# South Dakota Women Writers and the Emergence of the Pioneer Heroine

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The white women who settled Dakota Territory in the 1870s and 1880s did not write novels. After the grueling work of making a home out of a dugout, a sod hut, or a tarpaper shanty and of feeding, clothing, and nurturing their families, they had neither time nor energy for such imaginative creation. If they filched a few moments from their labors to write anything, their literary expression took the form of letters, diaries, or journals. This

<sup>1.</sup> Laura Bower Van Nuys, for instance, explains that her mother wrote letters in a "telegraphic style" because of the pressures of washing, cooking, and cleaning for her large family. She quotes from one of her mother's letters to her daughter: "I have just put the girls to bed Lulu is quite sick with a cold Nettie has one of her crying spells and Rose is sick with sympathy with her Quinnie has a touch of sore throat and Squiz fell against the boiler and hurt her eyebrow but they will all be well in the morning and able to eat breakfast" (Laura Bower Van Nuys, The Family Band: From the Missouri to the Black Hills, 1881-1890, Pioneer Heritage Series, no. 5 [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961], p. 47).

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source material has only recently been discovered and explored by scholars for the light it sheds on the settlement of the West,<sup>2</sup> and it is greatly modifying our interpretation of the western experience, an interpretation that has heretofore focused on the exploits of male figures—scouts, trappers, soldiers, traders, miners, cowboys, outlaws, and sodbusters. Female experience on the frontier did not go entirely unnoticed until recent times, however, for if the first frontierswomen did not write novels, their daughters and granddaughters occasionally did, shaping their impressions and memories of childhood or young womanhood on the prairie into a fictional expression of the pioneer experience. Their works form a substantial body of literature, and their narratives reveal the younger women's perceptions of themselves and the culture around them in the early years of settlement.

The primary theme of most of these fictional accounts is the maturation of a young woman on a homestead or in a new prairie town, her emerging sense of herself, and her evolving relationship with her family and community. Frequently, she finds herself caught between dreams of independence and demands that she conform to an accepted standard of behavior-teaching or marriage. The story, however, often centers around a "heroine" -a woman who grows, learns, thinks, and acts-because such behavior was possible and accepted in a frontier environment. Thus, the image that emerges gradually from over half a century of published work by South Dakota women novelists can be labeled "the pioneer heroine," and it is so common a theme as to constitute a genre of literature. It might be considered archetypal, representing the mythical base of the modern young woman who seeks and expects equality of opportunity with her brother in activity, in education, in responsibility, in recognition. If we consider the whole pioneer experience of American women since

<sup>2.</sup> Christiane Fischer, ed., Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900 (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, Archon Books, 1977); Julie Roy Jeffrey, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880, American Century Series (New York: Hill & Wang, 1979); Joanna L. Stratton, Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981); Glenda Riley, Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Elizabeth Hampsten, Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Sandra L. Myres, Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski, Women and Western American Literature (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston Publishing Co., 1982).

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the seventeenth century, the image can also be viewed as an expression of women's quest for selfhood.

That pioneer life in an American frontier community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave women greater opportunity and status is a fact that has been well documented by feminist historians.3 Survival on the frontier was an equalizer, placing great emphasis upon the economic contributions of women to the household and thus blurring the traditional gender distinctions. Pioneer life accorded women economic status, if it did not give them political or social equality, partly because they were often in great demand and in short supply. The Dakota pioneer experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeated this phenomenon of earlier frontiers, a fact that many of the South Dakota women writers observed and depicted in their works. Indeed, their awareness that pioneer life was liberating and challenging for them as women may have motivated and inspired the writers to translate the experience into a fictional form that, if it did not become art, at least moved toward a definition and imaginative recreation of the experience that only art can achieve.

The picture of South Dakota pioneer women that emerges from the women's works is not the one found in the classic literary works of male writers. The two best-known writers of the Middle Border, Hamlin Garland and Ole Rolvaag, emphasize the harsh, burdensome, and joyless conditions of prairie life. In Garland's short stories "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," or "A Day's Pleasure," or "Among the Corn-Rows" in *Main-Travelled Roads*, women are victims of a bleak round of physical work, emotional isolation, and grim destiny unrelieved by any cultural, aesthetic, or intellectual stimulation. Rolvaag portrays Beret in *Giants in the Earth* as obsessed by fear of the open prairie and driven beyond the limits of normality by her own guilt. The "reluctant pioneer," or the woman as victim, is the image that has dominated American fiction in the literature of the last frontier.

The women writers' view of pioneer life is far different from this grim picture and is much closer to the image emerging from the recent historical scholarship on women in the West. The pioneer heroine as portrayed by women novelists is not a victim but

<sup>3.</sup> Page Smith, Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970); Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America from Colonial Times to the Present (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975).

a doer. She is not neurotically fearful nor unduly burdened with toil and misery. She is also far different from the nineteenth-century feminine ideal extolled in "the cult of True Womanhood" that flourished in the literature and popular imagination of the period. The concept of True Womanhood delineated male and female "spheres" of activity and glorified the woman in the home as innocent, pious, submissive, domestic, white-skinned, delicate in health and sensibilities, and inclined to blush, faint, and weep frequently. The pioneer experience demanded other qualities, which South Dakota women writers recognized and rejoiced in, even though their mothers might have expressed dismay that their daughters were far from the model of the "genteel lady."

As a literary creation, the pioneer heroine is related by setting and geography to the matriarchal figures in Willa Cather's O Pioneers and My Antonia, published respectively in 1913 and 1918, the era in which the first generation of South Dakota women writers was also publishing. However, the interest and purpose of their works differ from Cather's. Her heroines, Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda, are fully developed women of the land, veritable "earth mothers" who are strong, enduring, and purposeful. Theirs is a mature triumph. South Dakota women writers appear to have focused much more intensely upon a traditional literary theme in American literature—the initiation into adulthood of the central character, in this case female rather than male. Their novels and stories deal primarily with the maturation—physical, emotional, spiritual—of a young girl or woman in a prairie setting.

The pioneer heroine as conceived by South Dakota's women writers also shows a literary affinity to Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868), that classic narration of a rebellious young woman coming to terms with the demands of society. Like Alcott, many of the South Dakota writers aimed their work at the young adult reader or the juvenile market. However, Alcott's Jo March struggled against the restrictions of New England gentility in the Civil War era, while the pioneer heroine of the prairie flourished in the leveling atmosphere of a Dakota frontier setting. She enjoyed the liberation from the domestic sphere that the frontier circumstances of Dakota Territory and early South

<sup>4.</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (Summer 1966): 151-62, 173-74.

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Dakota provided her. The freedom of the prairie offered a new dimension for a heroine, and the writers celebrated it.

