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ETHNIC WOMEN HOMESTEADING ON THE PLAINS OF NORTH DAKOTA

H. ELAINE LINDGREN

Women as well as men took advantage of government land policies that encouraged settlement on the Great Plains. Researchers have replaced earlier stereotypes that emphasized the reluctance of women to participate in the settlement process by more dynamic and realistic conceptualizations that portray women as courageous, enthusiastic, and adventuresome.¹

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

A landmark study conducted by Sheryll Patterson-Black, who examined records from land offices in Lamar, Colorado (1887 and 1907), and Douglas, Wyoming (1891, 1907, 1908), revealed an average of 11.9 percent of the homestead entrants were women. Percentages

increased with the passage of time, ranging from 4.8 percent in Douglas in 1891 to 18.2 percent in Lamar in 1907. Patterson-Black comments, "I find it astounding that this army of women settlers could be so entirely overlooked in historical sources." These land seekers included single women and widows as well as a few married women who were considered heads of a household. The promise of economic security through land ownership was a powerful attraction. Other motives included adventure, escape from oppressive marriages, and desire for a healthy environment. Comparing the situation of single homesteaders with their married counterparts, Patterson-Black observed, "It seems clear to me that the life of a single woman, or at least the childless one, was a cut above that of her married sister on the Great Plains frontier."²

A more recent study of homesteaders in Logan and Washington Counties in northeastern Colorado by Katherine Hill Harris provides comparable data. Harris states, "Before 1900, approximately 12 percent of the entrants in Logan County and 10 percent in Washington County were women. After that date the portion in both counties reached nearly 18 percent."³

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HISTORICAL SOURCES

Two historical sources add intrigue to the question of how many women filed on claims, both making specific references to Dakota Territory. In *The History of Woman Suffrage*, edited by Susan B. Anthony and Ida Harper, the authors state that during 1887, "under the liberal provisions of the United States Land Laws, more than one-third of the land in the Territory was held by women."⁴ Although this assertion is frequently cited, no source is given in the original.

Somewhat more conservative was Emma Haddock, also a champion of women's rights, speaking of land ownership around 1886. Haddock drew her conclusions from a questionnaire that she had distributed "throughout all the states and territories of the West." She reported, "All over the thinly settled portions of Dakota, hundreds of women live alone under their own shack and garden patch . . . many thousands of women in southern and middle Dakota own government lands. In fact, the woman who has not some kind of claim proved up is either a newcomer or a curiosity." Although enthusiastic in her support for women's ownership of land, she does candidly admit, "I cannot give figures as to the exact number of women who have taken government lands," and concludes, "As a result of this investigation, I learn that in the Western states, according to the best judgment of businessmen, the amount of land actually owned by women is about five percent. This estimate does not include real estate owned in cities and towns."⁵

Given the subsequent findings by Patterson-Black and Harris, Haddock's estimate was probably nearer to reality while Anthony and Harper's estimate may have been arrived at by casual observation and used to bolster the position of women in the suffrage debate.

WOMEN'S LAND ACQUISITION IN
NORTH DAKOTA

The following analysis is designed to further

insight into the question of women's land ownership, particularly in the area that in 1889 became the state of North Dakota. This work is a part of a more extensive study of the circumstances surrounding women's land acquisition during the settlement period (1870-1915). The intent of this phase of the project was to determine the percentage of women who filed on claims in their own name in selected townships and to examine the influences of ethnicity and time of settlement. Land policies varied considerably in their requirements over these years but allowed access to virtually the same group of people. To be eligible, an individual had to be 21 years of age, single, widowed, divorced, or the head of a household. Land filed for by a married couple living together was entered under the husband's name only.⁶

North Dakota offers a valuable opportunity to explore the ethnic variable. Settlement occurred relatively recently, largely between 1870 and 1915. Census data shows North Dakota as consistently ranking first among the states of the Great Plains in having the largest percentage of foreign-born population throughout the homesteading decades (38 percent in 1880, 43 percent in 1890, 35 percent in 1900). If that population group is expanded to include native-born persons of foreign parentage, the percentage increases to 71 percent for 1900.⁷ The cultural integrity of many groups remained undisturbed for many years and still influences the personal lives of many contemporary residents.⁸

Forty-three townships were targeted for analysis based on their ethnic composition during 1965, when a detailed map of the state's settlement times and ethnic population was compiled. Even though substantial migration has taken place in some areas since the original settlement, the 1965 data allowed me to identify areas likely to have been settled by particular ethnic groups.⁹

I used the *United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books* to compile lists of all the names of those successfully acquiring title to land through homesteading, preemption, or

timber culture for each of the forty-three townships.¹⁰ Individuals whose claims were canceled were not included. The total number of land recipients varies from township to township according to the acreage available for individual private entry.

