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Photographs / Images: Aldrich family group in Elmwood, Nebraska about 1910; Bust of Mrs Aldrich, Nebraska Hall of Fame, State Capitol, Lincoln

THE STORY BEHIND A LANTERN IN HER HAND

By BESS STREETER ALDRICH

INTRODUCTION

More than twenty years after her death Bess Streeter Aldrich remains one of Nebraska's most popular and beloved novelists. She was born February 17, 1881, at Cedar Falls, Iowa, the daughter of James Wareham and Mary Wilson Streeter, the youngest of eight children. She attended several colleges and spent one year as assistant supervisor in the primary training school at Iowa State Teachers College. She had already begun publishing stories and articles in a variety of publications. On September 24, 1907, she was married to Charles Sweetzer Aldrich, a young lawyer. Two years later they, with their first child, moved to Elmwood, Cass County, Nebraska, where Mr. Aldrich became part owner of a bank.

It was in Elmwood that Mrs. Aldrich began seriously devoting her time to writing, though she did not publish her first book until 1924. Mr. Aldrich died in 1925, and Mrs. Aldrich turned to writing as a way of supporting herself and her four children. In all she wrote thirteen books, including five volumes of shorter works. It was with *A Lantern in Her Hand*, published in 1928, that Mrs. Aldrich gathered the national readership that was to turn her books into "best sellers." Her novel, *Miss Bishop*, was purchased by United Artists and produced in 1940, starring Martha Scott and Paul Muni. A few of the scenes were shot in Lincoln, where the film was premiered in 1941. Mrs. Aldrich continued to write during the 1940's, though they were mainly short works.

She moved to Lincoln in 1946, building a home near her daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Milton Beechner. She died in a Lincoln hospital on August 3, 1954. An article by A.

Mabel Meier on the life of Mrs. Aldrich appeared in the spring issue of *Nebraska History* in 1969. A bust of Bess Streeter Aldrich was placed in the Nebraska Hall of Fame in the State Capitol on May 22, 1973. The following article, one of the last she wrote, was published in the *Christian Herald* in March 1952. It is republished by permission of her family. — Paul Riley.

When the editor of *Christian Herald* asked me to write the story behind the story of "A Lantern In Her Hand," it seemed an easy assignment. Here at my desk several weeks later the task does not look so simple. For the roots of a writer's work in creating characters often go deep into the garden soil of his own life. So the article must contain something of my childhood, for it was then that I began, all unconsciously, to gather material for this book.

The child of middle-aged parents, I was the last of a family of eight, born after they had moved from their Iowa farm into the college town of Cedar Falls, so I was not a farm child and never knew at first hand any of the experiences in the story. There was a great deal of talk and laughter in that childhood home, for many relatives were always coming and going, uncles and aunts who had been sturdy pioneers there on the Cedar River when the state was new.

My grandfather, Zimri Streeter, had arrived in Blackhawk County with his big family in 1852, when there was no railroad west of the Mississippi and the crossing of the river was made by ferry boat. He built a sturdy log cabin, sheltered his neighbors during an Indian scare or two, and turned the virgin sod. Dipping into the politics of the new county, he was elected to the first legislature after the capital was moved from its territorial status in Iowa City to the little new Des Moines. Because of his dry wit he was called "the wag of the House," and undoubtedly he was a reactionary, for there is an old letter still in existence which says he believes he "did more settin' on unwise measures than anybody in the House."

A dozen years later, at the time of the second Lincoln election, he was appointed by Governor Kirkwood to go down into Georgia and bring back the Iowa soldiers' votes. He was sixty-four years old then, and when he got back to Atlanta he found the city burning, all communication to the north severed, and

he had to march along with Sherman to the sea. There is a story to the effect that in all the hardships he had to undergo, sometimes foraging for food from the fields, his only complaint when he got back was that he had lost his hat.

All these tales of hardy old Zimri floated around my childish ears whenever his rather garrulous clan got together.

Mother's family came to the county two years later than father's people. At eighteen she drove one of the teams all the way out from Illinois. Sometimes she would recall the scenes of that trip: the ferrying across the Mississippi, the horses and oxen plunging up and down the bridgeless creekbeds, the tipping over of one of the wagons with the eight precious sacks of flour slipping into the water and the feather pillows floating down stream like so many geese, while the younger children chased after them with hilarious laughter. She would tell the happenings merrily as though there had been no hardships at all. The camping on the edge of the woods, the sounds of the night winds, the odors of the prairie grass — all these she pictured so clearly that I could almost see and hear and smell them myself.

