# Women on the Canadian Prairies

Stephanie Jayne Simon

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Donica Belisle, Ph.D.

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The purpose of this paper is to study the lives of women in the late eighteen hundreds to early nineteen hundreds living on the Canadian prairies. First-hand accounts that document the day-to-day experiences of pioneer women will be used to provide insight into how these women responded to their new environment, dealt with the trials and tribulations they encountered, and resolved the psychological and physical emotions their experiences evoked. Pioneer women faced many obstacles in the new land, but showed themselves to be resourceful people and good partners to their husbands. Pioneer women shared the workload on the homestead. They endured many hardships such as poverty, loneliness, sickness, and danger, in most cases overcoming all obstacles. At times they took full responsibility for the homestead, family and livestock. As they worked through these difficult years they began to see that though they contributed equally to whatever venture husband and wife were involved in, they were not considered equals in either culture or law. With that realization pioneer women took on a new task fighting for and achieving equal rights for women.

Primary sources used are taken from the following writings: *The Silence of the North* by Olive A. Fredrickson who lived predominately in northern Alberta since childhood in 1910; *Gully Farm* by Mary Hiemstra who came to Saskatchewan as a child with her parents in 1903; *It Could Have Been* Worse by Peggy Holmes who in the 1920's lived in St. Lina, Alberta with her husband; *Women and Wheat* by Georgina Binnie-Clark who struggled to build up a farm for herself during 1905-08, and *The Pioneer Years 1895-1914: Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West* by Barry Broadfoot, which is a collection of stories by pioneers who reminisce about the past. These women shared the responsibilities and work load of settling the land on the prairies alongside of the men.

They endured the hardships and struggles when there was little income and a lack of resources to keep the family alive and the homestead going. These women were determined to overcome the challenges by working hard, helping the men, and building a community. Stories from the primary sources tell about personal accounts from women that endured hardships of settling the land. These include living in log cabins, surviving the cold and harsh winters, defending the homestead from prairies fires, and the loneliness that came with isolation from other women. Other hardships and struggles for these women were when the men had gone from home, and the women were left to keep the homestead, their children, and the house on their own. This increased the women's responsibilities and work load since she had the task of caring for the homestead as well as her household chores. These personal accounts are evidence that women shared equally with the men in the duties of building a home for their families, and they were equal partners with their husbands on the homestead.

## Coming to Canada and Homesteading: A New Life for Emigrant Women

To get an idea of what life was like for pioneer women it is necessary to look at the phenomenon called homesteading. Homesteading was a phenomenon of the late eighteen hundreds to early nineteen hundreds, in which emigrants were lured to the Canadian prairies by government advertisements of "free" land. Under the Dominion Land Policy, 160 acres cost $10 for the homesteader who within three years could cultivate a minimum of 40 acres and erect a permanent dwelling; usually constructed from trees or sod.[i] To meet this requirement the homesteader needed to acquire oxen and implements to till and harvest the land. A homesteader would also need income to help develop his land and often worked on the railroad until his farm began producing.[ii]

Working on the railroad took the homesteader away from his family, and he would have to leave his land for long periods of time; this meant that many of the tasks fell to the wife.

Many of the families who came were not aware of the difficulties they would encounter because of promoters like Mr. Barr, who painted a glorious picture of the opportunities that homesteading had to offer. An example of this is Mary Hiemstra's family who came from England to Canada on March 31, 1903 to the Barr Colony in Saskatchewan. In England her father had a farm, but he was not satisfied with the small plot of land. A man from Manitoba came to tell those who would listen about what Canada had to offer and Hiemstra's father liked what he had to say. "If we had a bigger farm we could have a horse-drawn rake… they say even the small fields in Canada are a half mile long."[iii] he told his wife. It all sounded good to him. Hiemstra's mother on the other hand was very skeptical of the stories told by this Manitoba man and what was printed in the paper. It said land was free in Canada, but Hiemstra's mother thought "Papers don't seem to care what they print these days" and "You can't believe all you hear, and only half you see."[iv] When the decision came to go to Canada, Hiemstra's mother was repeatedly encouraged by her family to say in England and let Hiemstra's father go by himself. Hiemstra's mother agreed with them saying, "…that man from Manitoba told me a few things. There aren't any penny trees even on the prairies".[v] However, her commitment to her husband was strong even though she did not believe the promises of Canada.

