Kansas Frontierswomen Viewed Through Their Writings

by Glenda Riley

UNTIL VERY RECENTLY, descriptions of frontierswomen have been couched in legend, stereotype, and hyperbole. Drawing upon fictional accounts, media images, and historical studies derived from limited source materials, scholars and others interested in western women have found more myth than reality in their search for enlightenment. Consequently, frontierswomen traditionally have been portrayed as Gentle Tamers, Pioneers in Petticoats, Saints in Sunbonnets, Madonnas of the Prairies, Pioneer Mothers, Light Ladies, Calamity Janes, and Fighting Feminists.

The document series, of which this is the first installment, will illustrate the importance of turning to the writings of western women for insight and understanding. Until the mid-1970s, it seldom occurred to researchers and writers to explore such women’s documents as diaries, letters, and memoirs for firsthand information. Instead, they relied upon such dramatic statements as that made by historian Emerson Hough in 1921 describing the “gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before” as the “great romance of all America.”

They also turned to historian Everett Dick, who in 1946 added that, “how much of the retreat from the frontier from time to time was due to the figure in the sunbonnet and calico, is not known, but it is certain that many stayed until the prairie broke them in spirit and body.”

Most investigators accepted these descriptions of frontierswomen that presented them as downcast and pathetic beings. Helena Huntingdon Smith, writing in 1958, was one of the few to argue that such a “long lamentation” about the drab and harsh quality of frontierswomen’s lives was immensely exaggerated. “The emptiness of the Great Plains is thought to be peculiarly depressing to the fair sex,” she noted, “but when we reach the Pacific Northwest it turns out that the trees were what got them down.” Smith agreed that women’s lives were “tough,” but, she added of the women themselves, “so were they.”

The image of the Kansas frontierswoman has been a particularly difficult one to discern fairly and accurately. Living in a region beset by a bloody struggle over black slavery and the terror of “border ruffians” during the 1850s, the problems of the Civil War, recurrings episodes of drought and tornadoes and grasshopper invasions, Kansas pioneer women are often assumed to have lived troubled, unbearable lives. This view was often reinforced by Kansas women themselves. Anne E. Bingham, homesteading with her husband in the 1870s and 1880s, wrote: “It had been bleeding Kansas, drywasted Kansas, the state of cyclones, the state of cranks, the state of mortgages—and now the grasshopper fame had come!” She added that these were times that she “wouldn’t have given the snap of my fingers for the whole of Kansas.”

Over half a century later, writer Meridel Le Sueur presented Kansas in a similarly unattractive way. In a 1931 essay, Le Sueur insisted that she would “never recover” from her “sparse childhood in Kansas” of the early twentieth century. She recalled “fear everywhere on the streets in the gray winter of the land, and the curious death in the air, the bright surface activities of the pioneer town and the curious air dissipating powers of fear and hate.” Le Sueur’s essay, which won first place in a Scribner’s Magazine contest seeking


4. Border ruffians were lawless men who stole, pillaged, and terrorized free-state supporters. Horace Greeley coined the term “border ruffians” to apply to Missouri Senator David Atchison’s three thousand volunteer Missourians who marched on “Bleeding Kansas” in 1856 in support of slavery.

what is true and valid in our own culture,” concluded with another depressing thought:

I have seen your beauty and your terror and your evil. I have come from you mysteriously wounded. I have walked from my adolescence to find a wound inflicted on the deep heart. And I have seen it in others too, in disabled men and sour women made ugly by ambition, mortified in the flesh and wounded in love.6

Yet this is the same Kansas that Senator Charles Sumner characterized in the 1850s as a land of “unsurpassed richness, and a surface of fascinating, undulating beauty; with a health-giving climate, calculated to nurture a powerful and generous people, worthy to be a central pivot of American institutions.”7 Some women settlers gradually adopted this highly favorable view of the region. One, who came to Kansas during the early 1870s, remembered that her “wedding journey landed us in Kansas; the end of the world, it seemed to me then.” Yet, only a few years later on a long-awaited visit to her family in Philadelphia, she found herself “lauding Kansas to the skies.” She was overwhelmed by the overcrowding and polluted air in the city and welcomed her return to Kansas. She later commented that: “I had not met any people since I came east to compare with my friends in the West. We didn’t speak the same language. Like a flash it came to me—in the West we were doing things, we were creating, building up a great commonwealth. Had I my choice, I wouldn’t live any other place in the world.”8

Other Kansas women also believed that the region offered many benefits. One who settled there in the early 1880s remarked that her poor health improved markedly as a result of her move to Kansas.9 Others took up homesteads which they successfully “proved up.”10 Still others chose to stay in Kansas after the death of a spouse, preferring to work the farm and raise their children on their own rather than return to their former homes in the East.11

Clearly, there is great variation in the experiences, perspectives, and outlooks of Kansas frontierswomen.