The "first generation" of writers who attempted to give artistic form to their perception of life in a Dakota pioneer setting wrote in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the pre-World-War-I period of the twentieth century. These writers drew directly upon their own recent experience, and sometimes that was limited, as in the case of Mrs. George E. Spencer. She based her novel Calamity Jane (1887) primarily on her honeymoon journey to the Black Hills mining region.5 The heroine of the book, Meg Stevens, a poor but virtuous young woman who marries the lawyer-son of a rich easterner, is a conventional romantic figure. Although Spencer's portrayal of Meg Stevens does not resemble the pioneer heroine of later writers, her highly fictionalized picture of the title character, Calamity Jane, who is redeemed by Meg's goodness in the story, does indicate the imaginative attraction of a female character who fell outside the stereotype of the cult of True Womanhood.

Most of the other early women writers had more extensive living experience in Dakota Territory to draw on than did Spencer. Their literary efforts often appear crude and clumsy to today's reader, but that they attempted the creation of the pioneer heroine at all is testimony to the power of the concept for some women. Two very early works that envisioned Dakota settlement as worthy of literary exploitation are Mary Locke's In Far Dakota (1890) and Mary E. Q. Brush's Sarah Dakota (1894). Stella Gilman used her childhood on a Sioux River Valley ranch as a basis for That Dakota Girl (1900), and Eleanor Gates did something similar with her girlhood on the Vermillion River in The Biography of a Prairie Girl (1902). Gates attempted a more ambitious fictional effort in The Plow-Woman (1906) after she had established herself as a writer in New York. Matilda Woods

<sup>5.</sup> James D. McLaird and Lesta Van Der Wert Turchen, Introduction, in *Calamity Jane, a Story of the Black Hills*, by William Loring Spencer, facsimile ed. (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Dakota Wesleyan Press, 1978), pp. vi-viii. Mrs. George E. Spencer's given name was William.

<sup>6.</sup> Eleanor Gates Tully to Doane Robinson, 14 Nov. 1902, Folder 3, Doane Robinson Papers, 1880-1946, South Dakota Historical Resource Center (the center is hereafter cited SDHRC). See also American Women Writers, s.v. "Gates, Eleanor." Gates married a young playwright in 1901, but she retained her maiden name on her books.

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Stone, daughter of a Rapid City judge, addressed the problem of a young girl growing up in a Black Hills setting in Every Man His Chance (1908), Kate Boyles Bingham, with her brother Virgil Boyles, focused upon the life of young women in the Chamberlain. Lower Brule, and Badlands areas in Langford of the Three Bars (1907), The Homesteaders (1909), The Spirit Trail (1910), and A Daughter of the Badlands (1922). Two other early writers dealt more specifically with the problems of marriage in their works rather than the pioneer experience, although one did use elements of a South Dakota background, Emma Beaver Byrne, wife of Governor Frank Byrne (1912-1916), in The Song beneath the Keys (1916) explored the trials of marriage and infidelity in the growth of a young woman's spiritual life. Jane Burr's Letters of a Dakota Divorcee (1909) began as a rather flippant, cynical story of Sioux Falls as divorce capital before becoming a more serious romance set in the Black Hills.

This first generation of novelists formulated a rough outline of the image of the pioneer heroine based upon their immediate experience of life in Dakota. A "second generation," writing between World War I and the end of World War II (the daughters of the pioneers), developed it much more fully and imaginatively. Possibly because they were further removed from the past and visualized pioneer life from a longer perspective, their creations take on a greater artistic richness. At times, their works are thinly veiled history and autobiography, but these later writers handle detail, characterization, and incident with greater technical deftness. They appear to have a surer grasp of their materials.

The best-known "daughter" of early settlers to write during this later period of her experience on the frontier is, of course, Laura Ingalls Wilder. Although she did not publish her multivolume epic of a young pioneer girl's growth to womanhood until she was in her sixties, and she had the assistance of her already famous daughter Rose Wilder Lane, Wilder's By the Shores of Silver Lake (1935), The Long Winter (1940), Little Town on the Prairie (1941), and These Happy Golden Years (1943) form a classic expression of the pioneer heroine in South Dakota, displaying many of the characteristics of the genre. These books, however,

<sup>7.</sup> Matilda Woods to Doane Robinson, 18 Oct. 1909, Folder 10, Robinson Papers. Matilda Woods Stone was the daughter of James Woods and Mrs. M. C. Woods who settled in the Black Hills in 1876 when their daughter was twelve years old.

<sup>8.</sup> William T. Anderson, "The Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder" (M.A. thesis, South Dakota State University, 1982), pp. 51-69.

were not the first attempts, nor the last. In fact, a number of writers of the second generation flourished during these same years.

Like Wilder, all writers of this second generation show much more skill, style, and polish in the structure and narration of their stories than do the earlier generation. In addition, they had the benefit of more critical and editorial assistance. Rose Wilder Lane edited her mother's work and had her agent help in getting the books published. Lucile F. Fargo was a librarian and wrote other professional works before she turned to the young adult novel. Edith Eudora Kohl was in newspaper work. Ethel Hueston and Marian Hurd McNeely were professional writers who wrote other popular novels. The writers of the twenties and thirties exude an air of professionalism lacking in the first generation.

One must remember, however, that the primary critics that the first generation had were Doane Robinson and O. W. Coursey, both early South Dakota littérateurs. 14 If the early writers did

- 9. See Marian Hurd McNeely, The Jumping-Off Place (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929); Frances Gilchrist Wood, Turkey Red: A Novel of the Frontier (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1932); Rose Wilder Lane, Let the Hurricane Roar (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1933) and Free Land (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1938); Ethel Hueston, Blithe Baldwin (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1933); Anna Morris Clark, Sylvia of the Hills (Custer, S.Dak.: Chronicle Shop, 1936); Lucile F. Fargo, Prairie Girl (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1937) and Prairie Chautauqua (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1943); Mary Gates, Out of this Nettle (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1937); Edith Eudora Kohl, Land of the Burnt Thigh (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1938); and Gretchen McKown and Florence Stebbins Gleeson, All the Days Were Antonia's (New York: Junior Literary Guild, Viking Press, 1939).
  - 10. Anderson, "Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder," pp. 51-69.
- 11. Lucile Fargo turned her attention to her memories of growing up in Dell Rapids after she had written Youth and the Newsstand (1926), Second Wind (1926), The Library in the School (1928), Program for the Elementary School Library Series (1930), and Superintendent Makes a Discovery: The Answer to the Rural School Reading Problem (1931). Further information about this author appears in my Introduction to the reprint edition of Prairie Girl (Dell Rapids, S.Dak.: Dell Rapids Historical Society, 1983).
- 12. John R. Milton, ed., The Literature of South Dakota (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Dakota Press, 1976), p. 244.
- 13. Marian Hurd McNeely wrote Rusty Ruston: A Story for Brothers and Sisters (1929) and The Way to Glory and Other Stories (1932), among others. Ethel Hueston authored Coasting Down East (1924), Birds Fly South (1930), Ginger and Speed (1930), For Ginger's Sake (1930), Gingerella (1932), and Good Times (1932).
- 14. See Doane Robinson, "South Dakota Literature," South Dakota Historical Collections 6 (1912): 101-2, and O. W. Coursey, Literature of South Dakota, 4th ed. (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Educator Supply Co., 1925).

