

Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier

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From a rediscovered collection of autobiographical accounts written by hundreds of Kansas pioneer women in the early twentieth century, Joanna Stratton has created a collection hailed by Newsweek as "uncommonly interesting" and "a remarkable distillation of primary sources."

Never before has there been such a detailed record of women's courage, such a living portrait of the women who civilized the American frontier. Here are their stories: wilderness mothers, schoolmarms, Indian squaws, immigrants, homesteaders, and circuit riders. Their personal recollections of prairie fires, locust plagues, cowboy shootouts, Indian raids, and blizzards on the plains vividly reveal the drama, danger and excitement of the pioneer experience.

These were women of relentless determination, whose tenacity helped them to conquer loneliness and privation. Their work was the work of survival, it demanded as much from them as from their men-and at last that partnership has been recognized. "These voices are haunting" (The New York Times Book Review), and they reveal the special heroism and industriousness of pioneer women as never before.

Joanna L. Stratton was born and raised in Washington, DC, but considers Kansas and her family there as her second home. She began her work on Pioneer Women while attending Harvard College, from which she graduated with honors in 1976. She is currently pursuing graduate studies at Stanford University. CHAPTER ONE

To the Stars Through the Wilderness

The Journey

"Pioneering is really a wilderness experience. We all need the wisdom of the wilderness -- Moses did, Jesus did, and Paul did. The wilderness is the place to find God, and the city is the place to study the multitude; a knowledge of both makes master builders for the state and nation."

Lulu Fuhr

They called it "the Great American Desert." In the eyes of early explorers, Kansas appeared to be little more than an arid wasteland, unfit for cultivation and unsuitable for habitation. As a result, the Kansas wilderness remained relatively unknown until the middle of the nineteenth century. Originally a part of the Louisiana Purchase, it had been strictly maintained by the government as an Indian territory and as such was officially closed to any white settlement. Only a trickle of missionaries, soldiers, and surveyors were allowed to penetrate this barren, unfamiliar landscape.

But by 1850 an ever-increasing population and a growing economy focused attention on the country's need for new land. Expansive and promising, the Great Plains seemed to answer the call of a nation, and in May 1854 Congress, after considerable debate, passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. With Kansas and Nebraska now open to settlement, a homesteading fever swept across the country. In Kansas alone, there were nearly fifty

million acres of virgin grassland for the taking. People of all backgrounds and nationalities, rich or poor, were entitled to stake their claims and own a share of these untried plains.

Within months, settlers from the East, the South, the Midwest and even foreign countries streamed into the prairie heartland. Excited by the cheap land and the new opportunities to be found there, they bravely said goodbye to friends and family and abandoned every routine and comfort of their old lives.

"How our friends crowded around us at parting," wrote Lillie Marcks about her family's departure from Tiffin, Ohio, in May 1869. "Some cried and talked of Indians and bears. I was seven years old, had been staying with friends in Tiffin three weeks and they felt so badly about my going west and had me so beautifully dressed that even my father and mother scarcely knew me...."

"I recall my mother's headaches on the trip, and many children dirty and cross, and how we longed for the journey's end."

Like thousands of other women, Melora Espy gave up the security of family ties and old friendships for the promise of a new life in Kansas. "In the year 1853," wrote her biographer, "a young girl of seventeen, even then the Principal of a Young Ladies School in Toledo, Ohio, joined her fortunes with those of her lover, Henry Jefferson Espy, a young lawyer of Sandusky, Ohio; resigned her position as teacher, and went over the Long Trail to become one of the pioneer women of Kansas. To leave permanently one's home and friends, parents, brothers and sisters; to journey a thousand miles, part of the way in an ox wagon, part of the way in a steamboat of the early time, to a strange land inhabited by savages, requires the greatest courage. To forsake culture, plenty, prosperity and peace, for crude living, poverty, adversity and war, requires a poise of soul few possess."

Despite the anguish of parting and the tedium of the long journey west, pioneers continued to emigrate by covered wagon, horseback, stagecoach, steamboat, railroad, and even by foot. For many pioneers the water routes proved to be particularly convenient. After journeying to the nearest departure points along the Ohio or Mississippi River, they boarded steamboats that churned up the Missouri to Kansas. The boats were crowded, the progress was slow and the trip was tedious, but the steamboat remained the most comfortable means of travel, avoiding the jolting passage of the plodding wagons and stages.

As migration increased, the stagecoach became more popular. "The old stagecoach," recalled one passenger, "was built along the lines you so often see now in frontier pictures -- two wide seats inside facing each other and a driver's seat high up on the outside front of the vehicle. The baggage was carried on racks at the back and on top. The bottom of the coach was rounded and hung on springs that caused it to rock back and forth in a swaying motion. It was drawn by four horses which were changed every twelve or fifteen miles at stations along the way."