Once the Hiemstra's, along with other emigrants, arrived on Canada's east coast, they had a long journey across the country to the prairies; when they got off the ship, they

traveled by train. When the railway came to the "end of the steel," as they would say, emigrants got off there and traveled on down the trails out west by wagon pulled by oxen or horses. Distances travelled by emigrants were far greater lengths than they could imagine, and it was slow going with a wagon full of supplies, especially if it was pulled by oxen. Supplies were needed to get started on the prairies and were obtained at the stores in town. A team of horses or oxen and a wagon was acquired at the livery barns. Those who did not have the money to pay in advance could keep credit with the owner. Many emigrants that came from Europe had been trades people and did not know anything about farming. Even if they did farm, they were not aware of what they needed to survive on the prairies. During the first ten years of homesteading there was no economic substructure that a pioneer could rely on.[vi] Communities were not fully established, so there were few towns or country stores, and so pioneers had to produce food from the land. This was hard for them as they were not well acquainted with the conditions of prairie soil and climate.[vii] Many of the immigrants had no experience in farming either, but fortunately, there were often people who had come to Canada earlier who were willing to help the new pioneers.

> It was the man in the hardware store who helped us… [Wrote Hiemstra]. The man said buy three axes. Dad, I remember, said one would be enough. No the man said, what if you break one and lose another and then where are you. Without an axe, you are nothing… "What about a team?" Of course Dad hadn't thought of that and here was everybody getting off the trains, every day, and buying horses and we'd been camped just on the edge of town for four days and Dad hadn't done a thing about getting there. [viii]

Hiemstra's family left Saskatoon for Battleford by wagon pulled by horses. Travel for them was much slower than her father expected; the prairies far wider than he thought they would be, and the Hiemstra's had a low supply of food before they got far. During their travel they came across an old-timer who suggested leaving Hiemstra's mother and

her siblings on the prairies and her father going back with an empty wagon to get more supplies, or they would never make it to Battleford. Leaving the mother and children alone on the prairies was not the last time that would happen, as life on the homestead proved soon enough. This was a totally new experience for Hiemstra's mother since "he [Hiemstra's father] and Mother had never been apart for more than a night now and then ever since they were married, and leaving her alone with three small children in what she called the middle of nowhere wasn't easy."[ix]

Hiemstra's mother was now starting a new life on the prairies as a pioneer woman, and starting in a most difficult way; alone on the bare prairie. The daily tasks Hiemstra's mother completed on that trail while her husband left for supplies was a trend many homestead women would do from now on. Some of the tasks that Hiemstra's mother and other prairie women had to carry out were hauling water from the slough, straining out the pond critters to make tea, bannock, and wash clothes; milking the cow, and bringing her to the slough to get water; hauling wood to build and start a fire to cook and keep warm. From the beginning pioneering required hard work by both men and women.

## Resourceful Pioneer Women Helped to Construct Housing

Building a shelter on the homestead was a priority. Living in a tent was not an ideal situation once the Canadian winter came with its freezing temperatures and blizzards that kept one indoors for days. Houses were constructed from trees if bush was available, and if not, plowing the prairie land made sod for stacking. Women worked right alongside of the men to plough the rough prairie grasses and gather the sod. These women helped carry heavy pieces of sod and stack them grass side down in double rows

