

Letters of a Woman Homesteader Study Guide

Letters of a Woman Homesteader by Elinore Pruitt Stewart

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Plot Summary

Letters of a Woman Homesteader is a compilation of letters written by a young woman named Elinore Rupert, a widow with a small daughter named Jerrine, to her former employer, Mrs. Coney. When Elinore's husband died in a railroad accident, she held down odd jobs until she heard about the possibility of getting her own homestead and being self-sufficient. So she became the housekeeper for a Wyoming rancher, a Scotsman named Clyde Stewart. The letters are all genuine, with only the smallest alterations and tell of Elinore's experiences in Wyoming between 1909 and 1913.

Mrs. Coney found the letters so fascinating and amusing that she decided to have them published in the Atlantic Monthly, which made them rather famous. They are largely short stories written by a woman who was once a writer for the Kansas City Star. Elinore's character comes out clearly in the letters; she is jovial, energetic and determined. She has her own goal of becoming a woman homesteader in a time when few believe that a woman can do the job on her own. She is always helpful and is constantly looking for a good adventure. However, most of her letters feature others prominently as the heroes of the story, which indicates Elinore's humility. Her humility is also displayed through her consistent apologizing to Mrs. Coney for late letter writing.

Elinore's life on the homestead is a surprising combination of hard work and self-made joy and leisure. Many Americans today would find the prospect of a single mother with a young daughter setting out to own a piece of land through the grueling work of clearing trees, maintaining a garden and constructing a house practically unimaginable. But nothing would stop Elinore; in fact, the book ends as she achieves her homesteading dream. Elinore also marries Mr. Stewart after a few short (six) weeks on the homestead and somehow gets along with him fairly well and comes to adore him over time. They have four sons together, though one died at birth. Elinore also makes friends with locals, like Mrs. Louderer, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, Zebbie and Gavotte, along with welcoming anyone and everyone in the area. She even spontaneously organizes several weddings by making clothes, cooking food and picking flowers.

There are twenty-six letters in Letters of a Woman Homesteader. There is not exactly an overarching plot, as the book really is a series of short stories. However, to some extent, the book is organized around Elinore's aim of achieving her own homestead; in fact, the twenty-sixth letter, "Success", explains to Mrs. Coney how she has achieved her goal. Many of the letters explain parts of the story, though Elinore outlines her personal life sporadically throughout the book. Elinore Rupert Stewart, however, manages to have a fascinating life and personality in a time and place that seems to speak against the possibility that such a person could exist.



Chapters I-III: The Arrival at Burnt Fork, Filing a Claim, A Busy, Happy Summer

Chapters I-III: The Arrival at Burnt Fork, Filing a Claim, A Busy, Happy Summer Summary and Analysis

Letters of a Woman Homesteader is a series of letters written by one Elinore Rupert about her homesteading adventures in the American West. The first letter tells of her arrival at Burnt Fork, Wyoming on April 18th, 1909, written to a Mrs. Coney, a woman who she once worked for as a washlady. Elinore maintains that she is not lost but rather close to the Forest Reserve of Utah. She had a strange trip, which included one day on a train and two days on a stage coach. The first stagecoach was driven by a Mormon. Elinore did not care for Mormons, but the driver was a handsome man and so Elinore did not mind when he wanted to make love on the way. Her new employer, Mr. Stewart, met up with her on the second stage coach; Elinore makes fun of his manner of speech in the letter. When Elinore arrived she found her situation comfortable. She had a saddle horse and a shotgun she used to kill chickens.

The second letter was completed May 24th, 1909. Elinore filed a claim for her land and became a land owner. She lived next to Mr. Stewart and decided to start building her house. To get the claim, Elinore traveled with a neighbor and his daughter to Green River, the county seat. The whole trip took a week, but she had a great time. They saw a beautiful canyon along the way. When they arrived, Elinore had to deal with a "taciturn" old man at the office. Elinore mentions that her daughter Jerrine will enjoy cards on holidays from Mrs. Coney and that Jerrine has a block of wood she uses as a baby doll.

Chapter III dates September 11th, 1909. Elinore reports that she has had the busiest and happiest summer she can remember and has worked hard. She always had to work hard since her parents died within a year of one another when she was fourteen; she and her five brothers and sisters had to manage on their own. As a result, Elinore learned how to perform many tasks she would not otherwise have learned. Elinore helped Mr. Stewart bail hay, mow, milk cows and so on. She has preserved thirty pints of jelly and jam and collected fruit. Hay season ranged from July 5th to September 8th; Elinore and Jerrine took a day off into the mountains and had a wonderful time. Elinore also reports that she was always nice to the few people she sees as the neighbors spend a great deal of time alone and get shy when they see people.



Chapters IV-VI: A Charming Adventure and Zebulon Pike, Sedalia and Regalia, A Thanksgiving-Day Wedding

Chapters IV-VI: A Charming Adventure and Zebulon Pike, Sedalia and Regalia, A Thanksgiving-Day Wedding Summary and Analysis

The fourth letter is completed on September 28th, 1909. Some women invited Elinore to go on a foraging expedition, but Mr. Stewart said she was needed on the farm. But after the men left for a round-up, she felt that she had to go somewhere, so she saddled up Jerrine for a camp out. The trip went well at first; they had good luck with food. Elinore was confronted with the beauty of nature which made her feel that all action but that which reunites us with God is pointless. On the third day, Elinore and Jerrine awoke to find a snowstorm coming. They had to get home, though Elinore was prepared to hunt if she could not get back. On the way, she encountered a Southerner named Zebulon Pike Parker, a "Johnny Reb". The man was small and old but cheerful and sprightly. They ate deer together and shared memories. Elinore reports the details of his family that she learned. Parker was born February 10th, 1830. They stayed with Parker until breakfast the next day. He helped them make their way back.