Like western women in general, they cannot easily be categorized as “reluctant settlers” or “plucky pioneers.” Rather, their lives must be explored individually through the legacy of their own words. Only their letters, diaries, and reminiscences can reveal the details of their lives in early Kansas and their responses to the vicissitudes of the frontier. This series will present a number of Kansas frontierswomen’s documents, each exposing one segment of the complex story of westering women in Kansas.

The first of these are letters from Jane and Lucy Carruth who came to a claim south of Osawatomie in June 1856.12 They came to Kansas Territory with James

Harrison Carruth, Jane's husband and Lucy's father. Jane, who was formerly Jane Grant, was born in central New York in 1824 and married Carruth in 1841. Lucy, born in Cherry Valley, New York, in 1845, was the first of their children. Four brothers followed her, three born in New York and the last in Kansas in 1859.

James Carruth, a well-educated man who had studied at both Amherst College and Yale University, was drawn to Kansas because of his free-state sympathies. Here, he and his family worked a quarter-section claim in a neighborhood that included two widow homesteaders, a Quaker family, and a proslavery family. The Carruths hung on despite buffeting from border ruffians, war, and forces of nature. Sometime during the mid-1860s, Carruth was "elected to a professorship" of natural sciences at Baker University, Baldwin City, Kansas. Shortly thereafter, he and his family moved to Lawrence where he "served as a minister to a church in nearby Clinton."

Lawrence was the family home for some twenty-five years. It was there that Jane died in 1875. Also in Lawrence, Lucy married E. W. Woods, raised her family, and died in 1897. In 1883, James remarried. After his retirement in 1892, the couple lived in New Mexico, Texas, and Arkansas.

The following letters were written by Lucy and Jane in 1856. They were published in that same year under the title "Life Pictures in Kansas, 1856" in the New York Reformer, a newspaper in the Carruth family's hometown of Watertown, New York. The letters are held by the Manuscripts Department of the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka and are presented here in their entirety without any editorial changes in spelling or punctuation. The letters give insight into the incendiary situation in Kansas in 1856, particularly from the free-state point of view. They are also filled with details of daily living, but perhaps more importantly, with a buoyancy and optimism that explains why many settlers sought a new life in the West.


14. Harry Jasper Harris, "My Story," Kansas Historical Collections 15 (1923): 557, n 6; Ronald L. McGregor and Ralph E. Brooks, James H. Carruth and Disposition of His New Names Based on Kansas Plants, Contributions from The University of Kansas Herbarium no. 1 (The University of Kansas, 1982), 1. Sources differ on the date of the Carruths' move to Lawrence: Collections gives the date as 1866 and Albert T. Carruth in his 1905 introduction to the Carruth family letters agrees; McGregor and Brooks, however, state that the move was made in 1906.

Although Jane Carruth had imagined that she, like many settlers, would at first live in a shanty, her family instead made a tent their home.
July 11.

I don't know when I began this, or when it will get to you. It has made some difference about my diligence in writing, feeling that you might not get it. It is said that the "Border ruffians" have to see the inside of the free-state people's letters. Here we have no laws except what people carry in their own hearts. When a proslavery man wants to take a claim from a free-state man, he gets some of the lawless ruffians to go and drive him off by threatening death in so many minutes. One not far from us was so treated in the night this week. I hope their reign

A page from Jane Carruth's July 11 letter describes the troubles between proslavery and free-state factions. Portions of her letters left no doubt as to where her sympathies rested.
LUCY A. CARRUTH TO FANNIE SNYDER
Out Tent, Osawatomie, June 1, 1856
Dear Fannie:

Here we are, safe and sound, in the little village of Osawatomie. One of the Mr. Grants, of Antwerp, who started with us, is going back in a day or two, and I thought it would be a good chance to send a letter.

We arrived at St. Louis, without any accidents, Friday afternoon, the 6th, and took the steamboat "J. M. Converse," but did not start till Saturday afternoon. We had a pleasant time on the boat, and arrived at Kansas City Wednesday morning. While there fifteen of our company, including father, bought two yoke of oxen and a great, large traveling wagon (looks just like your meat wagons, cover all), and we started off Thursday afternoon. We got about a mile from Kansas City, and some of the company wanted to pack up their things a little closer, and we stopped there; two or three went back for some provisions, and came back with the news that word had been sent to Westport [presumably to border ruffians] to stop us when we got there and examine us. It was near night when the men got back with the provisions, and they thought we had better stay over night at the house of a Mr. Smart, across the road—a pro-slavery man—who said he would keep us over night.

