Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier Study Guide

Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier by Joanna Stratton

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

PIONEER WOMEN: VOICES FROM THE KANSAS FRONTIER recounts the history of frontier life in Kansas in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Intent on providing a platform for the forgotten voices of the past, this historical account is interwoven with excerpts from personal correspondence, diaries, and memoirs from some of the ordinary women who struggled through frontier life first-hand.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 lured many settlers to the Kansas Territory with the promise of cheap land. Water, timber, and good land were oftentimes hard to come by; those who couldn't build a log cabin had to make do with sod houses made with bricks carved from the very land itself. Fire, tornadoes, floods, droughts, blizzards, and even grasshopper infestations were constant sources of worry and strife on the plains. Native Americans, bullied and tricked by government land treaties in a perpetual effort to push them west, sometimes rebelled and turned violent, offering one more danger for the frontier family.

Corn was the chief crop and the staple of the frontier diet. Cow and buffalo manure, called chips, was the primary source of fuel for fires. Men generally worked the fields, managing to plow the hard Kansas earth with a large breaking plow, along with hunting; women generally tended to the household chores, including sewing, laundering, and cooking. However, conventions such as this were sometimes thrown out the window in a pinch, and many women hunted, farmed, and otherwise took over traditionally male responsibilities. Gender equality and opportunities for women were in fact one of the fortunate consequences of frontier life.

Opportunities for women could be found firstly in education. The poor salary of teachers discouraged men from taking such jobs, and so women became the chief educators of the frontier's growing population of children. Church was also an opportunity for women to escape from home chores and take a leadership role in the community, with the organization of bake sales, sewing circles, and other such fundraisers to build or improve the town church, not to mention charity work.

Kansas was also one of the most progressive states in the nation when it came to the political power and activity of women. Temperance united women politically across the state. Suffrage, though not conferred upon women at the state or federal level until 1912, was granted relatively early at the city level, and Kansas can boast of the nation's first woman mayor, among other accomplishments at the local level.

All in all, the hardships of frontier living in Kansas, especially for women, were overcome with strength, determination, and an abiding faith in God.

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2

Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1: Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, Kansas was called "the Great American Desert." To many it was unfit for cultivation, an arid wasteland. However, by 1850, America's growing population was demanding new sources of land, and in 1854 Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened Kansas to settlement (it used to be only an Indian reservation). Lured by cheap land, people from all places and economic conditions came to Kansas. Boats, though slow and crowded, were a popular form of transportation, due to comfort. The stagecoach was ideal for single people or small families, though the roads were rough. Horses were changed every 15 or so miles at stations to ensure the fastest coach possible. In 1862, construction began on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, which by 1870 had reached Denver. This provided another mode of transport through Kansas, though it was not without its perils; as one woman recounts, she was stuck for more than two days on a train when a blizzard swallowed train and track.

Finally, the covered wagon was the preferred mode of transportation for those with large families, or those with a lot possessions to haul to their new homestead. A homesteading family preferred to find another family or families to travel with, both for safety and to help spend time on the lonesome prairie.

Chapter 2: Upon arriving on their land (160 acres, as promised by the government), homesteaders had to explore their plot to find the most hospitable place to make their home. This could take days or a week or more, and in that time the family had to sleep in bedrolls on the dusty ground. Particularly, the family sought fertile soil, good timber for the house, and a source of water. In general, the eastern part of Kansas had more fertile soil and more water available but had more trees to clear, while the western part of Kansas was less fertile, more windy, and water was sparser, with the one advantage being the family didn't usually have to clear much land for farming or for their house and barn.

Water was perhaps the most crucial component of the homestead, and it was difficult to tap the deep underwater springs. Some resorted to "water witching," in which someone used a forked branch to "divine" where water was.

In wooded regions of Kansas, log cabins were built for the home, in which the straightest trees were cut down and notched so as to fit well together in a square shape. Cracks were plastered with mud and small sticks. Building a house was usually a community affair and a way to welcome and help the new neighbor.

For those who didn't have a good supply of trees, there were two options. The "dugout" was a primitive dwelling literally dug from a hillside. Dirt and rain, not to mention snakes, made this a pretty bad option. The other option was sod houses, created from blocks of

earth known as "prairie marble." To make this, an area 16 x 12 feet was measured out and cleared, then packed down with dirt to create a tough dirt floor. Strips of sod were cut from the earth with a grasshopper plow and stacked around the perimeter of the home, making two-foot-thick walls. Eventually an acre of land weighing about ninety tons formed the "soddy," or sod house. The sod house provided excellent insulation, cool during the summer and warm during the winter, and it was impervious to fire or wind damage. On the negative side, it was always dark and damp, and rain usually leaked through the roof.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Though in the nineteenth century a woman's place was considered the home, and she was expected to be subservient to her husband, the rigors and freedom of the prairie oftentimes changed this dynamic, with the husband and wife on equal footing as heads of the family. This was due in part to the chronic shortage of labor in the plains, to the point where women took up traditionally male tasks like planting, tending livestock, and even hunting.

After establishing their homestead, a family next set about to work the land. A patch of ideal farmland was cleared, a fairly easy process in a prairie usually devoid of trees and large rocks. Plowing was more difficult, given the tough soil, and a large plow known as a breaking plow was used to turn the earth. It usually took several yoke of oxen and a couple of men to work the plow.

Though farmers experimented with such things as tobacco, cotton, and rye—wheat and especially corn became the staple crops for the Kansas farmer. Appropriately, then, corn was the staple diet of the family, especially during lean times, though meat was also available. Corn farmers usually raised a small amount of livestock for food, including hogs and chickens. And the plains provided ample meat for the hunter, including buffalo and antelope.

Fuel was scarce in areas devoid of timber, and the homesteader had to display ingenuity in this regard. Everything from twigs and berries to corn husks was used for fire, but the most valued source of fuel was cow and buffalo dung. Families would take special trips into the grasslands, gathering up "cow chips" for use during the long winter months.

