Dakota Resources:

The Pioneer Daughters Collection of the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs

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"History involves more than books, newspapers, speeches, statistics, diaries, and letters. It has to do with people and what they did, what they thought and how they felt, their joys, their sorrows, and their emotions."

—Marie Drew, South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs

When Joanna L. Stratton "discovered" biographical sketches of eight hundred early Kansas women and published them in 1981 as the book *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*, her work was heralded as a first. Few people know that the South Dakota State Historical Society houses an amazing collection of pioneer women's biographies that is over *six times* the size of the one Stratton uncovered. Gathered by the South Dakota Federa-

Women homesteaders, 1907

tion of Women's Clubs over a forty-year period beginning in the 1940s, this extraordinary collection of six thousand stories represents the largest untapped collection of pioneer women's history in the state and, possibly, the nation.[1]

Marie Drew, chair of the Pioneer Daughters Department of the federation, devoted much of her time and energy to these biographies, according to Lillian Schwab, an Andover member of the federation who had known Drew from childhood. The Highmore

Marie Drew

1. The question of how many stories are in the collection is still an open one. Marie Drew, who regularly documented the size of the collection in her reports to the state federation, ultimately said the collection had reached six thousand stories. To this point, Lo Ross, chief researcher on a new Daughters of Dakota project that will make this material available to the public, has worked with about four thousand of the Pioneer Daughters stories. The new project, funded by the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, the Office of Equal Education Opportunities of the South Dakota Department of Education and Cultural Affairs, the Mary Chilton Foundation of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and private donations, will result in the distribution of five hundred Pioneer Daughters stories to schools around South Dakota.

woman promoted the writing of histories of pioneer women on frequent trips across South Dakota and in her travels to Arizona and Texas. While recovering from an accident in Huron, Drew continued to gather biographies from her hospital bed. She wore out four typewriters in the process of recording these stories.[2]

The Pioneer Daughters files contain histories from every state in the nation and from around the world, sent by people who wanted the experiences of their pioneer ancestors to be recorded and preserved. Some are simply obituaries, while others are fascinating newspaper features on pioneer life. Most of the Pioneer Daughters histories, however, are typed or handwritten manuscripts. The women's voices come through clearly, not only in autobiographical accounts and diaries, but also in biographies, which evidence careful listening on the part of the recorders. Drew set a standard for gathering the stories, and it was followed.[3]

These biographies of South Dakota pioneer women have never been published in their entirety. Although the South Dakota State Historical Society published edited segments in its *Historical Collections* series in 1966, State Historian Will G. Robinson frankly acknowledged that he never even touched most of the liveliest stories. Robinson did understand the importance of the collection, however, stressing that it was but the righting of an imbalance since "we have a shelf full of ponderous tomes, 32 inches in length with over [10,000] biographies of male South Dakotans."[4] "When it comes to the women who worked along side of the men," he said on another occasion, "and frequently made it possible for them to accomplish things which gave them a place in our history, little recognition has been given."[5] His observation was true nationally. What we know of the pioneer experience has usually come from accounts of the male experience.

Drew decided to correct that situation. The social history that she envisioned—the recording of what people did, thought, and felt—is the heart of the collection. There are descriptions of games and holidays; droughts, floods, and blizzards; sod houses and hay

2. The process of creating the Pioneer Daughters collection is documented in the papers of the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, which are housed with the State Historical Society in Pierre and with the historian for the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, currently Clara Gustafson of Pierre.

3. "Daughters of Dakota," *Historical Collections* 33 (1966): 18-19.

4. Ibid., p. 19.

5. Robinson to Drew, n.d., quoted in "Pioneer Daughters," in *South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, 1949-1950* (n.p., 1950), p. 36.

burning; prairie beauty and prairie fires; births and friendships; sicknesses and the deaths of children; land boomers and church funds; butter-and-egg money and making do. In these women's stories, as in their lives, fear and loneliness exist alongside satisfaction and joy.