to make the walls of their new homes,[x] and these sod homes were small, dark and had leaky roofs, but the women turned them into cozy homes. Many women covered the walls of their sod homes with paper or cloth and others plastered them with clay and straw. Some log and sod houses had windows and were divided into rooms with lumber or curtains. Leaky roofs came with the rain and created work for the women to keep the house dry. Besides all of this, many times these women performed this hard manual labor while pregnant and still nursing the last baby that had arrived months earlier. Still, these women continued on, kept homes, raised their children and worked side by side with their husbands in the fields. For the homestead to be established "all the muscle power of men and women as well as that of oxen or horses was needed." [xi] Both men and women were expected to work together till the work was done. After all the hard work the results were not always what the women expected. Hiemstra's father told her mother how he was going to build a cabin on the edge of the grove at the far corner of the quarter section. Her response showed her disappointment in the size of the cabin by remarking that it was the size of a handkerchief and no bigger than a doll house. Hiemstra's mother appeared to long for her home in England with her inability to see the size of the cabin as being sufficient. Hiemstra's father did his best to enlarge the size of the cabin even though tall poplars were hard to find. Once the walls were erected the task of putting a roof on consisted of Hiemstra's father ploughing several furrows into foot-long pieces, piling them into the wagon and hauling them to the house. With Hiemstra's father on the roof and Hiemstra's mother on the ground, she would hand the sod up to her husband. "It was hard, dirty work, and to get it over with as soon as possible Mother and Dad worked all day long, then, black and hungry, we got into the dirty wagon and went home."[xii] With all

this hard work by pioneers, it did not enter their thoughts while building their homes that the challenges of making a suitable home would not end. Later that winter Hiemstra's family would find the log cabin to be very cold; this was due to the green trees they used to build her home. This common problem for pioneers was resolved by filling the cracks with more mud. Hiemstra's mother was often pessimistic when Hiemstra's father proposed ideas to make life on the prairies better. At first, she would try to discourage him from going through with his ideas, but in the end, she supported her husband and did her best to help make the project succeed.

Many of the pioneer women learned to work along with their husbands utilizing whatever resources they had to make a suitable place to live. In the early 1920's, Olive Fredrickson with her first husband Walter Reamer went into the Northwest Territories for the winter to trap game for income. Since Fredrickson had to help construct the log cabin, she needed to be resourceful out in the wilderness, and find a safe place for her baby. She used a hammock she had received from an Indian woman in Fort Fitzgerald and hung it between two trees and covered it with a mosquito net. "Walter cut and notched the trees, and together we carried them up to the site and rolled them into place."[xiii] It took two weeks to build the cabin; it had a window, a door hung, and a bunk bed. Fredrickson cut hay with a butcher knife to make a mattress and built cupboards out of wooden packing crates. One drawback of their cabin was that big spruce beetles came out of the spruce logs when the stove heated the cabin because the bark had been left on. Even though Fredrickson did not always have the best living environment, she helped put a roof over their heads, and made do with the resources that were available.

On the other hand, Peggy Holmes and her husband had better resources to construct their home and together were able to build a good house for their family. Holmes went to Canada with her husband; they headed to northern Alberta to live in the bush at St. Lina. Here they planned the building of their new home "the Gables". "We both agreed that our log house had to be a home, not just a low building with a sod roof like most others. It must have two storeys with gables – custom built on a do-it-yourself basis."[xiv] Logs for the building of the home were done by "snaking" out tamarack from the bush with the team of horses and taken to a small saw mill a few miles away. This lumber was sawed so it could provide boards for the floors, doors, and finishing jobs. Together Holmes and her husband constructed the gable home by 1922. The three pioneer women, Hiemstra's mother, Holmes, and Fredrickson, are good examples of the different situations many pioneer women found themselves in, as immigrants to this new country. Some had better resources than others, but they all had to work hard, and help their husbands provide a home for their families to live.

## Pioneer Women Learn to Survive the Changing Seasons on the Prairies

### *Prairie Fires*

Changes came with the end of summer and start of fall: birds flew south for the winter, rabbits turned white to match the snow, and the trees lost their leaves and the grass became dry and crisp-smelling. This was also a time for prairie fires, and many immigrants had heard frightening stories. When they came, they came fast with wind, and no one had time to run. If they came at night people could easily die in their beds; burned to death or smothered by the smoke. "'Be sure you have everything ready,' the old-timers warned. 'Some sacks with hay in the bottom to give them weight, and a barrel of water to

wet the sacks in.'"[xv] Plowing a fire guard was another way settlers could help keep fire away from their barns and houses, that is if the fire did not jump the plowed furrows of dirt.

