Between 1922 and 1939, more than a dozen women wrote novels or stories that featured young women who were growing up, having adventures, and making lives in South Dakota. Although the writers ranged widely in age, background, and geographical location, the stories they wrote have much in common. They are all set in “new” country, either in prairie homesteading

areas or in rough frontier times in west-river ranching communities—places where survival skills are at a premium and where the central character is not restricted by deeply entrenched social customs and traditions. Furthermore, the narratives primarily focus upon a female character who either precipitates the action of the story or is the central consciousness in it—a character who is, in short, a heroine.

These heroines usually have demands placed upon them that require physical courage, ingenuity, self-reliance, and independence—traits that are more often associated with heroes than with heroines. To a woman, the heroines love the country itself, the land that requires so much of them. They find the wide expanse of prairie and sky, the sweeping winds, the awesome beauty of mountains and badlands, the violent cycle of weather, from blizzard, tornado, and drought to lush spring mornings or luxuriant autumn afternoons, a challenge to which they can wholeheartedly respond. Their adventures frequently grow out of the nature of the land and climate in the early years of settlement. These pioneer heroines grow, learn, think, and act in a western setting.

Most of the creators of these heroines based their novels upon their own experiences of either growing up in South Dakota or living in it for a period of time. Lucile Fargo’s family homesteaded near Mitchell before moving to Dell Rapids in the 1880s;

Edith Eudora Kohl homesteaded near Presho in 1907;

Mary Gates, though born in Iowa, grew up in South Dakota and later lived in Wisconsin;

Marian Hurd McNeely homesteaded near the Rosebud reservation for two years.

A few were stimulated to create their own imaginative stories on the basis of others’ experiences or after a visit to the region. Although she was born in South Dakota, Rose Wilder Lane had little actual experience living there and used her family’s reminiscences as material for her fiction.

Ethel Hueston described her novel *Blithe Baldwin* as a “gay and tender memory of the Black Hills,” and she wrote it


4. Mary Gates, *Out of This Nettle* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1937), dust jacket. Mary Gates used her maiden name on her books. Her married name was Muggah.


after she returned to New York City. Sarah Comstock's experience in the Dakotas was slight if one judges from the geographical inaccuracies and inconsistencies in *Speak to the Earth.* Yet, all of these women created heroines in stories set in South Dakota.

Why did so many women find the subject of a young woman growing up and having adventures in South Dakota compelling enough to write about it? This question raises others: Why did these writers find the subject fascinating? What stimulated their creative energy? Why did they so often retell the same story—the maturation and adventures of a young woman, usually single but sometimes a bride, in unsettled country? For whom did they write? What did they say about the women they described? How does their work relate to the books by male writers of South Dakota? To other writers of the region? To the whole body of American literature?

Clearly, these works form only a small portion of the large amount of writing that focuses upon the "middle border," or the last settled area of the country. After the publication of Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1890 and the work of other realistic writers,* a flood of stories depicting life in the Middle West issued forth, some of great critical stature like Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* (1913), *Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918) or Ole Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927). In fact, between 1891 and 1962, over one hundred forty novels were published that dealt with farm life, mostly in the Middle West. The real burgeon-

7. Ethel Hueston, inscription on flyleaf of her novel *Blithe Baldwin,* South Dakota Historical Resource Center, Pierre, S.Dak.

8. *Speak to the Earth* is set in sheep country in "Dakota" with very unclear geographical references. Comstock appears to confuse buttes with mountains, and the Bad Lands are located immediately beside the mountains. Her town of "Minoleum" is located between nonexistent rivers near the Gros Ventres Indians, and the region becomes more populated as the novel progresses—allegedly taking place on a ranch of a World War I veteran in the 1920s. It may well refer to North Dakota, although even the credibility of this is questionable. Comstock was born in Pennsylvania, attended college in California, and, by the 1920s, lived and worked in New York City. She specialized in nonfiction magazine articles, doing a series on western women for *Collier's.* She apparently traveled in the West in order to prepare these articles and may have used that experience to create *Speak to the Earth.* Her other books include *The Soddy* (1912), *The Valley of Vision* (1919), *The Daughter of Helen Kent* (1921), and *The Moon Is Made of Green Cheese* (1929).

9. Such works include Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917) and *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (1921), as well as Edgar Howe's *Story of a Country Town* (1883) and Joseph Kirkland's *Zury, the Meanest Man in Spring County* (1887).
ing of the form came in the twenties and thirties, after World War I. Literary attention was focused upon the region in yet another way during the years 1915-1940, when something called the "battle of the village" occurred in American literature. Small-town life was vigorously defended in the works of such writers as William Allen White of Kansas and Booth Tarkington of Indiana, while it was attacked by Edgar Lee Masters in *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* (1920), Zona Gale in *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920), and Ruth Suckow in *Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925). This flurry of publication indicates the popularity of the region in the first part of the twentieth century. The women writers of South Dakota were, perhaps, only adding their small trickle to the stream.