We started the next morning; went through Westport and no one touched us; we stopped at noon for a lunch near an old church on the Indian reservation; found it open, and went in. It was all dirt in the inside; there were some benches and a few old candlesticks there. Just as we left, one of the men rang the bell, but what effect it had on the country 'round we didn't wait to see. I forgot to say that there was a burying-ground and a number of graves there. Father and each of the rest bought a tent at St. Louis, and at night we camped out.

About noon of the next day we found that we were on the wrong road; we met a man and asked him, and he put us on the right road again. In consequence of having lost the way, we had to travel Sunday; for we were out of provisions.

We arrived at Osawatomie Monday noon; took dinner at the public house, and put up our tents on Mr. [O. C.] Brown's land. He is the agent of the New England Company, and is from New York City; has been here a year. We stayed there a week, during which time father picked out a "claim," and we are now on it. I think it is a beautiful one.

I should like to have you give me a balloon visit. What would you think of flowers up to your neck? Here is spiderwort, phlox, prairie pea, wild verberra (a most beautiful flower), scarlet milkweed, roses (as many as you could wish), and a great many others that I do not know the names of. I shall save many kinds of seeds this fall. We have a great deal of fruit on our claim—gooseberries, grapes, plums, mulberries, raspberries, and others. We have gooseberries every meal. Father has been making garden today; he has peas and beans planted, and a few potatoes that we brought along with us for seed. Potatoes are three dollars a bushel, and beans four dollars. Some things are cheap—butter, fifteen cents a pound; shoulder, nine; milk, five cents a quart. Mother and I have just been to cut some dry prairie-grass to make some beds. Night before last we had a thundershower; now the wind is blowing dreadfully. It has sprinkled some.

July 9

Last Friday afternoon, about five o'clock, a party of 150 or 160 "border ruffians" came into Osawatomie, rode up to Mr. Geer's (who keeps a public house and store), opened all the trunks and boxes, took $400 from a man—one of our company—and a check for $100 from another; took all the jewelry out of Mr. G.'s store, and all the guns and rifles (ten or twelve) they could find about there; stole twenty horses and one yoke of oxen; went to the house of Mr. Dayton, a printer, from New York City; the family were not at home; knocked the windows all in, opened all the trunks and boxes, and asked the hired girl where the press was. She said she would not tell, do what they would with her. They tore down one other house, and left, but sent back word that they were coming to burn the place to-day, which they have not done. I forgot to say that they set fire to Mr. Geer's house two or three times, but it was put out by some one.

Our claim is between three and four miles from the village, so that we did not see anything of this; but it is reliable notwithstanding. We are about eighteen miles from the line of Missouri, exactly west from St. Louis.

Lucy Carruth

JANE G. CARRUTH TO MELINDA EVANS
Osawatomie, K. T. [1856]
Dear Cousin Melinda:

I have kept my promise so well in writing to you that I need make no apology; it is enough to say that I have but little to occupy me in this land of promise. I wish that you and many more could see with your[?] own eyes; you would almost think that you were in the same garden that our Mother Eve was in. James

15. Presumably a member of the Reverend Peter Snyder's family. The reverend had been the Carruths' minister in Watertown.

was afraid it would be too level for him, but in that he
is disappointed—such beautiful swells of land; I cannot
convey its beauty to your mind.

We arrived here safe and pretty sound, considering
all things, and are quite happy in our tent on the
ground. The land surveyors have been around to-day,
and it don't give us quite the spot that we expected;
but it is all good, only we love to get the best. The heavy
timbered claims are all taken about the country, but
good chances for buying out those occur often.

We have corn growing in the field, and peas and
beans and potatoes in the garden. Things don't mope
here; they jump. We have not heard from our things
yet, but think they must be in Kansas City by this time:
but we don't have a mail but once a week, so that we
don't get the news in a minute. What things we have
were lent to us.

You may ask, "What have you to use?" In the first
place, we have two sheets that I had in my trunk that
Mrs. Dorn washed so late that they did not get packed
with the rest; those we have basted together and filled
with prairie-grass; that, crosswise, makes a bed for all
our family; under it we have brush, to prevent damp-
ness; everything being put out of doors every day, and
our tent raised from the ground to air it perfectly. Some
young men of our company who had trunks of bedding
lent us some, so that we have a very good bed and sleep
very sound.

