"PICTURING THE PAST" FARM WOMEN ON THE GRASSLANDS FRONTIER, 1850-1900

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SARA BROOKS SUNDBERG

According to a widely used, recently published college survey text about westward expansion in the United States, “rural life in the great open spaces of the trans-Mississippi west was filled with hard work, monotony, and often stultifying isolation.” The textbook goes on to say, “Nowhere were the physical hardships more starkly revealed than in the lives of pioneer women.” The authors emphasize this point with a passage from Hamlin Garland’s autobiography describing his family’s pioneer experience on the prairie: “My heart filled with bitterness and rebellion, bitterness against the pioneering madness which had scattered our family, and rebellion toward my father who had kept my mother always on the border, working like a slave.”

Nearly thirty years ago historians expressed skepticism about Garland’s negative depiction of his mother’s life and its influence on historical writing about pioneer farm women’s lives in the grasslands. They called for the reconsideration of traditional images of pioneer farm women’s lives on the grassland frontiers based upon analysis of women’s own accounts of their experiences. An outpouring of research and writing about prairie and plains farm women appeared during the late 1970s and 1980s. Much of the research that emerged critiqued Garland’s portrait of the downtrodden pioneer farmwoman of the grasslands, and other images like it, as stereotypical, a by-product of the masculine bias of American frontier studies. Yet the fact that Garland’s description is still singled out for emphasis in a college textbook about the history of the U.S. West demonstrates the continuing influence of this particular image of pioneer farm women’s lives and provides a good rationale for not only reconsidering the
picture Garland draws but also reassessing how we teach prairie farm women's experiences.²

How should we depict the experiences of grasslands farm women in the western history survey course? In a 1986 article titled “Women and the West: Rethinking the Western History Survey Course,” William Cronon and others argue that the best “antidote” to myths about women in the West is “surely . . . more history” about “the historical lives of western women.” Research on history learning corroborates this assumption, demonstrating that students’ perceptions of women in history are sometimes “blurry” and that one way to improve students’ interest in and critical thinking about history, including women’s history, is to ask them to interpret historical evidence from multiple, often conflicting, perspectives.³

Heeding these findings, this study intends to add “more history” by analyzing fifty-two accounts by pioneer farm women from a less well known part of the U.S. grasslands, the Minnesota prairie between 1850 and 1900. Using Garland’s frequently cited description of his mother’s experience as a baseline for comparison to Minnesota farm women’s experiences, this study finds that pioneer farm women from the Minnesota prairie provide not only “more history” but also multiple perspectives on that history. Minnesota farm women’s accounts of their own experiences demonstrate that many Minnesota women expressed far more positive and complex responses to the grasslands than Hamlin Garland’s passage implies, confirming the continuing need for alternate ways to picture the past of pioneer farm women on the prairie. This study also maintains that in order to have a full understanding of prairie farm women’s experiences it is critical to include these often conflicting responses in what we teach.⁴

The Minnesota prairie frontier is one episode of the nineteenth-century grasslands farming frontier that is not yet fully studied for pioneer farm women’s views of their experiences. There is no book-length study about Minnesota prairie women even though the relatively late period of westward movement in the state produced a significant number of writings by these midwestern farm women. Minnesota prairie women are particularly important to consider because Minnesota is one of the easternmost states with extensive grasslands. Much of western Minnesota, like Iowa and the Great Plains states farther west, is characterized by relatively flat, treeless grasslands. In fact, tallgrass prairie vegetation extends well into the eastern portion of all of the states that form the eastern boundary of the Great Plains. As some of the first white farm women to experience settlement on the vast grasslands in the northern United States, Minnesota farm women’s experiences are important indicators of how women could respond to the Great Plains grassland regions farther to the west. Some women eventually moved westward from Minnesota to the Great Plains. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s family, fictionally depicted in the Little House series of children’s books, is a well-known example of prairie settlers who moved westward from Minnesota, eventually homesteading on the plains of South Dakota. Historian H. Elaine Lindgren found that 35 percent of the native-born women who homesteaded in North Dakota were originally from Minnesota. This percentage is probably much greater because it does not include female immigrants who farmed in Minnesota and then later homesteaded in North Dakota.⁵

White settlement on the western grasslands in Minnesota lasted from about 1850 until 1900. In 1851 government treaties with the Sioux Indians opened lands for agricultural settlement in the south and southwestern portions of what was then Minnesota Territory. In 1854 the government granted preemption rights to settlers on unsurveyed public lands, releasing a flood of settlement onto the Minnesota prairie. The Panic of 1857, the Civil War, and the Sioux Uprising in 1862 temporarily slowed migration to the prairie until after the Civil War. In the years following the Civil War, immigrants from throughout western and northern Europe joined native-born pioneers as they poured into Minnesota. Indian treaties in 1863 and 1889, this time with the Chippewa Indians, opened
the northwestern prairie for settlement. By 1890 settlement had moved far into this region and by 1900 less than half of Minnesota prairie counties still met the government's criteria for frontier areas.  

Minnesota pioneer women's sources—among them diaries, letters, reminiscences, and oral interviews—represent experiences from throughout the tallgrass prairie region of Minnesota during this time period (Fig. 1). Ironically, it is because women in this study possessed both the ability and the inclination to write that they are not fully representative of all pioneer women. It is not clear how much farm women's literary efforts actually set them apart from other pioneer farm women in Minnesota. Educated middle-class people typified the western movement. Moreover, a survey of forty-one prairie counties in Minnesota in 1870 reveals that only 7 percent of the females in those counties were illiterate. That does not mean women chose to write. In a letter written in 1874 from Estherville, Iowa, located just a few miles south of the Minnesota-Iowa border, Norwegian immigrant Gro Svendsen explained, "You ask me if I am the only one in this neighborhood who can write. I could answer both yes and no. There are many here who can write but very few who can compose letters, so that I have to write not only for our nearest neighbors, but also for those who live far away." For those women, like Svendsen, who did choose to write, their writings often provide us a glimpse of their "historical lives."  

