Kansas Frontierswomen Viewed Through Their Writings: The Journal of Carrie Robbins

edited by Glenda Riley

At first glance, Carrie Robbins' account of her first year in Kansas appears to be a light-hearted, superficial view of a young woman enjoying life as wife, settler, and newly transplanted Kansan. A closer look, however, discloses the types of valuable information awaiting the perceptive eye in such documents. Writings by frontierswomen like letters, diaries, and in this case, an 1887 journal, are often virtual treasure troves of historical detail.

Exactly one day after Carrie Strong Kay married Cephas Prince Robbins in her hometown of Payson in Adams County, Illinois, she began keeping a journal with irregular, but often revealing entries. Her February 25, 1887, notation, for example, described in some detail a typical wedding celebration of the period. The following pages offer insight into a "civilized" woman's introduction and adjustment to the relatively uncivilized plains of western Kansas. Her shock at the appearance of the sod dugout in which she was to live was representative of thousands of plainswomen, as was her good-natured determination to convert it into a livable and even elegant dugout.¹

By early spring of 1887, Carrie Robbins was becoming a Kansan. After getting lost within a half mile of her own home, experiencing delight with the first religious service she attended on the Plains, and feeling lonely at the yelping of coyotes, she was gradually adapting to the Plains. Her adjustment was aided by kind and helpful neighbors, among them two bachelors with admirable cooking skills and one of the many women homesteaders who fanned out over the Plains during the latter decades of the nineteenth century.²

By fall, 1887, Carrie was not "feeling well." Despite this pregnancy, which she shortly discovered, she pluckily accompanied Cephas on a trip to maintain their claim to a timbered area in southeastern Colorado.³ When her pregnancy became a certainty, Carrie Robbins returned home to Payson, Illinois, to bear her first child, Harriet Louisa Robbins, on March 4, 1888.

Carrie's journal fittingly began with her journey to Kansas and concluded with her trip back to Illinois. The original, presented in unaltered form here, is held by the Manuscripts Department of the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka.

FEB. 25, 1887. Yesterday was my wedding day. I can hardly realize that Cephas and I are really married, that we are to be together every day, sit at the same table all our lives "till death us part," but we love each other so dearly, I know we shall be very happy.

The wedding was a pleasant one. Just the relatives and near neighbors were present; all seemed to enjoy it. The ceremony was performed about eight o'clock. Mr. Alabon [the minister] was embarrassed. I began to feel that I should have to prompt him. I guess I knew the ceremony as well or even better than he did. I was so afraid there would be an awkward pause immediately after that proceeding, so Mama spoke to Mrs. Durant and Mrs. Alabon that they stand near us and talk. Everything passed on smoothly. The supper consisting of sandwiches, coffee, pickles, cheese, and five kinds of cake seemed to be relished by all.

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3. The Timber Culture Act of March 3, 1873, authorized a person or persons who kept forty acres of timber land in good condition to acquire title to 160 acres of timber land. In 1878 the minimum acreage requirement was reduced to ten acres.
From her own sod house Carrie Robbins could see others dotting the countryside. Pictured here are two Kansas sod houses: the locations for both are unknown, and only one can be identified for date—1884—and ownership—the Smith family.
present. Cephas looked very nice; wore a nice black suit and black kids [shoes], standing collar and white satin tie. I wore my favorite. I had always said I would be married in white and I had my desire. The dress was a thin white with some ribbon in it and I wore flowers in my hair and at my throat. People said I looked quite well. Cephas was pleased so I am satisfied.

Dear Cephas, he is so good, sometimes I feel that I am not worthy to be his wife. Just before we started downstairs together to be united in the bonds of holy wedlock, he said, “One moment, Carrie. Let us ask God’s blessing before we go,” and we stood there hand in hand each offering a silent prayer that our Heavenly Father would bless us in our new relation. Then he said, “One more lover’s kiss, Carrie,” and we went down the stairs. And now, I think, my journal. I have given you all the particulars, save perhaps the hackneyed phrase: “The presents were numerous and beautiful.” Altogether, I think it was a pleasant gathering for all present. Our only regret is that Cousin Louisa Robbins was not present. Arthur Perry called this P.M. Our reception is to be at Father Robbins tonight.

