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Photographs / Images: Harriet, Elizabeth, Lucy, and Jennie Ruth Chrisman in front of their parents' sod house in Custer County, Nebraska, 1886 (Solomon D Butcher photograph)



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SOLOMON D. BUTCHER'S PHOTOGRAPHS from Custer County, Nebraska, in the 1880s have become icons of Great Plains settlement. According to Butcher, he made this well-known image of Joseph and Lucy Chrisman's four daughters in 1886: (l. to r.) Harriet (Hattie), Elizabeth (Lizzie), Lucy (Lutie), and Jennie Ruth (Ruth). In his notes on the photograph Butcher wrote that the sisters "took advantage of the homestead, timber claim and pre-emption laws, each holding three claims." When the photograph was made, however, Hattie and Ruth were not old enough to claim government land and Lutie did not file her first claim until 1887. Only Lizzie Chrisman, the eldest sister, had acquired land by 1886 using the

Preemption Act of 1841, which provided for direct purchase from the government at \$2.50 per acre. It is her house that appears in the photograph. Each of the sisters eventually filed homesteads.

During the 1930s family members, including Ruth Chrisman, provided additional details about the famous photograph. Hattie and Ruth are wearing dresses made of brown and white percale. Both Lizzie and Lutie are wearing brown and white gingham. Hattie's horse was "Bet," and Ruth's was "Jessie." The elaborate brocade on Ruth's shawl was not apparent until digital technology revealed details previously hidden in Butcher's original glass-plate negatives. ❏

JAMES E. POTTER