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Prairie Schoolwomen, Mid-1850s to 1920s, in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska

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PRAIRIE SCHOOLWOMEN, MID-1850s TO 1920s, IN IOWA, KANSAS, AND NEBRASKA

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The ideal schoolteacher of the mid-1800s was characterized by Catherine Beecher as an educated, unmarried lady who was "already qualified intellectually to teach, and possessed of missionary zeal and benevolence," she was ready to go "to the most ignorant portions of our land to raise up schools, to instruct in morals and piety, and to teach the domestic arts and virtues.[1] This description, as applied to the schoolwomen of Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas from the mid-1850s to the early 1900s, omits their unique characteristics and contributions. This article seeks to redefine the prairie schoolwomen as western women, both single and married, who were at home with the frugal rural life-style of the farms and ranches; who were fired by the idealistic belief that universal public education could lead to self-betterment and to social reforms for themselves, for children, and for the community at large. The majority of the prairie schoolwomen assumed not the role of "missionary" in teaching the children but rather were accepted members of the community and of the extended family relationships common to the one-room schoolhouse.

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TEACHERS AND PUPILS

The indigenous schoolwomen were members of the settler families who had come west from Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and other areas east of the Mississippi, and from central and northern Europe.[2] In the educational and communal void of the open country, the settlers were part of "a form of society . . . whose social conditions result[ed] from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land.[3] This thesis, proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner, can be applied to the development of schooling in the open country, where the settlers, who had variable levels of education, gradually became what Herbert Quick called the "self-educated society."[4]

Temporary schools were established in settlers' homes, in dugouts, and in soddies in order to implement the desired schooling for the rapidly increasing school-age population.

In Iowa the number of school-age children increased five-fold in the first decade of record. By 1870 the school-age population in Iowa was twenty times larger than in 1847. In Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, the growth was rapid and continuous (Table 1).

TABLE 1.
GROWTH IN NUMBER OF SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN, SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, AND AVERAGE DAILY ATTENDANCE 1849 TO 1895 IN IOWA, KANSAS, AND NEBRASKA.

IOWA (Statehood 1846)	1849	1858	1870	1882	1895
PUPILS					
Total school age children in state	(1847) 20,922 (1849) 50,082	233,927	431,134	604,739	712,941
Number enrolled	(1847) 2,439 (1849) 17,350	36,574	320,803	406,947	533,824
Average daily attendance	NA	NA	202,246	253,688	339,300
KANSAS (Statehood 1861)		1861	1870	1882	1894
PUPILS					
Total school age children in state		4,901	109,242	357,920	496,139
Number enrolled in school		2,310	63,218	269,945	393,840
Average daily attendance		NA	39,401	162,017	252,215
NEBRASKA (Statehood 1867)		1860	1870	1882	1895
PUPILS					
Total school age children in state		7,041	32,589	165,559	351,846
Number enrolled in school		2,930	12,719	115,546	274,282
Average daily attendance		NA	39%	NA	NA

SOURCES: Henry Sabin, *Twenty-seventh Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Iowa, November 1, 1895* (Des Moines: 1895), pp. 14-15; Peter McVicar, *Tenth Annual Report of the Department of Public Instruction of the State of Kansas, 1870* (Topeka: 1870), facing page 52; Henry Clay Speer, *Third Biennial Report of the State Superintendent for the School Years Ending July 31, 1881, and July 31, 1882, Kansas* (Topeka: 1882), p. 124; Henry N. Gaines, *Ninth Biennial Report of the Department of Public Instruction, State of Kansas, for the School Years Ending July 31, 1893 and 1894* (Topeka: 1894), pp. 5-6; *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools of the Territory of Nebraska to the Seventh Legislative Assembly 1860* (Lincoln: 1861), p. 45; William Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Nebraska, for the Years 1901-02*, Vol. 2 (Lincoln: 1903), pp. 808-809.

With many children to be educated, schoolhouses and teachers were in high demand. Sturdy sod schoolhouses and white frame ones became the accepted structures for schooling as soon as the tax base in a district could support both the schoolhouse and the teacher's salary.[5] The teaching positions that in other regions were filled by educated schoolmasters and schoolwomen, were, at first, filled by local mothers, wives, and daughters who were literate and who shared the belief that education would lead to the improvement of self and community. The rapid increase in numbers of schoolhouses and of teachers paralleled the population growth (Table 2).

TABLE 2.

GROWTH OF NUMBER OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND NUMBER OF TEACHERS FROM 1849 TO 1895 IN IOWA, KANSAS, AND NEBRASKA.

IOWA	1849	1858	1870	1882	1895
SCHOOLS					
Schoolhouses	522	2,182	6,888	11,285	13,631
Graded schools	——	——	213	2,359	4,777
Average length of school year	4 months, 4 days	NA	6 months, 4 days	7 months, 2 days	8 months
Value of School property	$68,762	$971,004	$6,191,633	$9,949,243	$15,645,543
TEACHERS					
Female	245	1,682	7,806	16,037	22,117
Male	336	1,118	4,909	6,044	5,726

KANSAS	1861	1870	1882	1894
SCHOOLS				
Schoolhouses	NA	1,501	5,555	9,334
Graded schools	NA	NA	NA	NA
Average length of school year	NA	5.2 months	22.8 weeks (4.6 months)	25 weeks (5 months)
Value of school property	NA	$1,520,041	$4,796,368	$11,193,396
TEACHERS				
Female	NA	1,161	4,808	7,916 *estimate total 11,903
Male	NA	1,079	3,342	3,987 *estimate

NA=Data not available
*=Estimated number of women and men

TABLE 2. continued

GROWTH OF NUMBER OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND NUMBER OF TEACHERS FROM 1849 TO 1895 IN IOWA, KANSAS, AND NEBRASKA.