Zebulon tells Elinore that he is sad to see her go and that he would just as soon talk to her as "to a nigger". Elinore reports that if a Yankee had spoken to her like that, she would have demanded an apology instantly, but she was kind to the old man, who she thinks didn't really know any better. Elinore returned before any of the men did; no one knew she left.

Chapter V is the letter of November 22nd, 1909. Elinore reported feeling guilty about her last letter, as she was worried it was too outrageous. She writes crazy stories because she has little to say otherwise. Elinore was busy making a wedding dress for a Ms. Lane; when Ms. Lane came to see the dress, she brought her two girls, Sedalia and Regalia, to be neighborly. They were from Linwood, thirty miles away. Mr. Lane was apparently a good husband, taking care of her when she was sick and pregnant. Sedalia was named after Sedalia, Missouri, whereas Gale was named Regalia three years after she was born until Ms. Lane heard the word "regalia" and liked it. The two girls are completely different. Sedalia is pretty and thin, but vain, selfish and shallow. Gale is not pretty but is clean, good and honest.

Elinore kept Gale for a month because Sedalia was about to get married and Ms. Lane wanted her to stay with Elinore so as not to foul up Sedalia's courtship as she was so "plain". The man Sedalia was to marry was named Mr. Patterson. One day he visited Elinore as well, and told her frankly that he didn't want to marry Sedalia. Elinore



introduced him to Gale and she spent the night asking Mr. Stewart about Mr. Patterson's character and prospects. She found Patterson to be a good man and made the match, setting the wedding for Thanksgiving Day. The wedding dress she made was for Gale. Everyone at the ranch was happy with the ceremony.

Chapter VI follows on the heels of Chapter V and tells the tale of the wedding. Everyone seemed to have a great time except Gale, as she discovered that Patterson was not a Mormon and so could not also marry Sedalia. Elinore cooked and Gale and Zebulon helped. Just before lunch, Mr. Stewart, Ms. Lane, Sedalia and Mr. Lane arrived. Gale looked nice. Sedalia insulted her out of jealousy. The justice of the peace came and married them; they had a dance that night. The dinner went well; every woman for miles helped. Boys from other ranches came and served.



Chapters VII-IX: Zebulon Pike visits his Old Home, A Happy Christmas, A Confession

Chapters VII-IX: Zebulon Pike visits his Old Home, A Happy Christmas, A Confession Summary and Analysis

Chapter VII opens on December 28th, 1909. Elinore reports that after Thanksgiving she sent a letter to Zebulon's sister, Mrs. Carter, asking her to write him. Widows living in Zebulon's old home wrote a complete record of the years "Zebbie" had been missing. When some local boys brought Zebulon over to Elinore's farm, he was incredibly excited and homesick. He became eager to visit home, so they found an old, homeless Frenchman named Gavotte to watch his place. One of the boys helped him get to Little Rock. Elinore remarks that she is exceptionally lucky in meeting great people and having good experiences.

Chapter VIII reports on Christmas. The ex-sheriff of the county was snowed in with them. The sheriff had been looking for a runaway boy named Benny Louderer. They had found his body eaten by wolves in the wilderness. Elinore started taking Jerrine to visit the Louderer ranch to comfort Mrs. Louderer. Mrs. Louderer lived alone and was very sad but she was welcoming and entertaining. They had a wonderful meal together and talked late into the night. When Elinore left, she started planning to make Christmas dinner with Mrs. Louderer. They cooked up a feast, starting early Christmas Eve morning. They then spent some time with Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, an old Irish woman and some local shepherders.

Elinore notes that Mrs. O'Shaughnessy was also a widow. She was a warm and cozy little woman. But before Christmas Day came, Mr. Stewart forbade Elinore and Mrs. Louderer from spending the day in sheep country (cattle-herders like Mr. Stewart don't get along with sheep-herders). On Christmas Day, he got clothes for Elinore and Jerrine. Mrs. Louderer stayed until New Year's Day. A few days later when the vaccinators came by, Elinore and Mr. Stewart named the farm animals together to keep track of them.

Chapter IX's letter went out on April 5th, 1910. Elinore follows up her previous letter with some information she had forgotten to send to Mrs. Coney before. Elinore's house is adjacent to Mr. Stewart's house. The Pattersons' ranch is around twenty-five miles away. They are doing well. Gale is thrifty and Bobby is making money. They had a baby. Sedalia is in the process of getting married to a Mormon bishop, though Elinore doubts it will go through. Sedalia continues to harass Gale. Elinore's grandmother has died. Elinore also regrets not telling Mrs. Coney these things and apologizes profusely. In a



follow-up letter on June 16th, she reports that she has a confession to make; she has married Mr. Stewart. She hopes that Mrs. Coney won't end their friendship over not sharing the matter. She was ashamed to mention it. Her name is now Elinore Stewart.