FEB. 26. Arthur Perry stayed so long we were a little late for the reception. Cousin Louisa came down in the afternoon so all our dear ones were present, also many of our friends, about eighty in all. The roads were perfectly dreadful, some of the people walked. Dr. Baker and party lost their way and wandered about in the cemetery for a time. Mrs. Robbins had nice refreshments for the company. We stood around the table. While we were eating we heard music under the window. Supposing it was some of the young people of the company, we paid no particular attention but afterward learned that the boys from town had come to serenade us. They soon called for Cephas. When we went out to see them, they asked to see his wife and called me Mrs. Robbins. They expressed congratulations, etc. After partaking of some refreshments they took their departure.

MARCH 1. At last we are fairly on our way to our new home. I feel almost worn out. We have visited and received calls constantly since we were married and have done our packing between times. Last night Cephas and Mamma packed until nearly one o’clock. We took the train from Fall Creek [Illinois] and spent the day in Quincy [Illinois], and the evening with Cousin Louisa, then took the ten o’clock train for the West.

MARCH 3. Arrived in Cimarron [Kansas] today. Spent last night at Cousin Charles Read’s in Reading, Kansas. As soon as we arrived here we went to Mrs. Cook’s, Cephas’ friend, and this evening we had the first glimpse of one of our future neighbors, Mr. Kerr, and I was pleased. We go out to our home tomorrow. Home. Oh, how good that sounds!

MARCH 4. Well, here I am at home but I really can’t say I am pleased with first impressions, but I am so tired I am scarcely in a mood to enjoy anything. The ride was long and tiresome. We had to travel so slowly through the sand hills and it was monotonous, hill after hill of sand dotted here and there with bunches of coarse grass. We did not reach Mr. Kerr’s until afternoon, and there I had my first good look at a sod house, rather low, dark and gloomy looking on the outside, yet with floors, windows, and the walls plastered. They are pleasant and comfortable upon the inside. I think I can make ours seem home-like. Mrs. Kerr and family seem very kind and hospitable. They were glad to see me and did everything they could to make it pleasant for me. After dinner we drove over to our house. ‘Tis a regular bachelor’s sanctum and to make it worse a man had been plastering and everything was everywhere. The center table consists of a huge barrel filled with everything from a shirt to a toothpick. My first thought was, “Oh, can I ever make home out of this confusion?” “But I must not get discouraged. I think I can make it cozy with patience and perseverance.”

MARCH 7. This is our first Sabbath in Kansas, we spent the day at home. I’ve been much interested in looking out the windows. As far as I can see ’tis brown prairie, dotted here and there with a little sod house. The prairie is covered with a short curly grass called “Buffalo Grass” with occasionally a tuft or bunch of tall prairie grass. We live in the center of a “town,” but it has no officers. The inhabitants seem peaceable and very happy. We often hear them talking among themselves but strange to say they never speak to us. Perhaps not so strange either, for they could not understand us nor we them. Our neighbors are prairie dogs. The town covers about a section [640 acres] of land, mounds thrown up a few rods distant from each other. The little dogs are about as large as rabbits, the color of a squirrel and have a short stubby little tail which keeps time to its barking by little jerks. Sometimes I hear a dog bark but cannot see him at first. This coat is so near the color of the grass, but I soon see the little tail bobbing back and forth. Sometimes they stand upon their hind legs and then spring into the air, clapping their front paws together and giving a sharp squeal as they jump. I suppose this is when they are particularly happy. Altogether they promise to be very interesting neighbors.

MARCH 20. Oh! I see so many strange things. Yesterday, an ox-team passed by and the owner got out of the wagon and came in to ask me where I live. Fortunately Cephas had just taught me the numbers of our land so I proudly told the man “The NW1/4 12-28-30.” Just a few evenings
ago we went to the top of the ridge just north of us to see a prairie fire raging in the sand hills. As far as we could see the sky was red with reflection of the fire and in the foreground we could see the little tongues of flame leaping from one bunch of grass to another and another. Happily we are in no danger for the Cimarron [sic] Trail is between us and the fire and our home is protected by good fire guards.