Dress was simple, with fashion avoided in favor of durability. Buffalo skins were especially valued for their ability to keep out cold, being fashioned into coats and hats. In the arena of clothing, the prairie woman had a wide variety of skills, from shearing sheep to dyeing wool, and stitching and sewing all the family's clothes. Laundering was a tedious process involving a kettle, soap made from fat and ash, and a lot of scrubbing.

In a land with a dearth of doctors and an absence of hospitals, disease was common and many fell victim to cholera, malaria, smallpox, and pneumonia. Malaria was particularly devastating among children. In these instances, women became the chief tenders of the sick, using a variety of homespun remedies and herbal brews. There were even women who people went to for minor surgery or to dress the dead for burial.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4: Because the prairie was far from "home" for many settlers, it became a desolate and lonely place, especially when the husband and wife were separated for weeks or even months when the husband went on a hunting trip or to a major town many miles away. At night, the howl of coyotes and wolves would frighten settlers, and sometimes the animals would be brave enough even to attack a settlement. Fire was also a constant worry. Settlers would strip sod from around their home to act as a sort of fire guard, but this was not a foolproof method, and homesteaders had to be constantly ready with water, wet blankets, and grain sacks to beat back fire, considering the arid prairie was so vulnerable to fire.

Times of illness, pregnancy, and childbirth were a particularly frightful time for prairie women, who were isolated and a long way away from any proper medical help. Many times, the prairie woman had no one to depend upon for aid in childbirth but a husband, neighbor, or daughter. In addition, poor diet, combined with constant hard labor and poor housing conditions, would sometimes result in birth defects or physical handicaps of a newborn baby.

Chapter 5: In addition to fires, Kansas settlers were subject to many other natural disasters, which included blizzards, tornadoes, floods, droughts, plagues of grasshoppers consuming crops, and bitter, dangerously cold winters. What made these disasters even worse was the relative lack of cover or protection - no trees to shade from the sun, no caves to retreat to, no hills to provide relief from gusting winds. Settlers came up with some ingenious methods for combating some of these perils, including nets to catch grasshoppers and primitive irrigation systems to fight against droughts, but still these disasters posed real dangers, especially to the health of corn or other crop. Many settlers found strength in a belief in God and the future when hardships came their way.

Winter storms were crippling. Bitter cold was exacerbated by intense winds of up to fifty miles per hour. All a family could do was huddle in their sod house by the fire on the coldest of days. Blizzards could dump an amazing amount of snow on the prairie in a short amount of time, causing death of cattle and crop alike, and burying homes in foot upon foot of snow. In these times, families became isolated from one another for up to two weeks at a time before the community men got together to clear paths in the snow.

Summer also brought its share of perils, especially drought. The Kansas Drought of 1860, in which very little rain fell for about a year and a half, crippled harvests, starved cattle, and caused widespread panic in Kansas. One-third of the state's settler population left Kansas that year, which hurt the public image of Kansas and stifled settlement of the state for years to come. Fortunately, the drought also prompted the creation of several faith-based and other relief organizations designed to help farmer

families. On the other hand, excessive rainfall could be just as bad, which could wipe away valuable topsoil or mix with cold weather to form large hailstones that could batter crops.

Grasshoppers were another source of carnage on the plains. "The Grasshopper Year," 1874, was when millions of grasshoppers descended on the prairie to eat everything in their path. Crops, vegetables, clothing, and even wood items were all consumed; blankets or sacks put over crops to protect them were futile, as grasshoppers simply ate through the cloth. Many a harvest was ruined that year, and the effect of the infestation was lasting. Streams brown with grasshopper excrement were no longer fit for drinking, and livestock had consumed so much grasshopper that their meat tasted like grasshopper, and was considered inedible.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

As the U.S. Economy and population grew, Native Americans tribes were increasingly pushed west. Tribes were treated as nations, with land concessions to be negotiated by formal treaties. These treaties, drafted of course by the U.S., gave all advantages to the United States and signed by tribes who poorly understood them. Tribes did not regard land as property to be parceled and sold, and thus many times they did not realize they were permanently giving up their right to land. Failure of the tribes to govern its disparate people, coupled with violation of new boundaries by indignant settlers, caused hostilities on both sides.

By 1830, the first definitive policy for Native Americans was in place, in which tribes were forcibly moved to places west of the Mississippi River, causing resentment on the part of eastern tribes as well as western tribes. Eventually the railroad and Homestead Act of 1862 caused Kansas to be occupied, with Indians pushed south into what is now Oklahoma. Occasional skirmishes or acts of violence perpetuated the myth of the Indian as a savage, and as a result very few white settlers bothered to interact with tribes. They were instead regarded with fear and resentment.

Native Americans, with no sense of white customs or notions of privacy or personal property, would often come unannounced onto the lands and into the homes of frontier families, poking around and marveling at plates and chiming clocks. As circumstances got worse for Native Americans as the buffalo continued to disappear, these visits would be increasingly less friendly, with tribes demanding food or skins.

While the eastern and central plains Indians were usually friendly and docile, the western Plains Indians were warlike and aggressive. After an incident in 1864 at Sand Creek in which hundreds of Cheyenne Indians were slaughtered by the government, full-scale warfare erupted in western Kansas, with murders and pillaging taking place. While some frontier families prepared to protect themselves with rifles, others fled to nearby military forts or larger towns.

The U.S. responded by authorizing new military forts throughout Kansas and stepping up its diplomatic and treaty efforts. These efforts for peace proved ineffectual, and settler murders continued. One county, Mitchell County, is cited as a particularly dangerous war zone. In the summer of 1868, Cheyenne and Sioux Indians ravaged the county. The capture of two young white women, Sarah White and Anna Brewster Morgan, caused particular panic. Morgan was in captivity for months and even got married and conceived a child with an Indian warrior. While Morgan was traumatized and forever changed by her captivity, eventually ending her life in an insane asylum, White used it as an opportunity to talk to reporters, sell her picture to the newspaper, and get attention.

The fall of 1878 provided one final chapter of tragedy for Kansas, as a group of Cheyenne led by Chief Dull Knife escaped their reservation and, intent on returning to their tribal lands, traveled through Kansas, murdering, raping, and plundering on the way. Before the United States army caught up with them, they had killed 40 people, raped many more, and caused $100,000 worth of property damage.