Percentages for this study were based on the total number of land units owned in a township rather than number of acres. If an individual owned more than one parcel of land, he or she was counted more than once; for example a person who received 160 acres through preemption and an additional 160 acres through timber culture was counted twice.

ETHNICITY

The lists of names were examined and categorized by apparent sex and ethnicity. The tract books do not indicate the sex of the land recipient so it is possible that I misclassified a few names. Area scholars of ethnicity completed the classification of names by ethnicity.¹¹ Thus, it was possible to calculate not only the percentage of women in the total population who filed on claims within a given township, but also the percentage of female entrants belonging to the following ethnic groups: Anglo-American (with some Anglo-Ontarians), Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Finlander, Hollander, Iclander, German, German-Hungarian, German-Russian, Bohemian, Polish, and Ukrainian. In most cases only one ethnic group was represented in a township; in one instance, however, two townships in Divide County were used for both Anglo-American and Norwegian concentrations (T161-R101 and T161-R100).

In most cases the ethnic concentrations suggested by the 1965 data were found to varying degrees. For example, in township 162-53 (Pembina County) 137 of 138 land recipients were classified as Anglo-American, while in township 161-100 (Divide County) only 32 of 147 land recipients were classified as Anglo-American. There were a few surprises. In Dickey County, township 129-59, I expected to find Finnish homesteaders. Instead the land records

showed the area was homesteaded by Anglo-Americans who later sold their land to the Finns and moved on.

Considering the methodology used for classifying data, caution must be exercised in interpreting the data. The identification of sex and ethnicity by name only may have resulted in some distortion. Given the exploratory nature of this study, I made the decision to include a broad range of ethnic groups instead of concentrating on only a few, acknowledging the disadvantages of small sample sizes that resulted from this action.

I considered the religious factor when possible. German and German-Russian groups were divided into townships that were predominantly Catholic or Protestant. Townships were further designated in terms of general time of settlement: "very early," the 1870s; "early," the 1880s and 1890s; and "late," after 1900. Again, caution must be exercised because settlement times for some townships fell clearly within the designations but for others settlement took place over a prolonged period or at the juncture of the categories, i.e., 1898-1901. Given the concerns outlined above, calculations for each township should be considered probable rather than absolute. The townships included in the sample are scattered throughout the state; their exact locations can be determined by the township and range numbers listed in the tables.¹²

WOMEN ACQUIRING LAND

Table 1 reveals that women did indeed acquire land in North Dakota. The percentages of female land recipients ranged from a low of 1 percent to a high of 22 percent, yielding an average of 10 percent for the 43 townships. Female recipients made up less than 10 percent of the total in 19 of the townships, between 10 and 20 percent in 21 townships, and more than 20 percent in 3 townships.

In general, townships in the eastern and southern part of the state had the lowest percentages of women filing on claims. In North Dakota this meant that fewer women sought

TABLE 1.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF WOMEN LAND RECIPIENTS IN SELECTED TOWNSHIPS BY SETTLEMENT PERIOD.

County	Township-Range	Percent	Ratio (Women/total) *
Very Early Settlement (1970-1879)			
Richland	131-48	1	(1/101)
Richland	131-49	2	(2/104)
Cass	137-50	5	(5/183)
Richland	131-50	5	(5/100)
Richland	132-50	5	(3/64)
Richland	136-50	11	(8/75)
Pembina	161-51	4	(6/141)
Pembina	162-53	6	(8/138)
Early Settlement (1880-1899)			
Pembina	161-55	3	(5/148)
Pembina	160-56	4	(6/152)
Walsh	156-51	8	(11/136)
Walsh	155-51	5	(7/128)
Walsh	155-58	10	(13/129)
Walsh	156-54	7	(9/136)
LaMoure	134-66	12	(8/65)
Dickey	129-59	16	(22/135)
Morton	140-85	33	(2/71)
Morton	139-84	12	(9/73)
McIntosh	130-70	13	(19/140)
McIntosh	130-68	12	(16/132)
McIntosh	132-70	8	(6/64)
Stark	139-94	14	(9/66)
Emmons	130-75	17	(23/139)
Emmons	131-74	6	(6/107)
Emmons	131-75	5	(4/88)
Emmons	131-76	10	(9/94)
Towner	162-67	9	(9/100)
Stark	137-94	10	(7/73)
Sheridan	143-76	16	(19/118)
Sheridan	146-74	14	(10/71)

*Number of women land recipients/Total number of land recipients in the township.