MARCH 31. I had my first slicker ride today. But my dear journal, I must tell you what such a conveyance is. A cell door would make a good one or a low flat sled with a ring in front to which we hitch a horse. Then we go first gliding over the prairie. Some of the people fasten a spring seat on it. But Cephas and I put a chair on and then lay a board on that. The only trouble with that arrangement is that we must sit down together and get up together, or we will be likely to sit down (on the ground) separately. We went down to Mr. Bradley's today. I was much pleased with the family and also called at Mr. Payne's. I think I shall like my new neighbors very much.

APRIL [no day given]. I am having strange experiences. I was out of gasoline [for cooking] and Ida Kerr came over to dinner. I had no bread, so I decided to go up and call on Miss Glass to see if she had some yeast. I had a nice call. She was an Indiana school teacher who came to the Western plains for her health. She lives alone on her claim with her revolver and her dog.

APRIL 14. I had quite an experience today. Cephas was busy at work on the barn and couldn't spare the time to go for the mail. But I wanted home letters so much that I decided to start out in the rain and mist for the trip to the office. Wabash [Kansas] is nearly two miles due N.W. and we can see the windmill plainly from our house, but a short distance from our house there is a lake bed where we lose sight of the mill. I started out and while crossing this, lost my bearings and didn't come in sight of the mill again. But I kept on going thinking I would surely see it soon. Finally I gave myself up as hopelessly lost. I could see nothing familiar. I thought I had gone too far north and missed the mill. After going some distance farther I saw some buildings and a man out in the yard at work so I turned my horse in that direction and drove toward it, intending to ask that man the way to Wabash. When I was within a few rods of the house, I found I was coming to my own home and the man I had seen was my own husband!!

He asked if I wanted to know the way to Wabash and I said, "That's what I came here for." I never was so bewildered in my life. I thought I had surely lost my senses. It seems I had made a complete circle, as all people do when they are lost. I had not been out of Cephas' sight at any time, nor had I been more than half a mile away from home. Oh! how Cephas has laughed at me. I don't think he will forget such a joke very soon.

MAY [no day given]. We went to Montezuma [Kansas] to attend a meeting of the district Sunday School convention. It was the first religious service we have attended and I assure you, my journal, we enjoyed it. It seemed good to hear the Word of God once again. We walked over to Mr. Parker's and went down with them and then walked home in the evening. The coyotes are yelping in all directions. The country seems full of them, but one can make itself heard for miles and as they are timid, harmless creatures, there is no danger, but they make me feel lonely and dismal.

MAY [no day given]. Our Sunday School was organized today. We are to meet in our house and Mr. Parker is the Superintendent. I am to teach the little folks. Oh, I hope and pray we may be the means of doing some good in this place.

References to the threatened destruction of home and crops by prairie fires can be found in the writings of frontierswomen, and the journal of Carrie Robbins is no exception. Under the circumstances in which she viewed a prairie fire, however, she felt safe because the Cimarron Trail separated the fire from her home.
JUNE 24. Today we had the severest storm I have ever witnessed. The hail stones were not large but came so fast and for so long a time that much damage was done. Window lights broken and garden gone, corn is nothing but stems and our oats look as if they had been mowed. Thirty-five of my chickens were drowned. We had a dreadful time—our house was just flooded and Ceph had to go down in the kitchen and bring up the supper on a moulding board. Water was a foot deep all over the yard and hail stones piled around the building six or eight inches deep. We feel very much discouraged. We have worked so hard and our crops are all gone.

JULY [no day given]. We had another hard storm. Ceph was away and I had to do the chores. I was out in the barn milking when it hailed so hard. I was so frightened and worried and had to stay alone but all things passed on smoothly and I did not feel much afraid. I was badly frightened a few weeks ago. I was alone and was awakened by a thumping and pounding at the door. My heart was in my mouth but I managed to say, "Who is it?" and "What do you want?" No answer came and by that time I was thoroughly awake. After listening a little longer I found it was nobody trying to get in, but still the dreadful racket kept on. I mustered up courage to go to the window and look out and saw the end of a broken rope trailing on the ground. Then I knew that calves had broken their rope and had come down near the house to get out of the wind. I felt relieved I can tell you. I went back to bed again but not to sleep for some time.