This explanation, however, is unsatisfactory. The women writers of South Dakota often wrote for young readers, and their work does not reveal familiarity with, nor dependence upon, the work of more prestigious writers. Furthermore, twice as many women as men published fiction based on South Dakota during the 1922-1939 period. The inspiration and motivation derived from the experience of living in South Dakota during the early pioneer years must have been particularly strong for women. Another important consideration is the fact that an earlier generation of women writers had already created the embryonic form of the pioneer heroine, blazing the trail in the use of homesteading, ranch life, and pioneer settlement as the basis for novels about women. From 1890 through 1920, writers like Stella Gilman, Eleonor Gates, and Matilda Woods Stone had created a picture of a young heroine whose courage, physical energy, and independence were drawn from life on the prairie, while her gentility, piety, and refinement were based on eastern values. Kate Boyles Bingham who, with her brother Virgil Boyles, published *Daughter of the Badlands* in 1922 really belongs to the earlier generation of writers. Her 1922 novel is merely her most fully developed ex-

pression of the pioneer heroine, which appeared first in her *Langford of the Three Bars* (1907), *The Homesteaders* (1909), and *The Spirit Trail* (1910). *Daughter of the Badlands* is a bridge that unites the two generations of writers. Thus, the novelists examined in this paper, the second generation of writers, do not represent the first voices raised to give a literary dimension to the pioneer heroine. At the present time, no evidence exists to indicate that the writers of the two generations knew or influenced each other in form or ideas, but the early versions of the pioneer heroine suggest the intrinsic and enduring appeal of this figure to women.

If the women writing about South Dakota heroines had literary models, they were probably not the best-known and most highly

acclaimed midwestern authors who used homesteading and small-town life as their subjects (Garland, Rolvaag, and Cather). Many of the second generation of women writers (Marian Hurd McNeeley, Francis Gilchrist Wood, Gretchen Mc Kown and Florence Gleeson, and, of course, Laura Ingalls Wilder) wrote for young readers. Others (Sarah Comstock, Ethel Hueston, and Mary Gates) wrote for a popular audience. Rose Wilder Lane published her work first as serials in the *Saturday Evening Post*. With the possible exception of Lane, these writers neither expected nor received the critical attention and recognition that have been accorded better-known writers. In fact, they are rarely mentioned in scholarly or critical works dealing with adult fiction or American literature. Yet, they have been widely read, and their novels still circulate in South Dakota and regional libraries.

These novels share the critical neglect of other classic works for young readers, works that also center upon the adventures of a young girl, and which we might assume these writers had read. Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) is probably the prototype of the heroine who finds herself in various scrapes and has to rely on her own wits and ingenuity to extricate herself. Often, she does not conform to the stereotype of the “true woman” or “lady” in nineteenth-century American culture: that innocent, pious, submissive, domestic, and delicate creature who blushed and wept frequently. *Heidi* (1884), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) were all popular novels with thousands of readers who identified with their title characters. These young girls were doers, the centers of stories. As one researcher put it, “Heidi, Rebecca, Anne, etc., are doing whatever has to be done—and they are doing it competently, joyfully, and all by themselves.”

Scholar Jacqueline Berke observes, “In each of the perennially popular works of fiction read by adolescent girls... mothers are conspicuous by their absence.” They are either dead (*Heidi, Anne of Green Gables*, the Nancy Drew series) or rendered ineffectual by poverty (*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*), family circumstances (*Little Women*), or illness (*The Secret Garden*). In addition, the young women often identify with or confront and win the respect of a strong male figure (grandfather and Peter in *Heidi*,...
Laurel in *Little Women*, Matthew and Gilbert in *Anne of Green Gables*, Ben Weatherstaff and Colin in *The Secret Garden*). Most important, each of the heroines acts independently and triumphs—setting things right, solving problems, winning recognition. Although the works do not reject marriage as the destiny of women, the more adventurous Anne and Rebecca are ready to enter the career most open to women at the turn of the century (teaching), and Jo March still hopes to become a writer.

The pioneer environment in early South Dakota provided a whole new field of action for such a heroine, and perhaps the pioneer heroine owes her existence to this literary tradition. Lucile Fargo's *Prairie Girl* (1937) is a case in point. Written late in Fargo's life, after the author had become a distinguished librarian and had written several professional books, *Prairie Girl* recounts the adventures of "Prairie" Clarke as she grows up in Rocky Run (Dell Rapids, South Dakota). In all important ways—the absent mother, the relationship with strong males, the heroine's independent action and triumph, and the acceptance of a career at the end of the story—this book follows the pattern of earlier adolescent fiction. Presumably based on Fargo's own experiences, the book shows Prairie exploring the Big Sioux river with her young male friend Wells, helping her father build their home with a wonderful "tower room" where Prairie has a secret club, working in her father's hardware store, dreaming of achieving great feats, and finally settling for a career as a school teacher. Prairie is her father's "boy," to the distress of her mother, who is a shadowy remote figure in the story. Prairie hates wearing corsets and pinning up her hair; "she was consistently scornful of the general anxiety about hemlines, hairpins, and whalebones... [Corsets] might be all right for grown women, but they were silly and uncomfortable for girls. So were the other things. Hairpins tumbled out if you ran, and you couldn't scramble over the rocks in the gulch clad in a long skirt." Eventually, when a blizzard strikes the rural school she teaches in, Prairie rises to the heights of heroic action that such a self-sufficient and enterprising young woman can achieve. As the storm rages, she doctors a child suffering from severe sore throat, organizes the children, rations the limited lunch-box remains, parcels out the wood for the stove as they burn desks and benches to keep warm, and keeps up the children’s spirits until they are rescued the next day. When her own

courage begins to fail, she finds resources within herself. "Look here, Prairie Clarke," she scolds herself, "you've got to see this thing through. None of your namby-pamby foolishness!"^17

Unlike the earlier writers of girls' fiction, Lucile Fargo makes no secret of her feminist views in Prairie Girl. Prairie Clarke is a heroine not only in action but in ideas. Surprisingly enough, she learns of the need for the emancipation of women from her father, and this viewpoint is strengthened when she visits the Women's Building at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. She debates the issue of women's rights in a school exhibition, and at the end of the novel, she is determined to finish college and pursue a career, which Wells Switzer, her young male friend, encourages. When Prairie calls herself a "New Woman," author Lucile Fargo distances herself and her book both from the earlier writers of girls' fiction.