TABLE 1. CONTINUED.

County	Township-Range	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
Late Settlement (1900 and After)			
Ward	161-88	11	(14/127)
Ward	157-84	15	(23/154)
Renville	161-87	12	(17/139)
Renville	158-84	21	(31/151)
Pierce	154-74	17	(25/143)
Pierce	153-74	21	(31/145)
Pierce	152-73	22	(32/148)
Hettinger	136-96	10	(7/69)
Hettinger	136-95	9	(6/64)
Billings	142-99	3	(2/66)
Billings	143-99	13	(9/69)
Divide	161-101	18	(27/149)
Divide	161-100	17	(25/147)

land in early settlement times than in later years. The average percentages of women taking land are 4.87 percent (1870-79), 9.59 percent (1880-99), and 14.53 percent (after 1900). Two northwestern counties settled after 1900 were analyzed as a part of the larger study of which this effort was a part. The percentage of female land recipients in Burke County was 14, consistent with the findings of this study, while the percentage for Williams County reached 18 percent.¹³ Patterson-Black and Harris similarly found higher percentages of women in areas settled toward the end of the homestead era, recording peaks of about 18 percent.¹⁴

If the 43 townships are grouped by settlement time to allow comparison with the observations of Anthony and Harper and of Haddock, the 19 settled before or around 1886 yield an average of 6.79 percent of land recipients being women. This compares favorably with the 5 percent estimated by Haddock. My findings do not support Anthony and Harper's claim that by 1887 one-third of the land in Dakota was held by women. None of the townships settled

in the 1880s came close to reaching the 33 percent figure. In fairness to the suffragists it should be noted that in counties in northwestern North Dakota, settled after 1900, the percentage of women owning land in a few townships did reach levels over 30 percent, but even in the later settlement periods such levels are exceptional.¹⁵ Anthony and Harper's reference is, of course, to Dakota Territory, a region that is now the area of the two Dakotas. Because data for parts of North Dakota, Colorado, and Wyoming are so consistent it seems highly unlikely that patterns in the southern part of Dakota Territory would be drastically different. Even though Anthony and Harper's estimate seems to have been an exaggeration, they should be given credit for calling attention to a neglected segment of pioneer women.

Time of settlement, as we have seen, is an important predictor of the sex of land recipients but variations occur. Only 3 percent of the land recipients in Billings County's township T142-R99, a late settlement in western North Dakota, were women, whereas township T129-

R59 in Dickey County, an early settlement, showed women as 16 percent of the land recipients.

ETHNIC SETTLERS

Few studies have explored the importance of the ethnic factor. Patterson-Black mentions that "people of many ethnic and racial backgrounds filed claims." Harris notes the importance of this element, but limits her study to "native-born whites."¹⁶ Cultural traditions do vary considerably among ethnic groups. North Dakota's ethnic past is recent and surprisingly vigorous. One can reasonably assume, therefore, that the norms controlling the status and power of women could easily have affected their views toward taking homestead lands. Unfortunately, the analysis of the position of women in different ethnic settings is a matter of only recent interest. The sources of information on groups living in North Dakota are few and none approach the question directly.

Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History does, however, provide a beginning point. Although only a few of the ethnic discussions include specific information on the position and status of women, there are occasional comments that lead one to some tentative generalizations. Robert P. Wilkins discusses the pioneering leadership provided by the English-speaking people who immigrated to North Dakota from the neighboring states, the British Isles, and Canada. He mentions the influence of school teachers, most of whom were women, and describes briefly the life of Ellen Thompson, who after filing on a homestead at Lisbon in 1881, opened the first school in Ransom County.¹⁷

Playford V. Thorson, in his discussion of Scandinavian groups in North Dakota, emphasizes that immigrants from Northern Europe were strongly influenced by modern democratic reform movements. He cites as examples the popularity of producer cooperatives, the consumer cooperatives, the women's suffrage movement, the temperance and prohibition organizations, and the trade union movement. Repeatedly such authors as Marcus Hansen, Charles H. Anderson, and Theodore C. Blegen speak of the more

expansive attitude toward the frontier, women, and life itself found in the Anglo-Saxon as well as Scandinavian traditions.¹⁸