Prairie fires were a threat to the pioneers, not only because of the risk of losing their valuables, but also because they came unexpectedly. The few items that pioneers did receive were accumulated through working hard, and were very valuable, since these items were often difficult to come by. Women shared equally with their husbands in the care and protection of the farm. Hiemstra writes that her mother said if a fire came she would run away, and she didn't sleep well at night because she worried about a prairie fire coming. When the fire did come, they saw a puff of yellow cloud in the distance behind the trees and it grew bigger. Her father immediately hooked the team up to the plow to make a wider fire guard, and her mother ran to the barn to get the sacks. They also started a back-fire to burn against the approaching prairie fire to protect their homestead. Hiemstra's mother had outdone herself, and stood by her husband in the fight to defend the farm. When the fire had passed and neighbors gathered together, the men praised the women for their vigorous efforts to beat the fire back with sacks. The women just did what they had to do to keep the little they had from being lost. Hiemstra's father said about his wife that "…she thought she wasn't pioneer stuff.' 'And I'm not,' Mother said firmly. 'And I'd rather be where there are no prairies fires to fight.' "[xvi]

Other pioneer women experienced the same fears Hiemstra's mother did. However, when the farm and family were threatened, they put their fears behind them, determined to survive whatever challenges the changing prairie season brought. One account in *The Pioneer Years 1895-1914* tells of one day that the men were gone, and

Mother was home alone when she saw smoke in the distance. With the pails of water ready, and sacks to dip in them, Mother was ready for the fire when it got close to the house. "…she fought it and fought it until she was exhausted. But she managed to protect a little bit of the land right around our shack and a bit of the thick grass where our horses could graze."[xvii] Many pioneers looked forward to the winter months, hoping this would end the prairie fires, but the changing seasons brought other problems.

*Long Cold Winters and Heavy Snow Fall*

On the farm things needed to be done to prepare for the coming winter, and many old-timers would warn the immigrants of temperatures reaching minus forty to fifty degrees Celsius. They told them to make sure there was enough firewood cut for fuel, and to get warm clothes to wear for the winter. The start of winter with its dropping temperatures and increased snow fall caused many Barr colonists to leave the homestead to stay in town. Hiemstra writes that "the cold that had driven many of the Barr colonists to Lloydminster was bad enough, we thought, but it wasn't long before it got much worse. The thermometer went down to fifteen below zero, and more snow fell."[xviii] It was not just the cold and snow blizzards that would threaten life, but the length that winter weather could last. "But nobody told us how cold it was and how long the winter lasted," Hiemstra wrote. [xix] When the winter was long, food supplies could become a problem if there was not enough to hold families over until spring finally came.[xx]

Again the pioneer women would prove to be resourceful and determined to survive the unpredictable changing seasons of the prairies. As with the prairie fires pioneer women had to protect their families. They had to make the food supplies stretch out as long as the winter did when spring did not arrive when expected. They also cared

for the home and children when their husbands left to buy more supplies. In the book Gully Farm, Hiemstra's father went to get food and supplies from Battleford with the neighbor, while her mother was left at home alone with the children. Hiemstra's father had sawed a large pile of firewood that he thought would hold out till he got back, but his supply had dwindled surprisingly fast. Hiemstra's mother went to saw more logs with the cross-cut saw, but in the cold her hands and feet became numb, and her breathing difficult. "We'll have to saw some wood in the house' she said at last."[xxi] Dragging logs into the house Hiemstra and her mother tried sawing the logs, but the teeth stuck halfway through the log and they could not move it. Hiemstra's mother showed her despair when little sister Lily said "I'se told" and trembled in a huddled corner of the wagon bench, a helpless little figure. "'This awful country,' Hiemstra's mother said in a despairing voice. 'I allus knew it was only biding its time. My bairns will freeze'."[xxii] To save her children from the silent cold of the deadly winter, Hiemstra's mother shoved the end of the uncut piece of wood into the stove. As it burned down her mother would push the log further into the stove. Not only was keeping a fire going a problem, but the food was almost gone. The tin box for tea was empty, the coyotes stole the rabbits hanging outside, and Hiemstra's mother was not able to snare any more. It was the last of the baking powder and to ensure it lasted her mother made flour gruel twice a day instead of bannock. The whole episode was a reminder of her dislike for this country which she believed was looking to end their lives, and she would remind Hiemstra's father of her dislike for this country and how she longed for England.