Now, for eating, our old bread chest is our table.
I had two bowls and some cups in one trunk, and our
old knives and some spoons, and at Kansas City our
company bought some tin plates, so that we have three
of those; those, together with some pail covers, when
we have company, make our dinner dishes; for stove
I have all outdoors; for oven I have a spider [long-
handed frying pan with legs] a little larger than ours,
and all belonging to one of our company. In this I have
some good shortcakes and fried cakes and pancakes;
and we have a breakfast cake. I went a mile and baked some raised bread at
a neighbor's. I have one iron kettle that will hold a pain-
ful, and a teakettle that was lent me by Mrs. Brown,
from New York City; the kettle had been used to white-
wash in, and then left out of doors, and I can assure
you that it has had many a cleaning to get it fit for use.
I use to heat water, wash dishes and boil clothes
in, and then have to clean it to make hasty pudding.

Most of my work has to be done outdoors and at a
great disadvantage. My arms have been blistered from
my elbows to my hands. James17 has had his back
blistered once. We all look as though we belonged to
the South in earnest. Albert's [her second son] face peels
off every few days, his skin is so tender. Walter [her
third son]18 runs into all the mischief he can find.
Having no table to work on makes my work very handy
for him to "help." He is almost the color of the Spanish
Santa Fe traders that pass through Kansas City.

July 5th we received letters from Mr. and Mrs.
Snyder, also papers the 1st day of July. They were very
welcome.

Mrs. S. wants to hear all the little particulars; so
that, if you will, you may let her read this. She wants
to know what we have to eat. We have a cow that gives
four or five quarts a day; will be a new-milk cow this
fall. We have bread, hasty pudding (my favorite dish,
also the children's), shoulder, butter, tea, coffee, goose-
berries (the wild, very nice). I had some dried fruit with

---

James H. Carruth, his wife, and family came to Kansas in
1856. A minister and a teacher of natural sciences, he later
served as Kansas' state botanist.

17. Either husband or oldest son, who shared the same first name.
18. This third son was Charles Walter, born in 1855, and only
about one year old at the time letter was written.
me. I have had some fried cakes. This is about the substance of our fare. If we always have as good we shall not get very lean. Yesterday, July 4th. I had calls from five ladies at one time, some of them from town; some of them have hard times here. They have passed two winters here—the first delightful; the last, like ours at the North, severe. We have had very hot weather all the time since we arrived in the territory. The thermometer stands, at eleven, at 104 in the shade, but I like it. We don't have, or have not yet had, any of those sudden changes. The country and climate are very delightful.

On our claim you can see twenty miles or more. We have land that is 100 feet above the river; it is so charming that I wish, and often, too, that I could lend Mr. Snyder my eyes [Snyder was blind] and have him here a little while. When viewing it, my mind involuntarily reverts to Doctor Watts's,

"All on those wide, extended plains Shines one eternal day."

How I wish that thousands of our poor but worthy people could be transferred here; what homes they could have, instead of spending a poor existence where they never can rise above poverty. It is dear living here at present, but as soon as people can raise things it will be cheap.

July 11

I don't know when I began this, or when it will get to you. It has made some difference about my diligence in writing, feeling that you might not get it. It is said that the "border ruffians" have to see the inside of the free-state people's letters. Here we have no law except what people carry in their own hearts. When a pro-slavery man wants to take a claim from a free-state man, he gets some of the lawless ruffians to go and drive him off by threatening death in so many minutes. One not far from us was so treated in the night this week. I hope that their reign is almost over. If the people at the North could only see how little real principle there is in the slave power, they would never kneel or bow down to it any more, but, let civil war or disunion or what not come, stand for right until the curse of our nation is driven into the gulf below it.

I write this with baby in lap, holding book on my knee. I hope that you will enjoy the reading as much as I do the writing. I often wish that I could monopolize a telegraph. I would often hold converse with my dear friends in Watertown; but with children in my lap and at my elbows, I find little time for correspondence. Lucy has been sick for two weeks; is getting better. Most of our Jefferson county (N.Y.) boys have been sick; they have worked too hard.

I don't know what to say about your coming here. I think you would do well here. They have no milliner here; but how well you would get through I don't know. It is said that two companies from Indiana have been robbed and sent back to Alton [Illinois]. One of the Grants has gone back, and when the other is going we don't know, but not soon. If you could get in one of those companies that we came in, you would get along well enough.