**The Image**

The farming experiences of many of the Minnesota prairie farm women represented in this study occurred at a time when settlers risked their livelihoods, and even their lives, to farm. Drought, wildfires, economically disastrous grasshopper infestations, and depressed farm prices plagued farmers throughout the northern prairies in the 1870s. Hamlin Garland's bleak portrait of his mother's experience are three negative assumptions frequently attributed to prairie farm women. His assertion that pioneer farming "tied" his mother "to the border" implies that his mother only hesitantly participated in the family-farming venture. The observation that pioneering "scattered" their family implies painful separation from family and friends. Finally, and most explicitly, Garland's comparison of his mother to a "slave" suggests that for women, work on their prairie farm comprised forced labor and physical drudgery. It is this image of the reluctant, lonely, and overworked prairie farm woman that is reexamined here based upon Minnesota prairie farm women's own words.  

**Reluctant Pioneers**

Were women on the Minnesota prairie reluctant pioneers? Most of the women in this study did not explicitly make the decision to farm on the prairie, but they do confirm that they participated in the decision-making process. Reminiscing about the winter of 1877, Mary Paulson King included her mother in the decision to make a prairie land claim in western Minnesota: "Everyone got the Western fever and our folks talked and planned how we could go." The Paulson family moved once, from Norway, and several more times within Fillmore County, Minnesota. None of the moves satisfied the family's desire for a land claim, so in 1878 they loaded their seven children in a wagon and traveled three weeks to Yellow Medicine County to stake a claim. Cynthia York Hill left Vermont for the West in the late 1850s. Hill remembered, "As we were agreed to go west we started the next Dec." Malena Steen probably agreed to move from her home in Norway to the United States before her marriage: "I was married to Severin Olsen Steen on April 17, 1870. A week later we took the trip to America." Later she included herself in the choice of Minnesota as a place to settle: "We began to study and look out toward the great Minnesota prairies."
These women were mostly newly married, both immigrant and native born, and, with only one exception, childless. Mary Carpenter, married for thirteen years with three children and another on the way, left Rochester, Minnesota, in 1873 on a two-hundred-mile wagon journey to a remote homestead in Lyon County, Minnesota. Despite the risks to her health and the burdens of traveling with young children, Carpenter agreed with the decision to move: “We are very ‘hard up’ for money, but it is best we should go now and have a place of our own if ever.” There were other practical motivations, besides family economy, that persuaded women like Carpenter to relocate to the prairie. Gratia Ferris expressed concern for her husband’s health. In 1871 the Ferris family migrated to Minnesota’s western prairies primarily because “Mr. Ferris’ health gave out from hard work, exposure and the damp locality.” Charlotte Van Cleve’s family left Michigan “in the hope that that far-famed atmosphere would drive away all tendency to intermittent fevers and invigorate our shattered constitutions.”

Women not only agreed with and participated in the family decision to farm on the prairie, they initiated their own prairie farm experiences and then stayed on the land. An investigation of homestead entries for Minnesota prairie lands demonstrates that women filed 5 percent of all initial homestead entries. Five years after making their initial homestead entries, the percentage of final homestead entries filed by women remained at 5 percent, demonstrating that women stayed on the land and “proved up” on their land claims. This percentage is consistent with the numbers of female homesteaders farther west in the grasslands. In a sample of North Dakota counties homesteaded prior to 1900, historian H. Elaine Lindgren found between 6 and 7 percent of homesteaders were women. In the Minnesota sample, it is not clear how many of these women were widows or how many were young, single, or married, but Martin County pioneer Britannia Livingston remembered “Aunt Becky” as a homesteader who lived alone on her land. Mary Carpenter knew “a young lady here [Rochester, Minnesota] a neighbor of ours . . . who took a claim of 160 acres.”

Most women who homesteaded probably came to pioneer homesteads either as wives or daughters of homesteading men. The promise the land offered for the maintenance and care of family attracted women, as well as men, to the prairie frontier. The welfare of their children significantly influenced farmers like the Carpenters of Lyon County. “A farm is the best place for boys too,” Mary Carpenter explained, “& we had no means to buy one there.” Mary Etta Ackerman’s parents echoed the Carpenters’ sentiments: “Like all pioneers, my parents came west to make a home and better their financial condition.” Ackerman’s mother, a pioneer in both Dakota and Waseca counties, etched an indelible image of this expectation on her daughter’s memory. Mary Etta Ackerman remembered that her mother, impatient to see their new homestead, refused to wait for her husband to bring a horse and wagon to carry the family the final few miles of the journey. Instead, she tucked her eleven-month-old son under her arm and eagerly strode through the tall grass toward the family’s new homestead with two other children “trudging” behind her. Ackerman’s memory of her mother that day, energetically striding toward their new prairie home, is hardly that of a reluctant pioneer.

