

Foreword

A SATURATED SOLUTION WILL CRYSTALLIZE almost immediately when the correct temperature and pressure are reached. That is a good analogy for what has happened in my mind to launch me into this long-range endeavor to write the book *Prairie Queens*. The first notion for this book came from my husband Joel Dobson in the fall of 1999 as we were sitting outside talking one evening. While I don't remember his exact words, the notion took root in my mind immediately and grew quickly. I envisioned a sort of "coffee table" book that would convey the remarkable stories of our pioneer ancestors through pictures and narrative. I thought to begin with my ancestors because that was where I already had the most information accumulated and would have the most motivation to dig for more. But, I hoped to write something that would be interesting to read, no matter whether the reader was related to anyone in the book or not. So, while I see the ancestors covered in this book as remarkable people, but not any more special or unique than the thousands of women who lived in the same time and made the same choices and sacrifices.

Fairly early on, I decided that I would try to tell this tale from the viewpoint of the women in these families. It seemed that I could better relate to their choices and issues than to those of the men. Second, I felt that the role of women in settling the West is less well documented than that of men and I wanted these women to be recognized for their heroic efforts. Third, I once read a comment that history tended to be contained in books written by white men, of white men, for white men. I wish I remembered where I saw that, but it stuck in my mind. The point is that history books tend to focus only on the role of one segment of the population and ignore the contributions of women, minorities, indigenous peoples, nature, geography, and natural disaster to the progress of the human race. Of course, I recognize the risk that this book becomes nothing more than a book written by a white woman, of white women, for white women. To avoid that outcome, I plan to expand the biographies in the future to cover both Native American and African American women who were in the same areas at the same time as the ancestors covered here.

Over the next few months, I had the experience of receiving what I can only call "downloads" of pages of this book. In my mind, I would see page after page so clearly, with all the pictures and text. Either our ancestors were sending me their messages from "the great beyond", or I was just synthesizing the mass of information I had already acquired from my childhood and from the research I had done in the course of publishing the family website AliceBell.com. The title for the book *Prairie Queens* came quickly. It was partly inspired by a small note in a book on Monroe City, Missouri, history saying that the original name for Monroe City was Queen of the Prairie. Furthermore, this book is mostly about the prairies of the Midwest. And the pioneer women were certainly as dignified as queens. Another connotation of the word queen is the Queen Bee who is so fertile and produces all of the offspring for the colony. The women who settled the West were generally very fertile, producing a child every two or three years on average, often until they were well into their forties.

As I started trying to actually get the book on paper, I realized that I didn't know as much as I needed to know to write this book. That was true of the actual facts of the women I wanted to write about as well as the historical context of their lives. From the beginning, I knew that I didn't want to write just a simple family biography that collected all of the oral history about an individual into one book. While that would have served some purpose, my early passions for both paleontology and journalism came into play. I wanted to KNOW if the oral histories were really true by digging into the fossil paper record supporting the life events of each individual. And I wanted to MAKE SENSE of their lives by understanding at least the main facts of the historical context of their environment. What motivated them to become pioneers and move west? What were the key historical events taking place around them? What would they have discussed with their spouses?

During 2000, I continued to gather facts and information about the people in this book and about the history of their times. This meant traveling to Missouri, Kansas and Virginia to visit County Courthouses, State Historical Societies and old homesteads. This endeavor included

actions that seemed perhaps a little bizarre to the “petite fonctionnaire” government clerks I called to track down the 1872 Bankruptcy papers for a great-great grandfather. It’s not every day they are asked to look up dossiers that are over 125 years old! But they were all flawlessly helpful, concerned and prompt. The actual papers were tracked down in a National Archives facility in central Philadelphia and copies made and sent in a most expeditious manner for 50¢ a page, no shipping or handling added. Et, voila! Another fossil has been found and put on display! The paleontologist has found a new bone and the journalist has a new thread to weave into the fabric of family history.

The physical travels were supplemented with research on the Internet, both to find clues about the individuals and to find historical documents about the development of the railroad or other events of interest relative to the lives of the pioneers. The Internet is a wonderful tool that has grown exponentially in the last ten years and will undoubtedly be a major force in the future of human communications. The content available on the Internet expands in all directions every day. Many sources are listed in the Bibliography. These range from truly wonderful government websites for the Library of Congress or the Bureau of Land Management to commercial sites like Ancestry.com.

A third, and truly enjoyable, line of attack was to visit the people alive today with the closest links to the past. What a joy to talk with them about their parents and grandparents, as they knew them. And what a bonus to have a family that saves so many old photos, letters, family trees and other artifacts so helpful in building a complete picture of those who came before us. Without the sense of heritage and preservation they possess this book would never have been conceived, much less possible.

The fact-finding missions were all thoroughly enjoyable and certainly won’t be the last, as I continue to work on this book for the next few years. However, I have a concern that it is important to know when enough is enough, in terms of research. There is a risk of endlessly digging deeper into the unknowable past and not putting enough effort into completing the work of actually writing a book that can be read by someone other than me. I have seen the whole book in my mind. Now it is time to get as much as possible down on paper. This will allow others to benefit from what I have assembled so far and allow me to more clearly see the missing links so that my research in 2001 can be appropriately focused.

Recognizing that it will likely be several more years before the book is “completed” to my satisfaction, I decided to write a first draft by compiling the biographies of several of the women I have researched the most. This means

that this version of the book will be only lightly developed in terms of the historical context and there will still be some missing facts for the biographies. But, you have to start somewhere, as they say, and I am eager to start this book in earnest.

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