I must stop, for James is going to town, and I want you should get a letter from Kansas. There are good chances to buy out good timber claims from those who want to leave. I think it will be hard to drive the free-state people from Kansas; they came to stay, and they calculated to do so.
If Mr. Ingalls [editor of Watertown newspaper] wants anything from my letter for his paper, let him have it, if you are willing he should read it. I thought it might be a little amusing to Watertown folks to see how we live.

Write soon. Write all the news.
Jane Carruth

JANE G. CARRUTH TO REV. PETER SNYDER
Osawatomie, K.T., October 23, 1856

My Dear Mr. Snyder:

It is a long time since I received your kind letter. I intended to answer it very soon, but I don’t always get everything done that I intend to. I wrote to Miss E., and thought that through her and Mr. C.’s [Carruth] letters to Mr. Ingalls you would learn that we were not driven out or murdered. The new governor [John W. Geary] is going round the territory with troops, but whether it is for better or for worse we are not able to tell. He was at Osawatomie yesterday. Some say that he is in pursuit of free-state men that have defended themselves and have helped drive off these “Emigrant Aid Society” camps.

We think that perhaps Mr. Ingalls never received Mr. C.’s letters relating to the battle and burning of Osawatomie [August 1856]; they were sent by people returning East. We had only stamps for half of the postage; could get no more here, but gave them money enough to put on them when they mailed them, and if they did not get the stamps, of course the letters must lie in some office.

We are beginning to see some dark clouds on our horizon, but hope that they may not be so dark that we may not be able to take a prospective view, if not one very near. Mr. C. has been sick six weeks to-day, and in that time he expected to have built us a log house. Everything we have tried to do since we came to Kansas seems to lack the blessing. Perhaps we were too selfish in our motives in coming here. But I hope that we may be able in another year to make things go more prosperously. I never expected that pioneers found air castles substantial enough to live in. My castle is much as I expected to find it at first; that is, to live on the ground in a shanty. We have a tent instead of a shanty. We have sent to Lawrence for cloth and paint to enlarge our tent, and shall try to winter in it, if Mr. C does not get able to build this winter. I added some sheers for temporary use, so that we could have our stove in, and I find our tent is the most comfortable place that I have seen. Lucy and I have had the wood to carry and saw since Mr. C. has been sick. To-day I blistered my hands in using a beetle [a heavy mallet] and wedge [used to split pieces of wood].

Our children are enjoying the walnut season. I wish that your family could have some of them. I measured one this week that was six and a quarter inches around. I think that they could be called “mammoth,” surely.

I am astonished when I find what I can endure. I might say that I am almost myself again. I look back and compare the present with three years ago this time with perfect horror. Such a prison as I was in!

To-day I have been making the boys some black cloth caps for cold weather. I find plenty to do everyday. Yesterday I took the children to one of the neighbor’s groves in pursuit of persimmons, a pulpy fruit about an inch through, and very delicious. Lucy has saved the seeds, and some time will send some to you. It is a tree twenty feet high, and would make a shade-tree.

I have been thinking how or in what way we could get some stock started. It is going to be the easiest way of getting along in this country. How many thousands of acres of grass have been burned that might be saved to raise cattle, and will be if the claims are all occupied. What I was thinking of, if we could get the means to buy cattle with, after a few years we could repay it with good interest. I thought if we had friends in Watertown who had children that they would like to lay out a little money for and let it double, it would give us a good start, and they not be any losers, but double their money rapidly. If, for instance, one should let us have ten dollars, and we should buy a calf that was a year and a half old, we would keep the calf till it came to its highest value, and return it in the money doubled, in such time as the parties could agree upon, and we have the use and increase for our part. We can get nice heifers for $10, and perhaps less. Perhaps you will think this an air castle.

There is a widow lady here that is making arrangements for going East in two or three weeks that has two good cows, with their spring calves, and a beautiful heifer a year old last spring, that could all be bought for $10, and very cheap at that. If we could have them it would help us very much in two respects—first, it would almost make us a living; and second, they are wanted to run with our cow, and we could make butter all winter and have to sell. Our minister [Rev. Samuel L. Adair] just returned from Lawrence, who went with a load of butter; found the price thirty-three cents per pound. If we could make some of our living from the cows and yet the stock be left, but that amount in money would soon be eaten up and nothing be left.

November 11

Mr. Persons is just going back to Watertown, and I have to stop suddenly. Mr. Carruth is improving.

Jane Carruth