In contrast to these groups, the German-Russian society portrayed by Timothy J. Kloberdanz is rigid and ultra-traditional. Kloberdanz points out that the political conservatism of North Dakota's Black Sea Germans manifested itself in many ways, including their opposition to the women's suffrage movement in 1914. He describes a frequent scene in North Dakota's early towns and farming communities: "Immigrant women could be seen walking a polite distance behind their husbands. Indeed, German-Russian women themselves cringed at the sight of Anglo-American married couples strolling together or holding hands in public."¹⁹

The subordinate role of German-Russian women is reiterated in Pauline Diede's account of the homesteading experiences of her own family. Her uncle mentioned that his wife had to comply with his decision to emigrate from Russia. "She had married me unwillingly, and unwillingly was obliged to obey and follow where I might go." Diede notes the group's preference for sons and the women's acceptance of abuse. "In Russia it was considered shameful for a woman to present her man with girl babies. The first-born, let alone the second, should have been a son," she writes. "Women went to their knees and cried their woes out to God, but if a woman spoke of her man's abuse, she was scolded, then and there."²⁰

This cursory review of ethnic traditions led me to believe that significant differences would be found among the North Dakota ethnic groups, with the more egalitarian groups providing a setting that would encourage women to file on claims while the more traditional groups would discourage such action. As tables 2 through 6 show, clear-cut differences did not materialize. What emerged was more complex, confusing, and intriguing.

The data indicate that Anglo-Americans were among the most likely to have large percentages of women filing on claims. Although the very early settlements had low percentages (5 and 6 percent), those townships settled be-

TABLE 2.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF ANGLO-AMERICAN WOMEN AS LAND RECIPIENTS.

County	Township-Range	Settlement Times	Ethnicity	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
Pembina	161-51	Very Early	Anglo-American	5	(6/128)
Pembina	162-53	Very Early	Anglo-American	6	(8/137)
Stark	139-94	Early	Anglo-American	15	(6/39)
Dickey	129-59	Early	Anglo-American	17	(22/130)
Divide	161-101	Late	Anglo-American	37	(13/35)
Divide	161-100	Late	Anglo-American	13	(4/32)

tween the mid-1880s and 1890 showed surprisingly high percentages for that period (15 and 17 percent). After 1900 the percentages again support the idea that Anglo-American women were among the most likely to take land. One township had only 13 percent but another had the highest percentage in the sample with 37 percent. (See Table 2.)

Among the Scandinavians, the Norwegians follow the typical pattern of lower percentages in the very early period (3 percent, 6 percent) and increased participation after 1900 (9 percent, 17 percent). For the rest of the Scandinavians, there was no comparable data for late

settlement and most townships showed the expected lows in early settlement, although the Swedish township and one Danish township had somewhat higher levels (13 percent, 10 percent). (See Table 3.)

Settlers of German heritage can be divided into two major groups, those who came to North Dakota by way of Russia and those whose ancestry can be traced directly to Germany. Among those whose emigration was directly from Germany, the very early settlement areas showed an extremely low proportion of women homesteaders (2 percent, 2 percent, 2 percent, 6 percent) whether settlers were Protestant or

TABLE 3.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF SCANDINAVIAN WOMEN AS LAND RECIPIENTS.

County	Township-Range	Settlement Times	Ethnicity	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
Cass	137-50	Very Early	Norwegian	3	(2/61)
Richland	136-50	Very Early	Norwegian	6	(4/64)
Pembina	160-56	Early	Icelander	5	(5/116)
Pembina	161-55	Early	Icelander	4	(3/84)
LaMoure	134-66	Early	Swedish	13	(7/56)
Towner	162-67	Early	Finlander	7	(1/14)
Renville	161-87	Early	Danish	7	(4/60)
Ward	161-88	Early	Danish	10	(7/67)
Divide	161-101	Late	Norwegian	9	(8/92)
Divide	161-100	Late	Norwegian	17	(16/94)

TABLE 4.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF GERMAN-PROTESTANT AND GERMAN-CATHOLIC WOMEN AS LAND RECIPIENTS.