Another record of an unhappy pioneer woman was that of a young lady who came to Canada to stay with her brother Dan in 1905 in Saskatchewan. She wrote her family in England stating her condition:

> In about two months a letter came back from Florrie. There were dried tear marks on the pages. She said it was terrible. Just terrible. We couldn't imagine how terrible it was. The weather was cold, terribly cold, and where they lived was not a house but a log shack and she drew a diagram to show how small it was. She said they ate porridge and rabbits and the only comfort was tea and sugar. The nearest neighbor was five miles away. And on and on. [xxiii]

## Loneliness on the Prairies

Distances between homesteads made regular visits to neighbors difficult; walking was the most common means of travel, unless one had a horse or oxen. Winter with its harsh temperatures, and abundance of snow made travel unpleasant and risky. Homesteaders and their families were often separated from friends and relatives, and many suffered years of hardship and loneliness. Women on the homestead endured difficult times and longed for the friendship and company of other women.

This isolation made life on the homestead hard for many prairie women who emigrated from Europe where people live close together in cities and towns.[xxiv] "Representations of this type of experience appear in the autobiographical writings of emigrant women themselves, in many vivid visions of the psychological trauma of a woman stranded on the plains"[xxv] Hiemstra's mother in *Gully Farm* found it very lonely with her husband gone to work away from home and longed for the company of another woman. "In spite of the washing and baking [for travelers passing by and bachelors,] Mother found the quiet days and nights very long and lonely. She had not visited with another woman for a long time"[xxvi] The neighbor woman, Mrs. Metherell, had gone to live in Lloydminster in early spring, and Mrs. Johnson lived several miles away, but Mrs.

Clayton lived two miles to the south. Hiemstra's mother often talked about and wondered if they could find her if they went looking. The distance was a long way to travel in those days, and landmarks looked very much alike, so the possibility of getting lost was all too real. However, loneliness had out won out over the fear of getting lost, and Hiemstra's family started walking to find Mrs. Clayton, and indeed they did. Living with her was Mrs. Johnson, and they invited Hiemstra's family to stay with them as well; which brought a total of three adults and eight children to live in a one room cabin.

Olive Fredrickson too experienced loneliness, by spending the winter on the trap line with her husband instead of living in Fort McMurray as she had hoped. "I had been looking forward to the presence of other white women, a few frontier comforts, and a doctor in case I or the baby needed one."[xxvii] This loneliness caused many communities to organize women's groups to bring them together to develop friendships, share stories, enjoy each others company, and help each other.

## Struggles on the Homestead: A New Role for Pioneer Women

The pioneer women who gathered together shared with each other their homestead experiences and this brought awareness to the women the valuable contribution and hard work they contributed to help the farm succeed. In the first years of homesteading it was hard to make ago of things. Land had to be cleared of trees, virgin prairies had to be plowed, and water carried from sloughs or neighbors. Crops that were planted depended on the weather for production. Early snow and freezing could wipe out a crop; wind and hail could flatten it; and grasshoppers could eat it. Even if there was a good harvest the money went to pay for credit at stores for food or other debt. Many settlers did not make ends meet, and lacked the money to keep things going. Many men

went to work on the railway, in coal mines, or in towns so they could make a living for their families. This meant leaving their wives alone on the homestead while they left to work. Some people did give up and return home to their native land, or went into B.C to the Okanagan Valley or to the coast to build a life there. But those who stuck it out on the prairies –they did their best and worked their hardest to survive each day. "The high failure rate of bachelor homesteaders and the tendency of widows to remarry emphasized the importance of a woman's labour on the farm, especially in the early years when a strong back and versatile skills were at a premium"[xxviii]