NEBRASKA		1860	1870	1882	1895
SCHOOLS					
Schoolhouses	primary	104	298	3,088	6,687
	high schools	4			
Graded schools		—	20	90	393
Average length of school year		—	70 days 3.5 months	NA	NA
Value of school property		—	$177,082	$2,214,474	$8,889,841
TEACHERS					
Female	primary	74			
	high school	2	269	3,507	6,943
Male	primary	36			
	high school	2	267	1,862	2,548

NA=Data not available
*=Estimated number of women and men

SOURCES: Sabin, *Twenty-seventh Biennial Report, Iowa, 1895*, pp. 14-15; McVicar, *Tenth Annual Report, Kansas, 1870*, facing page 52; Speer, *Third Biennial Report, Kansas, 1881-1882*, p. 124; Gaines, *Ninth Biennial Report, Kansas, 1893-1894*, pp. 5-6; *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools, Territory of Nebraska, 1860*, p. 45; Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report, Nebraska, 1901-1902*, Vol. 2, pp. 808-809.

WHAT TEACHERS WERE PAID

Although monthly salaries increased very little from 1850 to the 1880s, the length of the school year expanded from two months to more than eight, thus increasing the yearly salaries substantially (Table 3). It is evident, however, that teachers—men and women—were not among even the moderately wealthy. Men's salaries were roughly equivalent, on a twelve-month basis, to that of a hired farmhand who got his room and board. Women's salaries were similar to those of the hired girl or domestic who got her room and board.[6] One superintendent thought that teachers would have to steal their clothes if they had to pay for their board because they would not have enough income to pay for both.[7] From their salaries and additional income, including supplemental support from their families, teachers paid for "board, clothes (and the public demands taste in the dress of teachers), incidentals, books, magazines, institute expenses, subscriptions, benevolences, and all other expenses."[8]

Although teachers campaigned for higher salaries, it was only through individual negotiations with the school board members that a

TABLE 3.
GROWTH IN TEACHERS' MONTHLY AND YEARLY SALARIES FROM 1849 TO 1895 IN IOWA, KANSAS, AND NEBRASKA.

IOWA	1849		1858		1870		1882		1895	
	Monthly	Yearly	Monthly	Yearly	Monthly	Yearly	Monthly	Yearly	Monthly	Yearly
Female	$ 7.64	$32.08	$ 9.42	$ 48.98*	$26.80	$166.16	$27.46	$194.97	$31.63	$253.04
Male	14.53	61.03	25.33	131.72*	35.60	220.72	35.20	249.92	37.68	301.44

KANSAS	1861	1870		1882		1894	
Female	NA	$31.10	$161.72	$24.95	$114.77	$35.01	$175.05
Male	NA	39.60	205.92	31.95	146.97	43.09	215.45

NEBRASKA	1860	1870		1882		1895	
Female	NA primary $24.27 **high school 97.50	$33.00	NA	$28.50	NA	$38.66	NA
Male	NA primary $24.62 **high school 425.50	28.00	NA	37.99	NA	44.18	NA

*Estimated yearly salary
**High school salaries in Nebraska, 1860, appear unaccountably high.
NA=Data not available

SOURCES: Sabin, *Twenty-seventh Biennial Report, Iowa, 1895*, pp. 14-15; McVicar, *Tenth Annual Report, Kansas, 1870*, facing page 52; Speer, *Third Biennial Report, Kansas, 1881-1882*, p. 124; Gaines, *Ninth Biennial Report, Kansas, 1893-1894*, pp. 5-6; *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Common Schools, Territory of Nebraska, 1860*, p. 45; Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report, Nebraska, 1901-1902*, Vol. 2, pp. 808-809.

teacher could achieve a higher salary while staying in the same school district. Teachers not constrained by family obligations could move to other schools in order to improve their salaries and working conditions. Unfortunately, some school districts hired only poorly prepared or inexperienced teachers who would work for a low salary.

A few districts paid men and women equally, according to their education and experience. Teachers and teachers associations usually supported equal pay. The Teachers Class of Osceola, Iowa, resolved in 1860: "That females are as well capacitated to teach as males; and if so, they should receive equivalent wages."[9] In 1863, the Iowa State Teachers Association decided to charge women membership fees on the same basis as men because the women had been "counted worthy to take the place of the brave boys who have

gone to teach rebels the consequences of secession."[10] Nonetheless, schoolmen were usually paid more than women until the unionization of teachers in the second half of the twentieth century. The pay differential was not enough to return men to the schoolhouse after the Civil War. The sharp increase in the numbers and percentages of women teachers indicates that veterans and other men had lost interest in this "woman's job" (Table 2).[11] The feminization of teaching provided women with a respectable way to earn a bare living.

The first teacher in a school district may have been no more than literate, but the state and county requirements for certification increased so that continuing certification was based on continuing professional education. Teachers earned more money but were required to spend more of their income on their own education by attending the teacher institutes, normal schools, colleges, and universities. Some of the beginning teachers found teaching personally rewarding and continued attending institutes and summer sessions at the normal schools in order to renew their teaching certificates. They became the long-term professional teachers who continued their schooling throughout their careers. They taught in the best-equipped, highest-paying schools near their homes. Among the professional teachers were those who became community and educational leaders. Their experience and education gave them choices of employment as teachers, as elected or appointed administrators, and as teacher educators. Recognition of their achievements put them into positions of prominence as community builders and as leaders of educational development at local, state, and national levels.[12]

TEACHING AS "WOMEN'S WORK"

The data drawn from their public and private documents suggest that some of the long-term schoolwomen continued teaching and working as administrators and teacher educators throughout their adult lives and married years. It appears that school districts hired married women when a district was first organized, when the need for a teacher was a greater concern than her marital status, and, in some districts, when the best qualified teacher was a married woman. Although many women left teaching when they got married, some returned to it later and some never left. In order to determine which school districts hired married women and under what circumstances, there is a need for research in school district records that document an extensive period of time.