not have the critical advice and literary education that their later counterparts had, neither did they presume to assert that their work had any literary pretensions. There is almost a pathos in Emma Beaver Byrne's request for some critical evaluation of her work in a letter to Doane Robinson: "I am eager for your opinions, for I know they are of value. Has my manuscript any literary worth? Is there too much seriousness? . . . Has it interest? Thank-



ing you most sincerely for your kindness, for I know this is not a man's tale, not one you would carry away from a news stand should you chance to find it there, therefore the greater favor." <sup>15</sup>

15. Emma B. Byrne [to Doane Robinson], n.d., SDHRC. This letter is pasted into the center's copy of *Song beneath the Keys* (Boston: Roxburgh Publishing Co., 1916). Apparently, Emma Byrne had Robinson read the book in manuscript.

Stella Gilman referred to her works as "my two poor little books." Eleanor Gates complained that she could not convince anyone, not even her publishers, that Biography of a Prairie Girl was fiction and not autobiography. Although Kate Boyles Bingham published her work with her brother Virgil, O. W. Coursey maintained that she "became the complete master of style and worked out the technique for their first novel, 'Langford of the Three Bars' [sic], which made this brother and sister famous." 18

The first generation of novelists who lived in South Dakota came from families that emigrated from other states in the Midwest or the East, tracing their Yankee heritage back to New England or New York or Pennsylvania. Kate Boyles Bingham's family came from Indiana and Illinois, although she herself was born in Olivet, Dakota Territory, in 1876. Eleanor Gates came from Minnesota to southern Minnehaha County in 1877. Stella Gilman was born in Philadelphia and moved as a child to a farm near Hudson in 1878. These writers did not leave their sense of eastern superiority behind. Jane Burr's story of a divorcee who fled New York to secure her marital freedom in Sioux Falls indicates the common Anglo/Eastern point of view. "The Easterners have made this burg what it is," the heroine says of Sioux Falls. "Take away our influence and she'll sink into nothingness again."

Noticeably absent among the works of the first two generations of writers are novels by American Indian or immigrant women. The former had been residing in South Dakota for a much longer period of time, but they did not naturally turn to the novel, an English and European literary invention, as a literary form. Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Bonnin), a Yankton Dakota woman of considerable education (Earlham College and Carlisle) who worked for the Indian Service, published a good deal during the early years of the century, but she concentrated on American Indian forms—

<sup>16.</sup> Stella Gilman to Doane Robinson, 1 Feb. 1916, Folder 17, Robinson Papers. Gilman's two books were *That Dakota Girl* (1900) and *A Gumbo Lily and Other Stories* (1901).

<sup>17.</sup> Eleanor Gates Tully to Doane Robinson, 21 Nov. 1902, Folder 3, Robinson Papers.

<sup>18.</sup> Coursey, Literature of South Dakota, p. 391.

<sup>19. &</sup>quot;Daughters of Dakota," South Dakota Historical Collections 33 (1966): 72-73; Gates Tully to Robinson, 14 Nov. 1902, Robinson Papers; "Biographical Note," in A Gumbo Lily and Other Tales, by Stella Gilman (New York: Abbey Press, 1901).

Jane Burr, Letters of a Dakota Divorcee (Boston: Roxburgh Publishing Co., 1909), p. 54.

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old Indian legends and stories from her own childhood.<sup>21</sup> Marie McLaughlin, a Sioux woman who was the wife of the Indian agent at Standing Rock, wrote the myths of the Sioux for the American reading public.<sup>22</sup> Not until the middle of the twentieth century and the "third generation" of South Dakota women writers did the work of Scandinavian or German-Russian women begin to appear. The pioneer immigrant women probably found the language and cultural barriers a sufficient deterrent to expression in novel form. Following World War II, their descendants turned more naturally to the novel to recreate the pioneer lives of their grandmothers. Borghild Dahl, Inga Hansen Dickerson, and Mary Worthy Breneman found their Scandinavian or German-Russian heritage an appropriate medium for describing the pioneer experience, although they themselves were thoroughly assimilated by the 1950s.<sup>23</sup>

To see the image of the pioneer heroine emerging as a literary creation, however, we must examine the works of the first generation of writers (1890-1920). These women synthesized the values of the East (culture, education, religion) with the physical and psychological freedom of western life (the blurring of the distinction between male and female spheres on the Dakota prairie). They formed a picture of a young woman whose courage, physical energy, and independence were drawn from life on the prairie, but whose gentility, piety, and refinement were rooted in eastern values. Thus, these early women writers did not always, nor wholeheartedly, embrace western life. They often found it rough and uncouth, not at all in keeping with the traditional concept of True Womanhood.

In a very early work, In Far Dakota (1890), Mary Locke writes of an English woman who comes to visit her three children who

<sup>21.</sup> Zitkala-Sa, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," Atlantic Monthly 85 (Jan. 1900): 37-44; "The School Days of an Indian Girl," Atlantic Monthly 85 (Feb. 1900): 185-94; "An Indian Teacher among Indians," Atlantic Monthly 85 (Mar. 1900); "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," Harpers Monthly Magazine 102 (Mar. 1901): 505-8; Old Indian Legends (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1901); American Indian Stories (Washington, D.C.: Hayworth Publishing House, 1921).

Marie L. McLaughlin, Myths and Legends of the Sioux (Bismarck, N.Dak.: Bismarck Tribune Co., 1916).

<sup>23.</sup> Borghild Dahl, Karen (New York: Random House, 1947) and Homecoming (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953); Inga Hansen Dickerson, Trina (New York: Comet Press Books, 1956); Mary Worthy Breneman, The Land They Possessed (New York: Macmillan, 1956). See also Doris Stensland, Haul the Water, Haul the Wood (Aberdeen: By the Author, 1979).

have settled on a homestead in Dakota Territory. The visitor is distressed to discover that her son Tom, of rather aristocratic lineage, is enamored of a local girl named Polly, whom the mother finally persuades to marry someone more suitable - a native farm hand. In the character of the mother-narrator, Locke portrays the genteel ideal as the equivalent of virtue, a protection for young men against the malevolent influence of the frontier with its drinking, gambling, and easy morality. "If in every little new 'city' where English lads are found," she writes, "there were but one house which their countrywomen had converted into the likeness of an English home, where they would be welcomed and might enjoy the friendship of ladies of refinement and education. many an English boy would find the life of virtue easier to follow." In fact, she recommends that English women, sisters and mothers, join their sons and brothers on the frontier - which she assures them they will grow to like. "There is something attractive in the novelty of the life, and many, after a year or two, would be more than reconciled to the New Country, and quite unwilling to leave it for ever, even for the country of their birth."24 Even as critical as the mother is of Polly, she cannot deny the attractiveness of Polly's grace, energy, and easy familiarity with Tom. As a new sort of woman, Polly is also appealing. Looking at this young pioneer woman, the mother comments to herself: "You are a great curiosity, . . . so pretty and so terribly ignorant. I have never seen anyone at all like you. If you were English you would be vulgar, but you are not that."25