It is evident that the women on the homestead toiled and struggled along with their husbands to break the land and to survive the challenges the Canadian prairies brought. It is especially remarkable how these women endured the hardships and still cared for their family, made a home, and worked with their husband on the homestead. It is also important to mention the inequality placed on women in regard to a right to share in the benefits of the homestead that their husbands received. Particularly the value of women's work was underestimated and governing laws did not show equality for women in ownership and rights to land.[xxix] Not only was the labor of women less valued than the work of men, but their gender affected their rights as women as well; this especially depended on whether they were married, widowed, or single. Mrs. Zelickson, who came to Southern Saskatchewan with her husband in 1891, made note of her contributions to homestead life and calculated the value of her labor, she stated:

> Being a pioneer of Southern Saskatchewan, it is quite interesting to note the value of work which I have performed. Although not having the money in cash, I figure the experience is worth it… I estimate the value of my work for these 35 years as $141,578. I have cooked 361,351 meals, baked 78,800 loaves of bread, 12,045 cakes, 5,158 pies, preserved 3,300 quarts of fruit, churned 13,728 pounds of butter and raised 4,950 poultry. I have put in 48,180 hours scrubbing, cleaning and

> washing. I think this is quite a record and will be pleased to hear from any woman who can beat it."[xxx]

*The Married Women*

When the men needed to go out and work to bring in extra income the care of the homestead was left to their wives and children. Women worked as hard in the fields and stables as they did to cook, clean and care for the children. They cleared brush, planted seeds, helped with the harvest, and looked after the hens, pigs, and cows. "Thus, the flexibility of women in performing a wide variety of seemingly ordinary and small scale activities was vital to the success of farming operations throughout the period of settlement in Canada."[xxxi]

One account from a woman in *The Pioneer Years 1895-1914* tells how her husband wanted to have a farm, but he did not know how to farm and did not do any of the work; it was she that ran it. "I ran the farm for three years when he was over seas. He wanted to go off to war so he did and left me alone."[xxxii] With the help of several hired men, who proved to lack the farming skills needed, she had managed to make her farm prosper, and even bought another half section of land. By putting the money earned from the wheat back into the farm she was able to expand. There was an addition to the barn, she bought sheep and expanded the herd into a good size, and acquired a boar, sow, and piglets. "So when my husband came back there was a better farm than when he'd left. Much better. Then things started to happen."[xxxiii] With her husband back home he started to spend money foolishly and make poor decisions on the farm, he spent time with friend's playing cards, gambling, and going for swims. The wife assessed the situation: "Things went from bad to worse, going haywire, and I could see it. His father sent out 3,000 dollars to save the farm and that went. And then when we hardly had enough

money to buy the bare necessities of life he went into town and bought a piano. That did it for me, I think."[xxxiv] This shows how women were not in a position to reap the benefits of their labor as men were seen as the head of the house, and women had no recourse under the law. It was experiences like this that brought about an awareness that married women were quite as capable as men at farming and sometimes much better.

*The Widowed*

Widows were compelled to take over the pioneering endeavors. Olive Fredrickson writes that her husband who died in a lake on the border of the Northwest Territories and Alberta when his canoe capsized in a wind storm. She evaluated her circumstances: "I had looked around at my three children. …What was to become of them and me? …I was twenty-six, a homesteader-trapper's widow with three children, one hundred and sixty acres of bush-grown land, almost none of it cleared, a small log house, an old .30-30 Winchester and precious little else."[xxxv]

Fredrickson had not much choice, she needed to provide for her children, and her years with Walter were hard times and those years had prepared her for the hardships that lay ahead. With little money, as her husband's trap line never brought much in, she relied on the many wild animals around the homestead for food, and worked for neighbors digging potatoes or raking hay to pay for the use of a team of horses. In the following spring Fredrickson was able to clear a couple of acres of land to grow vegetables and start a hay meadow. "We managed to eke out a living. It was all hard work, day in and day out. I dragged myself to bed when dark came and crawled out at daylight to begin another day, but at least I and the youngsters had something to eat."[xxxvi] Again, pioneer women

showed that they had the ability that men did in keeping a homestead, even though it involved hard work and times were tough.

