomon Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, B983-3535, in John Carter, ed., *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 55. See also <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/images/lib-arch/research/photos/47fs.jpg> (accessed February 3, 2004).

2. "Civilization" suggests the institutions, behavior and manners, symbols, and material culture that Euro-Americans sought in their daily living as representations of a connectedness to their larger national identity. Thus, American civilization by 1900 included the "ideas and practices" of society that could also spread to the remote places of the Great Plains, where settlers needed a way of cul-

turally marking themselves in a harsh land. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 24.

3. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), vol. II, 2463.

4. Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Paperback Books, 1992), xii.

5. For more discussion on how Americans transplanted middle-class ideals as they moved to the West, see Timothy R. Mahoney, *Provincial Lives: Middle Class Experience in the Antebellum Middle West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3. Mahoney also uses the phrase "distant outposts."

6. Robert Griswold, "Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, ed. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 21. For a more simplistic discussion of women's civilizing influence due to so-called feminine qualities, see Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 12.

7. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840-1880*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

8. Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 88.

9. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 145.

10. Paula M. Nelson, "'Do Everything'—Women in Small Prairie Towns, 1870-1920," *Journal of the West* 36 (October 1997): 52-60.

11. Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Elegant Dug-out: Domesticity and Moveable Culture in the United States, 1870-1907," *American Studies* 25 (Spring 1984): 22.

12. *Ibid.*, 35.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Glenda Riley has shown how African American women homesteaders also desired to "begin 'civilized' housekeeping" in the West. See Riley, *Female Frontier*, 94-95.

15. *Ibid.*, 86.

16. Rachel Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, ed. J. Sanford Rikoon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 22.

17. *Ibid.*, 23.

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. Ibid., 23.
20. Ibid., 23.
21. Ibid., 28.
22. Ibid., 67.
23. Ibid., 29.
24. Grace M. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman: The Life of a Woman Homesteader on the Dakota Frontier*, ed. Walker D. Wyman (River Falls: University of Wisconsin–River Falls Press, 1972), 8. For the exact distance between the homestead and Philip, see also the obituary of Grace and Shy Fairchild's youngest son, Wayne Fairchild, http://www.rushfuneralhome.com/wayne_fairchild_obituary.htm (accessed 16 August 2004).
25. Ibid., 13.
26. Ibid., 40.
27. Ibid., 18.
28. Ibid., 47.
29. David E. Radke, comp., *Willo Muirl: Letters from Muirl Dorrough to Harry Shimmin* (Elizabeth, IL: n.p.1995). Letter typescripts in possession of the author.
30. Mary Beaumont Welch Papers, Iowa State University Library, Special Collections Department, Ames, IA, quoted in Ercel Sherman Eppright and Elizabeth Storm Ferguson, *A Century of Home Economics at Iowa State University* (Ames: Iowa State University Home Economics Alumni Association, 1971), 30.
31. Sandra Gail Teichmann, ed., *Woman of the Plains: The Journals and Stories of Nellie M. Perry* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 19.
32. Ibid., 22.
33. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 31–32.
34. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 125–26.
35. Donna M. Lucey, *Photographing Montana, 1894–1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2000), 171, 177.
36. Riley, *Female Frontier*, 88.
37. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 60.
38. Muirl Dorrough, Hyannis, NE, to Harry Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, September 18, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
39. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 44.
40. Ibid. Italics added.
41. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 18.
42. Ibid., 58–59.
43. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 72.
44. John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang 1997), 174–75.
45. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 73.
46. Ibid., 23, 38.
47. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 58–59.
48. Dorrough to Shimmin, October 8, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
49. Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules*, quoted in *The Western Women's Reader: The Remarkable Writings of Women Who Shaped the American West, Spanning 300 Years*, ed. Lillian Schlissel and Catherine Lavender (New York: HarperPerennial Books, 2000), 147.
50. Lucey, *Photographing Montana*, 215.
51. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 24.
52. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 47.
53. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 90.
54. Ibid., 58. See also Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*.
55. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 26.
56. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 14, 170.
57. Ibid., 170.
58. Dorrough to Shimmin, September 18, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
59. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 188.
60. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 55.
61. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 98. Italics added.
62. Dorrough to Shimmin, September 18, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
63. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 99. Italics added.
64. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 199.
65. Dorrough to Shimmin, September 18, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
66. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 187.
67. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 27.
68. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 120.
69. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 27.
70. Dorrough, Elva, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, October 17, 1912, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
71. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 161.
72. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 110.
73. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 78. Italics added.
74. Ibid., 81.
75. Ibid., 85.
76. For histories of the American mail-order catalog companies, see Frank B. Latham, *1872–1972, A Century of Serving Consumers: The Story of Montgomery Ward* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward and Co., 1972); David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days: A History of American Morals and Manners as Seen Through the Sears, Roebuck Catalogs, 1905 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940); and Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, USA: The Great American Catalog Store and How It Grew* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977).
77. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 25.
78. Latham, *1872–1972, A Century of Serving Consumers*, 40.
79. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 19.
80. Riley, *Female Frontier*, 91.
81. Dorrough, Pullman, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, January 18, 1914, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*; Latham, *1872–1972, A Century of Serving Consumers*, 46.
82. Lorin Sorensen, *Sears, Roebuck and Co.: 100th Anniversary, 1886–1986* (St. Helena, CA: Silverado Publishing Company, 1985), 12.

83. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 188.
84. Dorrough, Hyannis, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, December 4, 1913; Dorrough to Shimmin, September 18, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
85. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 17.
86. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 189.
87. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 27.
88. Mrs. Carrie Robbins, Journal, March 4, 1887, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, quoted in Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 23.
89. Faye Cashatt Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971), 71-72; quoted in Riley, *Female Frontier*, 101.
90. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 182.
91. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 96.
92. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 55.
93. Latham, 1872-1972, *A Century of Serving Consumers*, 20.
94. Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 29.
95. Dorrough, Whitman, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, June 1, 1912; Dorrough to Shimmin, April 12, 1912; Dorrough, Elva, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, April 6, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
96. Sandoz, *Old Jules*, quoted in Schlissel and Lavender, *Western Women's Reader*, 139.
97. Fairchild, *Frontier Woman*, 96.
98. Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 35.
99. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 39.
100. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 45. Glenda Riley also refers to the importance of the distribution of printed materials like novels, catalogs, etiquette and household manuals, and recipe books to Plains women. See Riley, *Female Frontier*, 176.
101. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 92.
102. Dorrough, Hyannis, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, September 21, 1913, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
103. Rebecca Earle, *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1999).
104. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 26, 61.
105. Quoted in Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 145.
106. Dorrough, Alliance, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, June 2, 1911; Dorrough to Shimmin, October 13, 1911, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
107. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 157.
108. Dorrough, Whitman, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, February 24, 1911; Dorrough to Shimmin, January 29, 1912, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
109. Dorrough, Elva, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, August 10, 1912, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
110. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 26.
111. Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 34.
112. Isabelle W. "Belle" Litchfield to Hattie Parkerson, March 19, 1898, and February 27, 1899, Domestic Science Club Papers, Kansas State University Archives, Manhattan, quoted in Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 43.
113. Calof, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 38.
114. *Ibid.*, 45, 78.
115. *Ibid.*, 103. Italics added.
116. Dorrough, Whitman, NE, to Shimmin, Dunwell, NE, February 26, 1912, in Radke, *Willo Muirl*.
117. Teichmann, *Woman of the Plains*, 90.
118. Allan Pred, "Biography Formation, Knowledge Acquisition, and the Growth and Transformation of Cities During the Late Mercantile Period," in *Making Histories and Constructing Human Geographies: The Local Transformation of Practice, Power Relations, and Consciousness* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 62.
119. Kwolek-Folland, "Elegant Dugout," 29.