The setting for Mary Brush's Sarah Dakota (1894) is also decidedly British, including the importation of the class structure, although the story opens on Chauncey Vandecar's Rollingstone Ranch near the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. Vandecar's motherless daughter Sarah is waited upon by a French-Canadian cook and his part-Indian wife as well as by a Norwegian hired man. Even Brush's crude attempts at dialect betray the author's bias as she portrays the French and Norwegian as culturally inferior but the Indian as wholly apart and savage. <sup>26</sup> The ranch takes on all the characteristics of an English country estate with Vandecar as an American version of the English country squire.

<sup>24.</sup> Mary Locke, In Far Dakota (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1890), pp. 48-49.

<sup>25.</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

Mary E. Q. Brush, Sarah Dakota (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1894), pp. 36, 45-49.

When his independent and athletic daughter needs "taming," she is sent to New York State to attend school.<sup>27</sup>

Another ranch, this time located on the Big Sioux River, has similar English characteristics in Stella Gilman's That Dakota Girl (1900). There is also a Norwegian servant, Peter Jensen. The heroine's father, "through hard labor and honest enterprise, ... has become rich in herds and land."28 No rough, western cowboy he-"his manners and conversation bear evidence of early culture and refinement."29 At the conclusion of the story, the pioneer heroine marries the easterner rather than the local cowbov. Such manifestations of eastern snobbery occur in other early works as well. No matter how happy the life of the pioneer heroine appears to be to the reader of Eleanor Gates's The Biography of a Prairie Girl, the mother of the girl nonetheless says as her daughter reaches young womanhood: "I want you to go East, to go where the sweetest and best influences can reach you. The prairie has given you health. It has never given you happiness."30 And in one of the later books of Kate Boyles Bingham and her brother, A Daughter of the Badlands (1922), the story opens with Bonibel Sherwood, the pioneer heroine, in an eastern school, acquiring the culture and refinement so idealized in these books.31

Yet, for all the writers' stated admiration for the more established civilization of the East and Britain, the heroines they create belong to the West. Whatever these women expound in the way of traditional ideas, their heroines take form and shape against the Dakota landscape through the experience of living on the prairie. They respond to the beauty and power of an empty land, to the clear air, to the sense of space and freedom. Mary Locke describes the landscape in *In Far Dakota* as "a wide expanse of prairie, covered with sunburnt grass; here and there black patches of broken land; now and then a tigerish-looking shanty, all stripes of yellow and black—yellow wood and black tar paper." Her heroine responds to it with enthusiasm: "The weather this autumn was mild and genial, the atmosphere clear

<sup>27.</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>28.</sup> Stella Gilman, That Dakota Girl (New York: Street & Smith, 1900), p. 21.

<sup>29.</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>30.</sup> Eleanor Gates, The Biography of a Prairie Girl (New York: Century Co., 1902), p. 286.

<sup>31.</sup> Kate Boyles Bingham and Virgil D. Boyles, A Daughter of the Badlands (Boston: Stratford Co., 1922), pp. 4-5.

<sup>32.</sup> Locke, In Far Dakota, p. 8.

and dry. No tonics wanted here. I felt stronger than for years past, breathing this bracing air."33

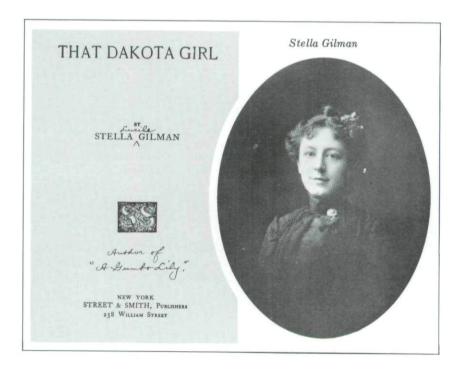
Stella Gilman in That Dakota Girl writes similarly:

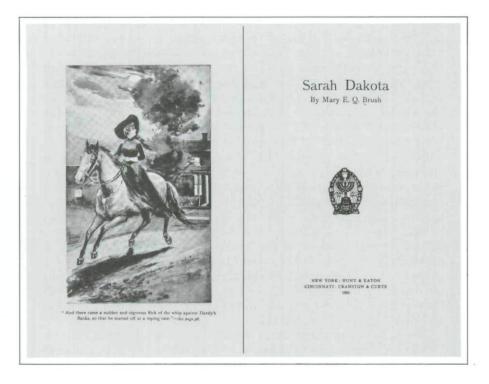
Surrounded by June's lavish beauty, breathing this glorious air, beneath this matchless sky, the moderately happy, the morbidly inclined, even the confirmed pessimist, are thrown at once into a state of pulsing rapture, and made to exult in the privilege of breath! Winter's biting blizzard's blast, the chilling gales of early spring, the hot, dusty, wearisome winds of dog-days, and the dreamy calm of Indian Summer, all are alike forgotten in the presence of this queen of all the months. Such is June in the land of the Dakotas. The rustling, beaming, springing, life-breathing June of the Western prairies!<sup>34</sup>

When the heroine in *Sarah Dakota* is asked to write an essay at school in New York, she decides to describe the prairies of her native country:

33. Ibid., p. 18.

34. Gilman, That Dakota Girl, p. 34.





In simple yet bold and striking language she told of how the prairies looked when the morning sun bound them with bands of pink and pearl; of the soft evening flushes of amethyst and purple, and the night shadows of ebon and brown and deep gray... the flaming crimson of the cactus set in the soft gray of the curly buffalo grass, and the rose-blooms that made the June mornings so sweet. She described the Big Muddy, with its swollen, yellow current... of the labyrinth of Western roads, dark earthed and hard beaten; of the solitary bowlders, in the hollows of which the rattlesnake was wont to sun his shining coils. She wrote of the winds sweeping over the prairies, bending the grasses as with a gentle hand or coming in the great gusts of the blizzard and wild destruction of the cyclone.<sup>35</sup>

Dallas in the *Plow-Woman* also comments upon a spring morning and the "blossom-strewn plain" that "made generous return for the long, merciless winter... of hateful memories." <sup>36</sup> Most of the

<sup>35.</sup> Brush, Sarah Dakota, pp. 164-65.

