

# Writings Of Dakota

The following article is re-printed by permission of Vonda Kaye Redman of Grand Forks, North Dakota, who is a graduate student at the University of North Dakota. Redman is working with the writings of women who pioneered in North Dakota. Her research has led to the publication of her findings in a number of periodicals, such as in *Plainswoman* and *North Dakota English*.

She was born in Fargo, North Dakota and grew up in Williston, North Dakota. After being employed in private business for a number of years, she moved to Grand Forks and in 1975 received her bachelor's degree from UND. She is now assistant to the dean at the UND Medical School while completing her master's degree in English, whose subject is on pioneer women, an annotated bibliography of all the pioneer journals, diaries, letters and reminiscences she has consulted in her research.

The following interview with Redman appeared in the January issue of *Plainswoman*.

**Where circumstances allowed, where isolation was not great, was there any tendency to make childbirth a community event among the female relatives and friends?**

Childbearing was something that tended to be kept within the immediate family. Except for the midwife, other women were not involved in the birth process. Afterward, news traveled that the baby had been born. It was customary, then, for the neighbor women to come and bring food and see what they could do to help.

As more doctors moved into the area, there are references to the competition and the anger that they felt when midwives delivered children. The doctors became very threatened and eventually began banning the midwives. One woman wrote of having to give up midwifery as a result.

**What impressions do you have of child-rearing practices?**

Children assumed responsibility

# Women Pioneers



Despite loneliness and hardships, many said it was a good life.

very early. Three-year-olds often had tasks to do.

Frequently, in those early days of homesteading, settlers could not survive just by working the farm or the homestead. The husband would go into the nearest town, which might be twenty miles away, and he might cut lumber, or work on the railroads that were being built frantically at that time, or do something else. The woman would be left alone on the homestead with the children. Some wives supplemented the family income by cooking for threshers or railroad men. They baked loaf after loaf of bread, as many as thirty or forty each day.

If the mother had to leave the homestead, perhaps to deliver produce or bread or to make a trip to town, a girl as young as nine years old might be left in charge. It could be in the middle of winter, and the parent might be gone for three or four days. The small girl would see that the chores were done and the younger brothers and sisters tended. Indeed, children assumed responsibility very early.

Schooling was catch-as-catch-can. For girls, it was not considered nearly as important as for boys. I have several passages where, between the lines, you can sense the yearning of the girl to go to school. But brothers were going, and someone had to stay home and help mama.

I was amazed. One woman wrote a reminiscence in her own hand, in which

she said that, as a child of eleven, she had attended school for three weeks. Then the family decided it was too much of a bother. She wrote she had educated herself. I am sure many women did so.

### **Did life on the prairie permit women to do things collectively, such as preserving food or quilting?**

Sometimes neighbor women helped one another. One would go over to another's house to help with the canning, and vice versa. Generally, however, most women seem to have done canning on an individual basis.

I found few references to quilting bees. In some of the more populated areas the women organized sewing circles, in which husbands occasionally participated. The diarists write about the women competing to see who could make the best lunch for such gatherings.

### **Did frontier women spin their own cloth?**

Yes, beginning with shearing the sheep. In fact, some women made everything. They write of spinning, knitting, and crocheting. They even made shoes and moccasins from old overcoats or other heavy material. While some diarists apparently did not



One woman wrote about the sorrow she felt when she saw her brothers go off to school, and she had to stay at home because her parents didn't think it was necessary for girls to have a formal education.

buy a thing, others write of traveling to the nearest town to purchase cloth and supplies.

### Will you describe religious practices?

Religion was a very prominent part of pioneer life. For many families, attending a church was impractical or impossible. Instead, they conducted services in their own homes, or a few neighbors would gather at the largest house. Because an ordained minister seldom was available, the settlers took turns reading from the Bible and singing. These were social events, too, complete with lunch. Whenever a minister did travel through the countryside, there was a lot of marrying and baptizing.

Did these people express anxiety because of the unknown, because of prairie fires, illness, death, or other tragedies that might befall them?

For the most part such sentiments were not recorded. The Indians represent an exception. White settlers expressed constant fear of Indians, and interestingly enough, most of those fears were unfounded in the people I have studied. Indians did come to homesteads, sometimes to ask for food and places to sleep, but they did not molest the women.