Chapters X-XII, The Story of Cora Belle, Zebbie's Story, A Contented Couple

Chapters X-XII, The Story of Cora Belle, Zebbie's Story, A Contented Couple Summary and Analysis

The Story of Cora Belle is contained in the August 15th, 1910 letter. Elinore reports that they had Grandma Edmonson's birthday party; their family consisted of Grandma, Grandpa and little Cora Belle, their sweet little only child. Cora's mother, Cora Jane, was to be married to a young man who desperate to marry her but who was shot before he could do so. Cora Jane was distraught when he died, though her parents had little sympathy for her because she was pregnant. They then told her to leave. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy took her to live with her. Cora Jane's parents repented before she gave birth to Cora Belle, but Cora Jane only lived a day after Cora Belle was born.

The story was twelve years old. The Edmonson's had been raising Cora Belle ever since. Cora is sweet, though not pretty (or ugly). She is the head of the family and does all the housework as her grandparents have rheumatism. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy helps her and Cora tends the sheep. They made a bit of money but Cora's grandparents always wasted it on bogus cures for their rheumatism.

One day, Elinore organized a "sewing bee" for Cora Belle's family. Cora Belle came along with her grandparents. The women with Elinore then gave them the clothes as a gift. Cora Belle was overwhelmed and cried. The next day, Cora and her grandparents left with the clothes. Elinore tells Mrs. Coney that she had a miscarriage.

The next letter opens on September 1st. Zebbie has returned from Arkansas. He showed Elinore a beautiful shirt that he received on his travel home and that has a story behind it. Zebbie Parker's family, the Parkers, had been involved in a feud with the Gorley family. Pauline Gorley was born around the same time as Zebbie and they had some mutual friends. While visiting them one day, Zebbie decided to speak to Pauline and get to know her. When Zebbie asked the Gorleys for Pauline's hand in marriage years later, they shot him, which prevented him from fighting in the Civil War. One night, George Gorley was killed and the Gorleys thought Zebbie did it, so Pauline came over in the rain to tell him to run so he wouldn't be killed. They never saw each other again; when Zebbie visited, Pauline had been dead for years. However, in the meanwhile she had made little gifts for Zebbie and given them to a friend to keep for him should he return. When Zebbie visited, he bought a stone to mark her grave. Pauline had kept the shirt waiting for Zebbie and he was able to get it and take it home. Zebbie was overwhelmed with happiness.

Elinore and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy accompanied Zebbie home; he was very happy to see his animals. That night he played the fiddle for hours while they waited out a storm.



Zebbie told Elinore that he was not sad Pauline was dead but happy because he knew she was his.

October 6th, 1911 is the date of the next letter. Elinore had been preparing to go into town when some of Mr. Stewart's friends visited, including a large, ungainly woman named Aggie McEtrick. She was quiet and oddly shaped and watched Elinore constantly. Aggie and her husband, Archie McEtrick, had six children. They were to go to town with Mr. Stewart the next day; they were also Scottish. On the way into town, Elinore saw Cora Belle's new home, which Elinore reports Cora delights in. Visiting Cora was always pleasurable as she was animated and straightforward. Mr. Stewart, Elinore, Archie and Aggie (and a few travelling companions) all stayed with her on their way. Abbie and Archie quarreled often, as they did at the hotel they stayed at in town. Apparently despite their fighting, Aggie and Archie were completely devoted to each other. Elinore ends the letter reporting that Jerrine is doing well and that she and Mr. Stewart had a baby boy named Henry Clyde, named for his father.



Chapter XIII-XV, Proving Up, The New House, The

Chapter XIII-XV, Proving Up, The New House, The Summary and Analysis

On October 14th, 1911, the next letter went out. Elinore has been rushed, as the thresher crew came to stay for two days. Clyde and his men have taken the thresher up the valley so Elinore and the children are alone. Elinore notes that she will have to wait two more years to get a deed for her land but she will get her homestead after all. She is still entitled to one hundred and sixty acres more. She notes that she would have never married Clyde had he not promised to help her meet her land difficulties. She is determined to succeed, just as other women have. Elinore also finds that Jerrine is quite analytical and perhaps born for the law. Zebbie's family had come to take him back to Yell Country and the Pattersons will soon leave for Idaho.

The next chapter was written on December 1st, 1911. Elinore notes that she is happy to have Mrs. Coney to chat with. She describes her house, her garden and how she created both.

The following letter was written throughout February, 1912 and concerns a "stocking-leg" dinner. Mrs. Louderer came to visit; during the visit, a Frenchman named Gavotte who was tending to Zebbie's place came by. He invited Elinore, Clyde, Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy on a trip to share a dinner concerning stockings, which no one quite understood. They had fun on the trip, though the ever present snow was a bit depressing. On the way, they stayed with a man, Manuel P. F. and his wife, Carlota Juanita. They were a Mexican family. That evening, they made unusual Mexican food for their guests.

Long ago, Elinore had given Gavotte a set of the Leather-Stocking Tales, which he read aloud to Zebbie. They planned a dinner where they would make as many of the meals mentioned in the tales as possible. They stayed with Gavotte for two days and had a long feast, including eating antelope and hedgehog and beaver-tale and grouse. Zebbie had returned though Elinore did not connect with him as much this time. It turns out that Gavotte is quite the conversationalist as he once worked collecting fossils under Professor Marsden of the Smithsonian Institution.