17. Ibid., p. 270.
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fiction and from the first generation of South Dakota women writers who, for all the daring deeds of their heroines, did not openly challenge the traditional notions of women’s role as mother and homemaker. For Lucile Fargo, the pioneer experience gave substance to feminist ideas, especially from the writer’s vantage point in middle age when she was writing the story.

In this point of view, Fargo is far more liberated than her contemporary Laura Ingalls Wilder, who in the same period was creating the famous series that follows the maturation of Laura Ingalls and her sisters. Also written late in the author’s life, Wilder’s stories purport to be history, but their popularity rests upon the persona of Laura, a genuine heroine, as well as on their minute detailing of pioneer domestic life. The book written in this particular period that deals with South Dakota is *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939). It recounts the Ingalls family’s first year in the De Smet area of Dakota Territory, when they lived in the surveyors’ house near the railroad camp. Other Wilder books are similar in point of view, although they record different time periods in Laura’s life.

In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, twelve-year-old Laura loves the open prairie as she rides a pony, explores the wonders of birds and flowers near the Big Slough, goes out to the railroad camp with her father, longs to follow the road endlessly west into yet wilder country, and faces down a wolf in the winter prairie night. Like Prairie Clarke’s mother, Caroline Ingalls cautions her daughter about her tomboy ways. She urges her not to play with her cousin Lena, who is too “boisterous,” and she lectures her concerning the proper manners for a lady: “Ma talked seriously to Laura. She said that she wanted her girls to know how to behave, to speak nicely in low voices and have gentle manners and always be ladies. . . . She wanted Laura to stay away from the [railroad] camp, and not get acquainted with any of the rough men there. It would be all right for her to go quietly with Pa to see the work this once, but she must be well-behaved and ladylike, and remember that a lady never did anything that could attract attention.”

Although Laura Ingalls is devoted to her father and the life he leads, in later books she ultimately acquiesces to the more traditional point of view expressed by her mother. The stories cele-

brate loving, happy family life, and homemaking—the background for Laura’s adventures. When the actual facts of author Laura Ingalls Wilder’s life are considered, however, one wonders if Laura’s acquiescence in these stories is not contrived to substantiate the glorification of domestic life that the series as a whole proclaims. The skeptical reader may sometimes believe that Laura’s submission is rationalized through the prism of sentimental reminiscence rather than explored as a genuine conflict between her own inclinations and the demands of society. The conflict is surely hinted at in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* in the tension between the freedom that Laura experiences on the prairie and the restraints of womanhood that are imposed by her mother.

The possible conflict becomes even more intriguing when Rose Wilder Lane’s life and career are considered next to her mother’s. Wilder, who had a difficult early married life on the Dakota prairie, remained with her husband when they moved to Mansfield, Missouri, to become chicken farmers. During the lean times, Wilder helped support the family by dressmaking, by working as secretary-treasurer of the Mansfield Farm Loan Association, and by writing columns for the *Missouri Ruralist.* While she was obviously important as a breadwinner in the family, her image through the years, protected by her daughter, has been that of the domestic woman who was happy as homemaker and mother. Rose Wilder Lane, in contrast, led a far less conventional life, both in reality and in appearance. She took a job as a telegraph operator, became one of the first woman real-estate agents in California, divorced her husband when he failed to support her, was a reporter for the *San Francisco Bulletin,* and served in Europe for the Red Cross after World War I. Even so, in later years her political position was staunchly conservative, and she espoused American individualism and capitalism, idolizing Henry Ford and Herbert Hoover. She championed women’s folk art in *The Woman’s Day Book of Needlework* (1963), and shortly before her death, she also became a correspondent for the Vietnam War

20. William T. Anderson, in “The Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” gives serious critical attention to the possible discrepancies between the Wilder legend and the reality behind it. He also looks at Rose Wilder Lane’s part in maintaining her mother’s legend and at the working relationship between the two women.
for Woman's Day. Thus, she appears to have claimed a feminist independence of action no matter what political beliefs she embraced. Her antisocialist beliefs may have led her to champion the traditional women's role in the family as a bulwark against a socialist threat. 21 Both her life and her work suggest an ambivalence toward the role of women that cries out for closer scrutiny.

In any case, Rose Wilder Lane the novelist certainly created a vivid example of the pioneer heroine in Let the Hurricane Roar (1933). In their marriage and in their building of a home on the Dakota prairie, her characters, Caroline and Charles, appear to be partners in a joint enterprise. Caroline carries her share of the load. It is she who volunteers to hold down the claim while Charles goes east to work after the grasshoppers have eaten them out. It is she who stays alone in the dugout with her baby throughout the terrible winter months, maintaining their home and conquering her own fears: "Caroline was never able to say, even in her own thoughts, what she knew when she first came out of the dugout after the October blizzard. It was a moment of inexpressible terror, courage and pride. She was aware of human dignity.... She drew a deep breath, and with her shovel she attacked the snow." 22 She kills a half-frozen cow and butchers it for meat; she fights a wolf. In fact, she claims she feels like Samson—that image of male physical strength—for having taken meat "out of the eater." 23 The whole last section of the book is a tribute to her individual achievement of surviving alone and protecting her child, the homestead, the joint enterprise, the future. She, at least, is no frail and delicate lady.