Women teachers represented 25 to 35 percent of the gainfully employed women in Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas in the 1880s. Table 4 compares the census data on women workers in general with the number of women teachers. The percentage of teachers among women workers may be slightly higher than the estimates shown in Table 4 because census takers counted girls as young as ten among the gainfully employed. Teachers were customarily at least five to eight years older.

To obtain another estimate of the number of prairie women who were schoolwomen during some part of their lives, I used the total number of women teachers cited in Table 2. From these totals, listed roughly by decades, I estimated the number of teaching positions held by women for each year. Referring to Kansas State Superintendent I. L. Dayoff's 1905 estimate of the average length of teaching career as less than four years, I used 3.5 years as an estimated average for 1870 to the 1890s.[13] From this data, I estimated the number of women who had taught or who were teaching in the 1890s as follows: Iowa, 72,000, or 12.2 percent of the female population fifteen years and older; Kansas, 33,400, or 8.2 percent; and Nebraska, 26,200, or 8.8 percent.

The large number of prairie women who taught school attests to the interest in education among the settlers. Schools were established and taught by natives of many states, not, as Julie Roy Jeffrey has suggested, just those primarily from New England.[14] The support for public education by the prairie settlers is confirmed in the high literacy rates

TABLE 4.
PRAIRIE WOMEN TEACHERS AS GAINFULLY EMPLOYED WORKERS, 1870-1895.

IOWA	1870	1880-82	1890-95
Total gainfully employed female workers, 10 yrs. & older	23,100	44,800	80,400
Total female teachers	7,806	16,037	22,117
% of gainfully employed women workers as teachers	22.1%	35.8%	27.5%

KANSAS	1870	1880-82	1890-94
Total gainfully employed female workers, 10 yrs. & older	6,500	19,400	45,500
Total female teachers	1,161	4,808	7,915*
% of gainfully employed women workers as teachers	17.8%	24.7%	17.3%*

NEBRASKA	1870	1880-82	1890-95
Total gainfully employed female workers, 10 yrs. & older	1,900	10,500	42,600
Total female teachers	269	3,507	6,943
% of gainfully employed women workers as teachers	14%	33.4%	16.2%

*Estimated number of female teachers in Kansas
SOURCES: For total number of female teachers, see Table 2, above. Population determined from: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Part 1, Series D 26-28; Gainful Workers, by Sex, by State: 1870 to 1950, pp. 129-130. It should be noted that the census records of the 1800s count adult females as 15 years and older, and gainfully employed women workers as 10 years and older.

of Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas from 1870 to 1900.[15] In view of the wide-ranging origins of the American-born and foreign-born immigrants throughout these years, literacy could not have been the product of settlers from one region but rather resulted from teachers and citizens working together toward their common goal of universal public coeducation. According to Carl Degler, coeducation was the most significant aspect of public education, as a "social decision ranked among the most fateful."[16] In the prairie setting, education became the way by which young women could leave home and earn their own living. Coeducation established a foundation for the progressive development of equality. The people who established public coeducational schools on the prairies and taught in them were:

> free from the prejudices which grow up amid old associations, that are peculiar to long settled and unchanging communities. They are inspired under the influences of a rapid development in physical resources and material wealth, to look for corresponding progress in social, political and religious sentiments and institutions. They have left the old, they expect the new.[17]

The prairie schoolwomen's motivation to teach was based on economic need and idealism. The core of the motivation was to educate the children for the common good. There was, nonetheless, a difference between operating on others as missionaries to the "most ignorant portions of our land," and operating with others as accepted members of the community.[18] The stereotype of the schoolwoman smacks of the role of the missionary who has come to save the "ignorant children." The reality of the prairie teachers was that they were western women who, as part of the emerging society, worked with their neighbors toward their common goal of universal public education. Among the expectations of the new, was the belief that "a great, primitive, newly gathered, democratic, independent, self-reliant, uncultured people could grapple with the task of educating itself."[19]

TEACHERS AND THE LAND

It is through letters, diaries, and school records that the schoolwomen identified themselves as members of Quick's "self-educated society." In their public and private writings, they recorded their perceptions of their lives, their work in schools and in their homes, their opportunities for leadership and independence, their loves and friendships, and their multiple roles in the development of the prairie society. Between the statistics and the stereotypes, the schoolwomen's personal and public records document their attachments to the land as their home country, their acceptance of themselves and their neighbors as capable people, and their belief in the value of education. Although the prairie environment was harsher and more stark than that of the eastern United States or the European homelands of the immigrants, the schoolwomen described the land realistically and with pride in its beauty, respect for its openness, and the emotional attachment associated with home.

Isabelle Simmons Stewart recalled the long, open vistas of Saline County, Nebraska, as it was in 1869: "From my Father's place looking west there was neither house, tree nor cultivated land to arrest the vision. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but the vast rolling prairie." Agnes Briggs Olmstead found her long walks to and from her country schoolhouses, in the 1860s and 1870s in Iowa, a source of pleasure and personal freedom. "Not the least of my pleasures was the sense of boundless freedom, of being no longer shut in. Here was elbow room, breathing space." Bessie Tucker Gilmer identified herself as a young woman who loved living in the country, but she was realistic in her disgust with the events of an early spring day in eastern Nebraska:

> This is a beastly day!! Rain and snow and SCHOOL! It's Saturday and we are making up a day . . . . The fire won't burn and we are all huddled up in our sweaters and the children are complaining because we are here. I really can't blame them. I feel the same way. I had a date tonight, cancelled because of the storm. There is just no end to my MISERY.