Chapters XVI-XVIII, The Horse-Thieves, At Gavotte's Camp, The Homesteader's Marriage and a Little Funeral

Chapters XVI-XVIII, The Horse-Thieves, At Gavotte's Camp, The Homesteader's Marriage and a Little Funeral Summary and Analysis

In Chapter XVI, there is no date. Elinore indicates that Mrs. Coney will be visiting them. She reports that Clyde discovered that thieves stole thirty-five horses from a ranch around seventy-five miles away. Law enforcement was in pursuit and they would probably succeed in apprehending the culprits. At the same time, Elinore had been feeling isolated at home with the new baby and wanted to go on a trip. The morning ride with Mrs. Louderer was beautiful. They were off to the mouth of Dry Creek and when they reached it they encountered a cattle herd. When they reached camp, they found it empty until Herman, a fat cook, and his ugly horse Hunks appeared. After a bit of bickering with Mrs. Louderer, he offered them food until the "boss" in charge of the man-hunt of the horse thieves appeared. That night, Jerrine, Mrs. Louderer and Elinore camped next to the posse until the sheriff arrived who woke everyone up.

As the group was eating, they heard a shot fired by a member of another part of the sheriff's posse. The sheriff and the rest of the posse were off. When morning came, they were still gone. But it became clear that somehow the outlaws were present in the camp, as one member of the posse had blood all over his shirt but he had no wound. This indicated that one of the outlaws had hidden away in his bedding and stolen a horse in the morning. Before the end of the morning, the search-party returned without success. The outlaw was wounded, though, despite probably being safe in Utah. Elinore and Mrs. Louderer were shaken up by the whole event and were eager to get home.

The next letter leaves Elinore November 16th, 1912. She was unable to write during the summer due to some physical ailments. Everyone took good care of her, though. Gavotte is still in charge of Zebbie's ranch and has had a prosperous summer as a wealthy Easterner paid him to collect fossils. He had recently made a gigantic find.

Chapter Eighteen's letter is dated December 2nd, 1912. Elinore notes that she'd like to tell Mrs. Coney about Clyde. She says that he is a great and good man but that she hasn't mentioned him because of the haste in which she married him. They had to get married quickly due to the necessity of living together and the brief period of time between planting seasons. Clyde had Mr. Pearson, the justice of the peace, come up with his family to marry them. Elinore had no time to make wedding clothes, so she had to improve upon what she had. The day she was married, she had only been there six



weeks and was a stranger. Elinore can hardly remember the ceremony, save that she forgot to take off her apron and old shoes.

Elinore had never planned on getting remarried; she simply wanted to be free to travel the continent and maybe even Hawaii. But before she saw the world, she wanted to try homesteading, despite noting that she probably should not have come to Wyoming to do so. Elinore also tells Mrs. Coney that their little boy Jamie, their first son, died. She was heartbroken for some time, but God gave her two little sons. She could not bear to talk about it before. All in all, she has a wonderful, rich life with a great husband, good children and wonderful and kind neighbors and distant friends. Despite Jamie's death, she is incredibly happy. Jerrine should be writing Mrs. Coney soon.



Chapters XIX-XXII, The Adventure of the Christmas Tree, The Joys of Homesteading, A Letter of Jerrine's, The Efficient Mrs. O'Shaughnessy

Chapters XIX-XXII, The Adventure of the Christmas Tree, The Joys of Homesteading, A Letter of Jerrine's, The Efficient Mrs. O'Shaughnessy Summary and Analysis

Letter 19 leaves Elinore's home on January 6th, 1913. This letter tells the story of her happy Christmas and deer hunt. Mr. Stewart and Junior went to Boulder for the winter. So Elinore's neighbors decided to greet her on December 21st, including Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. They decided to prepare a Christmas feast. Gavotte came by as well. He suggested that he and the women go deer hunting. They had to climb half-way up a snow-covered mountain for the hunt. That night, Gavotte heard a noise and discovered a nearby family, and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy and Elinore followed Gavotte to help them.

A woman was wailing at the cabin they came to; she was an Alabama girl who was pregnant and had fallen in love with a Mormon without knowing about his Mormonism when he took her out West. When they found her, she felt certain her husband was dead and thought she was going to die as well. So the women warmed her up and helped her give birth. The mother, Molly, named her newborn daughter Star; her husband was named Will Crosby.

The next morning Gavotte returned with a deer that he left for the family. The women and Gavotte then set out for home. The next night they got to town and spent all night sewing clothes for Christmas. Gavotte made presents out of paper. The next morning, on the 24th, they went back up the mountain-side to clear a road and had dinner at the old camp. They then smuggled their things back into Molly's cabin. Elinore, three other women and Gavotte put a Christmas tree together in her home while her children were asleep. They had made food as well. Molly's children had never seen a Christmas tree before and had never had presents. Afterward, they listened to the phonograph. In the end, Elinore was very glad to help; they left the next day for home. It was a great Christmas.

Letter 20 was mailed on January 23rd, 1913. Mr. Stewart had gotten sick so Elinore had to treat him; she wasn't able to write for a while. She thanks Mrs. Coney for some gifts. Elinore then declares her support for female homesteading. She notes that it doesn't require as much strength as many think. While it is hard work, there's no rent to pay. It is



easy to grow food in many places. Homesteading is a solution to poverty, though many are afraid of the risks. Any woman with the will can succeed. The Department of Agriculture will help with seed and other organizations help with advice on how to avoid common problems. Elinore simply wants women to avoid being tired, worried, cold and hungry, afraid to lose their homes when they could have so much more if they were courageous and determined enough to homestead.