As in Lane's and Wilder's work, the experience of homesteading dominates many of the women novelists' stories in an almost classic recounting of the American family epic—the building of a home in the wilderness. In the settlement of the plains, this was a family affair. The father often preceded the others to stake out the claim and then brought wife and children to help him build a sod hut or tar-paper shanty and to provide food and clothing while he broke the sod. Such an enterprise placed much physical and psychological hardship upon the women. In fact, women are often viewed as "victims" by such writers as Hamlin Garland and

23. Ibid., p. 140.
Ole Rolvaag. In this point of view, female characters are either worn out by the dreary round of toil and drabness, as in Garland’s short story “Up the Cooley,” or driven beyond their endurance to madness, as in Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*. This concept can also be found in women’s writings, and examples include the knife-wielding Mrs. Brewster in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *These Happy Golden Years* and the picture of Mrs. Hite in Lane’s version of the same incident in her short story “Home over Saturday.”

Loneliness, isolation, and monotony did sometimes exact a price from frontier women, a fact substantiated in some of the nonfictional accounts of pioneer life.

The women writers, however, do not usually see their sex as victims in the homesteading experience if we can judge from their young central characters like Prairie, Laura, and Caroline. Such figures have too strong a sense of themselves, of purpose, accomplishment, and enjoyment of what they are doing to be regarded as victims. Some of the writers go even further and move their characters from simple self-assertion to an open challenge of the sex-gender distinctions dominating nineteenth-century American culture—the notion of separate “spheres” for men and women. One such writer is Frances Gilchrist Wood, whose *Turkey Red* (1932) recounts the homesteading story of Janet and Allen Craig who stake a claim near Blunt, South Dakota. Unlike Rose Wilder Lane, who has the ability to create the immediacy of the experience and the sense of being there through concrete detail and a lean, direct style, Wood is sometimes rhapsodic, often allusive, and always sentimental. Her focus is blurred by digressions in which she portrays other frontier characters, and she

24. Lane’s “Home over Saturday” appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 11 September 1937.

25. Neva Harding who homesteaded in South Dakota from 1880 to 1885, for instance, wrote: “Pioneering is not hard on children, they take it as a matter of course. It is not too hard on men; who get about and make outside contacts. But it is tough on women. . . . it was the monotony, the loneliness that was the worst. In all the five years we lived on the claim, [mother] went to only one public entertainment, a dance at the ‘Exchange’ Hotel. . . . it was like putting her, at 28, into prison for the five best years of her life. . . . She drifted into deep despondency, with long spells of weeping; she continually talked to herself, and kept saying she wished she were dead. I was so frightened I told her she could not die—she dared not leave Marsh and me all alone. She looked at me as tho’ she had entirely forgotten who I was. She sighed and said bitterly, ‘No, I guess I can’t even die.’ . . . The five years were finally at an end, and we moved to town in time to save her reason” (Neva Harding, *I Recall Pioneer Days in South Dakota* [n.p., 1961], pp. 9-10).
uses many of the stock incidents of pioneer fiction: babies being born and children suffering with croup during blizzards, crops being ruined by hail and drought, and community efforts being made to maintain school, Sunday school, and singing class on the frontier. Her lead female character, however, is a genuine pioneer heroine.

Janet is introduced standing on a prairie slope facing the Missouri River “like a modern Victory,... a stiff wind molding the blue calico about sturdy arms and legs braced against its might, pulling loose the dusky hair to send it streaming back like a comet.” Like Lane’s Caroline, Janet has to hold down the claim alone while her husband works for wages to keep the family alive. Allen uses his team to haul freight from Huron to Blunt, and he buys an old printing press to start a newspaper (the type of work he did in the East before he came to Dakota). The most interesting part of the novel is the “turnabout” section in which Janet and Allen switch roles because he has hurt his hand and can no longer drive the team or run the press. She wants to take their child Binkie in the wagon with her when she drives a load to Huron in order to relieve her husband of child care while he is looking after the homestead, but he protests: “You can’t take the baby, Janet. This [hauling] is a man’s job, full size.... It’s no pick-up job—like this [homesteading]!” Janet is furious but agrees to leave Binkie with his father, who says in amazement, “Jan, you act like you’re—glad to go!” Janet’s response is the housewife’s eternal lament: “I am! So would you be if you lived here all alone a million miles from everywhere and never saw anybody for a thousand years!... You don’t know what loneliness is, Allen, with no neighbors.... You’re going to learn—many things while I’m gone.”

Allen does indeed! Binkie nearly falls in the well. Allen finds he cannot comfort a crying baby, water and milk a cow and tend her wayward calf, feed chickens, fight off hawks, carry water from the well, scrub clothes, cook food, and plant a garden all at the same time. (Meanwhile, Janet is successfully handling the freight work and enjoying herself.) At the end of the first day, Allen concludes: “To-morrow they’ll be yapping for food all over again. There’ll be the same dishes to wash and food to cook three times

27. Ibid., pp. 90-92.
over, and milking and watering and picketing—*with* the baby! And Jan cleans and sews and washes and irons and gardens—"Finally, the baby falls asleep in a badger hole. Janet returns in time to join her husband in the frantic search for the child. When they find him safely sleeping, they are both repentant for having moved out of their gender-defined roles but grateful for the experience of doing what the other does. David acknowledges the difficulty and demands of homemaking and motherhood on the prairie.