Beryl Decker, a retired western teacher, described the heart-felt longing of a displaced prairie woman for the land: "I have stood on a summer day in other fields, quiet and undisturbed by the wind, and my heart has cried with loneliness for wide prairies with grasses bent to the ground, some nearly uprooted by a dust-ridden tearing blast under a blistering sun. I love Nebraska and its wind.[20]

BOARDING

Some teachers lived at home with their parents or spouses; for many teachers, howev-

er, boarding was the only practical answer to living close to the schoolhouse. As boarders, the schoolwomen were generally treated as members of the families with whom they boarded, and they were included in the social, educational, political, and religious events held in neighboring homes, schools, and communities. Most teachers lived as well as did the families in their school districts, and for most the district in which they taught was similar to their home.[21]

Although wretched boarding conditions certainly did exist, the schoolwomen's accounts seem to indicate that the unacceptable conditions were temporary or short-lived. Historian Glenda Riley observes that "most frontierswomen found that the worst was over in two years. They moved into better homes, could buy many items from stores in new towns . . . had friends and neighbors . . . churches and schools." The beginners, who were hired by the lowest-paying districts, were most often the teachers who experienced poor boarding conditions. If they continued teaching, those conditions usually improved. In 1859 new teacher Mollie Dorsey described sleeping on the floor while "festive bedbugs held high carnival over my weary frame the night through." When she refused to teach until she had acceptable lodgings, her school director moved her to a pleasant home within two weeks. Mollie left teaching after one summer term. She found that she liked sewing better and could earn more money from it. In 1915 Bessie Tucker, another beginner, boarded with the school director's family in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. The mother was bedridden, so Bessie helped the two daughters, her pupils, clean the dirty house. She spent pleasant weekends with the only other family in the district, and within three months she was teaching and living comfortably in another school district three miles away.[22]

Boarding for Rosa Scheurs Jennings of Butler County, Iowa, in the 1880s, was being "a member of the family." She taught seven years in rural schools and "always had a pleasant place to stay." She was also eagerly welcomed when she visited the homes of her scholars. She wrote: "Those visits were good for all of us, levelers both ways. Having once eaten salt and broken bread in these homes, I could not, had I wanted to, be indifferent to the children's progress at school."[23] The schoolwomen's writings indicate that boarding had its bleak and dismal experiences, but for those who accepted the rural life-style, the hardships were balanced with family feeling, good food, and good times in homes that were "dear to [the] heart."[24] When, as Riley observes, the schoolwomen were "farm women who were familiar with most of the tasks that were demanded of them," boarding with families similar to their own was not an imposed hardship: it was an extension of the family and community relationships.[25]

Representative Lives

The life-styles and values of the schoolwomen can be seen in the representative lives of Nancy Higgins Gaddis, short-term teacher; Jane Price, long-term professional teacher; and Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, long-term professional schoolwoman and leader in community and educational development.

Nancy Higgins Gaddis. Nancy Higgins Gaddis was the quintessential short-term teacher. Although Nancy taught for only two years and left few written records of her life, her teaching certificates, handwritten teaching contracts, and attendance book have been carefully preserved for over one hundred years by her daughters and granddaughter. Her life is recorded through the family photograph album and her daughter's history of the family.[26] Teaching school for Nancy Higgins Gaddis was a highly valued experience of personal reward and idealistic satisfaction, as it was for many other short-term teachers.

In 1875, at age thirteen, Nancy traveled from Missouri to Custer County, Nebraska, with her abolitionist family. While surrounded by range wars and lynchings made famous by Solomon Butcher's photographs and history of the county, the Higgins family established

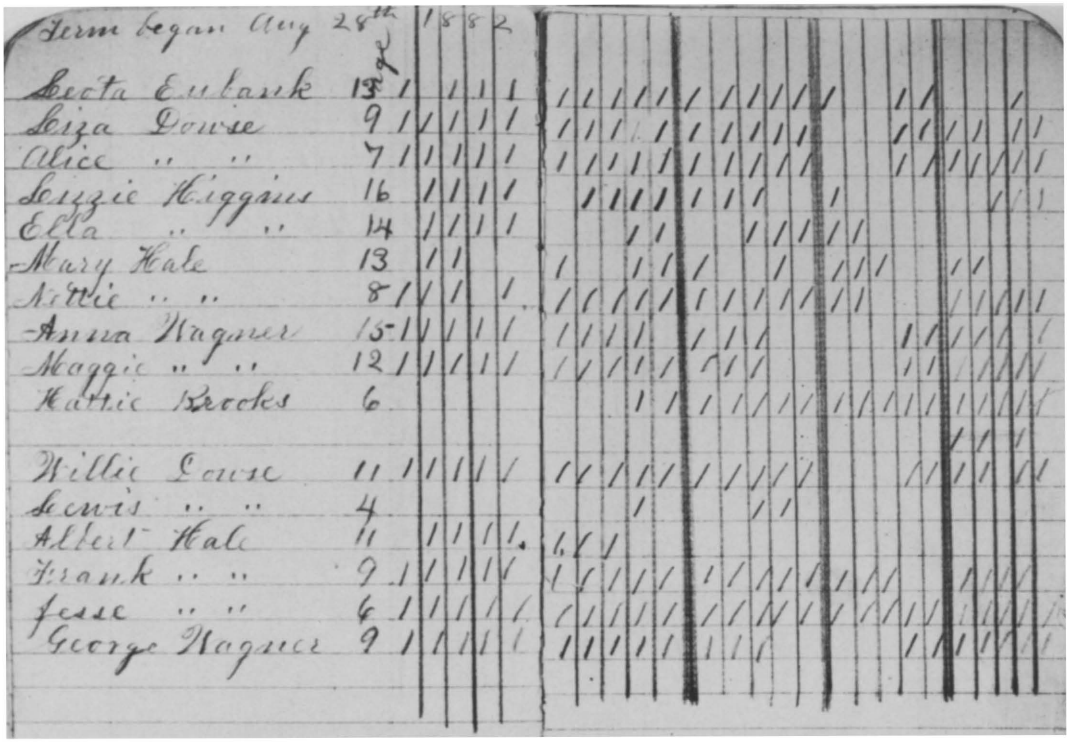

FIG. 1. *The extended family relationships of the one-room schoolhouses can be seen as recorded in Nancy Higgins Gaddis's attendance book. Among her scholars were her sisters, her neighbors' children, and the Hale children, who were her nieces and nephews.* Courtesy of Eleanor McKinney.