The 21st letter is from Jerrine, written on February 26th, 1913. She thanks Mrs. Coney for the story about horses (Black Beauty) she gave her family. She notes that Clyde is far away and that her brother Calvin is sweet but that God gave him to her family because he cried so much he upset the angels.

Chapter 22 is the 22nd letter, sent on May 5th, 1913. Elinore points out that during the spring they are so busy that they hardly have time to check their mail. Star is growing up to be a really sweet kid. She demurs from Mrs. Coney's compliments about helping Molly. And it was ultimately Mrs. O'Shaughnessy who was the real help. In fact, she is quite a helper and an efficient one too; Elinore supports this claim by telling a story about how she quickly amputated a man's gangrenous finger and slit open his arm and disinfected the rest of the infection. Elinore was surprised that Jerrine wrote to her and notes that while Jerrine wrote many letters, Elinore did not allow her to send them because she misspells. Jerrine loves the books "Black Beauty" and "Alice in Wonderland". She ends the letter reporting that she plans to visit a Mormon bishop's household where polygamy is still practiced.



Chapters XXIII-XXVI, How It Happened, A Little Romance, Among the Mormons, Success

Chapters XXIII-XXVI, How It Happened, A Little Romance, Among the Mormons, Success Summary and Analysis

On June 12th, 1913, Elinore writes that her maiden name was Pruitt and she still signs her name Elinore Pruitt Stewart. This brings up the story of how Elinore met Mr. Stewart. Elinore was working as a housekeeper while a Rev. Father Corrigan was helping her prepare to take the Civil-Service exam. He told her to consider the "sweet, free open" homesteading life and to put an ad in the paper which would indicate her willingness to work for help.

The next Wednesday Clyde wrote to her; he was in Boulder visiting his mother and was leaving for Wyoming and wanted an interview. The interview went well and Elinore left with him. Her job was to be a housekeeper, which would give her a home and the chance to find her own homestead.

Elinore apologizes that he was not able to visit Mrs. Coney, as a business complication arose. Junior is talking and Calvin jabbbers. Jerrine still writes her.

The 24th letter was written October 8th, 1913. Elinore proposes to tell Mrs. Coney about another romance. An Aurelia Timmons wrote to Elinore wanting a job on the homestead. Elinore was overjoyed at the possibility of help and left for Bridger Bench country to meet her. When she arrived to find Mrs. Louderer, she was not at home and the horseman advised her to visit a new resident, Kate Higbee, who lived nearby, though she couldn't find her home and had to camp on the way with the children (who were with her), meeting an old man, Hiram K. Hull, along the way. The next day they were off to Bridger. When they arrived, Elinore met Aurelia and Aurelia set her up with a room.

When Elinore went outside, she met a man leaning on their wagon named Bishey Bennet, who was unusually dressed up. He told Elinore that a "Miss Em'ly" was coming by. They walked inside Aurelia's house and Bishey told Elinore the story of how back in New York he and Miss Em'ly had planned to get married since they were kids. Both wanted to go West and he went first but twenty-five years had passed before she was able. He was to be married that evening. Elinore made herself matron of honor on the spot and quickly organized for a wedding. The Ferguson family, for whom Aurelia worked, did not mind. Both Bishey and Emily were nervous but excited and Elinore happily prepared for their wedding as quickly as she could. The next day the old justice



of the peace came by and married Emily Wheeler and Abisha Bennet. A friendly crowd attended the ceremony. The next day Bishey and Emily left for their new home together.

The penultimate letter concerns Mormons and left Elinore's home sometime in November, 1913. She again reports she is busy with house-cleaning with Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy invited her to go on a week-long trip to a nearby town to meet a Mormon Bishop, just for the fun of it. They traveled with a new neighbor, Mr. Beeler, who was travelling into town for some supplies. When they arrived at the settlement the Bishop wasn't there, so they stayed with a Mormon woman at the settlement. After observing the family for a while, Elinore realized that they were in the house of the Bishop's second wife.

Quickly the subject turned to Mormonism and polygamy and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy started to ask questions. The woman had been married to the Bishop several years after Debbie, but Debbie had no children. The Bishop wanted another wife but his wife was in control of the money so he decided to take a second wife rather than divorce. However, the first wife charged the second rent. The woman reports that they were all children of "plural marriages". And the Mormons believe that the experience prepares them for the afterlife. They believe in eternal marriage. The first wife in such families is the boss.

Apparently the Bishop had "cast off" the woman because of the law of the "Gentiles" against plural marriage. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy points out that her children cannot inherit in the Bishop's name, but the woman protested that the Bishop would take care of her. The house she was in at the present time was built by the Bishop, so Deb, the first wife, had nothing to do with it. Elinore asked if she would be happier being the only wife and she said she didn't know, but seemed very sad about it.

They left the next day and took a train ride into town and went to a hotel. In the morning, after breakfast, they left with a friend of Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's, Cormac O'Toole, as he had a team of horses that could get them where they were going. Elinore waited in the depot as they were getting the team together and overheard some men talking about the Bishop, who they apparently didn't like very much. They talked about how strange and sinful he was. One man noted that while Mormons no longer contracted plural marriages, those who had gotten a plural marriage before had kept their wives and that the Bishop had both of his. However, it was impossible to make a case against the Bishop as his wives would lie for him.

