

Prairie Visions Short Guide

Prairie Visions by Pam Conrad

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Overview

Prairie Visions is a compilation of information about pioneer photographer Solomon Butcher and the Nebraska frontier on which he lived, as well as a look at some of the stories and anecdotes of pioneer life which he recorded. An integral part of the book is the inclusion of black-and-white photographs taken by Butcher of his Nebraska contemporaries and which are now part of the Butcher Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Butcher first migrated to Nebraska in 1880 when he was a young man of twenty-four. He staked a claim along with other members of his family in Custer County and built a sod house as required by the Homestead Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1867. He did not stay in Nebraska, however, but returned to Minneapolis to attend medical school. He lasted only a year at medical training, but during this time he met and married Lillie Barber Hamilton and decided to return to Nebraska.

During the next several years, Butcher tried various schemes to support his growing family, but none of them succeeded as well as he envisioned. In 1886, he thought of yet another idea to bring him fame and fortune: he would create a photographic history of Custer County, a documentary of prairie life as it unfolded. He outfitted a wagon with the necessary supplies and traveled for the next several years throughout Custer County, taking more than fifteen hundred photographs of the county's pioneer families. He collected stories, biographies and anecdotes for the book he was certain one day would be published.

Butcher was forced to abandon his history project for a time during the 1890s due to drought and depression in Nebraska. Then in 1899, tragedy almost ended the project when fire destroyed his sod house. While lying in bed one morning, Butcher observed his roof was in flames. He became so hysterical in his attempts to put out the fire that he fell from a ladder, knocking himself unconscious. In the confusion that resulted, his family saved only one basket of clothing. All his equipment, his photographs, and the stories he had collected were destroyed. Fortunately, his glass-plate negatives were stored in a nearby granary and were safe. Butcher began again on the book he held in his dreams.

Finally, in 1901, fifteen years after Butcher first envisioned it, Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska was published. It was very popular, and the first printing of one thousand copies was sold out before the end of the year.

The book's success, however, did not quell Butcher's restlessness. It seemed, rather, to inspire greater quirkiness. He tried many enterprises over the next decades in an elusive effort to become rich, but each scheme gave way to his next grandiose idea. He died in 1927, perhaps never fully aware of the invaluable legacy he left in the vignettes recorded by his camera and pen.



Conrad's biography of Butcher occupies only a small portion of the book's eighty-one pages. The remainder of the text is devoted to sampling photographs and stories collected by Butcher and to additional information about homesteading on the prairie and the beginnings of photography.

About the Author

In the years since 1983 when she published her first book, Pam Conrad has proven to be a prolific writer. She has completed twelve books in eleven years and currently has other works in progress. Although consistently productive, Conrad is anything but repetitive. Her work is marked by its diversity and includes a picture book, a mystery, a biography, historical novels, problem books for young adults, and humorous books for young elementary-age readers.

Conrad was born Pamela Stampf in New York in 1947. Her father was a teacher and her mother a businesswoman. She attended the High School of Performing Arts, Hofstra University, and the New School for Social Research where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1984. In addition to New York, she has lived in Colorado and Texas. She married Robert Conrad, a designer, in 1967, and was divorced in 1982. She has two daughters, Johanna and Sarah, and she has said they are the inspiration for the juvenile books she writes.

With the publication of *Prairie Songs* in 1985, Conrad emerged as a leading writer of children's books. She has been praised for her sensitive characterizations, her lyrical prose, and the strong emotional relationships between characters she creates. She writes frequently of realistic problems confronting today's young adults, such as divorce, single parenthood, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Her presentation is graphic and clear, and even when the plot seems somewhat unbelievable, the author's exploration of the issues is honest, perceptive, and thought-provoking.

Conrad states that while the activity of which she is fondest is writing, she also enjoys needlework, country music, jogging, and reading. She continues to live in New York with her daughters.

Setting

The setting of *Prairie Visions* is Custer County, in central Nebraska, in the years between 1886 when Butcher conceived the idea of *Pioneer History of Custer Country, Nebraska* and 1901, when the book was finally published.

Butcher spent much of the intervening fifteen years photographing the families of Custer County and recording the accounts of pioneer life they told him.

In compiling his history, he stated, "These are the facts as I got them from one who was there."

Social Sensitivity

There are no issues in this book to cause anxiety for parents, teachers, or librarians. In writing *Prairie Visions*, Conrad has demonstrated sensitivity to African Americans who are sometimes overlooked in accounts of western settlement. She includes a brief segment on early black pioneers in Nebraska and illustrates the section with Butcher's photographs of a black family who settled in Custer County in the early 1800s.