The tension in this novel eventually resolves itself when Janet begins to help set type, make up forms, and ink the runoffs on their paper. In a truly heroic series of actions, she saves the county seat by getting the paper out alone while her husband is doing some emergency freighting. Tired and scared, after she has succeeded in getting the paper delivered to the settlers, she has to ride her pony seven miles back to the claim in the dark, with Binkie on the pommel. She loses her way and spends a terrified night on the prairie. She awakens at dawn to discover herself near home. "Why, I never saw the prairie so beautiful before,"

28. Ibid., p. 104.
she exclaims. "The frontier can't abide—a quitter!... I'm no quitter! I'm a pioneer!" Janet has succeeded in triumphing over her own fears and weaknesses, as well as over the enemies of the town. In the final chapter of the book, she is again compared to the winged Victory—the symbol of the pioneer woman—and is described as having "the same buoyant lift of body [and] wind-blown garments."

Not all of the homesteading stories concern married women. Single women homesteaders appear in well-known nonfictional accounts and have also been studied historically. One recent study of 220 single women (including widows and married women living alone) who filed claims between 1900 and 1915 found that more than sixty percent of them proved up on their claims. Most of these women also held jobs as teachers, waitresses, cooks, and midwives, or they ran hotels or newspapers to survive until they proved up. Single women came west for various reasons, but as one researcher wrote, they all "wanted the economic security that land ownership afforded and the borrowing power it provided," and they "were willing to seek their own fortunes, rather than wait for others to supply them." Two good fictional works about single women homesteaders written in this period center around the adventures of a single girl and her brother and around those of two sisters. Both stories are set during the period when parts of the Lower Brule and Rosebud Indian reservations were opened to settlement in 1907 and 1910. Both of the writers participated in the land settlement programs and wrote from their own experiences; in fact, one of the novels is only a thinly disguised autobiography.

Marian Hurd McNeely's *The Jumping-Off Place* (1929) is a story for young readers. Although the author is not well known, she produced a number of books, most of which are juveniles that

29. Ibid., pp. 200-201.
30. Ibid., p. 312.
33. Ibid., pp. 59-60.
were written after she was fifty years old—a pattern common to many of the women writers.⁴⁴ Although born and reared in Iowa, McNeely homesteaded for two years with her husband near Dallas, South Dakota, the scene of her story. After publication of *The Jumping-Off Place*, well-known author Dorothy Canfield Fisher

**34.** Her other books include *Rusty Ruston: A Story for Brothers and Sisters* (1929); *Winning Out* (1931); and *The Way to Glory and Other Stories* (1932).
praised McNeely’s ability to portray a young girl, stating in the foreword to another of McNeely’s books: “How rarer than the finest pearl is a real little girl in a book! — A little girl with personality of her own, with spice and spunk and brains and the odd charm that Mrs. McNeely could so captivatingly present.”

The central figures in *The Jumping-Off Place* are teenagers Dick and Becky Linville, an orphaned brother and sister who prove up on a claim that has been left to them by a devoted uncle. Against the advice of a critical and interfering aunt, the two pack up a few household belongings, take their younger brother and sister, and move to “the jumping-off place.” The oldest at seventeen, Becky must direct the project, and she experiences fear at the outset: “I’m not afraid of snakes or blizzards or hard work, but I’m panicky about myself. Maybe I’m not going to be big enough to do it if I don’t have Uncle Jim.”

In spite of her fears, Becky emerges as a heroine. The book is written from her point of view, and she is capable, independent, and able to manage the claim with her brother and care for the two younger siblings. The family struggles with claim jumpers, thieving neighbors, backbreaking work, drought, and loneliness. It is Becky who labors a whole day in the hot July sun to plant trees and flowers around the shanty and who builds and paints bookshelves. When the garden is burnt out in the drought and the children cannot make it through the winter, Becky saves the family by getting a job teaching a rural school to provide for their needs. This also enables her to save the school children in a blizzard — the classic action of the pioneer heroine, which is similarly described in Fargo’s *Prairie Girl* and Lane’s “Home over Saturday.” Becky keeps the children marching and playing games to keep warm after the coal runs out. “There wouldn’t be any children left to make a school if it hadn’t been for her,” said the commissioner of schools. “Country teaching is a good test of a young person, with the long walks, the building of fires and the carrying of water, besides the lessons. Miss Linville has done every bit of that herself, rather than hire one of the big boys to do it, as most of my teachers do.”

The story ends with Becky in triumph — as teacher, as homesteader, as pioneer heroine.


37. Ibid., pp. 282-84.
The other book on single women homesteaders during this period is Edith Eudora Kohl’s *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (1938). Kohl based her work on her own experiences, but she did not regard herself as a “pioneer,” nor did she consider the work autobiography. She had great admiration for the men and women who settled the plains (the “Great American Desert”) and for the cooperative spirit among the settlers that the struggle against both nature and human forces encouraged. It is that story that Kohl attempts to tell. The novel opens when the Ammons sisters, Edith and Ida Mary, arrive at their shanty thirty miles from Pierre and promptly decide, “We’ll start back in the morning . . . as soon as it is daylight.” They had come from Illinois, from pioneering stock, but were totally ignorant of conditions on the homesteading frontier, and they were not strong physically. They were surprised to survive the terrors of the first night on the prairie, but they did not return to Illinois. When they met their first neighbor, and when they became interested in the life on the prairie (coyotes, wolves, prairie dogs, sheep, cattle, and homesteaders), they were lured into permanent residence.