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7: This chapter deals with leisure activities. Social visits were a welcome relief from the day-to-day grind. Adults would have supper and share stories while children played, and afterward there might be a reading, singing, or storytelling. Passing visitors and new settlers were a special pleasure and were always welcome, though there were a few con men and other unsavory folk around as well.

Picnics were a favorite recreation, happening on Saturday afternoons or Sunday after church services. Everyone would bring a dish. The men might hunt buffalo or butcher hogs for fresh meat, and the children would play games and have races. Similarly, holidays were a festive occasions; perhaps the most-celebrated was the Fourth of July. On the Fourth, the blast of a cannon would announce the day, followed by a brief church service and dancing, feasts, and the harmony of a makeshift band. Fireworks would be set off at night.

Weddings were also an opportunity for social gathering. While most weddings were modest, overseen by a justice of the peace and a few witnesses, other more established families had more lavish affairs.

Dancing was a favorite pastime, especially for young couples. Bachelor's Balls might be held in order to find bachelors a good woman. A typical dance might take place in a barn, stable, or schoolroom. A collection would be taken for a fiddler, who would direct the dancers in a variety of dances, from waltzes to square dances.

Chapter 8: Children were an important part of the family, offering joy and energy to lonely and hard times, and eventually offering an extra hand on the farm or for household chores. Prairie families tended to be large, due to a high rate of child mortality on the plains. Chores were divided according to the sexes, with boys helping the father work the land, and girls helping the mother to mend, cook, and launder.

Toys were a very rare commodity on the plains, so children would use whatever was at hand, be it their imagination or branches whittled into dolls or whistles. Small animals, like ducks and dogs, would also provide endless fascination for kids.

Christmas was a special time for frontier families. The father would take a trip to find a tree to cut down for the Christmas tree. The tree would be decorated with popcorn, candles, colorful ribbons, or whatever else was at hand. Red stockings would be hung, and modest gifts would be exchanged. Santa Claus was alive and well in the homes of frontier families; if a child asked how Santa would get in without a chimney, mother would simply open the door a crack on Christmas Eve to let in the jolly old elf.

Chapter 9 and Chapter 10

Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9: As the frontier became settled and a new society emerged, there was a call and a need for education. Because teaching did not promise the kind of salary that would attract men, frontier mothers answered the call; having received schooling back East, they proceeded to teach what they knew to the children of the prairie. At first, the teacher taught at her own home for her own children and for neighboring children. The hard dirt floor served as a blackboard, into which would be scratched spelling and math lessons. There were no grades; the same material would be taught to children of varying ages.

Eventually, a town might pool its resources and construct a schoolhouse. The first schoolhouses were very bare, having perhaps nothing more than a stove for warmth and a small slate blackboard. A teacher might teach from the Bible, almanac, or a school reader from back east; children's own reading material at home would vary greatly, but they practiced with whatever was at hand. Given the importance of most children as home labor, attendance was not mandatory and was dependent on if a child had time enough for both chores and schooling. Eventually, professional teachers emerged. To supplement their meager income, teachers might board (live) at the homes of her students in exchange for teaching.

As teachers became professionalized, so did schools. Counties were divided into school districts, with each district controlling the schools inside it, including levying taxes, school supplies, and filing district reports. Districts were overseen by a three-person School Board, and over this body at the county level was the Superintendent. Over time, power over schools became increasingly centralized at the county level, and as a result schools and curriculum became more standardized.

Chapter 10: Religion provided comfort and confidence to the frontier person. It provided certainty and continuity in a land wholly different from previous homes. Common religious beliefs also strengthened community ties. At this time, Kansas was predominantly Protestant, though there were pockets of Jews, Catholics, Quakers, and Orthodox. Various denominations of Protestantism would gather in the same place for worship every Sunday.

In the early days, churches were a rarity, and communities worshiped in any building that was large enough and convenient, be it a home, schoolhouse, carpenter's shop, or railroad depot.

Gradually, as the neighborhood grew and got settled, there was a need for a more permanent religious establishment. Families would hold bake sales, sewing circles, and various other kinds of fundraisers to raise money for a new church. As money was scarce, this was supplemented by contributions in kind - nails, timber, and labor - to

make a church a reality. Early churches were very simple, with backless benches serving as pews and other furniture a hodgepodge of donated antiques and hand-me-downs.

Churches were another opportunity for women to take a leading role in the community, be it caring for the church itself, raising funds through organizing community events, or initiating missionary and charity work for the needy.

Most churches were lacking a proper preacher. Preachers were so sparse that a process of "circuit riding" was done among available preachers. These "circuit riders" would travel across Kansas to various "circuits," or areas divided by the church, performing baptisms, marriages, funerals, and sermons. Itinerant preachers in this fashion had only a meager income and had to depend upon hospitality among the congregation for room and board. The honor to house and feed the circuit rider was highly coveted.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Frontier towns started near major trails and stagecoach lines. The government decided that 320 acres of dedicated township land was enough to establish a town; to attain this number, speculators and businessmen bought up acres and convinced settlers to buy in as well. More salesmanship was required to attract the various businesses required for a town - saloon, hotel, general store, livery stable - usually in the form of free real estate. Despite this, there was a "boom or bust" quality to many towns on the frontier. If a stagecoach line altered or the railroad diverted travelers, businesses and residents might leave a town as quickly as they came to follow the traffic.

The hotel or inn was an important rest stop for travelers and a place to discuss politics, share stories, or simply gather to eat. Guest rooms were small and had their share of problems, including only dim kerosene light and bed bugs, but nevertheless they served the needs of those passing through. Inns were hard to maintain and turn a profit with, as food prices were usually high; help was hard to find, and business fluctuated with the number of travelers.

The general store became the center of town business and a popular visit for frontier people. Small towns featured only the one general store; larger towns divided what the general store had to offer into several businesses, including the pharmacy, blacksmith, and butcher. General stores also served as post offices. Like teaching, being a postmaster (or mistress) paid poorly and thus it was usually up to the women to take charge of this particular service.