County	Township-Range	Settlement Times	Ethnicity	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
Richland	131-49	Very Early	German-Protestant	2	(2/86)
Richland	131-48	Very Early	German-Protestant	2	(1/45)
Richland	131-50	Very Early	German-Catholic	2	(2/81)
Richland	132-50	Very Early	German-Catholic	6	(2/31)
Morton	139-84	Early	German-Protestant	11	(6/56)
Morton	140-85	Early	German-Protestant	3	(2/59)
Ward	157-84	Late	German-Catholic	6	(4/67)
Renville	158-84	Late	German-Catholic	26	(17/66)

Catholic. In Morton County—an early German Protestant settlement—figures of 3 and 11 percent occur. The later settlement of German Catholics in the northwest part of the state exhibits a wide divergency (6 percent, 26 percent). (See Table 4.)

The figures for certain groups of Germans from Russia are worthy of note, especially those of Protestant background in Sheridan County. In one township, 23 percent of the German-Russian land recipients were women, and in another, 13 percent were women. This seems to surpass the Anglo-American percentage but the time factor may be significant here. Although both groups were classified as early settlements, settlement in Sheridan County took place just before the turn of the century whereas the Anglo-American townships were settled earlier in the 1880s. Also, there were only 22 German-Russian Protestants in township 146-74, which means the higher percentage was based on a very small sample. A group of German-Russian Protestants who took land in McIntosh County in the 1880s displayed a 13-percent level in two townships and a 9-percent level in a third.

In contrast, women among the German-Russian Catholics who came to nearby Emmons

County during the same period showed less inclination to take land (4 percent, 4 percent, 8 percent). The later settlements in Pierce County have moderate to high percentages (13 percent, 14 percent, 26 percent). (See Table 5.)

Table 6 includes data from a number of other groups, most of whom settled in the state between 1880 and 1900. The German-Hungarian townships had modest percentages of women homesteaders (9 percent, 10 percent, 15 percent). Polish townships in eastern North Dakota in Walsh County displayed a mixed situation: one township had 13 percent women among the land takers and an adjoining township, primarily of river land, had none. The Bohemian townships, not far away in the same county, had 7 percent in both townships. The Ukrainian settlement in Billings County also showed diversity (4 percent, 18 percent). The figures are again suspect because of the small sample size.

In brief, North Dakota's settlement periods before 1900 show the following patterns: All ethnic groups (Anglo-American, Norwegian, German-Protestant, and German-Catholic) in very early settlement townships had low percentages of women taking land. During the 1880s Anglo-American women were most likely to file

on the land, but by the turn of the century German-Russian Protestant women were as likely to do so. Catholics among the Germans and the German-Russians were more reluctant than Protestants to take advantage of the free lands.

The situation after 1900, the later settlement period, is somewhat different. Again, an Anglo-American group showed the highest percentage, but German-Russian Catholics and German Catholics had high percentages in some townships. Norwegians showed moderate participation. In this period the religious factor

seems less important. Whereas the Protestant groups were higher earlier, the Catholics in later years showed similar percentages. It also appears that the German-Russian townships had a somewhat higher percentage than the German ones.

This set of exploratory data does not, in the final analysis, support my original expectation of finding distinct differences among ethnic groups in the proportion of women filing claims on government land.

Before 1880 few women, regardless of their ethnic heritage, chose to file on land. Later,

TABLE 5.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF GERMAN-RUSSIAN PROTESTANT AND GERMAN-RUSSIAN CATHOLIC WOMEN AS LAND RECIPIENTS.

County	Township-Range	Settlement Times	Ethnicity	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
McIntosh	130-70	Early	German-Russian/ Protestant	13	(5/40)
McIntosh	130-68	Early	German-Russian/ Protestant	13	(13/97)
McIntosh	132-70	Early	German-Russian/ Protestant	9	(3/35)
Sheridan	146-74	Early	German-Russian/ Protestant	23	(5/22)
Sheridan	148-76	Early	German-Russian/ Protestant	13	(11/88)
Emmons	131-75	Early	German-Russian/ Catholic	4	(3/73)
Emmons	131-74	Early	German-Russian/ Catholic	4	(4/92)
Emmons	131-76	Early	German-Russian/ Catholic	8	(6/74)
Pierce	153-74	Late	German-Russian/ Catholic	26	(18/69)
Pierce	154-74	Late	German-Russian/ Catholic	14	(13/90)
Pierce	152-73	Late	German-Russian/ Catholic	13	(6/48)

TABLE 6.
PERCENT AND RATIO OF OTHER ETHNIC WOMEN AS LAND RECIPIENTS.