There were, of course, women who were reluctant to migrate. Harriet Buck’s husband convinced her to migrate to McLeod County in 1853 with the promise that they would return to Vermont the following spring. Eight years later she confessed to her family that “I would rather live here [Glencoe, Minnesota] than any place I ever lived. I know you could not help [but] like this country.” Her comments may have been an effort to persuade her family to join her in Minnesota, but they also demonstrate that the real test of whether women enjoyed satisfying lives on the frontier came in the months and years after the decisions to migrate and after the arduous journeys to western destinations ended.
LONELY FARM WOMEN

Like the idea of the reluctant prairie pioneer woman, the image of the lonely and distraught prairie farmwife is complicated by farm women’s accounts of their experiences. Pioneer women remarked on how quickly the frontier filled with new settlers. Lucy Garland marveled at the rapid development near her home in Litchfield, Minnesota: “When A. J. came out it contained One house out on the open prairie. . . . When I came out two months later, there was a hotel, Depot, Stores, saloons and quite a number of dwelling Houses.” Meeker County, where Garland lived, is one of the easternmost prairie counties in Minnesota and also one of the first to receive settlement. The Barrow family was nearly alone on their homestead in Murray County in western Minnesota in 1879. Mrs. Barrow recalled that even in her remote corner of the prairie, “In the spring, several families settled not far from us and put up sod shanties, until they were prepared to build frame houses.” Mary Carpenter, newly arrived on her family’s prairie homestead, displayed her optimism about the development of the nearby town of Marshall: “There will be a paper published in Marshall soon. . . . One year ago Marshall consisted of one sod house, now it is quite a thriving railroad town.” Emphasizing her faith in the development of the region, she proclaimed, “I wouldn’t go back where we lived before for anything.”

Minnesota farm women’s writings confirm that farm women were not necessarily isolated and that they benefited from varied contacts in their rural prairie neighborhoods. “Most of my social callers were Indians who were strolling around and would drop in and sit awhile,” wrote Gratia Ferris about her Scott County home in the 1850s. Helen Bengtson from Wilkin County remembered, “They [Native Americans] often came . . . looking for things to eat but never harmed us in the least.” Such visits might strain food supplies, making Indian visits a nuisance, or they might result in meaningful relationships. Margaret Holl Hahn’s family, located near New Ulm, befriended an old Indian who later warned them of the Sioux Uprising of 1862. Similarly, Abby Bucklin recalled hearing stories from her grandparents about a young Indian woman, Winona, whom her grandparents befriended. Winona warned Bucklin’s grandparents of the uprising. The attitudes and experiences of these women do not mean that white women accepted, or respected, American Indian culture. They do suggest that there were opportunities for Native Americans and white women to meet, providing frontierswomen with unexpected opportunities for social contacts.

Farm women valued contacts with individuals outside their families, particularly neighbors. “This last month of summer,” wrote Blue Earth County resident Lydia Scott, “has been very pleasant for me doing my work, visiting and receiving company.” Two collections of diaries illustrate the frequency with which such visits might take place. Rice County farm woman Amanda Sanderson recorded her daily routine in yearly diaries she kept for thirty-nine years, eight of which are extant (Fig. 2). Sanderson and her daughter averaged one outside contact a week for four of the eight years documented in the diary. The other four years the two women fell short of their average by only twelve visits. In reality, there were weeks when Sanderson and her daughter enjoyed more than one visitor a week, and other weeks when they received none. Belle Northrup’s diaries also revealed an average of one visit per week over a two-
year span in the early 1890s. Sanderson and her daughter and Northrup farmed in settled areas. Eva Hill Fairbanks explains how such visits might take place: “It was the neighborhood custom to look across the prairie and if someone saw Lorne Pung [a neighbor] going to another house they too would hitch up and follow: perhaps three or four families would spend the day together unexpectedly.” Wilkin County resident Helen Bengtson explained what kind of activities might take place in a sparsely settled prairie region in Minnesota during the 1880s. 16

What did we do for amusement? Several had guitars and mandolins and we’d play and sing, play games, and have lunch and coffee. . . . We had books, good books too, both Swedish and English. For it was possible to learn English in the homes as well as in the schools. 17

As Bengtson’s observation suggests, the use of foreign languages could be a factor in social interactions on the prairie frontier. Women’s writings in this study do not indicate that the inability to converse with their immigrant neighbors played a role in prairie women’s feelings of loneliness and isolation, though some historians make this connection. Many immigrants came to the United States as part of a group or with extended families. Rather than exacerbating feelings of loneliness, these small immigrant communities could be buffers between immigrants and their new unfamiliar environment. Jon Gjerde’s study of “immigrant communities” in Renville County concludes that “immigrants settled in groups and developed relationships through the community which may have alleviated social, psychological and economic pressures.” Conversely, there is no evidence in this research that English-speaking farm women felt isolated because they were unable to communicate with their immigrant neighbors, although some English-speaking women were suspicious of immigrants, a view that could lead to self-imposed isolation. 18

Overall, despite the image of the frontier as a region noted for rugged individualism, many prairie women stressed a general spirit of community and cooperation in their neighborhoods. In 1893 E. V. Smalley, a late-nineteenth-century agricultural writer, explained that “Life on Prairie Farms” of the northwest was characterized by a “crusty individuality . . . the inheritance of generations of isolated living that does not take kindly to familiarities of close association.” But Minnesota farm women’s writings highlight an opposing dimension of the frontier experience, that of community. Helen Bengtson wrote, “The day before whoever was [going to town] drove around to the neighbors to find out what they needed. In town he did the errands and collected the mail for the neighborhood.” Challenging the assumption that such trips were made only by men while women were confined to home and children, a pioneer woman from Watonwan County wrote, “The neighbors would take their turn going to town. The women would go along with their butter and eggs.” A pioneer woman from Lac Qui Parle County summed up her view of her neighborhood’s spirit of cooperation: “Frontier life had its hardships and its trials, . . . but neighborly kindness and helpfulness prevailed.” 19