A newspaper was a relatively easy business to start and a popular way to record a town's history, extol the virtues of the town, and advertise vacant land. Many newspapers (and then rival newspaper) opened across Kansas. Early newspapers recorded events: new settler arrivals, vacant land for sale, and other objective events. This eventually gave way to very political and subjective newspapers, full of scathing editorials and soaring rhetoric.

Crimes, as everywhere, were a problem on the plains. Towns would usually elect their own sheriff, but jails were very few. A criminal might be locked up in a local stable, or even at the sheriff's home. Perhaps one of the most serious crimes was horse thievery, as horses were essential for farmwork and transportation and usually the only thing in a family of any real worth. Vigilante groups would occasionally rise up to catch criminals, dispensing their own swift justice without evidence or a trial, usually ending in the offender hanging from the nearest tree.

Chapter 12 and Chapter 13

Chapter 12 and Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12: Though cowboys are perhaps the most lasting image we have of the American frontier; in fact, their prominence was short-lived, with the majority of cattle drives happening from 1866 to 1886. These drives, from railroad-less Texas to Kansas to points East, aimed at resupplying the East's meat supplies after they became devastated after the Civil War. Until 1867, a restrictive quarantine was placed on Texas longhorns, who carried a tick which could kill other cattle breeds with Texas fever; the lessening of this quarantine ushered in the zenith of the cattle drive years. Towns like Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City sprang up around the drives.

A cattle drive's personnel included a trail boss, who would plot the route and conduct financial transactions; the cook, who would feed the men via his chuck wagon; about six or so hands to ride on every side of the herd to ensure a good pace and no stragglers; and horse herders to care for the horses and switch them out as necessary.

Cowboys were a mixed blessing to homesteaders. They were appreciated for the jolt they provided to the local economy and their supply of cow chips. However, herds could often stomp crops and eat valuable grassland. Little could be done to deter this behavior, as fencing was hard to come by and difficult to erect. Only in the early 1880s with the invention of barbed wire were farmers able to cordon off their land from cattle drives.

Once to Kansas, most cowboys would be released, and given their pay ranging from twenty-five to forty-dollars for the month. They could get cleaned up at the barber shop, get new clothes at the general store, then relax at the saloon, where activities included drinking, gambling, or dancing. The trail boss would sell the whole herd or a portion thereof, usually by the head.

Eventually, increased fencing, bad weather, declining prices, and extension of the quarantine rules spelled an end to open-range cattle drives. Cattlemen were forced to stay in one place to raise their cattle, ushering in a "closed-range" industry.

Chapter 13: Significant immigrant communities also made their way to Kansas, prompted by religious persecution or poverty in their native lands. The railroads sold lands cheaply to new settlers, which also encouraged immigrants to settle in Kansas. Scotland, Russia, Sweden, and Germany were among the nationalities represented in small communities throughout Kansas.

Perhaps the most famous immigrant community was Victoria, started by English nobleman Sir George Grant in 1872. Victoria attracted 200 Englishmen and women, who brought their wealth and Victorian customs with them, including fox-hunting (or coyote hunting, when a fox wasn't available) and veneration of the Queen in portraits.

Unfortunately, within only a few years, disasters befell Victoria, including a prairie fire and thievery (considering the town's wealth and rare livestock). Victorian farmers were ill-equipped to deal with the hard Kansas soil, and crops became increasingly poorer. Eventually, in less in 10 years, Victoria was all but abandoned. George Grant refused to leave the town he created, and died there in 1878.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

From its beginning as a territory, Kansas endured constant tension between pro-slavery and abolitionist groups that frequently erupted in violence and bloodshed. The Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 declared that each territory decide for itself the question of slavery. With Nebraska choosing the abolitionist camp, pro-slavery proponents fought fiercely for Kansas. In 1855, the first election was dominated by pro-slavery voters from neighboring Missouri, and thus the first legislature was largely pro-slavery. Abolitionists objected to the vote as fixed, and began their own government and legislative body.

A few slaves were brought in to Kansas by extremists from the South, but by and large there was no slavery in Kansas, especially by the start of the Civil War. Most people in reality were sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, and several helped run the Kansas lines of the Underground Railroad to shepherd runaway slaves to the North. Legendary John Brown, a fervent abolitionist, waged war against pro-slavery towns and groups for three years in Kansas. In retaliation to these attacks, pro-slavery forces attacked the town of Osawatomie in the summer of 1856. The town was chosen in part because five sons of John Brown lived there, and it was a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment. Pro-slavery forces managed to rout this town, but elsewhere abolitionist made gains.

By 1857, most hostilities had lessened, and Kansas was determined to become a state. A constitution declaring Kansas as a free state was ratified and sent to Congress in 1859, but only after the secession of the South in 1861 did Kansas officially become a state, on January 29th, a day of festivities and celebrations statewide.

When the Civil War did come, Kansas threw its support clearly to the North, and 20,000 men, nearly two-thirds of the adult male population of Kansas, joined the Union army. Some went east, while some stayed behind to stop the guerrilla-type warfare plaguing Kansas. The most infamous leader of these Confederate attacks was William C. Quantrill, a horse thief and robber turned Confederate soldier. Basing his operations out of Lawrence, Quantrill led 600 men on various attacks on communities throughout Kansas.

Quantrill's most famous exploit was perhaps his 1863 raid on Lawrence, where the collapse of a federal prison housing many confederate sympathizers was the root cause of a cry for revenge. Quantrill was merciless, and by the time the raid was over, 200 buildings were in ruins and 143 people were dead. A neighboring Union outfit pursued Quantrill, but he managed to slip safely back into Missouri.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Towards the end of the pioneer period, women increasingly had a voice in governmental affairs and moral and social issues. Temperance was the first issue to unite many women, and as early as 1857, campaigns were waged against liquor sales and saloons. The organization of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874 provided real impetus for change in Kansas, leading to the election of John St. John in 1878, a prohibitionist who introduced legislation to prohibit the sale of alcohol.

Still, liquor could not be banished from the state, as several local sheriffs looked the other way when it came to liquor, and a loophole in the legislation for pharmacy use of alcohol became abused. Women and the WCTU continued to fight for reform and stricter enforcement. Some became increasingly militant; perhaps most famously, a prohibitionist by the name of Carry Nation raided saloons across the state, urging "Smash, women, smash," as she wrecked saloons and broke their bottles.