The rest of the book is a rollicking, gutsy tale of their life on the first claim and on the one they took up later on the Lower Brule. Eventually, they printed a newspaper and ran a small post office. Life was hard, but it was always lively and full of interesting people, especially women. They were to discover that most women “had no time for self-pity or lamenting their rigorous, hard lives. . . . And they managed, on the whole, to live rich, satisfying lives.” On the sisters’ first day on the claim, three single “girl homesteaders” in shirtwaists and divided skirts called on them, riding horseback a total of eighteen miles simply to “drop in.” Edith took over the running of the local newspaper with no experience, but that did not stop her from asking the owner in Pierre for a two-dollar-a-week raise, which he gave her. She also asked for a new printing press and got it. She visualized the settlement of the country as a great cooperative enterprise between people, business, and the railroads, with the newspaper as the voice.

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40. Ibid., p. 5.
41. Ibid., pp. 21-22.
The most surprising aspect of the sisters' life was its sociability. Far from being isolated and alone, women on homesteads "inaugurated some form of social life, ... exchange of visits, ... informal gatherings." They shared sleigh rides, meals, and songs. Kohl writes: "A surprising number of homesteaders were girls who had come alone. They had a purpose in being there. With the proceeds of a homestead they could finish their education or go into business. Many of these girls came from sheltered homes and settled out in the wilderness of plains, living alone in little isolated shanties." It took great courage and resourcefulness, but in

MARY CLARK, teacher at Maass school - 1908

Many of the single women who homesteaded in South Dakota also held jobs, working as school teachers or in newspaper offices. Riding astride in divided skirts, young women like Mary Clark braved rough pioneer conditions in order to gain the money to work their claims.

spite of the hardships, Kohl concludes, the "settlers made merry."

While many women novelists thus used the homesteading areas of the state as a setting for the pioneer heroine, other South Dakota women writers were inspired to use the ranching communities west of the Missouri River or the mining towns of the Black Hills. Cowboy country had already been discovered as a rich

42. Ibid., pp. 133-34.
43. Ibid., pp. 175-76.
source of fiction with the publication of Stephen Crane’s story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” in 1898 and Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* in 1902. Bret Harte had used the western mining town in “The Luck of Roaring Camp” and “Tennessee’s Partner” in the 1860s. Both settings were male enclaves, with the possible inclusion of such unconventional females as Calamity Jane and Poker Alice. Nevertheless, several women authors in this generation created pioneer heroines who flourished in this male environment.

Some of the novels are too slight to be worth more than a mere mention. Anna Morris Clark’s *Sylvia of the Hills* was printed locally in Custer, South Dakota, in 1936 and falls far short of literary excellence. In the introduction, Clark writes that the work was based upon “the ambitious efforts of a Black Hills girl who, aided by a devoted mother, attained a college education and finally won the approval of an opposing father,” but the writer fails to capture the reader’s attention in this worthy attempt. Like other writers of the area, Clark lovingly describes the beauty of her surroundings. Elizabeth Nicol Hutton’s *No Man’s Child* (1930) is only slightly better than Clark’s effort. Richly sentimental, the story centers on the adoption of Becky, an orphaned child in Sioux City, by Rev. John and Mary Burton and her redemptive love in restoring John’s faith after they move to the Black Hills. Becky shows some of the characteristic independence and grit of the pioneer heroine, but the writer’s prejudiced picture of Indians and her heavy piety intrude upon the story. In spite of their books’ flaws, both of these writers focus upon young women who think and act.

More engaging for the reader, but lacking credibility, is Sarah Comstock’s *Speak to the Earth* (1927). Set in the “Bad Lands,” probably in either North or South Dakota, the story concerns Effie, a New York orphan, who comes west on a phoney real-estate venture and is rescued by Victor French, an embittered World War I veteran who is a struggling sheep rancher. They

44. Even before Owen Wister’s classic novel, the cowboy was featured in the dime novel of the nineteenth century but with little attempt at verisimilitude. Such writers capitalized on fictional figures named “Calamity Jane” and “Deadwood Dick” and totally incredible adventures.  
throw in their lot together, though Victor refuses to marry her, and eventually Effie grows into a kind of earth-mother figure. Because she is in tune with the natural forces around her, she is able to redeem Victor and restore the promise of the sheep ranch. At the beginning of the story, Victor is on the brink of suicide, but at the end, through Effie’s belief, devotion, and sacrifice, he has faith in himself and in the country. Most significantly, Effie herself is nourished by the land, achieving maturity and personhood through the wild country around her. She becomes somebody in the pioneer environment. The opening inscription of the work quotes from the book of Job: “But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee; or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.” Such wisdom becomes known through Effie, the earth-mother heroine.

The story of a little girl who loves adventure and finds it during Deadwood’s gold-rush years is the subject of All the Days Were Antonia’s. Presumably based upon the life of Florence Stebbins Gleeson, one of the authors, the novel provides a lively picture of Deadwood in the 1870s. Antonia, or “Tony,” and her mother travel by stage and wagon over difficult terrain to join her banker father in Deadwood. Tony delights in the whole adventure, the strange new sights and sounds and the primitive living. From the miners, she learns about gold hunting in the hills; from her father, she learns about gamblers and outlaws; from the Indians, she learns native dancing. She has immense curiosity about the “District,” a place of rickety dance halls and saloons: “By watching, Tony had learned that the camp was in two parts, as though a wall had been built between. Now and again men from the other part drifted through an imaginary gate and along past the bank, but they never told what they had seen there. Tony was quite certain that some day she too would learn its secrets. In the meantime there was still much at hand to explore.”