County	Township-Range	Settlement Times	Ethnicity	Percent	Ratio (Women/total)
Walsh	156-51	Early	Polish	13	(8/62)
Walsh	155-51	Early	Polish	0	(0/21)
Walsh	156-54	Early	Bohemian	7	(4/55)
Walsh	155-58	Early	Bohemian	7	(4/57)
Emmons	130-75	Early	Hollander	7	(4/58)
Stark	137-94	Early	German-Hungarian	10	(7/70)
Hettinger	136-95	Early	German-Hungarian	9	(2/22)
Hettinger	136-96	Late	German-Hungarian	16	(5/41)
Billings	142-99	Late	Ukrainian	4	(2/46)
Billings	143-99	Late	Ukrainian	18	(2/11)

Anglo-American women seemed more likely to take advantage of homestead procedures than other women, particularly in the mid-1880s, but the difference was not entirely consistent. Their greater participation could be explained by their familiarity with American culture and language. But the question remains, why did German-Russian immigrant women exhibit such enthusiasm for land acquisition? What factors contributed to make the men and women of this relatively rigid society accept the notion of ownership of land by women? In fact, German-Russian women in North Dakota in some instances decisively surpassed the Scandinavian women in the acquisition of land. And again we see that German-Russian Catholic women in Pierce County exceed the proportions of Anglo-American women who sought land in some of the townships elsewhere.

For most ethnic groups, the township data show substantial fluctuations. Some of these discrepancies might disappear with an expanded sampling of townships or a more sophisticated scheme for designating settlement times, but clearly there is strong evidence that some women in all ethnic groups determined it was in their

best interest to acquire land. Further investigation is necessary before firm conclusions can be made regarding the effect of ethnicity on women's decisions to file on government land. Since completion of the research for this study, two additional sources have provided information that suggests directions for further analysis.

LAND RECORD FILES

The first source is a set of individual land record files. The other is a translation from Russian to English of a publication that makes reference to inheritance laws that may have influenced the attitudes of some North Dakota Black Sea German-Russians toward ownership of land by women. Each source merits a brief review here.

The individual land record files from two townships provided general information from which I was able to determine claim filers' marital status and age.²¹ Additional narrative material was available for some of the nineteen Anglo-American and eighteen German-Russian female land recipients. The following descriptions illustrate the variation in age and

marital status among women who sought land.

Phena R. (Anglo-American), age 22, single, filed on homestead claim in 1884 and proved up in 1887.

Mary C. (Anglo-American), age 25, separated from husband, two children, established residence on a preemption claim in 1884 and purchased the land later the same year.

Susan H. (Anglo-American), age 40, widow with three children, established residence on a preemption claim in 1883 and purchased the land in 1884.

Sarah R. (Anglo-American), age 44, single, filed on a homestead claim in 1884, proved up in 1889.

Pamela W. (Anglo-American), squatted on land before it was surveyed. In 1883 at age 71 she filed on it and purchased it in 1884.

Katharina D. (German-Russian), age 21, single, filed on a homestead claim in 1902, married in 1903 before proving up in 1904.

Juliana H. (German-Russian), age 23, single, sole support of sickly mother and three younger siblings, filed a homestead claim in 1901 and proved up in 1907.

Teresia L. (German-Russian), age 32, married with four children, husband was disabled, which allowed her to file as head of the household, filed in 1901 and proved up in 1907.

Clara M. (German-Russian), age 63, single, filed on homestead claim in 1905 and proved up in 1911.

Anna M. (German-Russian), age 65, widow, filed on homestead claim in 1901 and proved up in 1906.

In comparing demographic data for all the women from these two groups, some common trends emerge. Both Anglo-American and German-Russian groups had similar proportions of single women and widows as land recipients (Anglo-American: 9 single, 8 widows; German-Russian: 10 single, 6 widows) but within these categories, there were some noticeable differences. Five of the German-Russian women married shortly after filing on the land while only one Anglo-American took this course of action. Five of the Anglo-American widows were young



FIGURE 1. *Anglo-American and Irish widow Dorothy Russell was sixty-five when she filed on land in Benson County in 1893. Photo courtesy of Raymond Russell.*

and had dependent children while the German-Russian widows were older and none had dependent children. All but two of the Anglo-American women were native born while all of the German-Russian women emigrated from Russia to the United States.

Women from the Anglo-American group were more likely to be in the middle age range. Only four were between the ages of 21 and 25 while 11 were between 26 and 49 and four were over the age of 50. German-Russian land recipients tended to cluster in either the younger or older age ranges. Nine were between the ages of 21 and 25, only two between the ages of 26-49, and 7 were over 50. Each group had one woman who was separated from her husband. One German-Russian was married to a disabled husband. All three of these women were considered the head of the household and therefore eligible for government land.