On the trip, a man they didn't know asked to accompany them and be dropped off at a Mrs. Belle's house. They obliged, though he seemed a little strange. The next day they heard that the Bishop had been shot leaving Mrs. Belle's house. Apparently the stranger they traveled with was the Bishop! The Bishop was still alive but no one expected him to live. Elinore was very glad to get home and was also very glad that Mr. Stewart was not a Mormon.

Elinore's final letter is also dated November 1913. Elinore notes that this letter is one she has wanted to write for a very long time. If Mrs. Coney meets a woman who wants



to homestead, Elinore encourages her to share the letter. Years ago, Elinore set out to prove that a woman could homestead if she wanted to. Well, Elinore got her land and started to cultivate it, planting potatoes and vegetables. She's also found that squash can be raised there, along with cucumbers and common beans. She milked cows and sold butter to pay for a year's supply of flour and gas. She's raised enough chickens to renew her flock and have all they want to eat and plenty of turkey. Flowers are everywhere and only Jerrine has helped her. While many of Elinore's neighbors did better than she did, she still did it. She tried every sort of work that the ranch makes possible and she can do all of it. She knows that she is especially strong but strength and knowledge come by doing. Elinore loves to experiment, to work and to figure things out. "Roughing it" suits her.



Characters

Elinore Rupert Stewart

Born in Arkansas in 1876, Elinore Stewart grew up in the Indian Territory in Oklahoma. When she was fourteen both of her parents died and she became responsible for her eight young brothers and sisters. While the younger three went to live with their grandmother, Elinore and the other five had to work for the area railroad. Elinore married a man who was much older than she was and who was killed in a railroad accident after their daughter Jerrine was born. She quickly became a nurse and worked for a hospital along with writing for the Kansas City Star until she decided to work her way West by moving to Denver, Colorado to work as a cook. In 1909, Elinore's pastor encouraged her to seek out her own homestead. To do so, she volunteered to work for Clyde Stewart, a Scotsman who owned a ranch in Wyoming. A mere six weeks later she married him and they had four children. Over the next four years, Elinore wrote to her former employer, Mrs. Coney. The first twenty-six letters are contained in *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*.

Elinore's character can be gleaned from her story. She was a jovial woman with an appetite for adventure and who possessed a strong independent streak. Elinore was also something of an early advocate for women, who thought that women could avoid poverty by moving West and working the land on their own. She was very community-minded, constantly organizing outings, parties and weddings among the distant locals in her area.

Clyde Stewart

While we have no direct contact with the other characters besides Elinore in *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, she describes her employer and later husband Clyde Stewart in detail. The early letters mock his thick Scottish accent and while the barbs continue in later years, they become gentler and more endearing with time. Elinore hides her marriage to Clyde for several years from Mrs. Coney for fear that she would disapprove due to how quickly the marriage occurred. Clyde is a forty-something widower when Elinore goes to work for him but after they are married, they have four sons, one of whom died at birth. Clyde spends his time working on his ranch and leading other ranchers on various trips, sometimes taking them on ranching expeditions for days at a time.

Elinore characterizes Clyde as an often private and stern man, though she always emphasizes that he is both fair and possesses a very good character. Her bold and sometimes independent personality occasionally butts heads with Clyde, but Clyde (perhaps characteristic of gender relations of that time and place) rarely yields to Elinore and she typically follows his lead.



While Elinore hardly knew Clyde at the beginning of their marriage, continuing to call him Mr. Stewart in her letters to Mrs. Coney for some time, she begins to refer to him as Clyde. However, she often feels that Mrs. Coney will think he has a bad character due to how they handled their marriage, so she tends to emphasize his virtues.

Jerrine Rupert Stewart

Elinore's first child with her first husband who begins to write Mrs. Coney letters towards the end of the book.

Mrs. Coney

Elinore's former employer and the addressee of all the letters in the book. It was Mrs. Coney who shared Elinore's letters with the public.

Mrs. Louderer

A local woman who becomes Elinore's good friend and co-conspirator in their many organized trips and good deeds in the community.

Mrs. O'Shaughnessy

Another one of the local women who Elinore becomes friends with; Mrs. O'Shaughnessy has her own independent streak and is also very efficient in her work.

Zebulon Pike

A Southern man from Yell County, Arkansas who grew up during the Civil War in the South. He still has a thick southern accent and is very old, despite maintaining his own ranch. "Zebbie" becomes a very endearing character in the book due to his love of animals and his attachment to his first love.

Gavotte

A friendly Frenchman who tends to Zebbie's ranch when he is away.

Cora Belle

A young girl whose parents died tragically and who is one of the sweetest people Elinore has ever met.



Sedalia and Regalia

Two sisters, the one pretty and mean and the other plain and kind who feature in one chapter of the book and appear in several others. They are Mormons.

Reverend Father

The reverend that encouraged Elinore to seek her own homestead.

The Mormon Bishop

An unnamed Mormon Bishop who creates quite a scandal in a local town and who is eventually shot and killed after Elinore has a chance to formally meet him.



Objects/Places

Denver

Elinore was a cook in Denver before she moved to Wyoming.

Wyoming

The location of Elinore and Mr. Stewart's ranch.

Burnt Fork

The nearest town to Elinore in Wyoming.

Mr. Stewart's Home

Where Elinore came to live after moving from her home adjacent to Mr. Stewart's.

The Countryside

Elinore is often effusive about the beauties of the Wyoming countryside.