Once a frontier area became more thickly settled, the kinds of social activities enjoyed by pioneers increased. Georgina Way reminisced, “When my boy was three weeks old, I drove fourteen miles to a dance and took in every dance all night and wasn’t sick afterward either. Of course I took him along.” Besides dances, other types of celebrations mentioned in Minnesota prairie women’s writings included concerts, masquerades, a circus, and community “Christmas tree” celebrations. Church services were another opportunity for social interaction. Malena Steen’s husband persuaded her that there would soon be church services in Big Stone County, and he was right. “The first month we were there we had a worship service at our house. . . . In addition, we had those first 3 years, 203 worship services.” 20
Visits to and from neighbors, community events, and church services did not preclude expressions of loneliness by farm women. Amanda Sanderson complained, “32 degrees above Cloudy and finds us all at home. Some reading. Some writing & some looking around & take it all around it is a lonesom [sic] day.” A full reading of Sanderson’s diaries demonstrates that this was an occasional expression of loneliness brought on by bad weather or temporary absences of immediate family members. More serious were women’s bouts with loneliness for distant family and friends. Writing to her mother, Elizabeth Steere confessed, “I cannot tell thee how much I miss thy company and thy counsel, I almost daily think of something to say too [sic] thee and ask thee but recollection soon tells me I am far far away.” Women described their contentment with their frontier homes, except for the fact that they missed old acquaintances and family. From Faribault County in 1867, Sylvia Carpenter wrote, “All we can say is if our folks were here and all our relatives and friends . . . so we could visit each other occasionally . . . we should consider ourselves comparatively happy.” Some women persuaded their families to join them. But for other women that never happened. Mary Carpenter recorded in her letters only one brief reunion with her mother. Even though her mother was only two hundred miles to the east, it was still too difficult for the Carpenters to afford the trip, and Mary’s mother was too aged to come to western Minnesota alone. Carpenter regretted the absence of her mother’s company even though she understood that there “was no place for us” where her mother lived. Her family’s economic interests were best served by their relocation to a western homestead.21 It was not just the absence of family or distances between prairie farms that evoked loneliness. According to some writers, it was the prairie itself. Seth K. Humphrey, an agent
for a farm mortgage company, traveled across the upper Midwest during the 1880s. His reminiscence of his tour across the Dakota prairie typifies the most desperate image of the prairie farmwife driven mad by the loneliness and monotony of the prairie:

Yet every day and with every mile I was getting that other view—the stay-at-home woman’s views—of the prairie as a vastness unrelieved; its utter silence, its appalling rigidity, as of an enormous thing long dead. And I could understand why it was sending so many of its women to the madhouses of Dakota. 22

Minnesota farm women’s responses to the prairie landscape in Minnesota were far more varied than Humphrey supposes, and it is not the case that Minnesota, or “Dakota,” farm women filled the “madhouses.” The absence of trees on the prairie was new for some farm women. Elizabeth Steere learned to enjoy its pleasures: “There are no woods in the west. I never remember of being where I could not see trees on every side till we came to a Prairie in Illinois and there we traveled miles out of sight of timber and Settlement.” But in the same letter she also expresses her appreciation for the prairie in Minnesota, “I wish thee could see the Prairie in the summer it seems so calm and still. I know thee would admire them and the sunsets.” 23

The idea of the prairie as a garden is a feature of nineteenth-century promotional literature and also appears in pioneer women’s writings. “When the long winter was over,” Julia Hibbard wrote from Steele County, “and the blackened prairie grew green, there also spring up beautiful flowers, many kinds like our garden flowers in the east. Then the prairie was beautiful.” For Mary Carpenter, the prairie was also far from desolate and empty: “There are wild geese, and ducks & prairie hens here. . . . There is also a very large sandy hill [sic] crane. There are many wild flowers.” In the summer, Mrs. Godfred Peterson of Stevens County remembered the “wild strawberries we’d find so we could eat strawberries with cream.” 24

Minnesota women’s comments illustrate that they were not necessarily alienated by prairie landscape. They were able to visit with one another and establish satisfying social contacts, and they saw value in the care of their families. Among the Minnesota farm women considered in this study, there is no evidence of farm women fleeing from the monotony and loneliness of the prairie frontier or succumbing to the madness Seth Humphrey describes. A survey of nineteenth-century patient records from Fergus Falls and Rochester State mental hospitals in Minnesota provides no statistical evidence of farm women driven mad by their lives on the prairie. In fact, there is no statistically significant difference between the number of male and female patients listing prairie counties as their former places of residence, suggesting that hospitalization for mental illness was gender neutral. Likewise, although the raw numbers for female patients who were married are nearly twice as great as those of female patients who were single, this difference is not statistically significant but rather reflects their proportion in the population. Only 12 percent of female patients diagnosed as insane listed themselves as “farmwives” or “farmers.” “Housewife” or “housekeeper” appeared as the most commonly listed occupations for female patients, but inconsistencies in reporting make it difficult to determine whether those who listed themselves as housewives were really farmwives. Among the causes of insanity listed for female patients, “overwork and neglect” most closely fit the image of the “mad” farmwife. Yet doctors diagnosed “overwork and neglect” as the problem in only 6 percent of the total number of female patients. Barbara Handy-Marchello found a similar lack of evidence for female insanity farther west in the grasslands of the northern Great Plains. 25

The image of female madness on the grasslands frontier is difficult to dispel, partly because degrees of loneliness, like degrees of mentally disturbed behavior, are difficult to identify and measure. As scholar Jeannie
McKnight argues, it may be that insanity among pioneer women manifested itself more as "intermittent flare-ups of bizarre behavior . . . and/or the kind of feeling disturbances such as melancholia and depression," which she contends are "so common to women's writing." Even so, the information about Minnesota women does not support Humphrey's picture of an epidemic of madness among farm women on the prairie. Hysteria and its related symptoms affected nineteenth-century rural lower- and middle-class women, but this behavior was by no means peculiar to them. As Clay County pioneer Emma Elton summed up the situation in her neighborhood, "There was hardship and much physical work in those days, but, I believe less mental strain. Neighborliness and hospitality were unlimited."26