The range of stories in the Pioneer Daughters collection is vast. The original American Indian inhabitants are there. Pearl Badger, born in a tepee in 1871, was sent to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania as a teen-ager. Despite the attempt to sever her connection to her people, she returned to Fort Thompson to live, would speak English to only a few of her white friends, and "was one of the older Indians who prefer to be known as members of the Yankton tribe and the Dakota Nation," her story reads.[6]

Career women are also present: missionaries, writers, teachers, the only woman to own a Wall Street brokerage firm, and the first female baseball umpire. Marjorie Breeden, daughter of one of South Dakota's foremost suffragists, got her education in country schools with Indian children and became the first woman to graduate from the law department of the University of South Dakota.[7] Leona Dix Wilbur, the state's first woman dentist, practiced in Mitchell during the 1880s with her father, George P. Dix. In an advertisement, he offered "to those who think a girl has not strength to extract teeth . . . $3.00 for any tooth she cannot extract and that any MAN, be he doctor, dentist or *professional murderer*, will extract within three hours of said failure, or, before inflammation sets in."[8]

Abbie Hall Jarvis, the first woman licensed by the state as a physician, was a traditional farm wife until she left her two teen-age sons at home with their father and took her two young daughters with her to Chicago. There, at the age of thirty-eight, she enrolled in medical school. Even though her education was interrupted for two years while she nursed her mother during her fi-

6. Mrs. Henry Badger (1871), Buffalo County, Pioneer Daughters Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre. Files in this collection are organized according to the subject's county of residence and then filed alphabetically by last name under the county heading. The date in the file title refers to the year in which the subject either entered Dakota Territory or settled in the county under which her name is filed. In the case of American Indian women, as here, the date represents year of birth.

7. Miss Marjorie Breeden (1892), Stanley County.

8. Leona Dix Wilbur (1872), Hutchinson, Yankton, and Davison counties.

Leona Dix Wilbur practiced dentistry with her father and brothers. Business cards and price lists publicized their services.

nal illness, Jarvis graduated fourth in her class in 1898. At least three hundred fifty babies in the Faulkton area, including her grandson, came into the world with her assistance. The Pioneer Daughters collection contains this story about her: "It was a familiar sight to see Dr. Jarvis on the street with her white apron and little black satchel. Everybody knew and loved her and would stop for a little chat with her. Especially the little children were ready with a happy 'Hello Aunt Abbie' and then sidling up to her would invariably ask,—'Do you have a little baby in that satchel?'—You see the mothers would tell the children that Dr. Jarvis brought the babies in her little satchel. So you can understand

why that was a very important satchel." The writer continued, "One time there was a family who had lost their little baby that she had left for them, it was a very tiny little baby and their little girl slipped up to her and said 'Aunt Abbie, we want you to leave us another little baby.' She tho't that she would—and the dancing eyes looked up at Aunt Abbie and said 'but next time Please leave us a larger one.' "[9]

Most abundant in this collection are the stories of homesteading women—white and black, rich and poor, Swedish, Norwegian, German-Russian, Jewish, and so on—who immigrated to the territory when it was taken for non-Indian settlement. Women came with their husbands, parents, friends, or by themselves, proving up and becoming landowners in their own right. In some instances, two generations of women lived on claims. Alice Alt Pickler, the wife of South Dakota's first congressman-at-large, lived on a homestead near Faulkton in the the early 1880s. In 1909, her daughter, Dale, homesteaded west of the Missouri River with four of her girlfriends. Calling themselves "The Happy Five," they held frequent reunions until they died.[10]

Many pioneer women worked long and hard. According to Lucy Keffler Volland, whose parents homesteaded near Sturgis, "I never got to go to school but nine days in my whole life. I always had to do a man's work, but I guess it didn't hurt me though." She began plowing with a team of oxen when she was about ten years old, and, she reported, "I must have been a pretty fair bullwhacker to manage those oxen that well. When father got horses for me to plow with that was an event. I used to whoop and sing to attract folks passing and I'd call out 'look, we got horses.' "[11] West river rancher Jessie Craven finally turned over management of the Open Buckle, her thirty-two-thousand-acre ranch, at the age of ninety-four. She had decided, she told a newspaper reporter, "to take it easy for the first time since she was married in 1881."[12]

Some of the vignettes in the Pioneer Daughters biographies are expected. There are frightening stories of blizzards, like this one from the biography of Margaret A. Carter, who had settled with her husband near Faith: "In the terrible blizzard of 1910 [Mr.]