Hard Work

Elinore is a fan of hard work, finding it very rewarding.

Homesteading

The process of developing land that under United States' law allowed those who developed the land to come to own it.

Weddings

Elinore organizes her own wedding in the book and several others.

Elinore's Claim

The legal claim that Elinore pursued that would help her acquire her own homestead.



Camping Materials

Camping materials are often a vital part of travel in Wyoming for Elinore and her neighbors, friends, family and acquaintances.

Hospitality

Due to the far-flung nature of ranches in Wyoming, strong norms of hospitality exist in order to help people survive when they need help. Elinore and her community demonstrate impressive hospitality throughout the book.



Themes

Ambition

Elinore Stewart is a woman of ambition. Despite the death of her husband and being left with a small child, Elinore decided not to wallow in grief or to simply languish where she had always lived. Instead, she had dreams of moving west and seeing the nation's wilderness. As a result, she worked a number of odd jobs as she moved from city to city. When she reached Denver, she took up a job as a "cook" (it's not clear precisely what she did) until she had a conversation with her "Reverend Father". She told him that she was depressed and unhappy, that she felt trapped and restless. He suggested that she seek out her own homestead in the West, so Elinore quickly put an ad in the paper. Homesteading was risky; one had to transform acres of land by one's self with a chance of starvation if things went wrong. When Clyde Stewart hired her, Elinore quickly moved to a place she had never known and spent the rest of her life there.

But Elinore never gave up on her dream of gaining her own homestead. Many women in that time gave up any dreams they might have had once they got married and had children. Not Elinore. She continued to pursue her claim and work to gain access to her own land. When she received her land, she worked it hard, planting gardens, chopping down trees and even building a cabin. The last letter of the book describes her success.

Community

Wyoming has never been a highly populated area. And in the early 20th century, it was far less populated than it is today. People had massive ranches that they were homesteading and they often lived dozens of miles away from one another and even further from any nearby town. As a result, one would think that any sense of community would be impossible to maintain, as such great distances separated neighbors from one another and travelling was arguably quite expensive. In fact, many trips to visit neighbors required camping out overnight on the way.

Nonetheless, the community ties in Elinore's neck of the woods (perhaps literally) were strong. Whenever a wedding was held, people would show up from miles away. People would often organize outings, sometimes for days at a time, on the spur of the moment. Women would congregate to cook and men would congregate to tend to their herds. When someone was sick, they would be taken care of and when someone new moved into the area, they were always welcome. If someone needed help on their ranch, it appears that they always received it.

Arguably one reason for such strong communities ties was the prospect of boredom and disaster. Boredom might motivate people to see each other often to have something to do, whereas the prospect of disaster might motivate people to keep communal connections alive in case they needed help. But no such incentives appear to have an



explicit motivational force. Instead, people in the area just seemed to care about one another and enjoy one another's company and they worked too hard to be bored for very long.

Freedom

One of the great attractions of homesteading in the American West was the promise of complete liberty. While the sheriff's posse was around to catch the occasional criminal and the land claim office and postal service were taken care of by the state government, one might go months without encountering a government official. One's land became one's own after a decade or so of hard work and an individual (a family or group) could rise or fall based on their own merits and demerits. Many were attracted to life in the West for just this reason. However, others travelled there to find other types of liberty, such as the Mormons who moved West for religious freedom and (just prior to Elinore's time) the freedom to marry multiple times.

Elinore moved West because she felt trapped by her circumstances, by working for someone else, for feeling hemmed in by debt and so on. Living on the homestead meant a life full of new risks but also a life free of debt and, with the exception of her husband, a life free of bosses and worries about being fired. Elinore also moved West as a way to get out of poverty and she strongly recommends that other women do the same. Since women were permitted to homestead by themselves, Elinore believed that women in poverty could start over and gain their freedom through the homesteading process. If women were simply willing to work hard, Elinore thought that they could do everything men could do. And Elinore set out to prove just that with her own life's work.

Style

Perspective

Letters of a Woman Homesteader is a compilation of letters written by Elinore Stewart. Hers is the only relevant perspective to the book. Elinore has one of those unusually energetic, upbeat and strong personalities that one finds rarely in real life. Given that her husband died and that she was a single mother, one would not expect for a woman, in a time when women were not even allowed to vote, to seek out her own homestead much less to continue to pursue that goal and do so successfully despite getting remarried, having three more children, raising her daughter and helping her husband to run a ranch. But Elinore pressed on. Elinore often extends her expectation and hope of strength to those around her, frequently encouraging those near to her.

Elinore's independence and boldness make her a prime candidate for an early form of feminism. She clearly chafes under the authority Clyde exercises over her and the fact that her husband is her former boss could not have helped. She also believes that women can seek their own fortunes without men and that while most women would never dream of homesteading, that they can and should so dream because, in Elinore's view, they can become successful if they are simply willing to work hard enough.

Elinore is also clearly a woman of great humility given how often she apologizes to Mrs. Coney but she can also be somewhat deceptive, such as when she hides things from different people in the book. All in all, she is a force for good in her community and the energetic and joyful organizer of many activities.

Tone

Upon hearing the title "Letters of a Woman Homesteader" one would not expect the tone characteristic of the book. Letters are often dry and rarely have any sort of narrative structure. But not Elinore's letters. First, Elinore clearly had some writing talent and experience as she spent several years writing for the Kansas City Star. Second, she seemed clearly afraid of writing Mrs. Coney boring letters so it appears she went out of her way to construct the vast majority of her letters around particular events out on the homestead. As a result, the book is a compilation of short stories with an often light, joyous and half-amused tone. Elinore's letters are clearly intended to warm Mrs. Coney's heart and show her that Elinore was living a good life.