Women's suffrage was also an important issue to Kansas women. Efforts started as early as 1859, and in 1861, women were given the right to vote in school elections, making Kansas one of the most progressive states in the Union. In 1867, a constitutional amendment was introduced to give women the right to vote, but despite nationwide attention and the fevered efforts of both famous and local suffragists, the amendment failed to pass. The issue laid dormant for nearly three decades thereafter.

In 1879, in the town of Lincoln, the state's first woman's suffrage organization was created, which prompted the creation of many other suffrage groups at the local level. In 1884, a statewide suffrage association was created, the Equal Suffrage Association, and it was largely pressure from this organization that prompted the Kansas legislature to examine women's suffrage again. In 1887, women won the right to vote in city elections (still not at the state or federal level).

This victory opened up more and more chances for women to become politically active. In 1887, Susannah Medora Salter was elected mayor of Argonia, the first woman in the nation to hold such an office. Similar elections followed.

Federal suffrage was voted upon and again defeated in 1894, but the suffrage movement continued to gain professionalism, organizational skill, and influence. It was not until 1912 that Kansas women were finally granted to right to vote; Kansas became the 8th state in the nation to grant this right.

Characters

The Pioneer Woman

In the frontier, the pioneer woman saw a chance to raise a family in God's country. Leaving civilization and family for the desolate wilderness, pioneer women took heart in their (usually Protestant) faith, and the sense of freedom, destiny, and opportunity that the plains promised.

As per the tradition of the nineteenth century and before, women were first expected to manage the home, be it the raising of children, managing illness, cooking, cleaning, laundering, and sewing, which women accomplished with a not inconsiderable amount of skill and knowledge, from complicated herbal teas to combat fevers, to sheep-shearing and dyeing of their own wools and making of their own soap. However, many women, due to the very existence of frontier families on the knife-edge of survival and starvation, were thrust into traditionally male roles, from helping on the farm to hunting.

In a largeer community sense, women, too, had chances they never had before, from directing the building of a new church, to overseeing education as members of the local School Board, to having a hand in city politics, be it as mayor, city council, or as part of special-interest groups like the Temperance movement or women's suffrage. The Kansas frontier proved to be a double-edged sword for its female inhabitants, offering opportunity and equality alongside tragedy and hardship.

The Pioneer Man

The pioneer man was lured to Kansas by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed legal settlement of the Kansas and Nebraska territories by whites, promising cheap land to whoever might brave the prairie. Accustomed to the comforts and civilization of the East, the frontier settler usually endured a period of shock and dismay; the "God's country"-type Utopia he had expected proved to be a desolate, arid prairie, with tough soil, little water, and plenty of natural hazards.

The husband in a frontier family was chiefly responsible for farming the land and raising a crop, which was usually corn. Armed with a breaking plow and a team of oxen, the farmer drove deep cuts into the tough soil, planting seeds underneath the plowed furrows. The husband was also responsible for hunting, sometimes going on long expeditions with other men to hunt antelope, buffalo and other large and small game. Back home, it was the men who helped to raise a cabin or sod house for a new neighbor, an event that became a community event and welcoming gift. Similarly, houses in town like the church or schoolhouse would also become a time of social unity.

Men could be gone from their homestead for weeks or months at a time, either on hunting expeditions, trips to a major town or railroad, or to find a second job or other

source of supplemental income for a struggling family. Life on the prairie could be a very lonely existence.

Mary Ann Bickerdyke

Known as "Mother" Bickerdyke, this woman gained fame as a nurse for the Union, patching up soldiers behind the lines and at the front. After the war, she took up the cause of veterans, caring for them and raising funds for them to settle in Kansas.

The Water Witch

The water witch is a curious denizen of the prairie. When families, new to their plot of land, had difficulty finding a source of water, they would employ the services of the water witch, who would used the forked branch of a peach or willow tree to pace over the land . When the head of the branch dipped down to the ground, that's where the water was.

Thadyus Hyatt

Hyatt was a New York philanthropist who was moved to action by the plight of the Kansas settlers during the Kansas Drought of 1860. From the east coast, he collected more than eight million pounds of provisions (clothing, food, etc.) to disperse among the starving Kansas population.

Sarah White and Anna Brewster Morgan

These two young pioneer women were kidnapped by Indians during the aggressions of the late 1860s. Morgan married an Indian warrior and conceived a child, who would die a year later. Morgan was traumatized by the event, while White used it as an opportunity for publicity and a chance to marry a good man. These particular kidnappings gained national notoriety, and caused the Kansas people along with the U.S. Army to rise up and squelch Indian aggressions in the state for good.

The Circuit Rider

The "circuit rider" was an itinerant preacher (usually Protestant, especially Methodist) who traveled throughout the various "circuits" the church had established in the Kansas frontier. Since preachers were scarce, it was up to these circuit riders to perform baptisms, funeral rites, marriages, and sermons. They depended upon the hospitality of frontier families for room and board.

Joseph McCoy

Joseph McCoy was a Chicago entrepreneur who was responsible for turning Abilene, Kansas from a sleepy prairie town into a bustling cattle-driving center. Choosing Abilene because of its abundant water supply, he built depots, saloons, stockyards, and other buildings and then waged an advertising campaign to attract cowboys and their herds of Texas longhorns. Cattle was first driven through Abilene in 1867.

Sir George Grant

In 1872, English nobleman Sir George Grant toured the Kansas prairie and felt it would be a great place for an English community. He bought fifty thousand acres and established the town of Victoria, which attracted nearly 200 English families. Victorian customs were observed, such as fox hunting and tea time, and in many ways Victoria was a Little England. Unfortunately, the noble families could not adjust to the harsh prairie, its tough soil, and its frequent hazards, and Victoria was abandoned less than a decade after it started. Sir George Grant refused to leave his town and died there in 1878.

William C. Quantrill

Quantrill was a Kansas outlaw turned Confederate rebel leader who led raids to terrorize and intimidate abolitionist communities all across Kansas. Most infamously, he led a raid on Lawrence in 1863 that left 200 buildings burned to the ground and 143 dead.