churches and schools and developed their livestock farm.[27] The family history includes descriptions of the rugged land, the visits of churchmen and other travelers, but omits comment about the violent conflicts among various elements in the county. The Higgins family apparently valued schools, churches, and homes as the appropriate indicators of progress, stability, and the values implicit in their lives.

Nancy was educated at the district school built on her father's land and at the coeducational Free Methodist boarding academy. At home she learned the traditional women's skills of quilting, cooking, and caring for others. Her daughter recalled that if a neighbor's stitches in Nancy's quilt weren't fine enough, Nancy would remove them and do the quilting over. Nancy was also regarded as her father's best livestock herder, an excellent horsewoman and livestock manager.

After teaching school near her home for two years in the early 1880s, Nancy married a homesteader from Iowa. Together they developed the Golden-Rod Stock Farm near her father's land and raised four children, all of whom were educated well beyond the district school. The Gaddis children and grandchildren became business people, college professors, teachers, missionaries, and farmers. Nancy was a leader in the Methodist Church, Women's Christian Temperance Union, Ladies' Missionary Society, and was a consistent voter in school elections.[28] Nancy Higgins Gaddis and her family established homes and farms, and through their long-term contributions and commitments developed and maintained stability in the emerging society.

FIG. 2. *Many short-term teachers and their families brought stability to the prairie communities. Among the descendants of William and Nancy Higgins Gaddis are farmers and business people; church workers and missionaries; teachers, professors, and librarians; prairie citizens.* Courtesy of Eleanor McKinney.

Sarah Jane Price. Sarah Jane Price was thirty and unmarried in 1871 when she, her father, and her two younger brothers moved from Indiana to Nebraska. At first they lived in a sod house, where Jane vigorously washed the straw ticks to get rid of the bugs. "I hope we will not live in a sod house always," she wrote in her diary. Four days after making this entry, Jane bought her own farm and farmhouse.[29] A long-term teacher as well as a farmer, Jane Price became a financially independent landowner. Head of her household and physically involved in all aspects of the work on her farms, she was also a landlady and small-time moneylender. At her death, she owned two farms, of 160 and 80 acres; four lots in Phillips, Nebraska; and two lots in Grand Island.[30]

She was at home in Nebraska, where she had the freedom to own and work her land, to invest in additional farms and building lots in town, to market her grain and garden produce, and to pursue her intellectual development. Jane was a self-taught intellectual who subscribed to several newspapers and periodicals, read every history and philosophy book she could obtain, and wrote public essays and private poetry. In her later years she traveled to Rome, relishing this chance to visit the historical sites she had read about.

In addition to the required books for the teachers' institutes, Jane's reading list over the years included *Compendium of Methodism* by Porter; *The Lives of Popes* by von Ranke; a five-volume *History of the Reformation* by D'Aubigne; *The Works of Josephus*; *The Life of St. Paul*; Redpath's *History of the United States*; a

travelogue, *Notes by the Wayside*; and an occasional novel. She eagerly read *Harpers*, *InterOcean*, *The Christian Advocate*, and *Ladies Repository* as well as such newspapers as the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Des Moines Register*.

Although her diaries are sparse in detail and curt in tone, Jane Price concisely stated her thoughts and opinions about people, events, the books she was reading, and her work at school and at home. She expressed her satisfaction when she had bargained well in selling wheat or onions; she was triumphant when she bought her first farm, when she delivered the Fourth of July oration at the community celebrations, and when some of her schoolgirls passed the teachers' examinations. The loss of some of her schoolchildren to diphtheria and scarlet fever is recorded in a matter-of-fact manner, but her grief comes through in her deceptively simple statement, "Our little graveyard fills up so fast."[31] After a visit from her sister, Jane methodically collected the seeds from numerous prairie wildflowers to send back to her in Indiana.[32] Her usual assessment of a relatively successful day was, "Nice day, barrin' the wind."

Sarah Gillespie Huftalen. Iowa-born Sarah Gillespie Huftalen started teaching in the early 1880s as a teenager in a one-room school near her home.[33] Over the course of her fifty-two-year career, she became a nationally recog-