JULY 4. We arranged last week when we met to practice singing to have a party on the 4th at Mr. Frazier's. The gentlemen were to furnish the ice cream and the ladies the cake. There were fourteen young people present. We played croquet and had a lovely time. We came home by moonlight. Mr. Frazier knows how to do things nicely. He is so nice and we had such a pleasant time. When we were invited there a few weeks ago, he and Mr. Hull cooked the dinner themselves. Everything was well cooked and well served.

SEPT. [no day given]. I have not been feeling well for a few weeks so we have concluded to take a trip to Colorado in the wagon. Ceph is obliged to go to Colorado to plow the tree claim. I have to stay alone, we have persuaded him to let me go too. We have been very busy making preparations to start. Night before last I took my plants over to Mrs. Payne's for safe keeping during our absence. I did not leave there until dark. Mr. Payne showed me two stars in the direction of home so I drove toward them but soon it began to cloud over so my stars were hidden. I was worried a little but thought I could get home all right.

Soon I saw a bright light off to my right in a direction where there were no houses as I thought. I wondered where it could be and watched it closely. Soon it began to move around and around, as if swung by some one. I then thought that perhaps that was the light in my own home so started toward it. When I got there I found the lantern on top of the house and Ceph in the barn, saddling his horse to come and hunt for me. Oh, he is so good and kind and loving. I am thankful for my good husband and that I am home tonight.

SEPT. 1. We left home about four o'clock, went to Colusa [Kansas] six miles west and obtained a good wagon sheet, etc., there, so now we are fully equipped for our journey. We go directly west so far as roads will permit. Some parts of the state are very rough and hilly. In one locality the hills are so thickly covered with sword cactus, the horses can hardly pick their way along the road. Bear Creek flows across our road several times. Its banks are covered with flowers in great profusion and variety. I have spent much of the time walking along by the wagon gathering huge bouquets of them. We are nearing the state line now and each hour's ride brings us nearer Colorado. We count the revolutions of the wheels to the mile so that we may guess something of the distances traveled when we get into a region where there are no landmarks.

In Colorado at last! By dint of much inquiry we have passed Wolf and Clay Creek and are now in the vicinity of our claim. Colorado is beautiful. The land is rolling prairie intersected by creeks along whose banks great cottonwoods grow in abundance. Many of the banks are high and rocky with wild flowers growing over them. This is glorious, the sound of running water and the rustling of the leaves of the trees never seemed half so sweet as now when we have been deprived of them so long.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 9. We camped on Clay Creek. We found a family living near and Ceph asked them about the location of our claim. The family consisted of the mother, a widow lady, and her eight children. They are English people who were formerly wealthy. They have come to Colorado to recover, if possible, their lost fortune. They dress in velvet all the time. Mrs. Henderson had on a beautiful brown velvet fastened in front with brass buttons. I noticed beautiful pieces of statuary and bric-a-brac on their kitchen shelf, keeping company with the lard pails and coffee pots. Mrs. H. is very kind and sent us a nice plate of fresh beef for our Sunday dinner, but she is very peculiar in her ways. She doesn't know how to economize in the least. The little boys were out hauling sand with their new shoes on today. The Sabbath has been a delightful day. We seem nearer to God than in a civilized country. We have studied our Sunday School lessons and
read some, then spent the rest of the day climbing over the rocks and the hills and enjoying the shade of the trees.

MONDAY [no date given]. We start for our claim. We have learned from Mrs. Henderson that it is three miles east and one south, so we take the direction as nearly as possible. I drive and Cephas counts the wheel revolutions so we may go the right distance. At the end of each mile we have been fortunate in finding the corner stone, so we are sure we are right. At the last mile when we thought we had reached our claim, we camped for dinner and while I got the dinner Cephas hunted for the stone. He was wandering around the prairie when I heard him shout and throw up his hat, hurrahing like a school boy. He was so delighted to find the stone with the numbers of our claim on it. Now we are sure and we will begin work at once.