9. Dr. Abbie Ann Jarvis (1880), Faulk County.
10. Mrs. Alice M. Pickler (1883), Faulk County; Mrs. Dale Conway (1909), Perkins County.
11. Mrs. Lucy Volland (1882), Meade County.
12. Mrs. Jessie Craven (ca. 1885), Shannon County.

Carter lost his way one night when he was coming home, or his saddle horse may have kicked him. He was found dead at the door of their daughter's home while the daughter was with her mother. 'His coffin had to be made of boards, and they made a rough-box, too, and he was buried on our own land,' said Mrs. Carter. She stayed with their claim and made final proof on the land after her husband's death."[13]

Alice Nancarrow Knight told her biographer that the blizzard of 1888 left her stranded overnight with seven of her schoolmates in their Roberts County schoolhouse. "Though the visibility was only a few feet," Knight's biographer recorded, "they attempted to leave the building, but the teacher decided against it. They went to bed supperless on a bed made of their coats. Fortunately, they had plenty of coal, but found it impossible to keep the room warm when the thermometer plummeted to many degrees below zero. Early the next morning parents came in sleighs, bringing kettles of soup. Alice still remembers how good that soup tast-

13. Margaret A. Carter (1900), Meade County.

In 1905, physician Abbie Hall Jarvis posed in front of her office in her new rubber-tired buggy.

ed. The children were then taken to the home of the nearest neighbor for a hot breakfast.''[14]

A daughter of homesteader P. A. Decker, who also resided in eastern Dakota Territory at that time, recalled: ''We were late starting to school that morning, we'd gone just a short ways when father called, 'Girls, you had best come back. I don't like the looks of the North.' In just a few moments there was an impenetrable wall of snow, fine as flour and hit with such force and so blinding that one was immediately lost even though one was on their own door step. Our cattle and horses were on the north bank of Fish Lake. The storm trapped and killed all but an ox team and one horse. Several people were killed in our neighborhood.''[15]

The extremes of nature brought drought as well as blizzards. In the spring of 1908, Mary Mayer Comes and her husband left the Mitchell area for Cottonwood, ''where pioneer life was no gentler.'' They planted seed, but the ''drought was so deep . . . it did not even sprout.'' Using wood gathered along the creek for heating and cooking, they ''gathered buffalo berries and wild cherries, and somehow managed to make a living.''[16]

Prairie fires were another source of hardship. According to Margaret Carter, ''When we were on our claim fire was a constant danger then just like it is now here in the Black Hills. One time five freight wagons camped 35 miles from our land. They dug holes and built camp fires to cook supper and breakfast, but they were short of water so couldn't douse their fire. They did try though, and covered it over with dirt.'' The wind soon came up, however, blowing the dirt away and scattering sparks that started a fire that eventually was ''125 miles long and 60 miles wide.'' Carter remembered: ''Lots of stock was lost in the fire and it swept right through our homestead. I recall that we brought our horse up to the door prepared to take him inside in order to save him. We were lucky as our house was of sod and was on a creek bank. They managed to save it by dipping water from the creek. Men fought the fire with wet gunny sacks. My daughter and her husband lost all the lumber they had hauled out for their new house.''[17]

Julie Decker Cook saw her father adapt to life on the prairie after learning a harsh lesson. Upon moving west for his health,

14. Mrs. Seymour Knight (Alice May Nancarrow, 1878), Roberts County.
15. Mrs. P. A. Decker (1883), Aurora County.
16. Mrs. A. J. Comes (Mary Anna Mayer, 1884), Jackson County.
17. Carter, Meade Co.