<sup>36.</sup> Eleanor Gates, *The Plow-Woman* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1906), p. 216.

heroines in these novels love the land—even, as in the case of Louise in Langford of the Three Bars, when they have migrated from the East as adults. "Louise learned to love the plains country," the authors narrate. "She revelled in its winds; the high ones, blowing bold and free with their call to throw off lethargy and stay from drifting; the low ones, sighing and rustling through the already dead grass—a mournful and whispering lament for the Summer gone.... The vastness of it [the country] and the untrammelled freedom of it... was to dwell with her forever." 37

Both of these elements—the prairie environment and eastern snobbery—contribute to the creation of the pioneer heroine. What emerges is a young woman who is courageous, energetic, and independent as well as gentle, cultured, and ultimately submissive. The latter qualities prevent the young woman from developing into the Calamity Jane stereotype that radically challenged the whole notion of the female gender as envisioned in the nineteenth century, and yet these young women are far more capable and aggressive than the ideal of True Womanhood. They do not swear, or drink, or compete with men in economic terms, but they pursue their own goals, develop their own physical skills, and make their own decisions.

The heroines of these early works illustrate this point. Sarah Vandecar in Sarah Dakota has been allowed to grow up as naturally as a prairie rose on her father's ranch-riding, boating, fishing, and climbing trees. She is uncomfortable in the presence of "Easterners," including her new stepmother, because they always "carry a grammar and dictionary around with them, and rubbers and umbrellas and veils and looked surprised and shocked at everything we say or do." Her stepmother, she says, "tried to be pleasant with me but somehow I felt gawky and awkward and ignorant with her."38 After running away on her pony. Sarah is rescued and sent east to school to mute her western voice, soften her bright-colored clothes, and educate her ignorance. This modification alters neither her courage nor her independence, but a strong overlay of Christian piety soon gives the book a tractlike character. Sarah remains the heroine of the story -performing brave actions, making decisions, competing, and winning. She decides to return to her beloved Dakota-a "lady,"

<sup>37.</sup> Kate and Virgil D. Boyles, Langford of the Three Bars (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1907), pp. 146-47.

<sup>38.</sup> Brush, Sarah Dakota, p. 30.

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now, with western capabilities—because "there is work there in the West." Sarah obviously draws her courage, physical energy, and independence from the prairie; her gentility is acquired in the East.

A more developed example of the pioneer heroine is Nitelle M'Jarrowe (an improbable name) in Stella Gilman's That Dakota Girl. She is also a hybrid lady/tomboy who has been to an Iowa school, speaks "boarding school French," plays the piano, sings, and impresses the Eastern hero Laurence Molnayre with her ability to converse upon "art, literature, science, and the most recent happenings."40 Although she lives on a ranch and is perpetually on horseback, sitting "in her saddle as though it were a rocking-chair,"41 she apparently performs no farm chores on the Big Sioux Valley ranch. She is young and beautiful, but her face is "sun-burned" in contrast to the pale-white ideal of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, she whistles, shoots, hunts, fishes, plays practical jokes, and is outrageously independent in her behavior. She is a genuine heroine who struggles to decide which of her two suitors she will marry - the good-hearted local rancher or the polished easterner.

The prairie provides the setting for a display of Nitelle's western skills, which are a female variation of the cowboy hero's skills in Owen Wisters's *The Virginian* (1904) although Stella Gilman published her book several years before Wister published his. Nitelle beats her lover in a horse race, to his chagrin; she rescues him in a Dakota blizzard, rousing him, forcing him to walk, and supporting him in the storm; and by killing *two* birds with one shot, she demonstrates a skill in shooting that rivals Natty Bumppo's in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder*.<sup>42</sup> Her self-reliance is clear when she flares at Molnayre after he suggests that the local rancher, her other suitor, has forbidden her to ride a particularly wild pony. "John Marion has never forbidden me anything," she informs him.<sup>43</sup>

One of the best-known writers to be captivated by the image of the pioneer heroine in these early years was Eleanor Gates. Her famous novel *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1912) was dramatized for the stage and for a film starring Mary Pickford, but Gates also

<sup>39.</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>40.</sup> Gilman, That Dakota Girl, p. 110.

<sup>41.</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>42.</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95, 134, 220.

<sup>43.</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

wrote two novels based on her childhood experiences in Dakota Territory: The Biography of a Prairie Girl (1902) and The Plow-Woman (1906). When Gates was still a baby, her family moved from Minnesota to a farm on the Vermillion River in southern Minnehaha County. Less than ten years later, the family, fearful of Indian troubles, moved again to California, where Eleanor eventually attended Stanford University and was a Phoebe A. Hearst Scholar at the University of California. In 1901, she married Richard Walton Tully, a playwright, and moved to New York. She became an independent and successful journalist and writer early in the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup>

Obviously, Gates's Biography of a Prairie Girl is drawn heavily from her memories of a childhood on the prairies, for it centers on the adventures of a "little girl" (never named) who grows to adulthood within the novel. After publication of the novel in 1902. Gates claimed that every day of her life on the Dakota prairies had impressed itself upon her memory, and she recalled: "though I was very young, I was taught to notice the flowers and plants on the plains, the wild animals and waterfowl, the antelope and large game and the constantly changing aspect of the plains and the sky.... My task was to herd, which I did on an Indian pony. In fact I could ride anything with four legs, and was the marvel of my city-bred mother."45 In Biography of a Prairie Girl, Gates's descriptions of school activities, a harvest wedding, Christmas celebrations, a pet cowbird, badger, and hen, and herding cattle all have the ring of accuracy. Scenes that deal with an Indian confrontation and an attempted robbery are less authentic than those based on her own experiences.

In this early book, Gates is ambivalent in her attitude toward life on the prairie for a girl. Although the heroine has exciting adventures hunting gophers, racing away from a prairie fire, breaking a pony, roaming the fields to gather flowers and arrowheads, the girl's mother (perhaps reflecting Gates's own "city-bred" mother) cannot bear to think of the girl's future on the prairie. She paints a sad picture of a life spent "hoeing and herding and working your life out in the kitchen, with nothing to brighten your days." 46 Yet, while the heroine does in fact want to go to college, her life on the prairie is pictured as anything but bleak, drab, and dreary.

<sup>44.</sup> Gates Tully to Robinson, 14 Nov. 1902, Robinson Papers.

<sup>45.</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46.</sup> Gates, Biography of a Prairie Girl, p. 285.