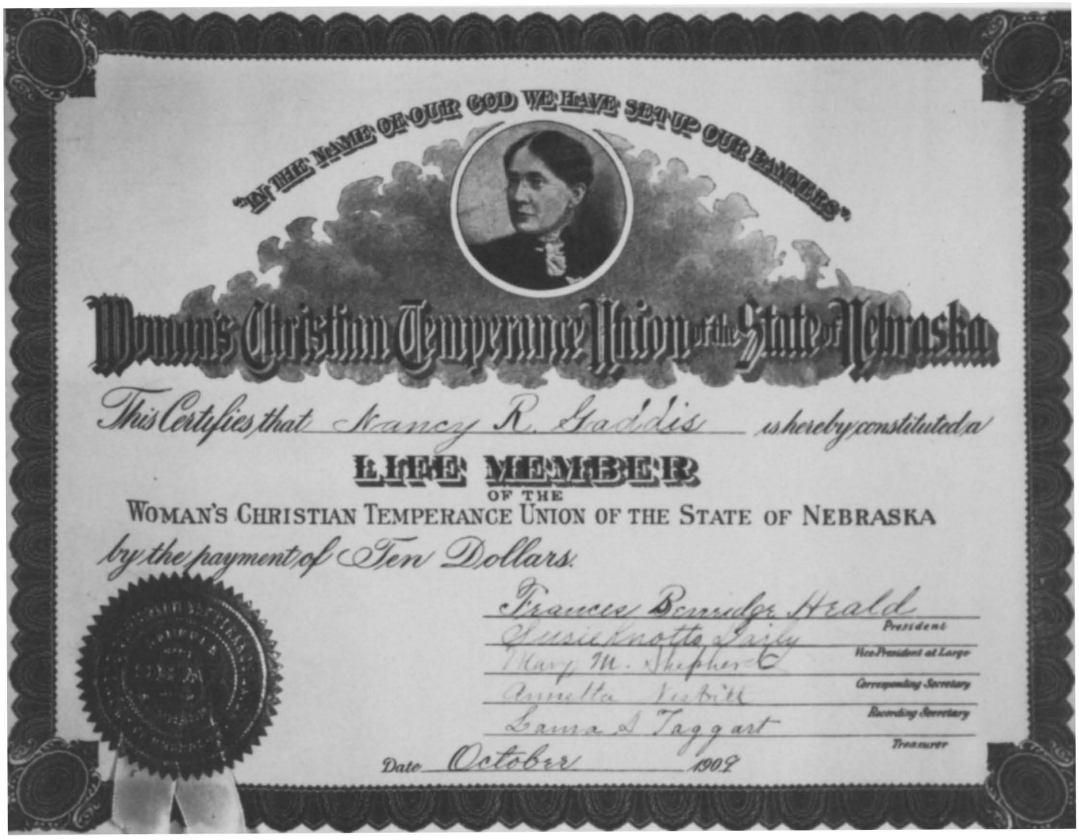

FIG. 3. *Nancy Higgins Gaddis was a life member and leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as were many of her contemporaries.* Courtesy of Eleanor McKinney.

nized rural teacher because of her progressive teaching style and her leadership in professionalizing rural education. A Democrat, she was elected county superintendent in a staunchly Republican county. As part of that superintendency, she was involved in the beginnings of the 4-H movement. Through her work in the Iowa State Teachers Association, she established professional affiliation for rural teachers. Sarah Huftalen had numerous articles published in professional periodicals that were aimed at improving classroom instruction. She

FIG. 4. *"Sarah L. Gillespie with dinner pail, Elocution book & Analysis note book. Lessons prepared & on the way to school. Teacher, author, lecturer, PROHIBITIONIST."* Photo courtesy of Huftalen Collection, Iowa State Historical Department, State Historical Society.

FIG. 5. *"All hands busy. A happy family at the school grounds, of course." Sarah Huftalen and her scholars, Norwich School, Page County, Iowa, 1910.* Photo courtesy of Huftalen Collection, Iowa State Historical Department, State Historical Society.

was a teacher educator at many institutes and at several colleges and normal schools. In addition to her educational leadership, she was a community leader in religious, political, temperance, suffrage, and such social causes as establishing public comfort stations for women.

Sarah Huftalen's remarkable diaries and notebooks reveal both her personal and professional concerns as she described and discussed her teaching methods, her students, her colleagues, friends and enemies, and her beloved husband, Billie. Billie, forty years her senior, was her househusband throughout most of their twenty-two-year marriage. When Billie's business failed, Sarah sought the best-paying teaching job to help pay off the note she had cosigned. Her career, which included administrative and teacher educator positions, spanned numerous changes in the education of children. Eventually she earned a B.S., a master's degree, and did course work toward her doctorate. Her career and education represent transitions from casual, often haphazard to professional teacher education; from isolation of the rural teachers toward professional association and recognition.

In her essay "Why a Teacher," Sarah Huftalen summed up the purpose of her long, productive life:

> To be a teacher, many methods of approach are necessary in reaching the minds and hearts of growing boys and girls: these at the levels of the child's abilities to pursue and achieve. And when such happy team work is obtained the teacher continues to walk beside the developing mind and soul; pressing a little here, guiding, directing thoughtfully, prayerfully, ever keeping the goal of a perfected character as the objective sought.
>
> . . . To accomplish this makes it mandatory to live in such a manner of thought and activity as will make the whole world better for our having lived in it.[34]

The multiple demands of homemaking and

FIG. 6. *Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, County Superintendent, Page County, Iowa, 1 January, 1913–1 September, 1915.* Photo courtesy of Huftalen Collection, Iowa State Historical Department, State Historical Society.

working no doubt prevented capable women from seeking the better-paying leadership positions such as those held by Sarah Huftalen. The definitions of teacher and womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rarely included leadership and administrative ability outside of the home, except in the all-women organizations in churches and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1869, Iowan Julia Addington became the first woman in America elected to the position of county superintendent.[35] By 1900, the number of women who were county superintendents had increased to 276. In 1913, Sarah Gillespie Huftalen was elected superintendent of the Page County, Iowa, schools, a position she held for two years. By 1922, there were 857 women county superintendents nationwide. According to Edith Lathrop, rural education specialist in the Office of Education in 1922, the West and other places where superintendents were elected rather than appointed were the places women could be found in administrative positions.[36] Although it was possible for a schoolwoman to become an elected or appointed school administrator, especially in the West, the position was not easily attainable. The number of counties with women as superintendents was a small fraction of the nations' counties. Schoolwomen who ventured into school politics did so with mixed support from their colleagues, their families, and the general public. There were counties, however, where the position of county superintendent, who supervised the rural schools, was seen as appropriate for women, but the higher-paid appointive position of town superintendent was seen as a man's job. The expanded structure of the educational system brought the benefits of the graded schools, additional instructional equipment, and better-educated teachers. It also brought about increased administrative positions for men. As Dr. A. E. Winship, editor of the prestigious *Journal of Education*, observed critically in 1901: "more than ninety-five percent of the teaching . . . is done by women, and more than ninety-five percent of the administration and leadership is by men."[37]

CONCLUSION

After one examines the working conditions and minimal opportunities for advancement for schoolwomen, the question remains: Why did they work under these conditions? In the prairie setting, events came together that pushed into teaching women who, in another environment, might not have worked outside of the home. Few successful schoolwomen could have identified their personal philosophies of education, but those who made some record of their lives seem to have known what they valued. They brought to the schoolhouses the moral, ethical life-styles demanded by their communities and espoused in the *McGuffey's Readers*. Although they were practical in their day-to-day concerns, they were inspired by an idealistic belief in universal public education as the means of improvement for children, for themselves, and for the community at large.