OVERWORKED FARM WOMAN

The unrelenting physical labor and often primitive working conditions on pioneer prairie farms suggests dismal work lives for farm women. Britannia Livingston frequently accompanied her husband on long rides across the Minnesota prairie. "I often returned home greatly depressed," she said. "It seemed to be that the women I met, especially the older ones, had become mere verbs—to be, to do and to suffer." Her comments appear to corroborate Hamlin Garland's comparison of his mother to a "slave," ground under by physical drudgery. But Livingston did not generalize to all women. "The majority of us," she explained, "would not trade our prospects." About herself she "resolved that I would BE and DO, I would not merely suffer." Most women wrote matter-of-factly about their work, and their comments reveal that they understood that their work contributed both to household maintenance by chores such as cooking and cleaning, and to household sustenance by "work which contributed directly to family economy by making cash expenditures unnecessary."27

Historians point to the primitive nature of pioneer farm homes as one reason why women's work lives were so hard. "It was only when she took one look at the unpromising ugly hole in the ground," historian Everett Dick writes, "that she sensed the utter loneliness and drab prospects of her future life." Norwegian immigrant Grace Rollag reacted quite differently to her first prairie home: "We were young so we did not lose courage. We dug a hole into the slope of the hill, and with a few boards over the top, to serve as a roof, we had our first home." Later Rollag and her family "went modern," moving into a sod home, a house that Rollag eagerly helped to build. Traveling to Rock County to start a new home, Jane Grout recalled that no one was "charmed" by the first sight of sod homes. Still, as historian Glenda Riley found in her study of frontierswomen in Iowa, "Just because a sod hut looked miserable did not mean its inhabitants were miserable." Lac Qui Parle County pioneer Mrs. Hans Johnson personified this idea: "We lived in a small house, walls of sod, two feet thick and a tar paper roof. . . . The spirit of contentment in owning our home reigned supreme, we had no funds but an abundance of courage and will power and a strong faith in the future." Gratia Ferris helped build her family's Pipestone County home from wood they transported from Scott County: "We commenced to frame a house 12 x 20, and one story high. . . . He [Mr. Ferris] would lay out the timber, mark them, and then I with saw and hammer, and chisel would saw them off and cut the mortises. . . . Saturday night they had the house up. . . . and our 'Hope Star' again beamed upon us."28

Johnson and Ferris both expressed confidence that their family's living conditions would improve in the future. Other women appreciated what comforts they could find. Mary Paulson King of Yellow Medicine County expressed pride in her home because it contained "boarded up" walls, instead of walls made of sod, and it had pine board flooring instead of the more usual dirt floors. Blue Earth County pioneer Georgina Way wrote, "Our first shack was not a dugout, but the next thing to it. It was log shed with sloping roof one way. We had two windows of glass so did not feel so much like pioneers." Perhaps part of
the reason some women accepted their prairie homes as a matter of course may be attributed, as Britannia Livingston observed, to the fact that “the most of us saw hard times before we saw Minnesota.”

It is also true, as historian Andrea G. Radke found for women on the grasslands elsewhere in the Great Plains, that Minnesota prairie women strived to make their surroundings comfortable and appealing by “refining” their living spaces “using simplified or ‘makeshift’ versions of proper cultural symbols and upper-class refinement.” Carrie Olin of Lyon County remembered that her family’s home “was neat and clean papered with newspapers.” Mary Paulson King’s home had whitewashed walls, creating both a clean and finished appearance. Simple furnishings added refinement. Amanda Sanderson made a wreath of hair flowers, a common wall decoration of the day. Live canaries were a special touch mentioned by several women. And flower gardens added cheerfulness to the homestead as a whole.30

Often, first homes were improved or were abandoned for more sophisticated styles of housing. Seven years after Grace Rollag moved into her sod home, an improvement over their initial dugout, she moved into a frame house. Mary Etta Ackerman remembered that her family’s covered wagon served as her family’s first dwelling. A small one-story dwelling replaced the wagon by winter. If improvements did not occur, some women expressed the kind of disillusionment reflected in Garland’s description of his mother’s experience. In 1887, after fourteen years of farming in Lyon County, Mary Carpenter complained, “If I only could have a half way convenient house & wood to burn, I fancy I could be a great deal more contented.”

The multiplicity of women’s chores, together with the inconvenience of pioneer homes, contributed to an image of pioneer women’s work as drudgery. There is little dispute that pioneer women worked hard and that pioneer conditions made women’s work more difficult, “The wimmin [sic],” Harriet Buck observed, “have to work a great deal harder in this Country than they do east because they do not have anything handy.” And some chores yielded little satisfaction. Mary Carpenter, for example, insisted that “tending straw [was] one sort of slavery, for some one must stay right by the stove & feed it constantly.”

The list of pioneer women’s chores is long. Women cooked, cleaned, engaged in home manufacture, worked in the fields, and hired out as laborers among other responsibilities. “I made 100 pounds of butter in June,” Mary Carpenter explained. “Have not kept count since. Sold 28 doz of eggs at 10 cts. A doz one week lately.” The monies from Carpenter’s home manufacture “bought everything we have had.”

Women’s work extended beyond the house and farmyard. “Home at 8:30 [p.m.],” Clara Bell noted, “I went out after supper and drove harvester until 9 o’clock made my back lame.” The following week she recorded, “Finished cutting the wheat—stacked most of the afternoon.” Women and girls worked for wages outside the home. Grace and Ole Rollag arrived in Rock County at harvest time in 1874. Grace (approximately six months pregnant at the time) along with Ole hired out as field hands. Understandably, Grace complained that she was paid less: “We women weren’t treated fairly, a difference of $1.50, just because you wore a different kind of pants, was too much.”