Carry Nation

Carry Nation was a famous and militant prohibitionist and advocate for temperance in Kansas. With a motto of "Smash, women, smash," she urged the destruction of saloons by smashing its bottles of what she called "Demon Rum."

Objects/Places

The Old Military Road

This is a road that led from Kansas City, Missouri, to Fort Worth, Texas, and other places in the southwest. Many herds of cattle and ponies were driven north on this trail, and it became so well-used that it became very wide (after one set of wheel tracks became too deep, wagons would ride beside the tracks, thus widening the road) and fissures opened in between the tracks.

Kansas Pacific Railroad

The Kansas Pacific Railroad began in 1862, going west at the same time Central Pacific started from Sacramento going east. By 1870 it had reached Denver. One woman in the narrative remembers being stuck on a train for more than two days after a blizzard swallowed up the train and tracks.

The Soddy

The "soddy," or sod house, was a signature building of the Kansas prairie, built by those in the western part of the state where timber was scarce. It consisted of one-foot-wide, four-inches-thick pieces of earth, built up like bricks to enclose a 16 x 12 foot room. It provided excellent insulation for the summer and winter, but it lacked ventilation and was a stuffy, damp, and dark habitation.

Cow Chips

Cow and buffalo dung, euphemistically called "chips," was a valuable source of fuel on the prairie where timber was scarce. Chips would be kept in gunnysacks in the cabin.

Kansas Drought of 1860

From June 1859 to November 1860, there was hardly any rainfall in the state of Kansas, and this combined with unrelenting warm temperatures caused a great drought that withered crops and grass, causing mass starvation. This situation caused the exodus of about 30,000 settlers from Kansas, or about one-third of the total population of Kansas at that time. This event hurt the public image of Kansas, stifling emigration to the state for years to come.

The Grasshopper Year of 1874

1874 was the year of a huge grasshopper infestation in Kansas that ruined many crops and harvests. Millions of grasshoppers descended on the plains, eating everything from vegetables to grass to clothing and wood. The grasshopper even had lasting effects, as streams brown with grasshopper excrement became undrinkable, and livestock full of grasshoppers became inedible, tasting so much like grasshopper .

The Fourth of July

This holiday was perhaps the most well-known and most celebrated event on the Kansas prairie. Neighbors would gather from many miles away to town, where a cannon blast rang in the holiday. A church service would be followed by a parade around town by a makeshift band. Feasts, games, and singing would take up the day, and at night a firework spectacular would be unleashed in the night sky.

The Kansas Weekly Herald

The Kansas Weekly Herald was the first newspaper started in Kansas. Its first edition was issued on September 15, 1854, in the city of Leavenworth. Newspapers were a popular way to communicate information and record a town's history, and a relatively easy business to start and maintain. By 1889 there were 733 weekly papers in operation in Kansas.

Victoria

Victoria, Kansas was a town started by Sir George Grant of England, intended as a community for English immigrants. The town attracted many noble families of England, who brought wealth and a Victorian sensibility and culture to the Kansas prairie. Unfortunately, the experiment ended after only a few years, when the English found farming too difficult, and the hazards of the prairie too draining. Many returned to England, while others moved to neighboring towns, such as Hays.

National Women's Christian Temperance Union

This organization, known as the WCTU, formed an arm in Kansas in 1874, and united women in a common cause of temperance (abstinence from liquor) and temperance's natural legislative corollary, prohibition.

Themes

Equality

One consequence of the homesteading movement was the creation of opportunities for women in arenas like the home, politics, and community, that had been discouraged or outright squelched before. Where tradition would have the woman confined to the home, raising children and performing household chores, many times the dynamic and desperate nature of the prairie thrust women (willingly or unwillingly) into male spheres. If there was an extra set of hands needed to sew corn seeds, operate a plow, or mend a yoke, chances are a woman could and would provide those hands.

Increasing gender equality was not limited to the home. The burgeoning frontier town became a place for women to assume unprecedented leadership roles. The construction of a church and its upkeep might be directed by a woman or group of women, who would organize fundraisers and charity work for the congregation. Teaching would also become an area for the woman to excel within; the entire education of the children of a town might fall to a single woman, who would administer the schoolhouse and determine curriculum. The woman's place in education would continue as education became more sophisticated and local School Boards were created to oversee school districts. Many of the first School Board members were women.

In politics, Kansas also proved a progressive state. The temperance movement united many women in a common cause, and the women's suffrage movement also proved to be a powerful vehicle for women to voice their opinions. Though women would not be granted the right to vote at a state or federal level until 1912, Kansas granted women local-level voting rights at an early time in its statehood. As a result, many towns could boast of all-female City Councils, or unprecedented women mayors.

Frontier Ingenuity

One large lesson to take away from Pioneer Women is an understanding of the level of ingenuity on display in frontier communities. A thousand miles removed from the developed, industrialized towns of the eastern United States, Kansas settlers had to utilize intelligence and resourcefulness to survive in the wilderness.

A good example of this are the sod houses of Western Kansas. In an area where timber was scarce, if not non-existent, farmers developed sod-cutting plows that could carve bricks from the tough Kansas soil, bricks to build up into a house that featured good insulation and resistance against all types of weather except rain. On the topic of the tough Kansas soil, breaking plows also had to be developed to slice through the Kansas topsoil for plowing. Through trial and error, it was found that corn was the hardiest crop

on the frontier, and as a result the frontier woman developed a vast array of dishes based upon the vegetable.

In absence of coal or timber, the resourceful frontiersman found that manure from cows, "chips," provided a certain if not fragrant way to keep the crucial hearth fire burning.

Ingenuity, born from necessity, found its way into almost every aspect of life. Fireproofing was done around a farm to protect against raging prairie fires. Children's toys were fashioned from whatever was at hand. Church services were held in carpenter's shops or courthouses prior to proper churches being built, as were school sessions. Even on the level of the town structure, a similar resourcefulness could be found, with towns booming or busting very quickly according to changing trail routes. In many ways, the frontier is a history of human ingenuity.