The stagecoach was particularly convenient for the woman emigrant, alone or with

children, who followed friends and family westward. However, the trip often proved to be a grueling journey over rough and rutted roads.

In 1867, Carrie Stearns Smith traveled by stagecoach from Kansas City, Missouri, to her new home south of Fort Scott. It was a tiring journey, but also one of adventure and spectacle.

"The stage station," she wrote, "was at a hotel I seem to recall as The Pacific....The stage swung around a corner with a great circling sweep of eight white horses, accoutered in all of harness and ornaments that could catch the sun and the eye. I have often been quizzed as to this statement of eight horses, but I cannot be mistaken; eight seems a superfluity but there were eight. It might have been an extra span was being driven to some station below to anticipate a future need of relays. The stage was a Vermont Sanderson, said to be the pioneer stage from coast to coast.

"At last we were all listed and crowded in -- wedged would better express the arrangement. The driver cracked his whip and away dashed the beautiful horses. I had been placed by the station agent in the care of a passenger they accosted as Governor Crawford, a slight invalid-appearing man, wearing a shawl, a fashion not then quite out of vogue. It occurred to me it would have been more appropriate to place the delicate traveler in my care, for he surely appeared the more likely of us two to succumb to the effects of rapid stage travel.

"Our route led south over Westport Road to our first mail station at Westport House, where with a great flourish and clatter of hoofs, we drew up alongside and an exchange of mail bags occurred. Then ho for Shawnee Mission, where at one of the huge original buildings, like formalities were observed. The dashing up and the dashing away from these stations was worthy of a king's retinue, an event that drew small crowds from the immediate vicinity.

"Our route was by no means the shortest distance between more important settlements. We diverged to the southeast and southwest here and there for the delivery of mail or the more practicable fording of streams. Whenever we halted for relays of horses, the traces were loosened, and the released spans marched unled to their long low shed barns, and those to be driven marched each to his accustomed place in front of the stage -- not an animal led or driven. Two or three minutes only were consumed in the exchange....

"We reached Paola just at dusk. The hotel was a rude rambling one-story affair, and soon after supper, when fairly abed and about to fall asleep, the sounds of fiddles in the dining-room told that a country dance was beginning. All the sleeping rooms seemed to open out of the dining-room. I occupied one with a lady on her way east to Pleasant Hill. Though very tired, the fiddles, the stamping of stoutly shod feet on the rough floor, and perhaps the excitement attendant on new experiences, kept me awake until 3 A.M., and it seemed I had only caught the merest wink of sleep after dancing ceased, when loud knocking at our door and 'stage leaving!' aroused me.

"I had always been able to dress with real speed, but when I reached the stage at the door, the agent gasped, 'Why, every seat is taken!' And no one of the several men inside

offered a solution of the problem. So as I lifted mine eyes to the driver's seat, I managed to beg 'Could I sit with the driver?' The agent put the petition to the one aloft. 'Why, sure,' and I was pulled and hoisted to the seat. I secretly rejoiced. The previous day the presence of a sick child in the stage, poorly cared for by evidently very poor mountain people from Tennessee, had made the journey perforce most disagreeable because of the odor and flies.

"Away we dashed, I fairly holding my breath and the railing at the end of my seat. But the sensation of swift motion and aloftness, the keen air of the October morning's dawn, the unusualness and the unexpectedness of that phase of my journey -- it was intoxicating!...

"At one point we had forded a stream with a border of brush, and rounding a hill across the ford he [the driver] pointed to a small new grave. Such a sadness possessed me, as I pictured to myself the delay in camp, the suffering of the little one, the absence of medical skill, the death, the burial, and the grief of leaving that freshly heaped mound. But hundreds of such mounds have marked the advance of pioneers. And what stories of grief do they suggest to those travelers who have passed that way."

Later that day, when the Sanderson stagecoach arrived at Fort Scott, Carrie Stearns Smith climbed down from her scenic seat in order to change to another, southbound coach. There was a disappointing delay of a day and a half before an "oilcloth-covered Democrat stage" pulled in for her at four o'clock in the morning.

"I was helped inside and in the darkness we rattled out of the 'Fort,' my only company a roll of freshly tanned leather, the size of a big person's body, placed diagonally across the seats.

"On we clattered, finally crossing several miles of timber on Dry-wood Creek and at its farthest edge we drew up in the dawn to a log hotel. Here was breakfast. I was chilled by the early ride and asked the Dutch proprietress if I might go into the kitchen to warm. As I drew near the kitchen stove, the swarms of flies on the low ceiling flew down and back with bzz-zz-zz-zz! The housefrau came out with knives and forks from the table where an earlier stage's passengers had eaten, swung around the tea kettle lid and thrust the articles of tableware into the boiling water, hastily drying them on a cloth. 'Heavens!' was my mental ejaculation. 'And I bet on a penny she makes the coffee from that identical kettle.' She did; and I vowed to refrain from coffee, but I was so frozen I verily believe I should have broken that vow if three times that unwashed cutlery had been immersed in that kettle.