P. A. Decker "took up a claim a mile north of the Hopper School and built a shanty just large enough to hold all we owned, which a short time later caught fire and burned to the ground. Altho a strong minded man he said 'I sat down and cried like a baby when I saw everything gone.' In discouragement he returned to Rook Creek, Ohio, but the Dakota climate had proved so beneficial that he returned in January, 1883. His new sod house had walls three feet thick."[18]

Sod houses figure prominently in the stories, with some detailed descriptions like this one by Margaret Carter: "They used walking plows then and to 'throw up' a sod house the land was plowed and chunks of sod was laid up a good deal like they lay a brick wall. I guess the sod chunks or slabs were about 24 inches long by 16 inches wide. Our neighbors helped us build and the house was 14x20 all in one big room. It was plastered inside and was warm in winter and cool in summer, and it had a good rubberoid roof too. You can tell it was well built as it stood for 25 years. That was a pretty country around Faith."[19]

Some settlers were even more inventive in their living arrangements: "Because there was no floor in the Nancarrow shanty," wrote Alice Knight's biographer, "Alice's mother refused to live in it and so they made their home in the covered wagon in which they traveled until the father could make a trip to Canby, Minnesota for lumber with which he built a one room shanty." Later, to add another room to this shanty, the wagon box was taken from its running gears and placed adjacent to the shanty. "The Nancarrows livestock," the account continues, "consisted of 2 mules, 2 cows and one half dozen chickens. The latter were kept in a box in the rear of the covered wagon. . . . The sod shanty, which Mother Nancarrow would have no part of, was used as a barn for the stock."[20]

Loneliness is a common theme among the women. Nellie Bradley was eighteen years old in 1883 when she married Noah Webster Fulker at her family's home in Warrensburg, Missouri. That same year, the couple came by train to Dakota Territory and settled in Brown County, just south of Aberdeen on the old 281 trail. Nellie Fulker was "very lonely and was disappointed in the country. There was nothing but prairie as far as the eye could see. She

18. Decker, Aurora Co.
19. Carter, Meade Co.
20. Knight, Roberts Co.

kept her disappointment to herself as many of the good pioneer women did.''[21]

Frances Brown Towne, who homesteaded in neighboring Spink County, reported hearing that ''the Insane Asylum at Yankton was filled with women who had been bereft of reason by the monotony and wretchedness of the hard and lonely life on the prairies. I have been taught from the pulpit all my life that God brought all the sorrows and griefs upon us for our own good. I

Frances Brown Towne

have come to believe that the Lord has nothing to do with it. All things come about through natural causes and he has no supervision over the children of men. What possible good came to those women who filled the Insane Asylum? If I am skeptical I hope to be forgiven.''[22]

21. Mrs. Noah Fulker (Nellie Bradley, 1883), Brown County.
22. Mrs. Frances Towne (Laura Brown, 1881), Spink County.

The Pioneer Daughters stories also give a feeling for the realities of social life during this period. An interviewer who talked to Nellie Fulker as she approached one hundred years of age reported, "The first time her husband-to-be kissed her was the night before the wedding. Said he, 'Tomorrow at this time you will be my wife. May I kiss you goodnight?' She observed, with a twinkle in her eye, 'Men didn't gobble over girls all day then like they do now.' "[23]

Julie Cook recalled an incident in which "my sister being a young lady wanted to give a party. But she was so proud she was ashamed of those unfinished walls. Mother took sheets she had received at a shower before leaving Ohio and tacked them all around the sitting room walls all over the lath and hung pictures. How pretty the room looked."[24]

