

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1988

## Review of Land of the Burnt Thigh

Sheryll Patterson-Black  
*Denver, Colorado*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Patterson-Black, Sheryll, "Review of Land of the Burnt Thigh" (1988). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 381.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/381>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Land of the Burnt Thigh.* By Edith Eudora Kohl. Introduction by Glenda Riley. 1938; reprint. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986. Map, illustrations. xxxiv + 296 pp. \$7.95.

*Land of the Burnt Thigh* recounts the adventures of two sisters, Edith Eudora Ammons Kohl and Ida Mary Ammons Miller, homesteading in South Dakota in 1907. "Timid as mice" and "city girls" at that, these young women are initially shocked by the rough frontier conditions they encounter but quickly rally to become successful homesteaders; Edith, in addition, becomes a newspaper-woman.

A minor controversy surrounds this book and its contents: whether it is memoirs or fiction. The author herself stirs the controversy in her "Word of Explanation" when she states, "I have not attempted . . . to write an autobiography. This is not my story—it is the story of the people . . . who settled on that part of the public lands called the Great American Desert."

Some readers have assumed that Kohl's story does not represent the facts of her homesteading experience. Given the usual stereotypes of women and the homestead experience, particularly as it was represented during the mid-twentieth century, her account does sound a bit adventuresome. It describes battling prairie fires, rattlesnakes, and a blinding blizzard, observing two land rushes, opening a post office and general store, meeting Indians, and encountering other facets of the late homestead period, which overlaid many aspects of cultural and technological change:

horses and motor vehicles, telephones and claim shacks, natural predators and two-legged ones engaged in business and politics, reservation Indians just off the "warpath," immigrants and city folks with varied heritage, class, and agricultural experience. It was the last major settlement period in the U.S., and so fast-paced that remote, barren lands became dotted with claims, people, and even towns, overnight.

I judge that the time, place, and people were fantastical, but Kohl's account accurately reflects the fantastic experience of the late homesteaders, particularly the women. And it is this last element, perhaps, that has contributed to the question of whether the book is fact or fiction: a limited, cockeyed, mid-twentieth century view of normal women as reluctant pioneers or gentle tamers, not well equipped to homestead, perhaps, but well able to romanticize. In light of my own research into hundreds of accounts of women homesteaders, the story of the Ammons sisters does not seem overly adventuresome, but rather average for women homesteaders, particularly within the scope of the problems they encountered and resolved. Historian Glenda Riley, in her introduction to the new edition, seems to agree that "Kohl was simply trying to place her own experiences in the context of a larger historical trend." Kohl's account concurs with many others of the period, including Elinore Pruitt Stewart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* and *Letters on an Elk Hunt* and, most recently, Jules Sandoz, Jr.'s memoirs in *Son of Old Jules*, both describing similar experiences at about the same time, although in Wyoming and Nebraska. These accounts, like others, casually recount great difficulties and also reveal good humor and great joy at the challenge and success.

Probably Kohl was merely putting her life in perspective, as she says. "My own part in so tremendous a migration of a people was naturally a slight one, but for me it has been a rewarding adventure, leading men and women onto the land, then against organized interests, and finally into the widespread use of cooper-

ative methods." When Kohl says, "I have not attempted to write an autobiography," she means just that—for she rarely gives any detail about her personal or inner life, or much about those of her sister or friends. Instead, she recounts—and very well—their public lives as part of the sweeping panorama of this bustling, frenetic, final homestead period.

SHERYLL PATTERSON-BLACK  
Denver, Colorado