It seems that German-Russian women were more likely to be younger and planning to take land because of a pending marriage or were older widows without dependents. One can speculate

that the German-Russian women may have had a greater tendency to file on land at the direction of, or in collaboration with, a male relative or future husband with the intention of expanding a family enterprise rather than with the notion of setting up an independent household. Many Anglo-American women seemed more likely to be in a position of providing subsistence for themselves and perhaps their dependents.

Just as a trend seemed to be emerging, however, an exception appeared. Juliana, a German-Russian, filed on a claim in 1901 at the age of twenty-three and proved up in 1907. Her request for a final patent was contested by a party who claimed she had not met the residency requirements. Because of this action her file contains an unusual amount of informative material concerning her life circumstances. For the most part she lived on the claim during the summers and worked elsewhere during the rest of the year. Even though she did not have her own dependent children she was apparently the sole support of her mother, who was described as sickly, and of her three younger siblings. Besides managing this household, Juliana engaged in the physical labor necessary to maintain the claim. She cut sod and built the shanty, broke twenty-five acres for cultivation, cut hay, and threshed. The narrative made no mention of any other relatives, male or female, who might have helped her prove the claim, except for her fifteen-year-old brother who looked after the land when she worked away from the area. All those close to her seemed to have depended on her for their support. The contest to her patent was rejected and the final patent issued to her on the grounds that she had indeed met the government requirements and had established a residence in good faith.

Juliana's story points up the necessity of acquiring extensive case history material as well as demographic data for women from different ethnic backgrounds before attempting to make conclusions about the conditions that led to their acquiring claims. Her independence, whether by choice or circumstance, does not fit



FIGURE 2. Norwegian Randi Garmann-Stockman at the train station in Tioga, North Dakota. When she homesteaded in Williams County in 1910, she was twenty-nine years old. Photo courtesy of Bergliot Schanche.

into the rigid and traditional characterization of male-dominated German-Russian society. Was she an exception? If so, what were the factors that enabled her to assume a non-traditional role? Under what circumstances might desire for land and economic security, family approval or encouragement, opportunity, or even chance override the importance of ethnicity? Were women of some ethnic backgrounds more likely than others to file on land for the benefit of male relatives? Questions such as these are yet to be answered.

INHERITANCE PATTERNS

In addition to these land records, I also found

evidence that in the German colonies of southern Russia, inheritance rights may have been more favorable to women than scholars have previously thought. According to a publication from 1870, "In the South Colonies the hereditary rights for men and women are equal," and "In most South Colonies both sexes have complete equality of rights to property."²² These newly translated passages are of particular interest because they refer to the area of Russia from which many of the North Dakota Black Sea German-Russians emigrated. Other discussions of inheritance patterns have emphasized the favored position of males among the Black Sea Germans. In general, custom dictated the practice of ultimogeniture, in which younger sons inherited family lands and attempts were

made to find new farm land for older sons.²³ Caution must be exercised in interpreting the meaning of the translations as they have not been validated by other sources. Perhaps they are merely obscure passages left on the records but not viable in practice. Their existence, however, merits further investigation.

Considering the variety of backgrounds of women who decided to take claims and the conflicting statements of German-Russian inheritance patterns, the complexity of the relationship between ethnicity and land acquisition becomes even more apparent. Although some women of most ethnic groups elected to file on land in their own names, certain ethnic influences may have been important in their decisions.



FIGURE 3. Norwegian Thora Sanda-Norgard and her dog Fraja in 1910 in Mountrail, Colorado. Photo courtesy of Helga Norgard Anderson.



FIGURE 4. Tyra Schanche milking Lillie. This widow, with three small children, is pictured in 1910 when she was thirty-four years old. Photo courtesy of Bergliot Schanche.