Literary Qualities

Butcher made hundreds of photographs and collected a wealth of information from and about pioneer families. His *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska* contained four hundred pages of photographs and text. From this voluminous material, Conrad selected portions she believed would enhance and strengthen a book about Butcher and the era in which he lived.

It is in this selection that her artistry is apparent. The book is concise, to the point, and without a burden of details.

Although not a traditional biography, it gives the reader a sense of familiarity with Butcher and his hardworking wife Lillie, and it provides a remarkable look at pioneering families, the lives they lived, and the stories they thought worth preserving. The information on sod houses, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the beginnings of photography enrich the book. Conrad's easy, informal style fits the book well, and her love for the prairie and the drama of pioneer life gives luster to the reading. Her strong reverence for the work of Butcher is evident, creating incentive for the reader to linger a little longer and peer a little closer until there is a sense that these are real people with real stories to tell.

Prairie Visions is a documentary view of pioneer life and reflects insight into the historical, sociological, geographical, and economic climate of a slice of American history. For this, one must credit the vision and tenacity of Butcher who recorded history as it was lived; but one must credit, as well, the work of Conrad for the endearing and enduring portrait she has created.

Themes and Characters

Solomon Butcher is the only character in *Prairie Visions* that is developed with any depth, and even his portrait is not sharply defined. Family members, including his wife Lillie, son Lynn, and daughter Madge, are mentioned by name, but play little part in the narrative. Of more interest are the people in the stories and anecdotes of Custer County who appear briefly but add much to the entertainment value of the book. Who can forget Uncle Swain who throws himself into a snow bank to freeze in order to torment Aunt Sarah but gives up and returns to the soddy when she only laughs at him? It is the same Ephram Swain Finch who later supplies the financing which enables Butcher to finish his book. Equally interesting is the homesteader who falls down a well and spends several days contriving to climb out, as well as the cowhand who craves a boat while sitting astride his horse.

In telling the tale of Butcher, Conrad celebrates his extraordinary accomplishments while focusing on the times that shaped him. The photographs reveal pioneer life as it was lived in Nebraska in the late 1800s. One sees the faces, the clothes, the windmills, the soddies, and the prized possessions brought out for photographing. There is the softly rolling prairie that forms a backdrop for the portraits, and looking at the pictures, one is aware of its timelessness. In studying Butcher's stories, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the embattled pioneer's need for a strong back, a stout heart, and a stiff upper lip. There are tornadoes, prairie fires, outlaws, fleas, grasshoppers, and uncovered wells with which to cope.

Hot, arid summers and relentlessly cold winters mark the days, and the settler comes home to a crowded sod house that leaks miserably when it rains and gives shelter to snakes and small animals that build homes in its walls. Added to these miseries are the long hours of hard work for both husband and wife with few opportunities for socializing and merry making. Tedium and monotony, loneliness and homesickness, discouragement and failure are powerful foes with which settlers must cope.

Prairie Visions is a paean to the tenacity and strength of the pioneers who stayed to tame the prairie and build communities in Nebraska. It is also a tribute to the vision of Butcher who knew history was being made and had the foresight to preserve it for later generations.



Topics for Discussion

1. There are divergent ideas as to why many pioneers were often photographed with prized possessions such as pianos, sewing machines, and musical instruments included in the portraits. Some historians say the subjects were told to bring out their cherished objects for photographing. Others say people left these outside the soddy anyway since quarters were so crowded and Nebraska was generally very dry. What is your opinion about this, and what are your reasons?
2. If you were told to bring your most prized possessions to be photographed with your portrait, what would you bring? What do you think your parents would bring?
3. Conrad's portrayal of Butcher is succinct; his biography reduced to a minimum of facts. Do you think the book would have been improved with more details or do you think her concise style is better?
4. Conrad pictures Butcher as being dilatory, scheming, lackadaisical, and unable to stick to a task that required hard work. How do you account for the extraordinary legacy left by such a man?
5. There are a wealth of inventions, products, machines, and conveniences available to you that were unavailable to your grandparents when they were your age. What three do you believe most enhance the quality of modern life?
6. Photographs are considered an invaluable aid to historians. What do the photographs in *Prairie Visions* tell the historian about life on the Nebraska frontier?
7. It was usual practice among pioneer families to provide all passing strangers food and lodging. How do you account for this tradition of hospitality?
8. Conrad says that one question she ponders when poring over the photographs taken by Butcher is, "Where are the outhouses?" Speculate as to the answer to this question.
9. Look at the photograph on page 34 of *Prairie Visions*. Note the cellar located at the side of the soddy. For what purposes do you think pioneer families used their cellars?
10. Conrad mentions the presence of a black-and-white dog in many of Butcher's photographs. Look at the pictures on pages 22, 25, 37, and 78.