Eleanor Gates herself was not satisfied to leave the subject on this ambivalent note. In 1902, she wrote to Doane Robinson that she had begun another novel: "And again the background is South Dakota, which proves that the first ten years of my life were the most impressionable, since I feel no desire to use countries that I have since seen. After the winter is over I am planning to go west and have a month or two on the prairies, - if I can find any that are virgin and unfenced. I understand they've been spoiled by too much settlement, - spoiled, that is, from the artistic point of view."47 The result of this artistic effort is presumably The Plow-Woman, in which Gates attempts to create a fictional pioneer heroine without the crutch of autobiography and with greater maturity and insight. Dallas Lancaster, the central figure in The Plow-Woman, is much more fully conceived and credible than either Sarah Vandecar or Nitelle M'Jarrowe in earlier works. For all its melodramatic plot and sentimental overtones. this novel is a serious attempt to render the female western experience artistically.

The opening scene reveals the character and quality of the pioneer heroine: she is plowing the family's land on the Missouri River herself because her father, crippled and cantankerous, and her sister Marylyn, fair and frail, are unable to. We see her working in a slouch hat, wiping her face with the sleeve of her jersey, hitching her skirt through her waistband to "cool her ankles," plowing in a red flannel petticoat. She has finished raising a shack to protect the family against a Dakota winter and is now breaking Dakota sod. Yet, on her "sun-browned face" is a "look of deep content."48 Dallas is not the model of True Womanhood. When challenged on her activity, she laughs: "Outside work is fine.... Better than cooking over a hot stove or breaking your back over a tub. Men have the best half of things—the air and the sky and the horses. I don't complain. I like my work. Let it make me like a man."49 John Lounsbury, the trader-rancher, is attracted to her rather than to her sister who "reminded [him] of girls he had seen beyond the Alleghanies-girls who knew little, or no, toil, and who jealously guarded their beauty from sun and wind."50 To him, Dallas seemed "a splendid figure" with a "forehead upon which shone the very spirit of the unshackled." She must, he thought,

<sup>47.</sup> Gates Tully to Robinson, 14 Nov. 1902, Robinson Papers.

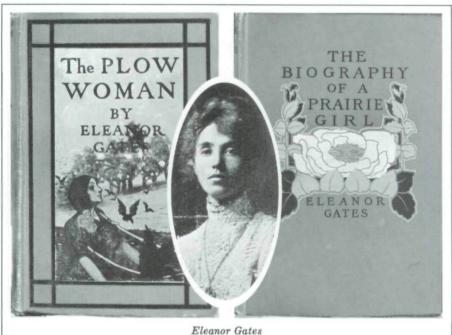
<sup>48.</sup> Gates, The Plow-Woman, p. 7.

<sup>49.</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>50.</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

"have sprung as she was from the plains one day-grave, fullgrown and gallant."51

Dallas is determined to stay on the homestead in spite of treacherous claim jumpers, sinister outlaws, hostile Indians, cruel blizzards, and wild animals that attempt to drive the family out. She even refuses to go to the fort for safety, resenting the superiority of the officers' wives. She saves the family in a winter storm and seeks Lounsbury's aid in a hard, lonely, futile night drive in a wagon to the trading post. She says belligerently: "I'll



stick it out all the same. And my outside work—I'll plow and I'll plant just like I used to. But this time, I'll do it with a gun!"52

In a story with the trappings of a typical western (conflict between army and Indians, an Indian capture, a chase, a shoot-out,

<sup>51.</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>52.</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

an eventual rescue, and a reuniting of the lovers), Dallas is definitely the heroine. She finally risks her own life to save her sister's, while Lounsbury languishes with a gunshot wound. Even in a romantic sense, she is a new kind of heroine and does not retreat into the female sphere of the home when she marries. Lounsbury tells her: "Dallas—you're a wife for a man out here! ... There'll be other things coming up to fight.... That's the beauty of this West—it keeps you busy. But we'll be together to make the fight." Unlike the unnamed heroine in Biography of a Prairie Girl, Dallas has no desire to leave the prairie when she marries. Lounsbury tells her she can live anywhere, but she prefers to make their home on the claim.

In Dallas can be seen many of the characteristics of the pioneer heroine. She is independent, enterprising, strong, resourceful, courageous, competitive, athletic, and self-assured. Eleanor Gates obviously admired such a woman and thought her worthy of literary expression, as did Mary Brush and Stella Gilman. The qualities these writers depicted in their heroines are valuable assets on the frontier for both men and women, but they were not the qualities usually considered "feminine." In fact, in the popular lore of the period, such qualities were believed to be unappealing to men, although these heroines succeeded in getting the appropriate young man in the end, and all the writers appear to accept a conventional marriage as the ultimate destiny of a woman, however independent she may be. These novelists were certainly not avowed feminists demanding either suffrage or a new political and economic role for women.

One early writer did touch upon feminist issues in developing the life of her heroine. Matilda Woods Stone's Every Man His Chance (1909) has an ironic title, for the story, after some false starts, centers upon Catharine Paine's ambition to become a physician and the opposition she faces from her father and lover. The title should be Every Woman Her Chance, for the book has strong feminist underpinnings. 55 Unfortunately, it is a badly written book with a confused story line, characters who are intro-

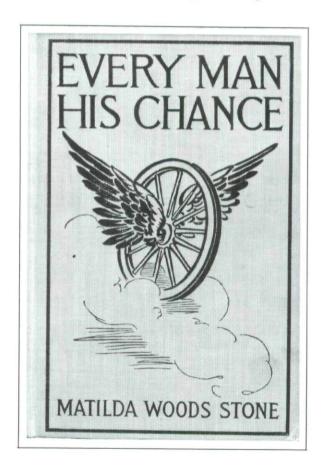
<sup>53.</sup> Ibid., pp. 355-56.

<sup>54.</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

<sup>55.</sup> It is interesting to note in this respect that Matilda Woods Stone used her mother's maiden name as her pen name. In 1909, she explained to Doane Robinson that Stone was her "mother's family name," and that she had placed it at the end of her own name so that it would "not disappear in an initial" (Woods to Robinson, 18 Oct. 1909, Robinson Papers).

duced, dropped, and reintroduced, inconsistent characterization, murky dialogue, and a florid diction that requires a determined reader. Only after patient effort on the part of the reader does Catharine Paine gradually emerge as an urban version of the pioneer heroine of earlier works.

Stone was apparently uncertain how to establish Catharine's character, for she takes her to Rapid City in 1881, only to have her insist on returning east, traveling alone with a packtrain. This episode reveals her courage and independence, but it does not seem to make much sense in the story. The author informs us that Catharine is independent, intelligent, aloof, and musical. She attends Vassar College on the strength of a high school scholar-



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ship, and when she returns to the Black Hills, she tries to persuade her father to finance her medical education. In the one really strong scene in the novel, she argues that he could do it on half of what he spends on her clothes and jewels. "Father," she continues. "you give me only what you wish me to have. I am hungry for bread and you load me with candies. I crave work, intelligent, womanly work."56 She points out that her mother supports her ambition but has no money to give substance to that support because "her business manager [Catharine's father] has appropriated the savings of her life time."57 The heroine's father will accept her involvement in music and painting, even though she has no talent, because that is "the sort of thing a girl ought to do."58 The plot wanders through Catharine's uncertain romance with Henry Burton, a professor at the School of Mines. When he returns from study abroad. Burton cannot accept her desire to practice medicine and to enter a marriage on an equitable basis. She tells him: "We should come together in the home just the same. Why do I need to be or pretend to be there while you are away? When all is said, there is no home, but communion. Its one essential is the nearness of loved ones."59 At the end of the novel, she is left alone with her ambition still intact and her life involved primarily in church work.

