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Article Summary: The young woman homesteader's life is vividly and emotionally described by the author. The isolation and harsh physical conditions caused many to fail, but many stayed and conquered the challenges with their husbands and families. This article is a tribute to those who succeeded in settling the prairielands and dispels any "romantic notion" of the homesteaders' daily lives.

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Photographs / Images: Solomon D Butcher photographs: Prairie wedding; husband and wife homesteaders; sod house; family at graveside on the prairie

SUNBONNET AND CALICO, THE HOMESTEADER'S CONSORT

BY EVERETT DICK

NEARLY half a century ago Emerson Hough called attention to the role of the trans-Missouri frontier woman in these words,

> The chief figure of the American west, the figure of the age, is not the long-haired, fringed legginged man riding a raw-boned pony but the gaunt sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before. That was America, my brethren! There was the seed of American wealth. There was the great romance of all America—the woman in the sunbonnet; and not, after all, the hero with the rifle across his saddle horn. Who has painted *her* picture?[1]

Parting from loved ones and leaving the old surroundings was a painful proceeding. Well wishers had warned against Indian dangers and made doleful predictions that the movers would never see their loved ones again since

[1] Emerson Hough, *The Passing of the Frontier* (New Haven, 1918), pp. 93-94.

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they were heading right into the very jaws of death. With the family in the yard surrounding the covered wagon, the last tearful goodbyes were said. Mounting the wagon seat, the young woman sadly took her place, and the couple moved into the west probably indeed never to see those loved ones again, unless their representations of opportunity in the new country caused relatives to follow. Finally, just as the wagon passed around a bend in the road, the girl looked back, gave a final wave to the family still standing in the yard, and the home tie was broken forever.

The new country was made up of young people. Usually there were from three to thirty times as many unmarried men as unmarried women. The young girl was such a rarity on the frontier that she was quickly given the opportunity to accept the love and protection of a vigorous young man who could offer her a primitive home on a quarter section of land, which he hoped that the government would give to them after five years of homemaking thereon.

A bachelor often returned to the East for the winter with the hope of becoming acquainted with a suitable person whom, after a whirlwind courtship, he could bring back to the frontier. A common warning against claimjumpers was a note on the soddy door, "Gone to get a wife."[2]

The first rude habitation was often an excavation in the side of a ravine. But the sales talk of one of these young Lochinvars from the west did not dwell upon the primitive nature of the home which he had prepared for his bride. It was only when she took one look at the unpromising, ugly hole in the ground that she sensed the utter loneliness and drab prospects of her future life. Many a plucky young woman, faced with stark reality, sat down and had a good cry before she moved her belongings into the unpromising domicile.

Although a sod house had its advantages—it was warm in winter and cool in summer and cost little to build—it also had grave drawbacks. It was always infested with

[2] John Ise, *Sod and Stubble* (New York, 1936), p. 20.

fleas as was even the log cabin which did not have a cellar. Bedbugs found a ready refuge in the walls. With a tea kettle of hot water, a can of kerosene, and its attendant feather, the tidy housewife almost weekly went over the premises, but it was a losing fight. Every time some visitor came, he was sure to bring a new batch of bedbugs. Even the county superintendent and the circuit rider, from having slept at another soddy the previous night, were agents in this transmigration of the pests.[3]

Then, too, the few windows in the thick-walled house permitted little light and air for ventilation. Dirt and straw from the roof kept dropping on everything. Some particular housekeepers made a ceiling of cheese cloth which caught the falling particles of dirt and hay and thus kept it out of the cooking and off the dining table.

The most disagreeable feature of all, however, was the fact that few sod houses really turned water. With the coming of a heavy rain, and the soakage of the sod roof, in time little rivulets of muddy water began to run through the sleepers' hair, and a saturated roof would drip for hours after the rain ceased. One woman remembered frying pancakes under the protection of an umbrella. An Eastern visitor at the home of a Dakota woman said that during a rainstorm she noticed her hostess gathering up all the pans, kettles and skillets and placing them in strategic positions. She could not imagine the reason for this unusual proceeding, but in due time she found that the prairie woman knew her business, for not long afterward water began to drip from the roof and every pan was in just the right spot to catch the drips. Sometimes a woman used the covered wagon for her clothes closet since the canvas turned water better than the sod roof.

Fuel was always a problem. The first settlers burned buffalo chips, but the source of this supply was shortly killed off and cow chips were relied upon. Fortunate indeed was the family on whose claim a crew of Texas cow-

[3] *Ibid,* p. 18.

boys bedded down their herd of 2,500 on its way to the north country, for that meant potential stacks of cow chips for the winter's fuel. In fact when the family went visiting or on an errand to the neighbors, each member carried a sack and a stick with a nail in its end. Thus equipped, they played a game of "I spy," each vying with the other to see how much fuel he could spear during the walk.

