

Edith Eudora Kohl. Land of the Burnt Thigh. 1938, reprint St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The publication in 1938 of Land of the Burnt Thigh came on the crest of a wave of historical memory and nostalgia in the United States that included the establishment of the National Archives in Washington D.C., the creation of Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, the publication of Carl Sandburg's monumental multi-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, and the popular reception of American scene painters Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Stuart Curry. A major beneficiary of this "turn toward history" during the 1930s was Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose autobiographical children's novels about growing up on the Midwestern prairies during the 1870s and 1880s were published between 1932 and 1943. Edith Eudora Kohl's personal story of settlement in the area south of Pierre and west of Chamberlain between 1907 and 1909 addresses the question of "free land" just as did Wilder's daughter Rose Wilder Lane's novel Free Land, also published in 1938. Lane emphasized that while obtaining a homestead from the government *was* virtually free, moving west was never costless, so the land obtained was not really free. Economic historians estimate that it usually cost a minimum of about \$1,000 to transport a family to the frontier, build a house and barn, put up fences and windmills, break the prairie sod, and do all of the other things required of farmers getting started on the land.

In the "Land of the Burnt Thigh" region west of the Missouri River, as elsewhere, only a fraction of homesteaders actually intended to stay on the land and farm it. Half or more of the land seekers—including Edith and Ida Mary Ammons—were motivated rather by the desire to obtain cheap land from the government and then turn it over for a profit. They were, in essence, land speculators.

South Dakota witnessed three major land rushes after Dakota Territory was established in 1861. The first, from about 1865 to 1873, took place primarily in the far southeastern part of the territory around Sioux Falls and Yankton. The second, lasting from 1878 to 1886 and referred to as the "Great Dakota Boom," filled up most of the southern part of Dakota Territory from the Minnesota border to the Missouri River. The third, and final, land rush took place during the first decade of the new century west of the Missouri River, until a hard drought arrived in 1910-11—just after Ida Mary died and Edith moved on to Wyoming to help open up another new frontier.

The land rushes in Lyman County and on the newly opened Rosebud Indian Reservation resembled what had happened on previous frontiers, but as this book suggests, the region possessed distinctive environmental characteristics. The land, which received less moisture than the area further east, was even more destitute of any vegetation in the form of trees, shrubs, and other plant life. It was subject to heavy winds, blistering heat, drought, and blustering winter blizzards. The three basic needs, according to Kohl, were food, fuel, and water. Teeming dens of rattlesnakes were particularly nettlesome. Most devastating could be uncontrolled prairie fires, one of which almost wiped out the Ammons sisters and the settlement they founded.

In this page-turning account, we get some sense of the agricultural dimensions of the West River South Dakota farming frontier during the first decade of the twentieth century. In addition to rattlesnakes and environmental challenges, we learn about proving up on claims, cultivating gardens, running cattle and sheep, breaking sod, raising crops (including oats, flax, hay, spring wheat, potatoes, yellow corn, and melons), and bringing in the harvest. The story covers a period of only two years and four months, so we get only a glimpse of the very beginning of the frontier, before things settled down and farm families worked out some of the “kinks.”

Themes organizing the narrative include the frontier experience, the land and laws regulating it, agriculture and methods of improving it, transportation, small towns, community, Indians, the role of newspapers, and the activities of women. The frontier provided a crucible in which the inherent tension existing between individual and society exhibited itself in full force. The two Ammons sisters displayed an amazing amount of bravery, spunk, creativity, and enthusiasm, modeling the role played throughout American history by ambitious, able, and risk-taking individuals. Other people who weave their way through the story, providing an interesting cast of characters, include Alexander Van Leshout, a cartoonist from Milwaukee; E. L. Senn, the proof-sheet newspaper king of South Dakota; Halbert Donovan, a New York investor-broker; C. H. West, a western colonization leader, and Ma Wagor, who enjoyed the “confusement” of running the Ammons store. The development of the frontier clearly depended on the industry, energy, and gutsy persistence of myriad individuals. Too often, however, the frontier has been depicted, especially in the popular press, as the playground of highly individualistic heroes, without giving equal attention to the forces operating to promote a sense of community.

That community was something real and widely present even during the earliest months and years of any particular frontier is brought out forcefully in this account. Edith and Ida Mary depended heavily upon the help of Alexander Van Leshout, Fred Farraday, and others to get out their newspaper. Especially during times of tragedy or environmental disaster—such as blizzards, drought, and prairie fires—people in the community rallied round to help each other out, giving of their own meager belongings to enable the community to survive. More commonly, on a day-to-day basis, cooperation was expected of everyone. Edith Ammons made promoting cooperation the central theme of her newspaper editorials. The sisters’ piano was constantly on the move from one shack or building to another to provide music for every sort of entertainment. Ida Mary’s school contributed to community spirit, and even more the Randall Settlement at McClure promoted community at their community hall with parties, dances, and other entertainments. Everyone would come to these, as community fostered democracy on the plains. When Ida Mary married Imbert Miller, they were treated to a charivari, virtually universal in turn-of-the-century American society.