Forced to rely on their own devices in other areas of their lives as well, these women remembered for years afterward and with detailed clarity the scares that had come with their new self-sufficiency. Alice Knight recalled that on one particular evening she and a neighbor returned home with their families from an afternoon of herding cows to find that a window in one of the houses was open. "The[y] exchanged worried glances and a few remarks," wrote the biographer, "and decided they had forgotten to close the window—then tried to forget the incident. Since their husbands were miles away threshing, the two women pooled their resources and the two families spent the night together. When the children were asleep, one woman whispered to the other, 'Are you asleep?' 'No,' the other answered, 'I can't sleep. I keep hearing noises and wondering about the window.'" Soon they heard a team pull into the yard, pass the house, and drive to the woodpile, where the driver unhitched and threw the harness over the fence. Then, "two men walked on to the barn where the stock was. Shortly they re-appeared and Mrs. DeFrance, who in the meantime had taken the gun from above the door, urged Mrs. Knight to level the gun on the window sill and 'shoot.' Mrs. Knight knew well enough how to shoot, but though she leveled the gun on her targets, try as she might she could not pull that trigger." The men then went to the woodpile, where the women were sure they "planned to find an axe," before turning toward the house. Petrified with fear, the women heard the door downstairs open

23. Fulker, Brown Co.
24. Decker, Aurora Co.

and a man's voice call out, " 'We're home.' Their husbands had had trouble with the thresher, had borrowed a rig and team to return home for repairs."[25]

Self-reliance did not necessarily bring independence. As the recorder of her mother's story, Julie Cook wrote, "Mother often went where she was needed. She nursed Rev. Underwood through a siege of Typhoid Fever. It makes me think of how when the country was first settled up Rev. Allen said, 'Dakota is a wonderful place for men and dogs, but a hell of a place for women.' "[26]

Perhaps the biggest contribution of the Pioneer Daughters collection is the opportunity it affords for revisionist history in the area of Indian-white relations. The collection gives an entirely different picture from the history that portrays the relationship between Indians and non-Indians in Dakota as inevitably hostile. A great majority of the non-Indian women report that the Lakota people were their friends. The biography of Alice Ashcroft Moseley, a Harding County resident, contains this story: "One of the oldest friends of the Ashcrofts was the famous Sioux Indian leader, Sitting Bull. He often visited them and bought butter and chickens from Grandmother. One day he came to buy potatoes from their garden. Grandfather was busy and did not want to take the time to dig them, so his daughter Ethel, ten years old, slipped away and dug a half-sack of potatoes and dragged them up to the house for Sitting Bull. He was so pleased that he promised her a pony, and soon a little bay horse was delivered to her. He was named 'Two-John' and she had him until she was married to Jack Jacobs in 1896."[27]

As the Ghost Dance movement reached its height in the winter of 1890-1891, families gathered at Camp Crook for safety from the Indians. "Several men went to the Ashcroft home to see that they came in," continued Alice Moseley's biography, "but Grandfather himself refused to go. He said, 'I have never harmed the Indians and they will not hurt me.' The rest of the family went in to town; but when it was over no one had been harmed."[28]

Armilda Matherly Gamet Cole, who had been two years old when her mother died, spent her childhood with her father, a trader, in the Black Hills. "One day," a newspaper story about

25. Knight, Roberts Co.
26. Decker, Aurora Co.
27. Mrs. Greenup H. Moseley (1884), Harding County.
28. Ibid.

her relates, "Matherly took his little daughter with him on a trip to Deadwood for a stock of provisions. He had six little black mules to pull the covered wagon and the trail wagon. On the way back with the loaded wagons they came to a long hill that was slick with ice. Matherly decided to take the wagons up the hill one at a time. 'Now Mildy you stay here with the trail wagon and I'll be back in a little while and get you,' her father told her." As the girl waited patiently, three wagons carrying Indian families came along the narrow road but could not pass the Matherly wagon because of a steep grade on one side and a drop-off on the other. " 'An old squaw came up and pointed to me, then to her back and up the hill,' Armilda recalls. 'I was only five or six but I understood her sign language. I climbed on her back and she wrapped her blanket around us papoose style and took me up the hill to Daddy. I thought it was fun but Daddy was provoked and scolded the Indians for taking me.' "[29]