"The driver and I breakfasted alone and exchanged brief sentences. Excellent bread, no butter; but lifting the last slice revealed a big grown specimen of cimex lectolarius -- familiarly known as bedbug!...

"By now the sun was well up. I had made slight acquaintance with the driver, a man of 35 to 40, and I ventured: 'I find the leather unbearable. Cannot I sit in front?' He was quite agreeable. Now I found a different type of prairie, and passing and leaving the few settlers' shacks near Arcadia, we followed the old military road over a barren, treeless stretch of

thirty or more miles. There were roving herds of cattle, here and there a bloated carcass. I inquired: 'Flies,' said Mr. Laconic, and further perseverance on my part drew out the details of how an animal, ill-conditioned, often became the victim of concentrated hordes of flies that should have more impartially divided their assiduous attentions among the herd, until the poor beast succumbed, and finally became the most conspicuous object in the landscape. It did not enthuse me at all, even though assured this was bound to become a great stock country.

"Much of the uninteresting stretch passed over that day was later opened up as a great mining region. At this time, however, coal had been found cropping out along creeks or draws in very small quantities, such spots being much favored by campers as furnishing fuel for the campfire where no wood was found.

"The Old Military Road claimed my unaffected interest. For years over this road military supplies had been freighted from Fort Leavenworth, Westport and Missouri points to Fort Worth, Texas, and other places to the southwest. Great herds of cattle and ponies were driven north over this trail. The freightage had been so heavy that for long stretches great cracks had been opened between wheel tracks and often so deep a man's walking stick could be thrust downward and not find bottom. One track had been abandoned, another used until impracticable, then a third, until in places as many as ten or twelve were in existence -- all equally worn. This trail is historic, and at one point at least in Crawford County, at Mulberry, where the state line and the public road coincide for a distance with the old trail, the Daughters of the Revolution have placed a tablet commemorating the Old Military Road.

"My driver, after a prolonged interval of silence, mused aloud: 'I suppose I will be hauling you back in about three weeks.' Heavens! 'hauling.' I had never heard the word except as to hauling logs to a mill by chains. Again I queried, delicately. 'Oh, I hauled two young women down to Baxter Springs last summer. They claimed they were going to stay -- settlers. But I notice I hauled them back again, over this very road.' My vocabulary was beginning to add new words unto itself."

In the 1860s, a new kind of "hauling" was becoming popular in Kansas: the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Both the Civil War and a growing frontier industry and agriculture had spurred the demand for a transcontinental railroad, and Congress complied, launching, in 1862, the concurrent construction of the Central Pacific eastward from Sacramento and the Union Pacific westward from Omaha. Authorized as a branch of the Union Pacific, the Kansas Pacific line was soon chartered to connect Kansas City and Denver, and by 1863 construction was under way. Advancing rapidly across the state, this system established regular passenger service between Kansas City and Lawrence as early as 1864 and had proceeded westward through Manhattan, Abilene, Salina and Ellsworth by 1867. Slicing straight through Hays and across miles of barren Indian country, the Kansas Pacific finally reached Denver by 1870.

It was in its first year of operation that Mrs. Henry Inman discovered that this spanking new means of transportation was not without its perils.

"In January, 1868, I left my home for Fort Harker, Kansas," she wrote. "In that day the facilities for traveling were not accompanied with the comforts of the present time, but all went fairly well until we reached East St. Louis. There was no bridge then over the Mississippi River, and at midnight I walked over the ice to a boat which took us to St. Louis proper. From there we journeyed on to Salina, Kansas, where our train was waiting to bear us on to Fort Harker, then the terminus of the Union Pacific Railroad.

"It was snowing slightly, but the storm increased, and although Secretary Coburn denounces the word 'blizzard,' with apologies to him I can substitute no other to express the conditions of the storm we rode into. I had seen picturesque ones in New England, but never where the snow seemed to come from every direction, up as well as down, and seventeen miles west of Salina we became snowbound. The drifts proved too much for our faithful engineer and his engine. So we were left on the open prairie to the mercies of the elements, with complete time for reflection and one entire side of our train buried in snow.

"One passenger car was all we boasted, and I often recall the personnel of that one. Railroad employees, land-seekers -- namely 'squatters' as they were then called -- furloughed soldiers returning to their respective posts and I, the only woman among them, with a child two years old.

"I often wish I had registered the name...

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