Their personal writings indicate that they were rarely shaken by the joys, hopes, fears, and labors of each day. These were not the women who lost their hold on reality through fear and loneliness, although they certainly knew fear, loss, despair, and failure. They were not the victims of society because it was in the developing prairie society that middle- and lower-class women, including the schoolwomen, were the local social activists. The social and economic elite who initiated and pursued social change in the older communities east of the Mississippi were not found in the prairie settlements in the early years. The involvement of the schoolwomen and other women in community and educational development enabled them to benefit from the social, educational, political, and economic advancements while being part of the social milieu that brought about these advancements. Their activism was largely directed toward their own self-improvement and the improvement of their own homes, families, schools, and communities. This home-grown activism was a

result of the "social conditions" of the prairie environment, in which what a person could do was of more significance than that person's lineage.

The prairie schoolwomen of the mid-1850s to the 1920s filled the void between the absence of schools and the establishment of local, county, and state educational systems. Rural women with little formal education as beginning schoolwomen, they filled the void between the undereducated teachers and the professionally educated ones. With the professional life of a teacher being less than four years by 1905, the schoolwomen were seen as undedicated and unprofessional by their critics.[38] These schoolwomen, however, were the organizers and members of the professional education associations, the literary societies, churches, schools, and other organizations dedicated to social improvement. In their diaries and reminiscences, they documented their dedication to educating children, citing school teaching as essential to their personal identity and their *raison d'etre*. They continued their education throughout their years of teaching and extended their local influence as schoolwomen, homemakers, farmers, and community builders.[39]

With the schoolhouse as the public social center that gave identity to an area, local men and women as the elected school directors, and the indigenous teacher in control of the educational events in the schoolhouse, schooling and teaching were fraught with trials and errors, but with enough successes that public education in the prairies became a reality. The redefinition of schoolwomen during the prairie frontier and early settlement days centers on ordinary western women who, through the stability of their lives and their belief in the value of education for children and themselves, created extraordinary results. In an atmosphere of transition, idealism, democratic floundering, ignorance, and hope, the prairies became flourishing farms, and the fledgling communities became amalgamations of the old and expectations of the new.

NOTES

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1. Catherine Beecher, "Address on the Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children," 1846, quoted in Nancy Hoffman, *Woman's "True" Profession, Voices from the History of Teaching* (Westbury: Feminist Press, and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 51. See also Polly Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

2. For the birth places of the populations of Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, see each state as listed in these Census Reports, published by the U.S. Government Printing Office: *8th Census 1860, Population of the United States in 1860*; *11th Census, 1890, Report on the Population of the United States*; and *Abstract of the 12th Census of the United States, 1900*. A detailed analysis of the population of Nebraska appears in Wayne Wheeler, *An Almanac of Nebraska, Nationality, Ethnic and Racial Groups* (Omaha: Park Bronwell Press, 1975).

3. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Problem of the West," in Ray A. Billington, ed., *Frontier and Section, Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 63.

4. Herbert Quick, *One Man's Life: An Autobiography* (Indianapolis: Bobbs, 1925), pp. 154–55. Iowa-born Quick was a teacher, lawyer, and novelist whose education through the district schools and teacher institutes was representative of men and women teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska.

5. On the development of schoolhouses, see Andrew Guilliford, *America's Country Schools* (Washington: Preservation Press, 1984); on the development and the politics of the school systems, see Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School, The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

6. I. L. Dayoff, *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent for the Years Ending July 31, 1905 and 1906, Kansas* (Topeka: 1906), p. 9.

7. D. Franklin Wells, *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the General Assembly of Iowa, January 13, 1868* (Des Moines: 1868), pp. 87–88.

8. Dayoff, *Fifteenth Biennial Report, Kansas, 1905–1906*, p. 8.

9. *Iowa Instructor* 1 (May 1860): 238.

10. Clarence R. Aurner, *History of Education in Iowa*, Vol. 2, Part 4, Teachers Associations, pp. 189–254. For an overview of teachers association support of equal pay, see Edgar B. Wesley, *National*

Education Association: The First Hundred Years, The Building of the Teaching Profession (New York: Harper and Bro. Pub., 1957).

11. Thomas Morain, "The Departure of Males from the Teaching Profession in Nineteenth Century Iowa," *Civil War History* 26 (1980): 161–70. A wider discussion of "women's jobs" appears in Julie A. Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America, Women's Work, the Sexual Division of Labor, and the Development of Capitalism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), pp. 187–234.