We finished our work at last and started for Lamar [Colorado]. It is a typical Western town full of bustle and activity. Everybody is here to make money. Lots are selling for $500.00 which a year ago would have brought only one-tenth the amount.

At last we are ready to start for home. We are to go a different route by way of Johnson City [Kansas]. We stayed there a few hours. It was election day and as the principal point of contest was the county seat it was a very exciting day.

The journey thus far has been without accident and the weather has been delightful. We passed the Twin Buttes in Colorado which was more like a mountain than anything I have ever seen before.

The great elevation rises abruptly from a level plain to a height of several hundred feet, black and rocky all the way up the slope. About two-thirds of the way it is one slope and then it divides abruptly and forms two sharp rocky points which stand out in bold relief against the sky for miles around. We have seen some antelope on the

In 1887 Carrie and Cephas Robbins traveled to Colorado to find their claim and improve it. Equipping their wagon with a "good wagon sheet," the Robbins may have looked much like the Jackson County, Kansas, family pictured here.
prairie and the prairie wolves and coyotes are plentiful while the huge jack-rabbit surprises us frequently as he bounds from his hole and is soon lost to view. It is said that the fastest horse cannot keep pace with them. Their long leaps cover eight or ten feet often-times.

We passed through a little town Sersaw [Kansas] then we went north to the river which we followed as far as Piercville [Kansas].

As we passed through Deerfield [Kansas] I wished we had time to stop and see Nettie Tandy but if we were to reach our little home before another Sabbath we had to hasten on.

Saturday morning found us in Garden City [Kansas] where Cephas had business that would keep him until noon, so it is thought best for me to go on alone, with the team, and he will meet me at Piercville at noon. So start soon after breakfast with many misgivings. As the river road runs by the railroad and our big Jim is afraid of trains, I decided to take the hill road. It is all new to me and the people stare at me as I pass and I hear them wondering if the man is sick.

Once I lost my way and had to inquire the road to my destination. I found I had gone five miles beyond the right turn so I had to turn back and go back.

It was a long lonely journey. At about one o'clock I was delighted to see the houses of Piercille in the distance. Before I reached the bottom of the long hill leading to the town I saw Cephas, coat in hand, coming to meet me.

He had inquired of the railroad men and as they had seen nothing of me along or near the track, he was quite troubled about me. We ate our dinner and then started for home. The sand near the river was dreadful. It was so deep the wagon sank in almost to the hubs in places. The wind has blown it up on the sides of the hills in great waves. It is beautiful but very inconvenient to travel through. Were it not for the plank road over the worse places it would be almost impassable.

SEPT. 90. We arrived at our own little home tired out but very glad to sleep in a house once more. It seemed so good to rest on a bed again. True, humble though it may be, there is no place like home.

OCT. 1. We went to church and everybody welcomed us back.

Cephas begins teaching before long. He is to teach at the little sod schoolhouse about a mile and a half north. The little building stands right on the ridge so I can watch all the way there and see him when he starts home again.

There are three or four neighbors whom I find especially congenial. Mr. Kerr's family, poor and uncouth, but very kind and very earnest Christians and the Parkers. The father and mother, one lovely older daughter and three or four younger boys. They are all hard working good people. I am drawn to them all. To the west our nearest neighbor is Miss Glass, about a mile away, and yet so near that in this clear atmosphere I can see every time she steps out of her door.

I went up to her house to bake my bread one day. Our oven was being fixed and Cephas forgot the bread so we were in a great dilemma. I finally decided to make the bread and after it was ready to bake, Cephas hitched up and took me up there to bake it. She has a coal stove and neither of us had used one to bake with. We made up a roaring fire and put the loaves in the oven but to my dismay in about ten minutes I smelled smoke. We were afraid the house was on fire and began to look about. I soon discovered that it came from the stove and rushed to the oven door and opened it to find my lovely loaves of bread burned to a solid crisp. We carried part of the fire out to the prairie and I took off the burned outer crust and we began again, this time with better success. Oh! what fun we had over it all. I laughed until I was tired!