Catharine Paine lives in town rather than on the land, and she is not as self-sufficient and physically resourceful as Dallas Lancaster or Nitelle M'Jarrowe, but she is more openly feminist in point of view. Matilda Woods Stone appears to have struggled to find some means of expressing these ideas through a fictional heroine, and while she is not quite successful, her efforts at least indicate the importance she gave to feminist ideas. In addition to her discussion of the heroine's career plans, Stone deals with the issue of divorce. One of Catharine's friends, Mrs. Allen, is divorced, and Catharine takes a tolerant view of it. She tells her mother that the first sin was in her contraction of a marriage of convenience, and that Mrs. Allen redeemed herself when she agreed to a divorce so that her husband could marry a younger, more suitable woman. 60 Both the question of a failing marriage

<sup>56.</sup> Matilda Woods Stone, Every Man His Chance (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1908), p. 115.

<sup>57.</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>58.</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>59.</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>60.</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

and the issue of divorce are explored in two other early novels by South Dakota women writers, but neither of those books develops what can rightfully be called a pioneer heroine.<sup>61</sup>

A final first-generation woman writer who contributed to the creation of this genre is Kate Boyles Bingham who, with her brother Virgil Boyles, wrote several books based upon South Dakota life. The first of these, Langford of the Three Bars (1907), became a national best seller. 62 Three others followed: The Homesteaders (1909): The Spirit Trail (1910): and A Daughter of the Badlands (1922). Although Bingham collaborated with her brother, it is the opinion of this researcher that she did the writing and he the research. The daughter of a Yankton attorney, Bingham taught school in Yankton after finishing normal college and wrote and published some short stories before she became interested in writing a novel based on local historical events - particularly the activities and murder of the outlaw Jack Sully.63 Virgil was a court reporter, a job that, significantly, is held by the woman Louise in Langford of the Three Bars, and it appears unlikely that the role reversal would have been Virgil's idea. As has already been cited, O. W. Coursey claimed that Bingham "worked out the technique" for their first book.64 Virgil Boyles did write a nonfictional work in collaboration with Coursey,65 but he did not write fiction independently as Bingham did. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis upon female characters in their coauthored western novels would point to Bingham's literary imagination and influence. Although these novels are typical westerns, involving complex plots with outlaws, cowboys, shoot-outs, chases, captures, Indians, and court trials, all of them center upon female charac-

In each of the first three books, Bingham and Boyles use two female characters so that a single image of the pioneer heroine does not emerge. In *Langford of the Three Bars*, Louise Dale is the court reporter who comes from the East against her parents' bet-

<sup>61.</sup> Emma Beaver Byrne, The Song beneath the Keys, and Jane Burr, Letters of a Dakota Divorcee.

 $<sup>62.\ 0.\</sup> W.$  Coursey,  $Dakota\ Literature$  (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Educator Supply Co., 1928), p. 114.

<sup>63.</sup> Brule County History (Pukwana, S.Dak.: Brule County Historical Society, 1977), p. 138. I am indebted to Caitlin Collier-Wise for calling this information to my attention. See also Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, 17 Feb. 1937.

<sup>64.</sup> Coursey, Literature of South Dakota, p. 391.

<sup>65.</sup> Virgil D. Boyles and O. W. Coursey, Where the Sod Shanty Stood (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Educator Supply Co., 1926).

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ter judgement to work at a trial of an outlaw in Indian and cattle country. "A pore little white lamb among a pack o' wolves and coyotes," the brakeman on the train comments as she descends the platform of the little town near the Williston ranch. Louise is lonesome and homesick at first, but she grows to love the country—its openness and freedom. She performs her job capably under stress, and the state's attorney, Richard Gordon, falls in love with her, but he hesitates to marry her because he has so little to offer her in this desolate country. Yet, Louise can rise to the occasion, and when Gordon is injured and needs her, she unhesitatingly decides to stay. Although she has an unusual occupation for a woman in the West, Louise is still too much of an eastern "lady" to have acquired the skills that would make her a real western heroine.

Mary Williston, the daughter of the rancher, conforms much more closely to the image of the pioneer heroine. When her home is attacked, she defends it with her father, firing shot for shot with him as he cautions her to keep up her nerve. In the midst of this life-or-death situation, the father suddenly realizes "that his 'little girl,' his one ewe lamb,... must go through what he had gone through." And the pioneer heroine can handle it:

A stream of icy coldness struck across her heart. She found herself calculating in deliberation which tree it was that held this thing—death.... It was coming closer and closer.... She turned the barrel of her rifle slowly and deliberately [and] sighted truly the motionless blur [an outlaw] to her right, and fired, once, twice, three times.... Shrinking low at her window, her eyes glued on the still black mass out yonder, Mary wondered if it were dead. She prayed passionately that it might be, and yet—it is a dreadful thing to kill.<sup>69</sup>

Mary prepares to kill again when Louise warns her that Gordon's life is threatened: "Swiftly and silently, she seized her revolver from the bureau, glided to the window, and fired three times in rapid succession....'I think I hit him the second time, Louise,' she said, with a dull calm." <sup>70</sup>

Mary is also adept at caring for horses on the family ranch. Her father tells Paul Langford: "You see, she is the only boy I have.

<sup>66.</sup> Boyles, Langford of the Three Bars, p. 41.

<sup>67.</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>68.</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>69.</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-102.

<sup>70.</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

She must of necessity be my chore boy as well as my herd boy. In her leisure moments she holds down her kitchen claim; I don't know how she does it, but she does." After some obstacles to the course of true love are overcome, Langford, the cowboy hero, wins Mary, the pioneer heroine, as his bride. How such a marriage works out as the West becomes more settled and pioneer days fade into history is not hinted at in the story. Nor do any of the writers perceive the inconsistency of the ideal western heroine and the traditional concept of the submissive, domestic wife, a model they apparently accept. Marriage, they must have assumed, would effect an immediate transformation based upon the belief that love could conquer all.