12. Sherrill F. Daniels, "The Community Builders, Architects of Nebraska [Ruth Calkins Oldam]," in *Perspectives: Women in Nebraska History, June 1984 Special Issue* (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies, 1984), pp. 62–73; Cornelia Mallett Barnhart, "Phoebe Sudlow," *Palimpsest* 38 (April 1957): 169–76; Delta Kappa Gamma, typescript articles on Susan Frazier, Eliza Morgan, and Genevieve Giddings Richmond, Nebraska State Historical Society; Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, MS 10, Huftalen Collection, Iowa State Historical Department, Historical Society, Iowa City; Ellen Payne Paullin, "Etta's Journal, January 2, 1874 to July 25, 1875," *Kansas History, A Journal of the Central Plains* 3 (Autumn 1980): 201–19; and 3 (Winter 1980): 255–78; Dorothy Ashby Pownall, "Agnes Samuelson, A Dedicated Educator," *Palimpsest* 43 (November 1962): 497–544; Ethel Hale Russel, retired teacher and community leader in Nebraska, Montana, Utah, Iowa, and Michigan, oral history taped interview with Mary H. Cordier, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 10 June 1982, Nebraska State Historical Society, and Regional History Collections, Western Michigan University.

13. Dayoff, *Fifteenth Biennial Report, Kansas, 1905–1906*, p. 9.

14. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women—The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), pp. 87–88.

15. *Report of the Commissioner of Education for 1902*, 2 Vols. (Washington: 1903), 2:2314–15; Fuller, *The Old Country School*, examines these rates of literacy as compared to other sections of the United States.

16. Carl Degler, *At Odds, Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 309. Glenda Riley in *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), p. 137, states that "neither equal education nor coeducation were ever contestable issues in Iowa." State Superintendents' Reports and schoolwomen's public and private documents also support this thesis.

17. S. D. Beals, *First Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Nebraska for the Year Ending December 31, 1869* (Lincoln: 1869), p. 52.

18. Beecher, quoted in Hoffman, *Women's "True" Profession*, p. 51.

19. Quick, *One Man's Life*, pp. 154–55.

20. Isabelle Simmons Stewart, reminiscences, Dorchester, Nebraska, 8 May 1925, p. 2. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska; Agnes Briggs Olmstead, "Recollections of a Pioneer Teacher of Hamilton County," *Annals of Iowa* 18 (October 1946): 96; Bessie Tucker Gilmer, "Journey Through Life," Diaries 1918–1979 with notes and additions through December 1984, p. 38. Nebraska State Historical Society; Beryl Decker, "The Wind in Nebraska," in Ainsworth Area Retired Teachers, *The Sway of the School Bell, Schools and Histories of Brown, Keya Paha, and Rock Counties, Nebraska* (Ainsworth, Nebraska: Ainsworth Area Retired Teachers, 1976), p. 8.

21. For additional examples of living conditions, see Mary Hurlbut Cordier, "Teaching at home on the prairie," *Plainswoman* 10 (March 1987): 3–5.

22. Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: a Perspective on Woman's History, 1607–1877*, Vol. 1 (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986), p. 83; Mollie Dorsey Sanford, *Mollie, The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories*, 1857-1866 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. 87; Bessie Tucker Gilmer, taped oral history interview with Mary H. Cordier, 12 and 13 July 1983, Lincoln, Nebraska. Nebraska State Historical Society.

23. Rosa Scheurs Jennings, "The Country Teacher," *Annals of Iowa* 31 (July 1951): pp. 55, 57, 52.

24. Bessie Tucker Gilmer wrote "dear to my heart" on the photograph of a home where she had boarded. Gilmer photograph album, private collection.

25. Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, Vol. 1, p. 82.

26. Ruth Gaddis Wilson, "There's no place like Nebraska," (privately printed, 1984), unpaged. Unless otherwise cited, the events in the life of Nancy Higgins Gaddis are documented by this family history and through interviews with Eleanor McKinney, granddaughter of Nancy Higgins Gaddis, by Mary H. Cordier, 1985-86, Kalamazoo, Michigan. McKinney shared with me her grandmother's memorabilia, including photographs and the family history. During the summer of 1987, McKinney deposited some of these documents in the Nebraska State Historical Society.

27. The Solomon D. Butcher Photograph Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Solomon

D. Butcher, *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska with which is combined Sod Houses of the Great American Plains*, 2nd Edition (Denver: Sage Books, 1965, reprint of the original, ca. 1900).

28. School district records found when the district schoolhouse on the Higgins land was torn down indicate that Nancy Higgins Gaddis was a consistent voter in school elections.

29. Sarah Jane Price, Diary, 2 September and 6 September 1879. The Sarah Jane Price Diaries, 1878–1895, are deposited at the Nebraska State Historical Society. The entries are signed Jane Price. Unless otherwise noted information for this section is from the diaries.

30. Deeds filed in Hamilton County, Nebraska.

31. Price, Diary, 8 May 1879.

32. Price, Diary, July 1888.

33. Sarah Gillespie Huftalen Collection, MS 10, Iowa State Historical Department, Historical Society, Iowa City. This extensive collection includes diaries, school notebooks, photographs, lesson plans, essays, and scrapbooks.

34. Huftalen, "I Remember This and That, No. 2, 1906- 1951," pp. 104–5.

35. Henry Sabin, *Twenty-eighth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Iowa, November 1, 1897* (Des Moines: 1897), p. 112.

36. David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), pp. 187–89.

37. Quoted in William Fowler, *Seventeenth Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Nebraska for the Years 1901-1902*, Vol. 1 (Lincoln: 1903), p. 134.

38. The National Education Association attempted to identify the problems of rural education and solutions to the problems in the *Report of the Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools, July 9, 1895* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1897). Wayne Fuller contends that rural teachers were unfavorably compared with urban teachers because of "anti-rural bias" and because professional educators were convinced that small school districts provided poor education. Teachers could be "cured" of their poor teaching through the teacher education programs in which the professionals had vested interests. *The Old Country School*, pp. 163–64.

39. In "Having a Purpose in Life: Western Women Teachers in the Twentieth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Spring 1982): 107–124, Courtney Ann Vaughn-Roberson identifies a similar blend of domesticity, idealism, and professionalism among long-term teachers in Oklahoma, Texas, and Colorado.