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Spring 2010

Review of *Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West* by Marcia Meredith Hensley

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Schackel, Sandra, "Review of *Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West* by Marcia Meredith Hensley" (2010). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2582.

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Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West. By Marcia Meredith Hensley. Glendo, WY: High Plains Press, 2008. 303 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Since the republication of *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* in 1982, Elinore Pruitt Stewart's

descriptions of homesteading near Burnt Fork, Wyoming, have served as a model for the single woman's homesteading experience. Although Pruitt held her homestead for barely a week before marrying her employer Clyde Stewart, her letters shaped our notions of the homestead experience in the early twentieth century. *Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West*, a collection of twentieth-century homesteading accounts, many of them in the Great Plains region, greatly expands this genre.

A newcomer to Wyoming in 1983, author Marcia Meredith Hensley recognized that neither Stewart's experience nor her own resembled the "reluctant pioneer," the stereotype of the westering woman, and she wondered if there might be more single women accounts in addition to Stewart's classic. Statistics from the National Homestead Monument show that two million people attempted to earn a patent on land through the Homestead Act, and as many as 200,000 of them were single women. Hensley does not claim that the twenty-one single women homesteaders profiled here are representative of this group as a whole, but that they are voices of authority because they wrote down their experiences, which were then published in the popular press or held in the family.

Two major innovations in transportation encouraged Americans to move West at the turn of the century: the train and the Model T Ford. Piling their belongings into a freight car or packing them into a roadster, single women left urban settings to realize their dreams. A dressmaker, a stenographer, a widow: "[W]hy does she choose the career of the pioneer, where the only spectacle is the stretch of unplowed country and of cloudless sky?" asks Mary Isabel Brush. Likely, adjustments to the Homestead Act in 1909 and 1912 made homesteading more appealing to single women. In 1909, the government increased the size of individual allotments from 180 to 360 acres; and in 1912, the Revised Homestead Act reduced the residency requirement for "proving up" from five to three years while allowing a five-month absence each year. These adjust-

ments allowed women to own more land and to return to their jobs or families during harsh winters. Brush describes the single woman homesteader: "When you travel through the West, on the branch railroads, you see her in a different character. You see her on free, rolling stretches of fair prairies plowing. You see her in the sage-brush deserts, irrigating. She is not—it comes over you in a flash of illumination—an isolated, queer character, working out her own unique destiny. She is two thousand strong . . . with many more to follow."

Hensley divides the accounts into four categories: those published in the popular press, letters to friends and families, homesteaders' memoirs, and rediscovered single women homesteaders in historical records. Nearly thirty articles by or about single women appeared in periodicals between 1913 and 1928, suggesting that the theme of female independence appealed to readers of major magazines including *Collier's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Independent*, *Overland Monthly*, and *Sunset*. Perhaps overly optimistic, these essays were part instruction manual, part testimonial, as Cecilia Weiss notes in *Collier's* in June 1916: "In the first place my 320 acres do not support me—yet. I support them."

Hensley's homesteading women provided role models for those who had the courage to move West and develop independent lifestyles. As part of the cultural shifting of morals and manners taking place in early twentieth-century America, single female homesteaders reflect changing attitudes about "woman's place" and at the same time serve as agents of change themselves. This lively anthology adds more voices to the chorus of new western landowners and their efforts to stake their claims.

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