Would you surmise the black-andwhite dog is a breed dog that flourished in Custer County, or is it Butcher's dog who enjoyed being photographed?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compile information about homesteading on the Nebraska frontier which can be learned from *Prairie Visions*.
2. Looking at the photographs included in *Prairie Visions* and using information gathered from the text, speculate what life was like for a Nebraska prairie child.
3. The inspiration for *Prairie Visions* came from an earlier book by Conrad entitled *Prairie Songs*. A point made in this book is that frontier life was very harsh and one must be resilient to survive. What were some of the hardships that tested the courage of the pioneers?
4. This book contains a section about the Nebraska soddy. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the sod house?
5. Using what you have learned about the use of soddies in Nebraska, explain the wide divergence of pioneer homes in early America, such as log cabins, dugouts, or adobe houses.
6. Write a report on some aspect of pioneer life. Suggestions include: making a quilt; building a fire; breaking sod; building a soddy; planting a garden; preserving food; slaughtering a pig or calf for meat; and going into town to buy necessary supplies.
7. In your opinion, what would be the most difficult aspect of your life if you were one of the children pictured in *Prairie Visions*? What would be the most pleasant aspect?
8. Pretend Solomon Butcher is photographing and interviewing your family.

What anecdote from your family life would you tell him? If you cannot think of one, ask your mother or father to help you.

9. Oral history is a valuable means of preserving information about an earlier era. Interview an older person about the way life has changed in his or her lifetime. Suggestions for topics include: What games and activities did children play when you were growing up? What was your school like? How has dating changed? What was life like without television? How did you celebrate important holidays, i.e., Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, when you were a child?

For Further Reference

Conrad, Pam. "The Last Book." *Horn Book* (May/June 1992): 309-310. In this brief article, Conrad explores the notion of a primitive people who believe in two deaths: when a person's body dies and when all people who knew that person die. This brings her to wonder about an author and what happens when her last book is no longer readable. Her musings are interesting, giving insight into Conrad as a person rather than into her works.

Review. *Horn Book Magazine* (May/June 1991): 345-346. This review gives a brief synopsis of Conrad's book. The reviewer calls it a well-designed, narrated album that makes imaginative use of source materials to convey real setting and character.

Rochman, Hazel. "Starred Reviews: Books for Youth." *Booklist* (March 15, 1991): 1503. Rochman describes *Prairie Visions* as "beautifully written" and calls it "history that connects us and expands our vision."

Related Titles

Conrad has written two additional books whose setting, like *Prairie Visions*, is early Nebraska. *My Daniel* is the story of Julia Creath, now an old woman, who wanders through the Natural History Museum with her two grandchildren while her mind flashes back to the Nebraska prairie when she was a young girl. Twelve-year-old Julia loves her older brother Daniel "with a white fire." She believes nothing bad can happen to either of them. After all, Amba, a strange woman who can see into the past and foretell the future, has told Julia she and Daniel will be locked together for all time.

However, the summer Daniel is sixteen, something bad does happen. Daniel learns money is being paid for dinosaur bones, and he becomes obsessed with saving their farm by finding a dinosaur. He finds the fossilized remains of a dinosaur, but before the man from New York arrives to examine them, Daniel is killed by lightning.

Daniel's dinosaur turns out to be an extraordinary find. It is crated and sent to New York where it is reassembled and placed on display. When Julia, clinging to her two grandchildren, looks at the dinosaur for the first time, she is filled with joy. She feels Daniel's presence once again, and knows it is true what Amba has said, she and Daniel are locked together for all time.

In *Prairie Songs*, Louisa Downing loves the Nebraska prairie, but realizes life on the frontier is difficult and knows one must be strong to survive.

The arrival of the new doctor and his wife Emmeline, creates an exciting diversion for everyone. However, Emmeline arrives at her soddy dressed in stylish New York apparel, bringing crates of books and trunks of beautiful dresses. It is obvious to all that she is frail and delicate, "a hot-house flower," little suited for the harshness of the frontier.

Nevertheless, Emmeline does wonderful things for Louisa and her excessively shy younger brother Lester. She gives them reading lessons, and a love for poetry blossoms in Louisa, while Lester begins to emerge from his shell.

Emmeline, however, sinks into a silent world of madness and despair. She eventually dies, frozen in the Nebraska snow, and her death forces Louisa to look realistically at the rigors of frontier life. Instead of being discouraged by its limitations, she is renewed by its promise.

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