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Review of *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* By Joanna L. Stratton

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Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. By Joanna L. Stratton. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981. Illustrations, bibliography, index. 320 pp. \$16.95.

The history of this book is as remarkable as the lives of the women it chronicles. While rummaging through her grandmother's attic, Joanna L. Stratton discovered in yellowing folders the personal memoirs of eight hundred Kansas pioneer women, some describing events that had occurred as early as 1854. Lilla Day Monroe, Stratton's great-grandmother, who was also the first woman to practice law before the Kansas Supreme Court, collected these narratives in the 1920s, asking women to write about their daily lives and experiences as early settlers. Monroe planned to publish their accounts in an anthology as a tribute to the pioneer house-

wives who helped to settle Kansas, their contributions having been largely ignored by historians.

With Monroe's death in 1929, Lenore Monroe Stratton (Monroe's daughter and the author's grandmother) took over the project. But it eventually bogged down, and the memoirs were filed away in an attic cabinet, where Joanna L. Stratton discovered them in 1975. Six decades after its inception, the author has completed the project in superb fashion.

Stratton's book is a social history of early Kansas settlement, based almost entirely on the eight hundred memoirs. It provides an intimate look into the daily activities of average settlers, focusing on the "women's side of pioneer life." Using excerpts from the narratives, the author ably documents the endurance, perseverance, hardiness, and optimism of Kansas pioneer women. It took these qualities to survive, as a woman's life on the frontier was one of daily toil and frequent loneliness. The book tells of one young woman whose loneliness was so intense that, when left alone for the day, she would go out and lie down among the sheep for company.

Loneliness was only one of many hardships experienced by Kansas women. The book vividly describes their struggles with sickness, droughts, floods, grasshopper infestations, wolves, prairie fires, and blizzards. But men and women experienced these hardships together and, Stratton points out, they worked as partners to assure the survival of the family. Men and women alike delighted in social encounters; travelers were always welcome; and holidays and picnics broke the monotony of unending toil. Separate chapters are devoted to frontier schools, churches, towns, and war, with a concluding chapter on temperance and suffrage crusaders.

There are limitations in writing history based on personal memoirs, as the author readily acknowledges. These narratives were solicited mainly from white homesteading women and do not record the stories of marginal women—black women, Indian women, prostitutes, or "the indigent working class." The stories re-

counted are those the women were willing to see published. They fall silent on many topics of interest to modern researchers: childbirth, family planning, pregnancy, and family relations.

Stratton has skillfully synthesized the stories of these Kansas women, producing a delightful—if sometimes painful—reading experience. Their words remain to haunt our memories long after the book has been set aside. Who can forget the anguish of Anna Morgan, a captive of Indians who was returned to white civilization when seven months pregnant: “After I came back, the road seemed rough, and I often wished they had never found me.” Nor can we forget the story of Christina Phillips Campbell, the only white woman in one pioneer Kansas town, whose close friendship with Indian women helped her survive the first years of loneliness. Stratton uncovered a gold mine in her grandmother’s attic, and she has done us a favor by sharing its wealth in *Pioneer Women*.

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