Tony explores the barbershop and the “calaboose,” places usually off-limits to females. She falls in the creek and dances with the Indians in a scarcely credible scene. She is the toast of

47. Sarah Comstock, Speak to the Earth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), title page.
49. Ibid., p. 121.
Deadwood, a favorite with rough miners, cowboys, Indians, and even, ultimately, the outlaws. She helps her mother nurse in a makeshift hospital during the fever season and goes with her mother to the Bluebird Saloon in the gambling district. She overhears outlaws attempting to rob her father's bank and provides information that enables her father and his friends to capture them. Although the story is sentimental and strains belief, Tony is a true heroine who finds the lawless rough life of Deadwood a challenge to her own personal development. On the final page, she is actually crowned for her bravery with her own poplar wreath in a scene that recalls the traditional celebration of a hero.\(^50\)

While these female heroines of the sheep ranch and small town entranced some writers, the female counterpart of the cowboy appealed to others. Kate Boyles Bingham's heroine Bonibel Sherwood in *Daughter of the Badlands* has the skills required in cattle country. She can ride and shoot, and she becomes a heroine in a narrative of captures and chases that contains the "bad guys" and "good guys" of the western formula story.\(^51\) Two other writers also utilize western South Dakota life to create the "cowgirl" version of the pioneer heroine.

Ethel Hueston's *Blithe Baldwin*, published in 1933, well illustrates this version of the heroine. Hueston, a widely published author, was so taken with her visit to the West and the Black Hills that she wrote not only this work but one of the many biographies of Calamity Jane.\(^52\) The central figure of *Blithe Baldwin* is, of course, named in the title and has all the earmarks of the typical pioneer heroine. The only child of Wyoming rancher "Big Baldy," she is his "boy" and loves horses, cattle, and ranch life. Characteristically, he has sent her east to college. The story opens with her return for the summer and her announcement that she does not intend to return to college. "It was just dumb to go away back East to be educated out of books when I had all this at home," she tells her father.\(^53\) She also scoffs at the English

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50. Ibid., p. 268.
52. Ethel Hueston wrote many other books in the 1930s and 1940s, including *Calamity Jane at Deadwood Gulch* (1937), *Ginger Ella* (1932), *High Bridge* (1938), *No Shortage of Men* (1945), *Drink to Me Only* (1943), *Mother Went Mad on Monday* (1940), *Heaven and Vice Versa* (1947), among others.
style of riding horses, which she has been required to learn at college. "I was ashamed," she said. "I was glad there was nobody around there who amounted to anything to see such actions. The boys [the cowboys] would have died laughing."

Her father does not agree, and the two quarrel over her future. He claims she could not earn her living, and with her mother's encouragement, Blithe runs away, riding her horse to the Black Hills, where she gets a job on a dude ranch (the Bar Nothing) to prove that she can earn her board. She is eminently successful, making herself indispensable on the badly run ranch. She proves to have a shrewd head for business, taking over the books and management of the place and surviving a series of disasters: the demanding wife of the owner, eccentric guests, a blizzard, and an enraged bull. In the traditional display of heroic courage, she rides through a storm to a woman having a baby. Blithe has the skills of the western hero, having ridden broncs bareback before she could walk and won prizes at rodeos. She is independent, energetic, enterprising, and she gets her man in the end. She is described as the "one running around in pants—sort of runs the show." Both she and her mother are portrayed as having more sense and ingenuity than either her father or the young college man, a guest at the dude ranch, that Blithe decides to marry.

In a western setting, the pioneer heroine appears to be endowed with superior knowledge, whether drawn from nature as in *Speak to the Earth* or derived from feminine wisdom as in *Blithe Baldwin*. The western man is pictured as strong, lovable, and capable, but decidedly in need of the direction and manipulation of an imaginative, sensitive, and clever woman. Such a heroine also is Jess Millard in Mary Gates's *Out of This Nettle* (1937). Jess is less enterprising and more emotional than Blithe Baldwin, but she has the same courage, independence, and resourcefulness.

Gates's story is set near the Bad Lands and opens with Jess as a trick rider in a flea-bitten, one-ring circus traveling the little towns of South Dakota. Jess is an orphan, fending for herself since her brother Bob was shot down as a flyer in World War I. She has just recovered from an accident while riding a bad horse and is terrified of such daredevil performances. After being accosted by an evil-minded rancher, she takes her pony and pet lion

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54. Ibid., p. 12.
55. Ibid., p. 11.
56. Ibid., p. 308.
West of the Missouri River, young women grew up on ranches and learned to ride horses, shoot guns, mend fences, and work with the cattle. Near Fort Pierre in 1910, Regina Rousseau used her pistol to kill a rattlesnake. and runs away to the Bad Lands. Digused as a boy, she is hired on as a ranch hand, and even after her true sex is discovered, she is kept on to herd cattle. She loves the life: “The pure air, the long restful nights, the quiet hours in the sun had worked a miracle: she was no longer jumpy. She felt years younger, gayer, prettier. She loved the endless miles of colorful land that reared themselves into the sky with arrested motion. She was always discovering new shapes, new beauties.”

Too many narrative lines and too much detail distract and confuse the reader so that the novel is less than successful, but the picture of the heroine emerges clearly. Jess quiets the cattle, preventing a stampede by singing to them, and she restores the faith of Jimmy, the crippled ranch owner with whom she has fallen in love, and encourages him to walk again. She conquers her fear of lightning and “spooked” horses, finally riding one triumphantly in a rodeo in order to win money to save the ranch:

She was snapped about like a whip-lash, her head jerked back and forth on a neck of rubber. There were blind moments when she seemed to

be facing one way, and her horse, another. But still she raked him with her spurs. And not until he was completely subdued did she stop fanning.

