

No Husband, No Problem for Women in “Staking Her Claim”

New book reveals that ten percent of all homesteaders in the West were single women.

By Jenny Shank, 3-22-10

Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West
by Marcia Meredith Hensley
High Plains Press, 304 pages, \$19.95

The popular image of homesteaders in the American West is that of a family traveling across the plains in a covered wagon before the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, the husband driving the team while the wife tended to the children. In [Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West](#), Wyoming-based historian and writer Marcia Meredith Hensley offers a radically different vision of the homesteader: a single woman, unmarried either due to lack of interest or opportunity, traveling by train out to the West in the early 1900's, and taking up claims in Colorado, Montana, Utah, and other western states.

Many of these women seized the opportunity to acquire their own land after the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act was passed by congress. In the days before Social Security, some unmarried women saw owning land as a way to guarantee an income or a place to live when they were elderly. The Enlarged Homestead Act sought to encourage dryland farming, as most of the land near rivers had already been claimed. Interested homesteaders paid a fee, filed on an available 320 acre plot of land (often upon the advice of professional “locaters”), and if they lived on their land for at least seven months out of the year for three to five consecutive years and improved it in some way (usually by raising crops), they could receive a patent and officially own the land. Only about 40 percent of people who attempted to homestead succeeded in “proving up.”

Hensley writes:

“According to statistics provided by the National Homestead Monument, two million people attempted to earn a patent on land through the Homestead Act... There are no nationwide statistics documenting how many of the two million homesteaders were unmarried women, but my research suggests that as many as 200,000 women may have attempted to homestead, and, of those, as many as 67,500 may have successfully proved up.”

Staking Her Claim is a sort of scrapbook of documents that allow the reader to examine the phenomenon of single women homesteaders from different angles. Hensley profiles twenty-one different homesteading women through a variety of means. One section features newspaper and magazine articles, boosterish in tone, that were written about homesteading women in the first half of the twentieth century. Another includes a series of letters that three single women wrote to family or friends while they were homesteading. Another features excerpts of memoirs that five homesteading women wrote many years after their adventures ended. The final section, “Rediscovered: Single Women Homesteaders in Historical Records,” chronicles women who gave oral histories of their time homesteading. They speak for “the majority of single women homesteaders” who “left no written records” of their experiences.

The pieces in “Heroines of the Popular Press: Homesteaders’ Stories” sometimes provide more insight into the different journalistic standards of the early twentieth-century press than they do on the women’s experiences. Mary Isabel Brush’s piece in a 1911 edition of *Collier’s*, for example, never actually names the woman she’s writing about, referring to her as “she” and romanticizing the homestead experience.

I preferred the insights that came from the homesteader’s own voices, either through their letters or memoirs. It’s impossible not to root for these women as they describe their difficulties with snakes, cold, heat, storms, crops that won’t grow or gardens that are immediately eaten by prairie dogs. The women usually hired men or had male relatives do some of the most difficult physical work, such as constructing their shacks.

We learn from Hensley’s commentaries that many of these stories turn out well, with the women becoming life-long, proud residents of the West, but there are plenty of sad stories too, such as that of Ida Gwynn Garvin, a forty-eight year old widow with seven children who suffered from tuberculosis and homesteaded in Loma, Montana. We learn of her experiences through her letters home to her mother in Ohio, where Ida had left several of her children.

Ida died at age 53 in 1921, and Hensley reflects, “The Montana air had not cured Ida’s tuberculosis, but with the cooperation of her family, she had achieved her goal of providing property to leave her children, and she had led a life more vibrant than she would have if she had stayed within the confines of the sanatorium.”

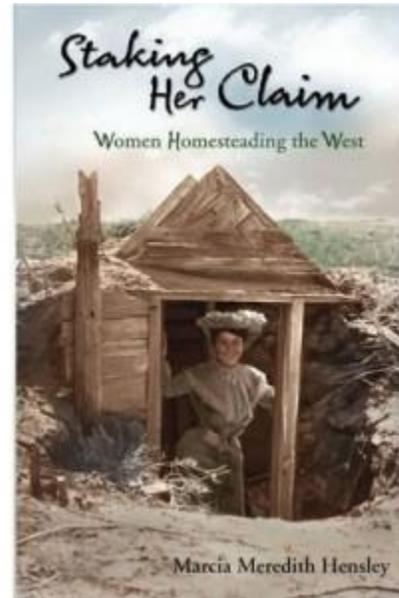
Homesteading required a lot of cash, as making crops pay in the dry West was difficult, so these women often pursued other careers, especially teaching, to support their homesteads. One of my favorite stories was that of a woman who had a different occupation, Dr. Bessie Efner Rehwinkel. Dr. Bessie lost her medical practice in Iowa during the financial crisis in 1907, and decided to pack up her three adopted nieces and start again on a homestead in Wyoming. She wrote of her experiences in a memoir, *Dr. Bessie*. She faced many hardships, but in the end provided a good life for herself and her family. She writes:

“How grateful we ought to be that our knowledge is limited to the here and now and the past, and that the road over which we must travel opens its vistas only in small segments at a time! If all the mountains and valleys of obstacles, hardships, sorrows, and failures were known to us at the beginning, we would never have the courage to start, but be frightened into inactivity, frustration, and despair. But living day by day with the difficulties of each day, we are able to go on and in the end accomplish what in its totality would have seemed utterly impossible.”

Like many of the women profiled in *Staking Her Claim*, Dr. Bessie started out with some illusions about what homesteading would be like: “Here I learned that pioneering in a new country is not a glamorous experience, as so often depicted in movie and novel, but a hard day-by-day struggle and a most unglamorous struggle for one’s very existence. And it is not a struggle with gun and rifle and beautiful horses and cowgirls against Indians and wicked gangsters, but a life-and-death struggle with the dust storms and grasshoppers and hail and blizzards and cold, and against failure and frustration, loneliness and despondency.”

I also especially enjoyed the excerpts from the memoir of Katherine Garetson, who homesteaded near Estes Park, Colorado, and ended up opening a tea house for visiting tourists to pay her bills. She writes, “Filing a three-year residence claim is the most serious thing you can do, aside from marrying. I think.”

She echoes Dr. Bessie’s insights in the following observation about some of her acquaintances’ reactions as she prepared to spend her first winter in her cabin: “Alfred had much concern over my preparations for the winter, and Mr. Mills, while pretending that it was a matter-of-fact thing for a woman to brave a Rocky Mountain winter, must have been aghast at times over the foolhardiness of my exploit. Nothing would have induced me to go into that undertaking had I known what things could happen; what the life was like.”



Hensley credits several historians whose work in the 80's and 90's sought to overturn the popular conception of Western pioneer life as being a male-dominated endeavor. *Staking Her Claim* will underline this point in the reader's mind, through its vivid tales of single women homesteaders' exhausting, satisfying experiences.

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