Triumph Over Hardship

Author Joanna L. Stratton needs but to state the facts to characterize the frontier life as extraordinarily difficult, dangerous, and uncertain. From a rickety stagecoach ride through the wilderness, to wolves and coyotes, to blizzards, droughts, loneliness, starvation, unchecked disease, the Civil War, Indians, and pro-slavery marauders, Kansas is oftentimes depicted as a dangerous and deadly place.

However, the thread that unites much of this hardship, disaster, and turmoil, is the subsequent resilience of the pioneer woman. Whereas lesser women may have given up on the dream of self-sufficiency on the prairie (and in the English community of Victoria, the reader in fact is presented to people who did pack up and leave, defeated), the hardy pioneer woman would, time after time, build a new life from the ashes of tragedy.

There are several reasons for the peculiar fortitude found in the pioneer woman. Above all, as stressed, is an abiding faith in God, a faith that would lead many to believe in a sort of manifest destiny, the belief that Kansas was God's country, and they were meant to inhabit it as to be closer to Him. There was also the thrill of opportunity and freedom from the traditional roles prescribed to women back East. In the frontier a woman could lead her life the way she saw fit. Finally, and dovetailing off of the first two reasons, there was the inherent promise in the building, from the ground up, of a new community, providing a sort of irresistible Utopian experiment that made all the hardships worthwhile.

Style

Perspective

Author Joanna L. Stratton stumbled upon hundreds of accounts from pioneer women in her grandmother's attic. These accounts had been collected by her great-grandmother, Lilla Day Monroe, suffragist and lawyer, who intended to make them into a book. Stratton has fulfilled the desire of her great-grandmother, then, with this volume, which intermingles history with personal accounts of life on the Kansas frontier.

Though traditional history (Civil War battles, legislative acts, etc.) find their way into Pioneer Women, Stratton is chiefly interested in the lives of those history may have forgotten, the everyday frontier family, and its day-to-day struggles. These seemingly ordinary aspects of life are Stratton's object of interest, and it is clear she wishes to make a case that the "ordinary" can be in fact "extraordinary," and may in fact tell us more about history than more traditional accounts. And particularly within this family, Stratton concentrates on women as a forgotten voice. Indeed, all of Stratton's first-hand accounts are made by women, and topics are almost always brought back to their impact upon women.

There is a sense that this period and place in history are especially exciting to the author, as there were unprecedented opportunities for women, be it traditional male duties such as farming and hunting when a husband was gone or needed an extra set of hands, community organization for church and education, or politics in the form of the temperance and women's suffrage movements.

Tone

Author Joanna L. Stratton's tone could be described as sympathetic, but also matter-of-fact. Introductory and closing paragraphs (in chapters) are usually a time for Stratton to reveal subjectivity, sympathy, and emotion. In these paragraphs, she might praise pioneer women for their hardiness or strength of character, lament the dangers frontier families had to endure, or rue the abolitionist debate that would tear communities apart. Stratton clearly wants the reader on the side of the pioneer women, inviting the reader to walk a proverbial mile in the shoes of the pioneers.

Past these kind of bookends, however, Stratton usually employs a reserved, authoritative, and objective tone, appropriate to a history. Here, she eschews any emotion, switching rhetorical styles for the purpose of ensuring us she is an objective historian who isn't simply perverting history to her own ends or selecting only the pieces of history that fit her perception/conception of it. She leaves any emotion to the first-hand accounts she interweaves throughout the history. The tones within these accounts combine the sort of distance that comes with the passage of time (as they were written years later), with the intimacy and immediacy of someone who actually endured the

experience being recounted. Pioneer Women therefore mixes emotional immediacy with historical objectivity.

Structure

Pioneer Women features a five-part structure. Part I deals with the beginning of the frontier period, traveling across the country, finding a homestead site, and erecting a home. Part II is concerned with the various dangers to the frontier family, including weather and Indians. Part III deals with the social aspects of frontier life, including recreational activities, school, and church. Part IV is about the structure of the frontier town and the cattle drives' impact on towns. Part V deals with political issues: first it details the fight between abolitionist and pro-slavery groups on the way to Kansas' statehood; secondly, temperance and women's suffrage is explored and explained.

Chapters within each Part neatly separate each topic. There is usually a paragraph at the start of each chapter to introduce the contents of the chapter to come and an ending paragraph to summarize the same.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of structure is the fact that the book interweaves objective history (from the author) with personal first-hand accounts excerpted from letters, diaries, and memoirs of frontier women. These excerpts serve to expand upon the topic being covered, making the history more personal and adding the kinds of details only a first-hand account could provide.

Quotes

"Beautiful and bountiful, the land was the great lure of Kansas. Some settlers sought freedom, some yearned for prosperity, some craved adventure, but in the end it was the promise of the land that drew them halfway across a continent. Here they could build their own homes, cultivate their own fields and develop their own communities. Undoubtedly, it took a special kind of fortitude to adjust to this harsh terrain. Yet with hard work, imagination and tenacity, the future was theirs to mold. In this new land, God's own country, they reached to the stars through the wilderness." (45)

"In locating a prime homestead site, the family sought to find good soil for farming, timber for housing, and water. But the soil and vegetation conditions varied considerably from one part of Kansas to the next. The eastern regions had fertile soil, ample streams and moderate rainfall. With sufficient timber for housing and water for cultivation, this area proved to be relatively hospitable to the pioneering farmer. Traveling westward, however, the emigrants found fewer streams, sparser vegetation and flatter terrain. In some ways, this topography proved easier to cultivate, since there were no forests to clear, no marshes to drain and few stones to extract from the soil. But the serious deficiency of precipitation in the region, coupled with its higher wind velocities and lower humidity levels, placed the western farmers at a serious disadvantage." (49)

"For all the terrors of isolation or attacking wolves, the frontier family soon learned that its worst enemy was nature itself. In Kansas, each season carried its own perils. Spring might favor the farmer with sunny skies and balmy temperatures; yet often melting snows and spring rainstorms caused torrential floods that menaced home and field alike. Tornadoes, with their deafening roar and deadly funnels, often ripped across the land, obliterating everything in their path. Summer, in turn, was apt to unleash droughts and hot winds that withered the crops and crippled the fall harvest. Plagues of grasshoppers devoured entire cultivated fields and miles of prairie foliage. Finally, the bitter winter season brought numbing temperatures and crushing blizzards." (89)