When the hump was quite gone from his powerful back, she trotted him around the enclosure. She leaned backward and patted his shiny hips with a forgiving hand; leaned forward to smooth down his sparse mane; ran her fingers over his wet neck. She rubbed his small ears—and still the famous outlaw showed not the smallest sign of resentment.

Dusty and flushed and trembling with exhaustion, she rode him close to the grandstand. Even the wildly applauding throng did not startle him into more than blinking.\(^{58}\)

The story ends happily, with Jess triumphant in love as well as in the rodeo.

Some evidence exists to suggest that these fictional pictures of women in cattle country are based on reality. In 1979, as part of a Modern Language Association project on regional women’s literature, a young woman interviewed nine older women in the Rapid City area. Ranging in age from 70 to 102, the women had all been born on or had immigrated to ranches in western South Dakota. They remembered growing up in the West with especial fondness for the open spaces, the freedom of ranch life, and the work of fencing and cutting cattle. As one woman described it: “Anything that they did out there on the ranch, I was right there; I was in the middle of it. Really, I was one of the cowboys. My step-dad would rather take me lots of times because I wasn’t afraid.”\(^{59}\) The women spoke glowingly of the dances, rodeos, mock massacres, and stock meetings that provided social life for them. Another very old woman recounted her experience of holding her own homestead among neighboring cattle ranchers. The men, she said, “made you mad. You just felt like telling them to go to Hell. —They wasn’t bossing me. I was on my own. They must have thought I was a tough old sassy thing, but I didn’t care what they thought. I had to fight my own battles. I didn’t ask them for help.”\(^{60}\)

From this brief survey of women’s novels, it is clear that even the cowboy in western literature—that quintessential masculine figure—had a female variation in stories by women writers in the 1920s and 1930s. As these writers knew, women could act the heroic part of outwitting the outlaws, riding the range, and participating in all the action and adventure of ranch life as well as men

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58. Ibid., pp. 282-83.
60. Ibid., p. 9.
could. Kate Boyles Bingham had pointed the way in her earlier works and in her *Daughter of the Badlands* in 1922. Other early writers had also created pioneer heroines on the cowgirl model as well as on the homesteader model. Whether in cattle country or on a homestead, however, the pioneer heroine had achieved only tentative form in the generation of writers before 1920. In the 1920s and 1930s, South Dakota women writers developed the pioneer heroine fully. The young female characters who appear in the pages of *Prairie Girl*, *Let the Hurricane Roar*, *Land of the Burnt Thigh*, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *Blithe Baldwin*, and *The Jumping-Off Place* are credible portraits of young women or girls. They do not strain the reader’s ability to believe as so many of the heroines of the earlier generation of writers did. For the most part, the later generation of writers also produced more readable stories, making the pioneer heroine blossom as a fully conceived imaginative creation.

The young women in these books—Becky, Prairie, Laura, Janet, Caroline, Blithe, Jess—are genuine heroines. They succeed in finding strength in themselves to meet the challenge of living on the prairie or plains in pioneer conditions. Like the heroines of the classic adolescent fiction for young girls, they are usually quite independent of their mothers, they identify with male activities in homesteading, ranching, and small-town life, and they triumph through exercising their own wits and resources. Furthermore, the books often suggest at the end of the story that the heroine will find future satisfaction in a career—teaching, ranching, farming, running a newspaper—rather than in home or family life alone. Possibly this reflects the greater employment opportunities opening up for women in the thirties and forties.

The question for the researcher, however, remains: Why did the woman writer, often in middle or older life, return so often to the story of the adventures of a heroine in a western setting? The last scene in Edith Eudora Kohl’s *Land of the Burnt Thigh* offers a possible clue. At the end of that story, the Ammons sisters are leaving their claim as Ida Mary gets married and Edith moves on to a new frontier in Wyoming. “On top of the ridge,” Edith says, “I stopped and gazed at the cabin with no sign of life around it, took my last look at the Land of the Burnt Thigh. A wilderness I

61. See Alexander, “South Dakota Women Writers and the Emergence of the Pioneer Heroine.”
had found it, a thriving community I left it. But the sun was getting low and I had new trails to break.”

This final image of the pioneer heroine heading west to wilder country bears a resemblance to the figure of Huckleberry Finn, who, at the end of his Mississippi River odyssey, decides to “light out for the territory” rather than be “sivilized” by Aunt Sally. That similarity suggests an answer to the question of why women writers returned again and again to the experience of the pioneer heroine.

Pioneer days offered a freedom, a ready opportunity for young women to learn, to grow, to develop, to be. “Thriving communities” drove them back into their restrictive roles, into “female spheres” of activity, into stereotypes of women. Few of the women writers, either in their stories or in their lives, challenged the traditional role of females for any length of time. Many married and turned to writing only late in their lives. Others entered traditional careers, becoming librarians and teachers. These writers were not “pioneers” in expanding the roles of women as Margaret Sanger or Amelia Earhart or Antoinette Brown or Elizabeth Blackwell had been, but they did cherish the ideal of the independent and free young woman nurtured on the Dakota plains and prairies. Thus, they returned in their imaginations to recreate the experience of a young adulthood in which they discovered their true selves. Such a creative endeavor nourished their hearts and spirits. We can be grateful that their work enables us to be nourished from the same source.

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