So the pictures she drew for me verbally became a part of my knowledge, even though they had happened so many years before I was born. And with no possible foresight on my part of how they were to be used one day in stories, they seemed to belong in my own memories.

Mother was a high-minded woman, a lover of good literature even though her own schooling had ended in a log schoolhouse. She was a person who found joy in little things — to whom a cloud floating across the blue was a poem — to whom the twilight chirp of robins was a prayer. In those early days of hard work after starting the new home with my father, she must have been torn between her love of the finer things of life and the menial tasks her hands were forced to do. And being so torn, she did what many another pioneer woman did: she lifted her eyes to the hills while her hands performed their humble labors.

When she was in her eighties, she once related some pioneer experiences about the snow sifting through the chinks of the cabin and making grotesque figures on the bed quilts. In a moment of sympathy I remarked that we daughters were sorry her life had been hard in her pioneering days, that it seemed unfair that we now should live in an easier era with all its modern con-

veniences. She looked at me with an odd little expression and said: "Oh, save your pity. We had the best time in the world."

I thought of it many times after she was gone — that I would like to do a story of that type of woman. Other writers had depicted the Midwest's early days, but so often they had pictured their women as gaunt, browbeaten creatures, despairing women whom life seemed to defeat. That was not my mother. Not with her courage, her humor, her nature that would cause her to say at the end of a long life: "We had the best time in the world."

So my desire was first, to catch in the pages of a book the spirit of such a woman, and second, historical accuracy. Almost before the outline of the book was formulated, I named this main character Abbie Deal, a name which seemed from the first to fit her. The fictitious character, Abbie Deal, might have lived anywhere. She might have traveled into the Mohawk Valley in another era. She might have gone with her husband into the wheatlands of Dakota, onto a Montana ranch, into the orchard country of the northwest. But the natural choice of settings was the Iowa and Nebraska backgrounds known to me.

Probably the question most often put to me in the twenty-three years since Abbie Deal was pictured in "A Lantern In Her Hand" has been, "Was she your own mother?" The answer is *yes* and *no*. With all the above introduction to my mother's character, it is easy to see that she was with me in spirit all of the time I was at work. But in the physical realm, that pioneering in Nebraska, she was not Abbie Deal. For mother never came to Nebraska until she was in her seventies, when she moved here with us to live out her days. And as I never lived in Nebraska until after my marriage, whatever knowledge I have of the pioneer days has been obtained from old people who did live there in an earlier day. Some of them were still living when the book was written, none of those who helped me are now alive. It was only the authentic historical material that I lacked for the story, as those childhood memories of my own hardy forebears gave the keys to the pioneer character.

Three books of mine had been published previously and I was under contract to my publishers for another one when I came to the decision to do that pioneer mother story which had been dormant in my mind for so long. Because one of the previous books, "The Rim of the Prairie," had pictured a pioneer couple

among its cast of characters, the editor of the *Nebraska State Journal* asked me to give a talk over the radio on "The Pioneer in Fiction." Twenty-five years ago that was something of a pioneering event in itself, and I remember how my family all trailed over to a neighbor doctor's home to hear me, his radio being the only one in town. At the close of that rather nervous talk into the unfamiliar mechanism, I asked all those listening who had any anecdotes concerning the early days here in Nebraska, and who were interested in having them incorporated into a novel, to send them to my home. Expecting perhaps a half dozen or so responses, I was amazed to see the letters, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks and diaries which almost swamped me. In addition to this, there were the interviews with many old people closer at hand.

For fourteen months I worked among that material sent me and the notes from the interviews, the actual writing took only five months. The necessity for the lengthy preparation was the rambling nature of those letters and interviews, as they jumped blithely from one subject to another and one year to another without regard to sequence of events, making one huge jigsaw puzzle. So it took that long to prepare anecdotes and events in their correct succession of time. So thorough had been this sorting into containers for each year of the story that when the actual writing began I could pick up any chapter and work on it, be it fourteen, five or eleven. A certain reward for this rather painstaking process is the fact that the book has been used for years as supplementary reading in history classes, through an educational edition with questions at the end of chapters.

"A Lantern In Her Hand" was written to please no one but my own consciousness of the character of many of those pioneer mothers. It was written in the so-called "mad twenties" when most of the best-selling books were about sophistication, flaming youth, or far-flung countries. There was some youth in it, but not of the flaming type. There was no sophistication, for Abbie Deal was of the soil. There was not even diversity of scene, for Abbie was only a homemaker.

"Lantern" seemed destined to be lost in the wave of the popular type of the times. That it has made new friends each year since that day might be a bit of a lesson for young writers. *Regardless of the popular literary trend of the times, write the thing which lies close to your heart.*