Miss Glass surely wants a claim more than I do, for if I never would have the courage to live alone with a dog and a revolver as she does. She seems very happy and contented and have such good times together.

And then in speaking of my neighbors I must not forget the Paynes. They are from Illinois, too, near Clayton and used to know Dr. Kay there. I like them very much. Mrs. Payne is bright and intelligent and so kind and motherly. The father is very pleasant too and I am especially fond of the young lady, May. She finds it pretty hard to live away out here away from all society. Mr. Frazier, our good neighbor on the east, is quite devoted to her. When Cephas introduced them one day at Sunday School, he said as we left them, “I wonder if anything will come of that. They seem to be quite taken with each other.”

OCT. [no day given] 1887. We were invited to Mr. Frazier’s for dinner with the Paynes and Miss Glass. He had a delicious dinner well cooked and well served. His table was really elegant with nice linen and silverware. He and Mr. Hull seem very happy together.

THANKSGIVING DAY. It was a real blizzard. The wind blew and the fine snow filled the air. Several people have been lost. Mr. Payne wandered about for two hours in trying to go from the house to the barn. We stayed at home that day and our thoughts wandered frequently to the dear ones at home.

One night not long ago, Miss Glass came down for her milk. A terrible wind storm came up so it was impossible for her to get home. I, of course, insisted upon her staying but how to plan I did not know; we had only one room and one bed. I fixed a bed on the floor for Cephas, but even
then I did not see how we were going to arrange it. But Cephas soon solved the difficulty by saying, "I'll go out and see how the chickens are fixed for the night and you can go right to bed." So we hustled into bed and after we were nicely fixed, the good man of the house returned after settling the chicks to his satisfaction. He blew out the light and laid himself down upon his bed in the darkness. In the morning when we woke he was not to be seen, so we dressed at our leisure.

We had had quite a joke on Mr. Frazier lately. He left the home of his lady one dark night about ten o'clock and drove and drove for miles without getting to his destination. Four o'clock in the morning found him miles south of his home, but after inquiring, he soon found his way and lost no time in getting home....

We like this house so much better than the other. It is on a public road and much nearer neighbors.

DECEMBER 25th, Christmas Day and Sabbath Day too. I have taken much pleasure in making little gifts for the dear ones at home.

We had oysters for dinner, a surprise for Cephas. I had Mr. Frazier get them for me.

I have such lovely house plants. My large pot of pansies is full of bloom. It is indeed a "thing of beauty."

I am thinking of going home. We are planning for the arrival of a dear little one in our home and Mamma wants me to come home. I have not decided yet for Grandma is there and Mamma has had the care of her ever since she was hurt last August, so I hardly think it will be best. It is very hard to know what I ought to do.

JAN. 30, 1888. I start for home, take the train at Cimmaron [sic] at 12 o'clock at night. It was a long hard drive to town and I was pretty tired. A gentleman on the train was very kind to me in Kansas City, so I was not worried about making the change.

After her return to Kansas with her new daughter, Harriet Louisa, Carrie resumed the duties of a Kansas farm woman. On April 1, 1889, she and Cephas relocated on a farm one mile east of Oskaloosa, Kansas, near her uncle, Rice Kay. The Robbins' life on the new farm was soon shattered by a tragic accident. While Cephas was instructing the hired man in the shooting of a revolver on June 29 of that year, the gun accidentally misfired, severing Cephas' spinal cord. After many agonizing days of pain and paralysis, Cephas died on July 15, 1889.

Carrie once again returned to Illinois, this time a widow with a young daughter to raise. She lived with her family until Harriet was no longer an infant and in 1892 accepted a teaching position at the Ladies' Seminary at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Deciding that she needed to improve her own training and education, Carrie Robbins attended and graduated from a kindergarten training course in 1896. In the fall of that year she organized the Free Kindergarten System in Quincy, Illinois, and in 1897 performed the same service in Moline, Illinois.

On February 1, 1900, Carrie Robbins married a distant cousin, Lyman Kay Seymour, and returned to Payson, Illinois, where she remained until her death on April 17, 1901.4