The scarcity of doctors and schools required that women also serve as nurses and teachers. Mary Etta Ackerman remembered, “Aunt Betsey was a hard worker and raised a large family . . . yet she was never to [sic] busy to go the aid of a sick neighbor.” Caroline Eastman arrived in Big Stone County in 1875 to find, “I was on call to bring babies into the world, as well as when a grim reaper called. All services were given gladly and no salary was expected.” Some women like Sarah Christie Stevens of Blue Earth County possessed exceptional knowledge: “Poor Dave . . . was taken with pleurisy. We kept mustard or flaxseed poultice applied, I gave him acuite & Bryonia every 15 minutes.” Farm women in remote areas during the early period of settlement assumed
responsibilities as teachers. Elisabeth Steere, for example, homeschooled her children: “We have no school and it is so cold we could not send [the children] even if there was. I teach the children which adds no little to my labors.” Stevens also taught school and in 1890 became superintendent of schools in Blue Earth County.35

Extraordinary circumstances such as the Civil War and the Sioux Uprising of 1862 caused some women to take on new roles as managers of farms for extended periods. Georgina Way’s husband enlisted in the Civil War, leaving her to manage their farm and raise their three children, all of whom were under five years of age. “I did all kinds of farm work in those days,” she wrote, “for men’s help wasn’t to be had, they were all in the war.” Raised in New York City, Way admitted that she was unaccustomed to heavy farm labor; nevertheless, she “didn’t make any fuss” about her additional responsibilities. Guri Endresen lost her husband and a son in the Uprising of 1862. Endresen retreated from her homestead for almost four years on account of her tragic losses. She held onto the land. “I may say that one or another has advised me to sell my land, but I would rather keep it for a time yet, in the hope that some of my people might come and use it. It is difficult to get such good land again.”36

Farm women also struggled to hang onto family farms during the grasshopper infestations of the 1870s. Destitute farm families sought relief from the state government after grasshoppers destroyed their crops. Mrs. T. Williams explained her family’s dire circumstances to Governor Cushman Davis in 1875, “Starvation is all most staring [sic] us in the face.” She testified that her husband “has worked hard and has done all that he could to make his family aliving [sic].” She wrote, “Now please tell me what is best to do, to lieve [sic] will be [to] lose all the home we have, and to stay we must starve, and if there is any way to keep from perishing from cold and hunger I would gladly remain.” Hard times such as those brought about by the Civil War, the Sioux Uprising, and grasshopper plagues thrust pioneers into life-threatening circumstances they could not conquer with hard work alone. Yet the experiences of Way, Endresen, and Williams tell us about more than failure; they also illustrate women’s tenacity and their commitments to the land and hard work.37

Mary Carpenter’s overall story is another example of the complexity of one pioneer woman’s life. She worked for the care and support of family and expected that her work would realize a better future for her family. But the Carpenter family fell deeply in debt by the 1880s. In 1886 Mary expressed pessimism when her husband proposed purchasing more land. Gradually, her health declined and in 1889 she died, reportedly from “melancholy, tending to derangement.” On the one hand, Carpenter’s story appears to corroborate Garland’s sad depiction of prairie farm women and Seth Humphrey’s portrait of women driven mad by their lives on the prairie. But we know that Mary Carpenter’s letters reflected more than a litany of disappointments. Her letters also reflect optimism and commitment to her family’s farm venture.38

Mary Carpenter’s experience is not unique in this regard. “When we got in our first crop of wheat,” Georgina Way remembered, “I used to stand in the door and watch it wave as the wind blew over it and think I had never seen anything so beautiful.” It is not impossible to imagine Mary Carpenter expressing similar pride in her family’s farm had her particular circumstances unfolded differently. It is also not impossible to imagine Carpenter sharing the sentiments of Danish immigrant Johanna Kragh, who married a farmer in Brown County, Minnesota, a few years after her arrival in the United States in 1857. Her husband died, leaving her with the farm and eight children, the oldest child eighteen. Despite her husband’s death and the hardship it must have entailed, Kragh held onto the farm. At the age of ninety, she proudly recollected, “We all stuck to the farm which I still have in Evan, Minnesota.” That women and men “stuck” to the land and then transferred family farms to their children to carry on is part of their legacy to the shaping of the Midwest.39
“Picturing” Pioneer Farm Women

Rural women’s writings, as historian Ginette Aley explains, “mediate the challenge of differentiating between entrenched mythology and historical realities regarding women’s lives.” This survey of Minnesota prairie farm women’s lives challenges the “entrenched mythology” of downtrodden prairie farm women and demonstrates that women’s responses were far more varied than Garland’s image. This is not a new story; historians have documented similar responses from other parts of the grasslands. Including their voices is not just a matter of demonstrating whether the midwestern frontier was “good or bad” for women. It is about reaching beyond historical stereotypes and misperceptions and seeing the prairie and plains farming frontier as a time and place that contained multiple meanings for both men and women.  

Stereotypical images divert us from seeing diversity in farm women’s lives in the grasslands, and perhaps they even divert us from seeing them at all. History educator Sam Wineburg and a team of researchers asked school-age boys and girls to literally “picture the past” through drawings. Investigators asked students to draw a western settler. Despite the inclusion of many more women in schoolbooks since the 1970s, girls overwhelmingly drew more men as western settlers than women. The students’ drawings demonstrated that females in history, in general, were “blurry” characters for female students and nearly “invisible” for male students. Even older students enrolled in a women’s history course experienced difficulty in picturing women from the past. Older students found it difficult to reconcile the content of their course with their cultural images of the past. Women’s history, for them, appeared “opinioney” or “subjective.” “It is not enough to expose students to alternative visions of the past, already digested and interpreted by others,” Wineburg concludes. “The only way we can come to understand the past’s multiplicity is by the direct experience of having to tell it, of having to sort through the welter of the past’s conflicting visions.”

In the western history survey course, the task of integrating women into history requires not only “more history” but also a change in how we tell that history. What would happen if we finally swept aside the stereotype of the downtrodden prairie farmwife, and other images like it, and put Wineburg’s advice into practice in our classrooms and textbooks? We might juxtapose Georgina Way’s description of herself as a young woman, standing transfixed in the doorway of her sod home, marveling at the beauty of the family’s first wheat harvest against Mary Carpenter’s endless struggle to make ends meet and her untimely death. What interpretation of farm women’s lives in the grasslands might students picture then?