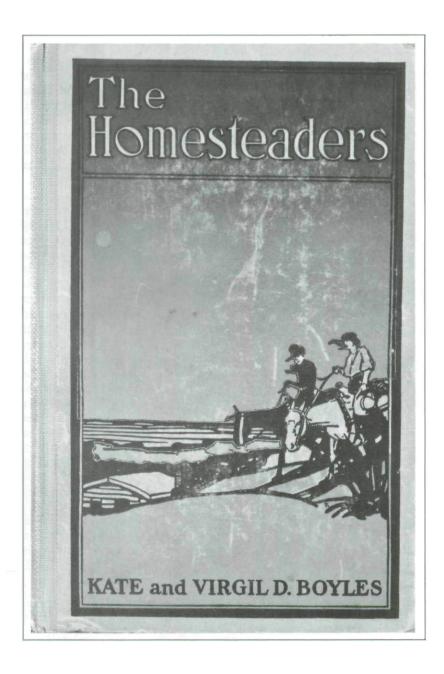
Like Langford of the Three Bars, The Homesteaders (1909) is based upon a historical event in the Chamberlain area.72 A brother and sister, called Josephine and Jack Carroll in the story, defend their homestead against ruthless cattlemen who would drive them off. In one night's attack, Jack is shot and Josephine must guard the homestead alone while watching over his body. She returns to Virginia to bury her brother but comes back to Dakota to take up her claim. Josephine acts like a pioneer heroine-she shares the work of the homestead, rides after the cattle, and shoots a "bad guy" in a chase. However, this novel introduces another dimension to the picture of women in the West in the character of Onjijitka, or Rosebud, daughter of a Dakota mother and a white father. Although the picture is sentimentalized (Rosebud falls in love with Jack and willingly thereafter serves the welfare of the Carrolls), Rosebud appears to have the same strength of character, the same courage and independence, as the white pioneer heroine.

When Rosebud first appears in the story, she has just returned to live with her mother's people after receiving an education in the East. Bitter and proud, she tells Josephine:

I thought I'd learn to be white. I learned—almost. I learned this much and then I had to stop: that I might learn to read and write, comb my hair according to the mode, wear abominable stiff corset things, sing and dance and play the piano and embroider... but that I never could be white.... I beat my heart out until it was all bruised and bleeding; with sorrow at first, then with rage, because you had lied to me, you know, and

<sup>71.</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>72.</sup> Maka Teepee 1880 to Chamberlain 1980: 100 Years of Chamberlain, South Dakota, 1880-1980 (Pukwana, S.Dak.: Brule County Historical Society, 1980), p. 28. I am indebted to Caitlin Collier-Wise for this reference.



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then because I would not be a dog of a half-breed, to fawn upon the white man.  $^{73}$ 

Josephine befriends Rosebud and demonstrates a concern for the native people by visiting their summer encampment at Lower Brule. It is Rosebud who persuades her to return to the claim after her brother's death. She writes to Josephine in Virginia: "If you will come back, Josephine, I will gladly come to you as I promised, and we, you and I, just two girls, will fight it out together. Your land is too fair to loose [sic], too rich in promise... We will force these insolent men to acknowledge the justness of our position." Pooken like a true pioneer heroine!

Indian and white relations are again explored in The Spirit Trail (1910), which is set at the time of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and is a fictional account of the activities of Episcopal bishop William Hobart Hare (the White Robe in the story). Katharine Mendenhall, the daughter of the general at Big Bend, has come from the East to join her family. She is bored at first, but her life soon becomes exciting in this novel of several plot lines. She is captured by an Indian band, accompanies them on a summer hunt, makes friends with White Flower, shares in a daring and risky escape with her, joins a cattle drive, and finally returns home. Her father comments that he could never keep her from doing what she pleased, especially since "the tomboy" in her developed so much more rapidly under Dakota skies.75 The theme of the divergent story lines is the necessity for better understanding of Indian culture and greater integrity among Indian agents and other government officials in observing treaties. Much of this theme is expressed in dialogue between Katharine Mendenhall and the priest Hugh Hunt, so that Mendenhall becomes the central consciousness of the novel. Although the pioneer heroine appears to be a secondary aspect of the story, the mere fact that she is the focal point of its ideas indicates the intellectual importance accorded a woman character in a western novel.

In the character of Bonibel Sherwood in *Daughter of the Badlands* (1922), Bingham and Boyles develop their fullest expression of the pioneer heroine. There is only one young woman in this novel, so the focus is not divided, and Bonibel herself is a half-

<sup>73.</sup> Kate and Virgil D. Boyles, *The Homesteaders* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1909), pp. 66-67.

<sup>74.</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>75.</sup> Kate and Virgil D. Boyles, *The Spirit Trail* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1910), p. 119.

breed—her father is a white rancher and her mother a Dakota woman. In the opening scene, she is winning a tennis match at the college she is graduating from in the East, and a cowboy spectator comments: "These Easterners haven't anything over her when it comes to things that take quickness, quickness to think, quickness to act; . . . I can see that the other one doesn't stand any more show than a dogie in the hands of a cattle rustler. . . . Comes by it honestly, of course. You can't rattle an Indian." When Allan Sprague, the easterner who loves her and wants to marry her, learns the identity of her mother, Bonibel runs away, returning to her father's ranch in the Badlands of South Dakota. The rest of the novel is Allan's pursuit of her through misunderstandings, misinformation, cattle rustling, blackmail, an attempted kidnapping, a burning of the ranch house, a roundup, a shoot-out, and several chases.

Bonibel is the heroine throughout the book—courageous, proud, and unflinching, refusing to be controlled or dominated. "Dear God," she tells Allan angrily at one point, "that I should have fancied I needed help and understanding from you!... An Indian knows where to find help without asking it of a pale face." She rescues him at night in the Badlands, wins a horse race, daringly carries a message to the roundup, and takes a job teaching in an Indian school rather than surrender to someone she thinks will not respect her. Eventually, Allan wins her, on her terms, and takes up land to become a western rancher himself. Daughter of the Badlands is a cowboy western, but the central character is a woman who eventually wins the easterner—the reverse of Owen Wister's cowboy hero who eventually wins the eastern school teacher in the Virginian.

By the time Daughter of the Badlands was published in 1922, pioneer days in South Dakota were history, but the image of the pioneer heroine had been given form and substance in the fiction of early South Dakota women writers. That this heroine appears frequently in the early literature attests to her reality in the experience of these women. That the model was further developed and elaborated upon by later writers in the thirties, forties, and fifties attests to the potency and validity of the image in the lives of all women. In fact, by mid-century, the pioneer heroine had acquired an almost mythical dimension as a kind of imaginative

Bingham and Boyles, Daughter of the Badlands, pp. 4-5.
Ibid., pp. 92-93.

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truth that one returns to in order to validate the self. Speculation as to why this image is so compelling for South Dakota women writers throughout the years, however, lies beyond the limits of this study. For now, we can only admire their strength and purpose in writing at all. We can marvel at their determination to assert their presence upon the enormity of the land around them. If they could not make their existence known by building an empire or running a government as their brothers and fathers did, they could do so by writing a book. The pioneer heroine they created is their legacy to us.

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