The interest in democratic and social reforms that seemed to permeate many of the Anglo-American and Scandinavian societies must have provided a background that enabled some women to consider land ownership and to perceive themselves capable of undertaking such a venture. On the other hand, even in traditional societies where democratic ideologies were not in favor, some women chose the same course of action. A partial answer to the acceptance of land ownership by German-Russian women may lie in the particularly strong ties to the soil felt by both men and women. Kloberdanz states, "Although the great emigration from the South Russian steppes to the North American prairies occurred at a time of many social and political upheavals in Russia, the primary reason for moving to the new world was land hunger." This intense desire for land has been found to

be characteristic of women as well as men. In certain instances, German-Russian women admitted they sometimes "married for land, not just the man." Kloberdanz also points out that even though German-Russian women usually assumed subordinate roles in the public sphere, which was controlled by men, they enjoyed equal status in the fields. "The one place that Black Sea German men, women and children were equal was in the field. Here there were no rigid divisions by either sex or labor."²⁴

Nina Farley Wishek (Anglo-American) recorded her reaction to seeing German-Russian women working in the fields and noted her change in attitude toward them. "To me, one of the strangest ways of the foreigner was the custom of women working in the field. As I had never seen it in my old home state (Michigan), I rather resented it as an insult to my sex. In

later years I became accustomed to it and even came to realize that the girls and women enjoyed the freedom of outdoor life. Many girls preferred working outside."²⁵ Under these conditions it seems possible that if land were available for the taking, German-Russian women as well as their Anglo-American counterparts would consider land ownership.

The above examples illustrate how ethnic factors may have influenced women to file on claims. The rather specific focus of this study might well be expanded to investigate land ownership as a means by which women of various ethnic groups crossed the boundaries of the

private household sphere into the public domain of men.

CONCLUSION

The classification of names of land recipients in selected North Dakota townships provides a foundation for further research into the role of ethnicity in the decisions of women to file on claims. The data indicate that the percentages of women filing and proving up on claims in North Dakota were similar to those found in surrounding states. During early settlement the percentages of women taking land were low, averaging about 5 percent, although significant increases occurred after the 1900s with many townships showing percentages over 15 percent and occasionally 30 percent.

Women of all ages and marital status took land. Single women from age 21 to over 70, young widows with dependent children, and older widows who usually had grown children homesteading nearby made up the majority of those females seeking land. But "free" land also held promise for women who had been deserted or who were responsible for dependent husbands. One could speculate that many of the women responsible for dependents saw homesteading as a means to economic security while young single women had the luxury of seeking adventure as well as a sound investment.

North Dakota settlers included women who were native born as well as many who emigrated from Europe. These women were active participants in the settlement process. Some were among the first pioneers squatting on land before the surveyors came. After the lands were surveyed many more came to file on pre-emption, homestead, and timber culture claims.

Some women from all ethnic groups obtained patents for government land. Although the data collected for this study suggest possible trends, there are substantial fluctuations in the percentages of women taking land within ethnic groups. A group that held liberalized attitudes toward women's suffrage did not necessarily include more women among its ranks of land re-



FIGURE 5. *Nora Pfundheller-King-Lenartz, a German, at twenty-one in Mountrail, Colorado, 1913. Photo courtesy of Nora Pfundheller-King-Lenartz.*

cipients. Perhaps circumstantial factors overrode the influence of ethnicity, and the desire for financial security provided the common base among women who took land.

Before coming to any conclusion, however, it is imperative to conduct further research that will involve expanded samples, more sophisticated classification schemes, extensive case history information, and a heightened knowledge of inheritance patterns and ethnic attitudes toward land acquisition by women. Follow-up studies should also examine what happened to the land in the years that followed the women's proving up their titles. Did these women ever dispose of their land? Did they sell it to relatives or to strangers? Did they keep it throughout a lifetime? What were the consequences of land ownership? Did it confer power and privilege upon these pioneer women? Such research would clarify the contradictions presented here and eventually lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of women who, as land owners, were an integral part of the settlement of the Great Plains.

NOTES

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7. Frederick C. Luebke, "Introduction," *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 17, 19.

8. William C. Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983), p. 1.

9. William C. Sherman, associate professor of sociology, North Dakota State University, Fargo, advised me in selecting townships.

10. *United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books* (also labeled as *Federal Land Office Homestead Tract Books*) for North Dakota are on microfilm at the Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota.

11. Scholars were William C. Sherman, Timothy J. Kloberdanz, both from North Dakota State University, Fargo, and Playford V. Thorson from the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

12. Townships can be located on a map that includes township and range designations, or see Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota*.

13. H. Elaine Lindgren, "Land, In Her Own Name," (manuscript in progress).

14. Patterson-Black, "Women Homesteaders"; Harris, "Women and Families."

15. Lindgren, "Land, In Her Own Name." In Williams County, North Dakota, only 3 of 57 townships showed percentages above 30 percent (30 percent, 31 percent, 32 percent).

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