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Notes


5. Ginette Aley makes the point that greater number of sources about Midwest women are available from the post-Civil War era, and she identifies a few studies that focus on Minnesota women in “Knotted Together Like Roots in the Darkness: Rural Midwestern Women and Region—A Bibliographic Guide” Agricultural History 77, no. 3 (2003): 468. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s map of major ecosystems in North America includes Minnesota grasslands as part of the Great Plains. See map “Ecological Regions of North America,” ftp://ftp.epa.gov/wed/ecoregions/cec_na/NA_LEVEL_1pdf (accessed October 4, 2009). Glenda Riley includes Minnesota women in her discussions about pioneer women’s experiences in Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), and she discusses Minnesota pioneer women in general in A Place to Grow Women in the American West (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 6-10. See also Anne B. Webb, “Forgotten Persephones: Women Farmers on the Frontier,” Minnesota History 50 (Winter 1986): 134-48. Some scholars question the similarity between the experiences of farm women on the prairie and plains, especially in more recent decades; see Dorothy Schweider and Deborah Pink, “U.S. Prairie and Plains Women in the 1920s: A Comparison of Women, Family, and Environment,” Agricultural History 73, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 183-200, and Cary W. De Wit, “Women’s Sense of Place on the American High Plains,” Great Plains Quarterly 21 (Winter 2001): 29-44. For a study that finds strong similarities between farm women’s experiences on the prairie and plains frontier, see Riley, Female Frontier. Alice Hall Petry questions whether there is enough difference between prairie and plains women’s lives to make meaningful comparisons in her review of The Female Frontier by Glenda Riley in Great Plains Quarterly 9 (Summer 1989): 185-86. The Ingalls family resided near Walnut Grove, in southwestern Minnesota, before eventually moving to DeSmet, South Dakota. See, for example, On the Banks of Plum Creek and The Long Winter (New York: Harper and Row Books, 1965). For examples of women who homesteaded in North Dakota, see H. Elaine Lindgren, Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 1-31, especially 23. Native Americans, though an integral part of the frontier, are not considered pioneer settlers. Consequently, Native American women are not included in this study.

6. Theodore Blegen, Minnesota: A History of the State (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1947), 166-67, 173, 229. In 1850, the date of the first federal census of Minnesota, the state of Minnesota met the U.S. Census Bureau’s criteria for frontier areas, which was fewer than twenty-one people per square mile. By 1900 less than half of Minnesota
prairie counties met this criteria. U.S. Bureau of
the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh Census
1890, Part I: Population* (Washington, DC, 1892),
xxxv-xxxvii. Figures for population densities were
compiled from R. W. Murchie and M. E. Jarchow,
*Population Trends in Minnesota* (St. Paul: University
of Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station,
1897), 4.

7. Both the cost of an overland journey and
the cost of making a prairie farm discouraged
the migration of the very poor to the prairie. See
Lillian Schlssel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward
Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 23;
Clarence Danhof, “Farm-Making Costs and the
'Safety Valve': 1850-1860,” *Journal of Political
Economy* 49 (June 1940): 317-59; Robert E. Ankli,
“Farm Making in the 1850s,” *Agricultural History*
48 (January 1974): 51-70; and Minnesota Bureau of
Statistics, *Minnesota: Its Place among the States Being
the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Statistics
for the Year Ending January 1, 1860* (Hartford: Press
of Case and Lockwood, 1860), 86-87. Literacy
figures compiled from U.S. Bureau of the Census,
*Ninth Census United States Census of Population:
1870, Vol. I: Population Statistics*, Table XXIV, 630,
and Table X, “School Attendance and Illiteracy,”
417; Gro Svendsen, *Frontier Mother: The Letters of
Gro Svendsen*, trans. and ed. Pauline Farseth and
Theodore C. Blegen (Northfield, MN: Norwegian
American Historical Association, 1950), 125.

(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press,
1974), 55-74; Gilbert Fite, ed., “Some Farmers' 
Accounts of Hardship on the Frontier,” *Minnesota
History* 37 (March 1961): 204-11; and Annette
Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and
Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-1878* (St.
These stereotypical characteristics are developed in
Beverly Stoeltje, “‘A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The 
Image of the Frontier Woman,” *Journal of American
Folklore* 88 (January-March 1975): 30-33. Glenda 
Riley's analysis of prairie women in *Frontierswomen: 
The Iowa Experience* served as a model for this 
study.

9. Mary Paulson King, “Memories of a Prairie
Childhood,” 14, Chippewa Valley Historical Museum
Archives, Eau Claire, WI; Cynthia York Hill,
unpublished manuscript, privately held; Malena
Abelsdatter Isene Steen, unpublished manuscript,
Norwegian American Historical Society, Northfield,
MN (hereafter cited as NAHA).

10. Mary Carpenter to “Dear Cousin Lucy,” April
24, 1873, Carpenter Papers, Minnesota Historical
Society, St. Paul (hereafter cited as MHS); Gratia
Fetris to “My Dear Sister Mary,” November 30,
1907, MHS; Charlotte Quisconsin Van Cleve,
"Three Score Years and Ten": *Life-Long Memories of
Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and Other Parts of the West
(Minneapolis: Harrison and Smith, 1888), 129-30.