On first trial women from the East did not appreciate this ready-made fuel. There was no blaze and furthermore if the stove smoked, it carried an unpleasant odor which filled the house.[4] As a matter of fact, people got used to the odor and the fire was hot even though there was no blaze. The worst feature of it was that it burned out so quickly it kept the family busy stoking the fire and disposing of the ashes. In connection with this feature, a standing joke in the sand hills of Nebraska ran in this wise: A visitor asked a man how his family was. He replied that the children were all right but he hardly knew about his wife since theirs was a passing acquaintance. They saw each other, said he, only as she was going out with a pan of ashes and he was coming in with a bucket of cow chips, since it kept them both on the go to keep from freezing. And with all that hustle and bustle, they had no time for idle visiting.[5]

When cow chips ran out, hay was burned. This was prepared for the fire in one of two ways: twist it and feed it into the stove or tramp it into a hay burner. In either case the wise householder kept a pile of hay just outside the door and often, in stormy weather, the wife had to put up with a pile along the wall opposite the stove in the house. The men usually twisted the hay into "cats" as they sat about the stove in the evening, and these twists were thrown into the fire. A common type of hay burner consisted of a sheet iron vessel the shape of the old-time elliptical wash boiler. It was usually filled at the hay pile out-

[4] John Turner, *Pioneers of the West* (Cincinnati, 1903), p. 117.
[5] Kathryne Lichty, "A History of the Settlement of the Nebraska Sand Hills," Master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1960.

side the door and carried inside where stove lids were removed and it was inverted over the fire box. It was the task of the woman to carry out the burner, tramp it full of hay and place it on the stove. It was one continual round of duty, and if not attended to like clockwork, the fire went out.[6]

The fastidious Eastern girl, just arrived, shrank with dismay at the use of cow chips for fuel, deeming them too dirty to handle while cooking, but actually they weren't as messy as the soft coal which was used after the railroad came through the country. The very thought of this fuel, however, led to much hand washing while cooking. The procedure of making biscuits has been described as consisting of the following routine: first stoke the stove; get out the flour sack; stoke the stove; wash the hands; mix the biscuit dough with the hands; stoke the fire; wash the hands; cut the biscuit dough with the top of the baking powder can; stoke the stove; wash the hands; put the biscuits into the oven; keep on firing until the hot bread is ready for the table, not forgetting to wash the hands before taking up the biscuits. The mother had to go through this tedious round three times a day except when she might be frying pancakes or making some other sort of bread.[7]

While direct evidence is difficult to find in support of the matter, sufficient inferences are available to conclude that the ordinary sod house woman was not the most tidy housekeeper. An earth floor to live on, a sod roof to allow its dirt to drop upon the dinner, dirt walls harboring all sorts of vermin and even reptiles, a pile of hay or cow chips in one corner together with a scarcity of water to keep clothes and person clean offered conditions which did not permit nor encourage the housekeeper to be too particular.

Childbirth came early and frequently on the plains. In the later frontier period, a family from Missouri by the

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[6] Romaine Saunders, interview with Everett Dick.

[7] Charley O'Kieffe, *Western Story: The Recollections of Charlie O'Kieffe* (Lincoln, Nebraska), p. 26.

name of Lane started on its way west by covered wagon late in the season. Toward evening one November day on the plains, a real blizzard struck them. Mrs. Lane had been in pain all day and now she recognized the nature of her condition. It was a day's journey back to the last house they had seen; consequently they drove on hour after hour far into the night, hoping to reach a human habitation. Finally the team gave out and they were compelled to make camp in the storm as the roaring wind whipped the biting sleet mercilessly down upon them. In some manner—probably by raising the wagon tongue and supporting it with the neckyoke, drawing a canvas over it and fastening down the ends—the husband fashioned a crude tent and fixed a bed under this makeshift shelter. With the greatest difficulty he got a fire started and only with a tremendous effort was he able to keep the shelter from blowing away.

A few hours later, unattended except by the untutored husband, that teen-age wife brought forth a baby girl. They melted sleet in the skillet to get water to bathe the infant. The young girl continued to have pains and about the time they got the baby dressed, a second one came. It was a wonder the mother did not die, but the fire lasted until the babies were dressed and the mother began to feel more comfortable. Shortly thereafter, the wind died down although snow continued to fall steadily. Fortunately there were plenty of covers, and the family snuggled under the wagon sheet, slept warmly. Thus were born Missouri and Sedalia Lane. The lady recording the incident concluded:

> Mr. Lane is a powerful good husband. He waited two whole days for his wife to gain strength before he resumed his journey, and on the third morning, he actually carried her to the wagon. Just think of it! Could more be asked of any man?[8]

Not all wives were so fortunate. Many of the stones in the prairie cemeteries, if they could speak, would attest to the fact that childbirth was a dreaded ordeal and too frequently a fatal one. Death, always sad, was even more

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[8] Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961), pp. 47-50.