The settlers nevertheless were terrified. If someone came around, almost like Paul Revere, with word that the Indians were coming, the homesteaders would go to the nearest town or the biggest house in the vicinity. It seems that most of the time the threat never materialized, so the next day they returned to their homes. By and large the Indians apparently did not cause the settlers as much trouble as American history might have us believe.

Other causes of concern included prairie fires, which were a common



Big fear was prairie fires. Everyone helped in order to try to get fires out, grabbing sacks or anything handy to stop flames.

threat. Also, I have read of women pacing the floor all night when the husbands were out in a blizzard. Usually the man had stopped at another house, had turned his buggy upside down, or had curled up in the snow to wait out the storm. The way the women write about such experiences does not employ a great deal of emotionalism. Such occurrences, which certainly could be traumatic at the moment they were happening, were accepted almost as a matter of fact, as just a part of life.

As for illness, unless the woman was sick almost to death, it is not mentioned in the writings I have seen. Occasionally I have found reference to a severe headache, but I have not read of women spending days in bed or having such things as the flu. Nor do the diarists write of menstruation. I never came across one mention of it, not even in euphemisms.

#### **Did you uncover evidence of mental breakdown?**

No, except for one case that was commented on extensively. As a party of pioneers left Breckenridge, Minnesota, which apparently was thought to be the last vestige of civilization at that particular time, a woman became hysterical. Her screaming that she wanted to go back was so loud that settlers from far and away came to see what in the world the noise was about.

She did go on, however, and shortly after settling in North Dakota gave birth to a child.

I discovered an instance where a man wanted to go back and his wife talked him into staying. Getting to North Dakota had been difficult, and it was she who was convinced that things would work out.

Many other persons spoke of not wanting to stay, or of being lonely and depressed. Although they did not use the word depression at the time, that is clearly what they were experiencing.

#### **In the writings you have studied, do the women intimate that they have innate handicaps or liabilities? Are there things they think they cannot do because of their sex?**

Obviously the level of consciousness then was not what it is today with regard to female roles. I think that women were in a position during those pioneering days where, even though they did a lot that we may consider drudgery—baking bread every day and cleaning out the dirt floor of the dugout, for example—they were so necessary and valued that they achieved a kind of status or importance that housework does not convey today. Perhaps it was more fulfilling then because the contribution was so vital.

In a number of accounts I perceived a sense of inferiority, which sometimes

was conveyed by other women. I am thinking particularly of a diary written by a young girl during the 1880s. A gentleman came to call. She writes something to the effect that "I didn't treat him very well. I don't know what got into me. I know that I need to act more ladylike. Like Ma say, I ain't much." Comments about the proper way to act, or derision about other females who do not act "properly," are frequent.

**In their letters and diaries, did the female pioneers display political awareness?**

On the one hand, there was a woman who sat at the polls on election day and watched the voting. She was politically aware and an activist. On the other hand, a woman wrote with great pride about her husband, who was a political leader. She first told about all of his activities and honors. She supported him in a "wifely fashion." I

believe that is how she put it. She belonged to the sewing circle and the auxiliary, but he occupied the positions of power and influence.

The diarists do not indicate awareness, at the turn of the century, that the United States was becoming more involved in world affairs. From the writings you would never know who was President, or that there was a Spanish-American War.

**As you survey the mass of material you have used, could you summarize what you see as its historical importance?**

The women's writings give a flavor of life the way it was, outside of the dime novels, the westerns, and the myths that have sprung up. In a way I have been peeking over the shoulders of persons who never expected their writings to become public. On occasion, during an especially poignant passage, I stop and think, "I'm really inside this person; this is soul material." My





What was amazing that, after all the housework and chores, some women found time to even write in a diary?

personal feelings are of reverence for the writings. Novels can be very good and accurate in their depiction of growing up on the prairie, but there is something over and above that when you are reading about the real thing.

Certainly some materials are historically more significant than others. Yet even a record of commodity prices has worth. Letters that may seem to the average person to record endless daily activities can be very valuable because we today cannot otherwise know what those daily activities were. Many of the diaries contain nothing more than a litany of mopping floors, churning butter, ironing, mending, and the like. If

nothing else, they show how much the women accomplished in one day. They did many, many chores and still found time to write in their diaries and to write all of those letters.

The reminiscences, especially, have a judgment to convey about the quality of life as it was lived on the prairie. The women milked the cows, baked the bread, did their daily duties, and somehow that was enough. When it was all over they could say that life was good. Many put closure to their reminiscences by saying, "though we had our hardships, it was a good life. We were happy, and we thank God for our blessings." ■