11. Figures compiled from U.S. General Land
Office, Register of Initial Homestead Entries:
Tracy-Marshall District, 10853-13320, January
1881-December 1900; Alexandria-Fergus Falls
District, 1201-2201, 1863-1872; 5972-915, February
1880-February, 1889; Crookston District, 1-7611,
1872-1882; 7612-14951, July 1881-1892; Redwood
Falls District, 1-3821, July 1872-September 1887,
3822-3874, October 1887-February 1889, MHS.
Figures compiled from U.S. General Land Office,
Registers of Final Homestead Entries: Crookston
District, 1-6249, July 1873-November 1889; 6250-
12646, December 1889-June 1903; Tracy-Marshall
District 4340-7710, January 1881-September 1897;
Alexandria Fergus Falls District, 1-6031, April
1869-February 1889; Redwood Falls District, 1-3747,
1872-1888; 3748-3757, 1889, MHS. Lindgren, *Land
in Her Own Name*, 52; Lindgren, “Ethnic Women
Homesteading on the Plains of North Dakota,”
In a sample of female homesteaders in Minnesota,
historian Anne B. Webb found that approximately
4 percent of all homesteaders were women. Of 
these female homesteaders, most (48.6 percent)
were widowed or divorced. See “Minnesota Women
Homesteaders: 1863-1889,” *Journal of Social History*
Pioneer Woman,” *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, June 1,
1925, 2.

12. Mary Carpenter to “Dear Cousin Lucy,”
July 9, 1874, Carpenter Papers; Mary Etta Hoople
Ackerman, “Pioneer Days in Minnesota,” 5-6,
Waseca County Historical Society, Waseca, MN.

13. Hatty Buck to “Dear Brother and Sister,”
March 13, 1855, and Harriet Buck to “Dear Brother
and Sister,” March 14, 1863, Eliza Shattuck Papers,
MHS.

14. Lucy Garland to Cousin Clara, August 13,
1873, Lucy Garland Papers, MHS; Mrs. Sylvanus
Barrow, *The Farmer Collection*, Box 1, File B, MHS;
Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873 (August 1873?),
Carpenter Papers.

Collection*, Box 1, File B, MHS; Mrs. Margaret Holl
Hahn, typed manuscript, MHS; Abby Bucklin, “Just
Indians,” 44, typed manuscript, MHS. Glenda Riley
finds similar experiences in *Iowa in Frontierswomen: 
The Iowa Experience*, 179-81, and for the frontier
in general in *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 
1825-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico

16. Lydia M. Sprague Scott, Diary, August
1894, Lydia M. Scott Papers, MHS; Amanda
M. Sanderson, Diaries, Rice County Historical
Association, Faribault, MN; Belle Northrup, Diaries, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, MN; Eva Hill Fairbanks, unpublished manuscript, privately held.

17. Bengtson, *The Farmer* Collection, Box 1, File B, MHS.


21. Sanderson diary, November 7, 1880, Rice County Historical Association; Elisabeth Steere to “My Dearly Beloved Mother,” December 18, 1857, Isaac Steere and Family Papers, MHS; Sylvia Carpenter to “My Dear Aunt Ellen,” December 2, 1867, Sylvia Carpenter Papers, MHS; Mary to Cousin Lucy, July 9, 1874, Carpenter Papers.


23. For example, see Peg Wherry, “Home on the Range: Reactions of Pioneer Women to the Kansas Plains Landscape,” *Kansas Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1986): 71-79; Elisabeth Steere to “My Dearly Beloved Mother,” December 18, 1857.


25. The survey of patient records is drawn from Fergus Falls State Hospital Records, Statistical Record A, July 29, 1890-November 7, 1898, and Rochester State Hospital records, Statistical Record, Vol. A 1879-1899, MHS. Information from the survey was then compared with population figures from United States Bureau of the Census, Eleventh Census, United States Census of Population: 1890 I Statistics of Population, “Native and Foreign Born and White and Colored Population,” Classified by Sex, By Counties: 1890, Table 22, p. 504; and R. W. Murchie and M. E. Jarchow, *Population Trends in Minnesota* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station, 1937), p. 93. Foreign-born women composed a significantly greater number of the female patients in these hospitals. Whether this finding is related to gender or to other factors is unclear because this study did not compare numbers of foreign-born men versus native men in the institutions. For a related discussion of insanity among pioneer women in Minnesota, see Ornvul Odegaard, *Emigration and Insanity: A Study of Mental Disease among the Norwegian-Born Population of Minnesota* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaards, 1932), 85-89; and Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains*, 7-82.


Plains, 1880-1920,” Great Plains Quarterly 24 (Fall 2004): 228; Mrs. Carrie Olin, The Farmer Collection, Box 2 File O, MHS; King, “Memories,” 22; Sanderson diary, January 18, 1884. For use of canaries, see Grout journal, May 15, 1873; Sanderson diary, August 5, 1887. For flowers, see Mary Carpenter to no name, no date, Carpenter Papers; and King, “Memories,” 20.


32. Harriet Buck to “Dear Brother and Sister,” October 22, 1869; Mary to “Dear Cousin Lovell,” March 26, 1887.

33. Mary Carpenter to Cousin Laura, August 18, 1871.

34. Mary to Cousin Laura, August 18, 1871; Bell, vol. 4, August 4 and August 10, 1886; Hahn, typed manuscript, MHS; Rollag, “Family History,” 6; King, “Memories,” 21.


37. Mrs. T. Williams to Governor Cushman Davis, February 9, 1875, Governors Records, Box 17, File 361, MHS.


39. Morris, Old Rail Fence, 117; Mrs. Johanna Kragh, The Farmer Collection, Box 2, File K, MHS.

40. Aley, “‘Knotted Together,’” 468. The literature on prairie and plains women is large. For a study that addresses traditional stereotypes about pioneer women’s lives on the Great Plains and explicitly compares women’s lives on the prairie and plains, see Riley, Female Frontier; and Kathryn McPherson, “Was the ‘Frontier’ Good for Women? Historical Approaches to Women and Agricultural Settlement in the Prairie West,” Atlantis 25 (Fall-Winter 2000): 75-86.

41. Wineburg, Historical Thinking, 123, 133, 131.