"The young girl was such a rarity on the frontier that she was quickly given the opportunity to accept the love and protection of a vigorous young man." (S. D. Butcher photograph)

"She maintained her position by the side of her hearty helpmeet."
(S. D. Butcher photograph)

"Death, always sad, was even more poignant on the frontier."
(S. D. Butcher photograph)

"Although a sod house had its advantages . . . it also had grave drawbacks." (S. D. Butcher photograph)

poignant on the frontier. Mrs. Charles Robinson, wife of the man who later became the first governor of Kansas, wrote of an incident at Lawrence:

> Mrs. T., a young lady from Boston, is dead . . . slowly the mourners wind through the prairie, and over the high hill beyond us, to the lowly cemetery. We all feel that death is indeed here. . . .
>
> Death to us here, away from ones old home, has more than its usual significance, and awakens a thoughtfulness and a tenderness for the bereaved and heart-stricken which in the old homes we felt not, save for a dear friend. We make their sorrow, their utter loneliness, our own.[9]

Grinding poverty was the rule in Prairieland. As a result of drought, grasshopper visitation, panic, hailstorms, and prairie fires, the homesteader all too frequently had to raise money to replace an ox lost by disease or to buy new machinery with which to farm effectively. Too often this money was raised by the unwise procedure of mortgaging the farm for a few hundred dollars with interest at two percent a month. From that time on, the whole family, and especially the wife, lived under the dread of a mortgage foreclosure. It was like living continually on death row awaiting the hangman's noose.

The ballad written by Will Carleton and sung at the Farmers' Alliance meetings best describes the terrible specter of the mortgage:

> We worked through spring and winter
> Through summer and through fall,
> But the mortgage worked the hardest
> And the steadiest of them all.
> It worked on nights and Sundays;—
> It worked each holiday
> It settled down among us
> And never went away.

They lost their home and the song continued:

> The children left and scattered
> When they hardly yet were grown:

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[9] Sara T. D. Robinson, *Kansas, Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston, 1856), p. 43.

My wife, she pined and perished,
And I found myself alone.
What she died of was a 'mystery,'
The doctors never knew
But I knew she died of mortgage—
Just as well as I wanted to.[10]

Often in the perilous teeter-totter between foreclosure and payment of the loan, the energy of the woman turned the scales. She milked the cows, made butter, raised chickens and sold eggs. These salable products often paid the entire grocery bill. Simple as it sounds, it was hard grueling work to produce these commodities. In summer the cream had to be lowered into the well for refrigeration then raised for the tedious work of churning and lowered once again to keep it until it was marketed. In the winter, the milk had to be protected from freezing.

Isolation and loneliness was the portion of the border woman. Man's work often took him on trips away from home: to the mill, hunting, looking for straying livestock, trips to town. But the care of little children or stocktending usually kept the woman at home week on week with no interchange of speech or thought, until the uninterrupted dreariness and solitude made life a burden.

Mrs. Hester Pattison McClure of Geary County, Kansas, was at one time deprived of the sight of a white woman for more than a year. At last, learning that one had come to live some miles away, she resolved to visit her. Accordingly, taking her children by the hand, she set out early one morning. Finally she stood at the cabin door and what joy was hers. There was one of her kind. They were perfect strangers, but they fell on one another's necks and wept, they laughed and wept again.[11]

As settlers moved in, woman's life became less isolated and dreary. With the coming of the schoolhouse, the spelling school, the lyceum or literary society, and the singing

[10] *Nebraska Folklore,* Volume I, p. 12-13.
[11] James R. McClure, "Taking the Census in 1855," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society,* Volume VIII, p. 246, footnote.

school made their advent. By all odds, the dance was the most popular social function, however. If possible these country dances were held in a cabin with a board floor, but if that was not available, the hoedown proceeded just the same on a dirt floor. The music had to be stopped occasionally, however, to sprinkle the dirt to keep down the dust. One pioneer recollected seeing a man and his wife dancing barefoot on a dirt floor with the dust flying high. Usually the unshod dancers tried to borrow a pair of boots for the special social function, however. There was little regard for time or tune as an unpolished swain grabbed the delicate woman and rushed her over the floor with the tenderness of an animal of the wilds. The dance was announced a week or more ahead of the event and people went forty miles on horseback or in big wagons and stayed until broad daylight the next morning.