The early 1900s were a period of reform, usually going under the name of “progressivism,” all across the United States. The spirit of reform, bolstered by optimism and hope for the future, comes through strongly in the book. This is more than a nostalgic reminiscence of what the frontier had been like thirty years before the book was written. The volume is, in a sense, a secular sermon devoted to celebrating the sense of community and the spirit of adventure that reigned on the prairie frontier in West River South Dakota at the time. Implicit in the discussion was the suggestion (just as it was in

the writings of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, who were writing at the time) that with hard work, bravery, and determination, Americans could face down the hardships and challenges of the Great Depression just as their predecessors had overcome their adversities from the colonial period onward.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. From what you know about the Dakota frontier during the "Great Dakota Boom" of 1878 to 1886, when most of eastern South Dakota was settled, how did that experience resemble or differ from what happened in West River South Dakota between 1907 and 1909, when this book is set?

2. How do you react to reading about the kinds of challenges faced by Edith and Ida Mary Ammons? How would you explain their willingness to leave the comfort of St. Louis for an unknown prairie frontier where they would live literally on the edge of survival?

3. Edith was only 23 years old when she ventured out to South Dakota, having been born in the same year as Harvey Dunn, who also portrayed the prairie frontier in his paintings. How would you compare the image that Dunn painted of the frontier with the one described in words by Edith Eudora Kohl?

4. The narrative related in The Land of the Burnt Thigh is essentially an admiring, triumphal story of victory over the elements and the "taming" of the frontier. The flip side is that as white people moved in, Indians lost their hunting grounds and had to accommodate themselves to the white way of life. How does Kohl treat Native Americans in her story?

5. Referring to the land lottery on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, Kohl observes on page 47, "The land so lavishly disposed of was the white man's last raid on the Indians." And on page 239 she writes, "Much has been said of Indians stealing white man's horses and little of the depredations of the whites upon the Indians." How do you understand Kohl's statements in these instances? Does she seem conflicted about how the Indians were treated, and does she evince any sense of shame or discomfort about what happened? How does she describe white-Indian relations in general? Does this story help us understand the complexity of Indian-white relations then and now?

6. Kohl describes her and her sister as young, small, and prone to sickness. How does this description stack up with your notion of what it would have taken to survive and succeed on the prairie frontier? To what do you attribute the success (if that is the right word for it) of the two women in this story?

7. In the introduction to the Borealis Book edition, Glenda Riley, one of our foremost historians of women on the frontier, discusses the historical role of women homesteaders. Does this book and Riley's introduction give you a somewhat different picture of women in the early twentieth century or of the frontier in general?

8. How would you describe the attitudes of Edith and her sister toward their own gender? Were they feminists? What did they think was the ideal kind of life for women? How do they compare to other women pioneers, such as Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gloria Steinem, Rosa Parks, and Sandra Day O'Connor?

9. The Ammons sisters taught a school, put out a newspaper, ran a store, ran an Indian trading post, and delivered the mail, in addition to boosting the settlement and lobbying and promoting the area in political circles. How were they able to do all of this? Do these accomplishments testify mostly to their own qualities and characters or to the situation and opportunities that existed at that time and place?

10. “One of the central lessons of this story is how crucial it is to be in there at the start when a frontier opens up.” Discuss.

11. The “Reservation Wand” was a seven-column, four-page newspaper that was printed on two pages of ready-prints sent out from Presho, in which the other two pages consisted of advertising and regional and national news items and features that had already been printed up. How would you describe the paper they put out? How would you compare it to modern local papers, and what does it tell us about the history of journalism in the United States?

12. Who were your favorite characters in the book? Why?

13. What did you learn from the book that you didn’t know before?

14. How would you rate the book, and would you recommend it to others?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Edith Eudora Ammons Kohl was born in Illinois in 1884. In 1907, at the age of 23, she came to South Dakota with her sister and homesteaded near McClure. To make a living, she edited a newspaper, established a post office at the village they developed and which was named Ammons after the sisters, and ran a store and Indian trading post. After a prairie fire destroyed the little community, her sister got married and Edith moved to Wyoming to promote frontier homesteading. Later, she moved to Denver, where she became a writer.

[SUPPORTED WITH FUNDING FROM THE SOUTH DAKOTA HUMANITIES COUNCIL]