In fact, the stories are so much fun and heart-warming that it is somewhat surprising when Elinore's tone turns elsewhere. For instance, at the beginning of each letter, Elinore typically apologizes profusely for some negligence on her part before beginning her story. She is also rather brief in discussing the death of her first child, which must have been awfully tragic and she never talks about her first-husband. Further, when she



is sick, she says little about it. In fact, very generally dark tones only bubble up to the surface for a moment and then quickly die down.

The joyful tones range, though, between the serene and the excitable, depending on the event. Sometimes when Elinore is travelling, she remembers the scenery to describe it to Mrs. Coney; in those moments, Elinore often waxes spiritual. However, when Elinore is busy, say, planning a wedding, her writing about the matter seems hurried, busy but productive and excited.

Structure

Letters of a Woman Homesteader is a compilation of twenty-six letters that have hardly been editing save some changed and omitted names and places. The letters range in time between 1909 and 1913 from when Elinore first moved to live with Mr. Stewart until she finally achieves her own homestead. Each of the letters is self-contained and all are built around an extended story, which in effect makes the book a collection of short stories. The letters, of course, begin and end with little bits of new and niceties, but the "meat" of the letters is a clearly developed narrative.

Some letters are very brief, containing mostly lengthy descriptions and impressions, like the first letter, "The Arrival at Burnt Fork," while others have a moderate length, like the second letter, "Filing a Claim" which tells the brief story of Elinore finding out how to file her homesteading claim. Other letters, like the third, "A Busy, Happy Summer" describes a time period punctuated with various events, whereas other letters like, "A Charming Adventure and Zebulon Pike" and "Sedalia and Regalia" are character sketches primarily, outlining many of the unique characters of Burnt Fork. Some letters are more seriously, like "A Confession", where Elinore admits that she quickly married Mr. Stewart, whereas other letters are intense and adventurous, like "The Horse-Thieves". One letter was written by Elinore's daughter, Jerrine, to Mrs. Coney; it is very short.



Quotes

"I was not a bit offended when he insisted on making love all the way, especially after he told me that he was a widower Mormon." (Chapter 1, 4)

"This has been for me the busiest, happiest summer I can remember." (Chapter 3, 15)

"But when you get among such grandeur you get to feel how little you are and how foolish is human endeavor, except that which reunites us with the mighty force called God." (Chapter 4, 30)

"Joy waves are radiating from this ranch and about Thanksgiving morning one will strike you." (Chapter 5, 53)

"I am the luckiest woman in finding really lovely people and having really happy experiences." (Chapter 7, 62)

"The thing I have done is to marry Mr. Stewart." (Chapter 9, 79)

"They ain't for me, I know they ain't. Why it ain't my birthday, it's Granny's." (Chapter 10, 94)

"When you get to be as old as I am, child, everything will have a new meaning to you." (Chapter 11, 115)

"Speaking of things singly, Wyoming has nothing beautiful to offer. Taken altogether, it is grandly beautiful, and at sunrise and sunset the 'heavens declare His glory'." (Chapter 12, 124)

"I should not have married if Clyde had not promised I should meet all my land difficulties unaided." (Chapter 13, 134)

"Sometimes I almost have a brain-storm wondering how I am going to do it, but I know I shall succeed; other women have succeeded." (Chapter 13, 134)

"My own home looked mighty good to me when we drove up that evening. I don't want any more wild life on the range,—not for awhile, anyway." (Chapter 14, 179)

"I had only been here six weeks then, and was a stranger." (Chapter 18, 187)

"When you think of me, you must think of me as one who is truly happy." (Chapter 18, 191)

"There was never anything more true than that it is more blessed to give than to receive." (Chapter 19, 212)

"To me, homesteading is the solution to all of poverty's problems." (Chapter 20, 215)



"My brother Calvin is very sweet. God had to give him to us because he squealed so much he sturbed the angels. We are not angels so he Dont sturb us." (Chapter 21, 219)

"Sometimes a woman gets too angry to talk." (Chapter 24, 237)

"I laughed at him, but I am powerfully glad he is no follower of old Joseph Smith." (Chapter 25, 278)

"If you see a woman who wants to homestead and is a little afraid she will starve, you can tell her what I am telling you." (Chapter 26, 279)

"Many of my neighbors did better than I did, although I know many town people would doubt my doing so much, but I did it. I have tried every kind of work this ranch affords and I can do any of it. Of course I am extra strong, but those who try know that strength and knowledge come with doing. I just love to experiment, to work, and to prove out things, so that ranch life and 'roughing it' just suit me." (Chapter 26, 282)



Topics for Discussion

Why did Elinore agree to become Mr. Stewart's housekeeper?

Why does Elinore write Mrs. Coney? Why does she apologize so often in her letters?

Why did Elinore marry Mr. Stewart after six weeks?

Explain how Elinore got her own homestead.

Elinore has a philosophy about female homesteading. What is it? Why should women do it?

Explain Elinore's conception of single motherhood; compare and contrast it with present-day models of single motherhood.

How does Elinore handle death in the book?

Which of Elinore's stories impacted you most? Why?