White settlers' fears of the Indians seldom had grounds and often ended similarly. Mary L. Tarrant reported having an "Indi-

29. Mrs. Armilda Matherly Gamet Cole (1878), Lawrence County.

Pioneer daughter Carrie Hanson Brascamp serves tea to a 1910 visitor on her homestead claim in Perkins County. This photograph is an example of the many excellent ones contained in the Pioneer Daughters Collection.

an scare'' only once, during the 1890 Ghost Dance movement. ''One day a large band of Indians showed up at her place,'' relates her biography. ''There were 50 wagons of them—men, women and children. Their vehicles, single file, were stretched along 160 acres. Mrs. Tarrant thought for sure she and her family were going to get scalped. A couple of the men came over to her and asked if they could water their horses. 'I was greatly relieved, as you can well imagine,' she said. It turned out that the Indians were taking their children to the Indian school at Rapid City. . . . After that the Indians often stopped at Mrs. Tarrant's to water their horses. 'Never once did any one of them pick up anything that didn't belong to them. They always paid for what they got,' she asserted.''[30]

Mary Comes recalled having been in charge of her younger sisters when a group of Indians stopped at the homestead. The eight-year-old girl was ''afraid the Indians would take our baby, so to satisfy their demands for food, I went to the cellar and got some of Mother's homemade bread and told them to catch some chickens from the farmyard. . . . They still wanted more 'chicks,' but were able to catch only two of the frightened fowl. After the Indians were given food, they left peaceably,'' she remembered.[31]

Many of these women settlers reported surprise at the absence of Indian violence, which they had been led to expect. In the words of one west river resident, Flora De Bell Youngquist, ''When I think back and remember how peaceful and pleasant conditions always were and know that it had been only twelve years since the Custer Battle, it seems marvelous that the Indian people could settle down and be so friendly and peaceable in so short a time. Even at the time of the Ghost Dance-Wounded Knee trouble in the winter of 1890-91, some of our Indians went to the Badlands to join the hostiles but the ones who remained were very quiet and friendly. The 9th. Cavalry were camped around us all winter, but many of the Indians told us they would protect us if any trouble came.''[32]

And some women were frankly sympathetic to the Indians, believing that violence, when it happened, was justified. ''Storms were not the only worries the early settlers had,'' wrote Belle Hubbell Tessin, whose family homesteaded along an Indian trail in

30. Mrs. Mary L. Tarrant (1895), Meade County.
31. Comes, Jackson Co.
32. Mrs. Florence De Bell Youngquist (1885), Todd County.

northern South Dakota. "Fear of the Indians was great. We could not blame them in a way for being on the war path since the early settlers had taken their land from them."[33]

Recalling her childhood on a claim along the James River, Sarah Ward Klebsch wrote, "One morning, not long after we came to Dakota, I looked out across the prairie and saw what I thought to be a huge herd of sheep. I watched it for several days and decided to investigate." When she drew closer, Sarah discovered that the "herd of sheep" actually consisted of "bleached skulls and bones of buffalo." White hunters had slaughtered at least a hundred of these animals for their hides only, and the meat had been left to rot. "Actions such as this," she concluded, "could not be tolerated by the Indians. They were justified in defending themselves from people who showed so little consideration for them and there [*sic*] property which they had cherished so long."[34]

The biography of Sarah Klebsch, which presents a different view of Indian-white relations than one finds in most written history, can be said to represent, in microcosm, the Pioneer Daughters collection as a whole. Through their stories, women from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and experiences speak for themselves, providing new perspectives and filling in the historical picture. With the story of each woman comes, in the words of Marie Drew, "the story of her family, friends, and community."[35] Drew made a valuable contribution to both women's history and the history of South Dakota when she collected the Pioneer Daughters biographies and preserved a record of what people did, thought, and felt.

33. Mrs. George Tessin (1883), Day County.
34. Mrs. Ernest Klebsch (Sarah Ann Ward, 1879), Spink County.
35. *South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, 1949-1950*, p. 36.

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