Although in one way an advantage, in another the shortage of female dancers proved a hardship on the ladies. One lady in reporting her experience complained the next day that she was about "done up." Said she: "There were only ten women and forty men and we danced all night, and the men nearly danced us women to death."[12] Dances varied but there was one known as a Calico Ball. Of course, a calico gown and a sunbonnet were proper dress for any occasion on the prairie in the seventies. At a Calico Ball, however, the lady made a calico dress and a necktie to match it. The men were given a bunch of neckties and asked to choose one without seeing the lady whose dress it matched. In this way, original partners were selected. The same method was used in church socials in areas where dancing was frowned upon by certain religious groups.

Dress was not a mark of distinction. All wore old disintegrating clothing which had come west with them in a covered wagon. After the grasshopper and drought years, with their barrels of relief from benevolent organizations in the East, dress was even more irregular and unconven-

[12] Charles Henry Morrill, *The Morrills and Reminiscences* (Chicago, 1918), p. 91.

tional than before. Sacks, which had brought relief flour, were used to patch old dresses, and if a prairie zephyr should happen to lift a skirt there might be revealed a petticoat bearing the words, Pillsbury's Best or the name of some other brand of flour. On occasion, a newcomer would unpack some finery from the bottom of a trunk and come out dressed in real style for a social event. The belle of the evening at the Fourth of July celebration at Blue Springs, Nebraska, in 1859, was fortunate enough to have a silk dress, although it did set off her sunbonnet and cowhide shoes in a marked manner.

On the prairies and plains where swept unhindered the searing, devastating hot winds from the south in summer and the bone-chilling arctic gales from the north in winter, alternately roasting and freezing the lowly plains dweller, the frontier woman was subjected to one of the greatest tests of her kind. Here a new dimension to frontiering appeared, that of a decreasing rainfall as population moved west and a diminishing number of trees the farther migration pushed. The lassie who had been reared a bit farther east among the trees, near a singing brook, or amidst the rolling green hills, found herself in a different world on the plains.

After a series of unusually wet seasons which had coaxed the self-deluded settlers out onto the high plains, nature reverted to normal and the first four years of the last decade of the 19th century constituted an era of scant rainfall. When year after year the scorching sun beat down on the parched earth and seared grasslands, hope died and many a sod house woman urged her husband to leave the God-forsaken country where it never rained. As though a plague had struck the country, family after family, utterly defeated, hooked up the skinny team to the old covered wagon and in complete dejection took the back track to the east, abandoning their claims made in such high hopes only a few seasons before. Now like rats deserting a sinking ship, these defeated homemakers left the scene of their utter failure. Those who rode across southwestern Nebraska and

Kansas report that in whole counties they saw little except dry prairie and vacant sod houses.[13]

How much of the retreat from the frontier from time to time was due to the figure in sunbonnet and calico, is not known, but it is certain that many stayed until the prairie broke them in spirit and body.

These solitary women, longing to catch a glimpse of one of their own sex, swept their eyes over the boundless prairie and thought of their old home in the East. They stared and stared out across space with nothing to halt their gaze over the monotonous expanse. Sometimes the burning prairie got to staring back at them and they lost their courage. They saw their complexion fade as the skin became dry and leathery in the continual wind. Their hair grew lifeless and dry, their shoulders early bent, and they became stooped as they tramped round and round the hot cookstove preparing the three regular, though skimpy meals a day. There was little incentive to primp and care for one's person. Few bothered much about brush and comb. Hollow-eyed, tired, and discouraged in the face of summer heat, drought, and poverty, they came to care little about how they looked. It is small wonder that some begged their husbands to hitch up the team, turn the wagon tongue eastward and leave the accursed plains, which they declared were never meant for human habitation.[14]

But by no means were all the women crushed and defeated by the rude frontier. Many a member of the sunbonnet sex bore her loneliness, disappointment, and heartaches without a complaint, and encouraged her husband to fight it out in the face of failure, frustration and utter rout. Valorously she rallied the broken forces and assailed the common enemy once more. Brushing aside the unbidden tears, she maintained her position by the side of her hardy helpmeet, and waged unflinchingly a winning battle against the odds of poverty, defeat and loneliness, a valiant figure in the winning of the prairie and plains west.

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[13] *Gering Courier,* Gering, Nebraska, July 20, 1894.

[14] Seth K. Humphrey, *Following the Prairie Frontier* (Minneapolis, 1931), pp. 131-132.