"General George A. Custer, in MY LIFE ON THE PLAINS, wrote about the capture of Anna Morgan and Sarah White in political terms: 'It was the story of oft repeated outrages like these, but particularly of these two, that finally forced the people of Kansas to take up arms in their own defense. . . . so earnest and enthusiastic had the people of the frontier become in their determination to reclaim the two captives, as well as administer justly-merited punishment, that people of all classes and callings were eager to abandon their professions and take up arms against he traditional enemy of the frontier.'" (126)

"On the prairie, dancing, riding and picnicking were by no means the only forms of amusement. Gamesmen hunted everything from ducks and geese to coyotes and buffalo, and occasionally women also tried their hands at shooting game for sport. There were winter sleigh rides across snowy fields, taffy pulls in warm kitchens, and group spelling bees in the local schoolhouse. Literary societies emerged and provided weekly forums for debates, recitations, singing and dialogues within every growing

community. Amateur theatrical groups, made up of the local talent, presented plays in the courthouse or the schoolroom, performing everything from lively informal skits to Shakespearean tragedies." (143)

"On the whole, the family tended to be large. A house full of six to twelve children was not uncommon, and the high rate of child mortality on the frontier encouraged many parents to compensate with additional children. On a practical level, each new pair of working hands helped the family achieve greater self-sufficiency.
For children of all ages, the daily work load was both physically demanding and time-consuming. For the younger ones, there were the daily chores of carrying water buckets, gathering buffalo chips and picking wild fruits. In later years they joined in the heavier work of plowing and planting, building fences and cabins, trapping small animals and helping about the house." (144-45)

"Generally, the class structure was informal, even if the discipline was strict. The school terms were usually short, lasting only a few months at a time. Although most students were interested in their studies, they attended only as their farm chores and the weather permitted. The clanging of a sturdy iron bell that hung outside the schoolhouse door called the youngsters to class each morning. Arriving by foot or horseback, students of assorted ages and various grades took their seats together in the one room. The curriculum, usually ungraded, was left largely to the discretion of the teacher herself. Reading, writing, grammar and spelling always consumed a large portion of the class time, with the basic arithmetic skills in constant review. In addition, geography, history and geometry were taught when pertinent books, maps or globes could be obtained." (160)

"In earlier years, the family cabins and public buildings were adequate for the small frontier congregation. In time, however, a more accommodating and permanent facility was needed. Local parishioners, anxious to build their own church building, gradually assembled whatever funds and materials they could. Toward this goal, the congregation solicited contributions from both its own members and others in the area. Special fairs, raffles and picnics were organized to promote the new church, and the women worked together through their ladies' sewing circles to raise money. Occasionally, national church organizations even game some assistance to the struggling congregations. Money itself, however, was a notoriously scarce commodity on the frontier. When the needed funds fell short, the congregation relied heavily on contributions in kind. Local families donated whatever timber, nails and tools they had. The men worked together to build the church structure, and the women culled from trunks and corners any curtains or furniture that could be spared." (176)

"Undoubtedly, the general store was the most frequented establishment of the frontier town. At first, a single store usually met the community's needs, stocking everything from quinine and calico to hand tools and breaking plows. Occupying a cramped Main Street storefront, it was invariably the center of the town's business life, the place where homesteaders came from miles around to purchase their supplies and sell their crops. For the pioneer woman, a shopping trip to the town general store offered a heartening change from her isolation and daily chores." (194)

"By the mid-1880s, the long cattle drives to the Kansas railroads gradually ended. As increasing numbers of homesteaders settled the western plains of Kansas, fenced fields and thriving communities blocked the trails and limited access to open grazing grounds. Several severe winter blizzards annihilated many herds, and declining prices crippled the cattle market. Furthermore, the construction of the railroad across the Texas borders made the long cumbersome drives unnecessary. Finally, the westward extension of the official quarantine line against the Texas cattle eliminated many Kansas cattle towns and eventually ended the drives altogether in 1884." (220)

"All told, the fight over slavery had brought Kansas an inordinate share of hardship and tragedy. For more than a decade its frontier communities had been torn by political turmoil and partisan hostilities. Wracked by violence in its territorial years, Kansas had not found peace with the attainment of statehood in 1861. Instead, the Civil War had only prolonged its troubles for four more years. In the end, more than 8,500 of its troops suffered war casualties, giving Kansas the highest military death rate of any state in the Union. It was not until 1865, with the end of the Civil War, that its weary settlers finally felt the relief of harmony and stability." (252)

"In 1887, women finally won the right to vote and run for office in all city elections, although state and federal elections still excluded them.
This advance brought women new opportunities in the political arena. Over the next few years, increasing numbers of women became active in local affairs, joining campaigns, working in party politics and running for elective offices. On April 4, 1887, Susannah Medora Salter was elected mayor in the small town of Argonia, becoming the first woman in the nation ever to hold the office. Following her unprecedented victory, the towns of Baldwin, Cottonwood Falls, Rossville, Elk Falls and Oskaloosa likewise elected women mayors. In fact, by the turn of the century a total of fifteen women had won mayoral elections across the state. Minnie Morgan, the mayor of Cottonwood Falls, was even accompanied by an all-woman city council." (265)

Topics for Discussion

What lured people from the East to settle in Kansas?

Describe the various types of housing available to the Kansas settler and the possible advantages and disadvantages of each type.

What disasters and tragedies could befall the frontier family? How were these unfortunate events dealt with or prevented?

What recreational activities were available on the prairie? List a special occasion and explain how it might be celebrated and what would be involved in the festivities.

Describe the frontier town, including the various shops and services that might be found there. Where were towns generally built? What is the "boom and bust" effect as related to the frontier town?

What led to the prevalence of cattle drives (and cowboys) through Kansas? What led to the general disappearance of the open-range cowboy and cattle drives by 1886?

How was the issue of women's suffrage fought for in Kansas? What were the movement's victories and setbacks?