*The Single Women*

In 1905, a single woman, Georgina Binnie-Clark, came to visit her brother in Saskatchewan and came to love the Canadian West. She too wanted to become a homesteader, but soon found that women did not, under law, share equally in the right to own the land. In Canada single women and female heads of households could not claim the 160 acres for $10, because under the 1872 law of Dominion Lands Act they were barred from this privilege. "…Canadian Dominion Lands Act of 1872 placed stringent conditions on how women could acquire land. The only way a woman could obtain homestead land was if she was a widow with minor children"[xxxvii] Binnie-Clark paid $5000.00 to buy her own farm, a large sum of money when compared with the $10.00 that men were paying the government for a 160 acre plot of land. She soon realized that there was no need for the bias against women taking up homesteads. Binnie-Clark produced crops and raised livestock, managed her money to pay her debts and purchase goods, and was able to hire men as farmhands. She also wrote of her accounts to teach other women how they could successfully own a homestead and make a profited by acquiring proper farming knowledge. Binnie-Clark found this

> was enough to prove to me that farming on the prairie properly done is farming easily done, and that, worked out on a well-thought-out plan, it is a practical and should be a highly profitable means of independence and wealth for women as it has always proved for men. But on every side my neighbors had obtained their land as a gift from the Government, or at least one hundred and sixty acres of it. So that even allowing that a woman farmer is at a slight disadvantage in working out a farm proposition, she has the killing weight of extra payment thrust on her at the very outset. She may be the best farmer in Canada, she may buy land, work it, take prizes for seed and stock, but she is denied the right to claim from the government the hundred and sixty acres of land held out as bait to every man. [xxxviii]

As a result of the government bias, Binnie-Clark initiated the Homesteads for Women movement, which escalated between 1908 and 1911. With the efforts of Binnie-Clark and other women, the issue was brought to the House of Commons in 1910 but did not succeed. While Canada had started movements for women to own homesteads and have voting rights, in the United States single women could already acquire homesteads. Rachel Bella Calof of North Dakota explains:

> The law provided that a homestead claim could be filed as late as five years from the time a homesteader settled on the land, but I had only the six weeks before my marriage in which to file my claim. Married women whose husbands owned or were claiming land were denied homestead claim rights but single women had the same rights as men. Abraham's land would be in his name but mine would be in my maiden name.[xxxix]

Women of British ancestry in Canada had the expectation of privileges and advantage in acquiring property, and were frustrated that they had no such advantage, and indeed exercised little power. Single women of all backgrounds were denied the right to homestead, and married women had no legal right to the homesteads they helped to acquire and maintain as dower rights were abolished in Western Canada in 1886. In Manitoba, up until the First World War, the majority of married women who lived on a farm or elsewhere had to depend on what their husbands could provide them during his lifetime for security. "Women could partake of the pioneer mythology too but not as independent contractors: few women qualified to be homesteaders in their own right. Women were to be the helpmeet partners of the male farmer."[xl] It is evident that women were not given the credit they deserved for the contribution they have made in settling the prairies, and for the equality in the work they have done; that is so often credited to the pioneer men. Accounts of farming in Manitoba did not give justice to the economic role of women on the homestead but mentioned their works as housewives. Even then it was

described as 'lacking normal or typical routines," but the men's work was "steady, reliable, and predictable. …despite the evidence to the contrary provided in an autobiography of a farm woman's work in Alberta." [xli] Perhaps, if women were seen as equal with men under the law there would have been more women emigrating, and there would have been homesteads settled by women.

> Without a sufficient number of surviving and expanding farms, the staple economy and prairie settlement would falter. Without wives, fewer operations would have succeeded. Overcoming both the physical and emotional hardships of building a new life under difficult circumstances, and the economic inequities that were a deliberate part of the National Policy required the full effort and versatility of the farm wife.[xlii]

Women Organizations: Prairie Women Coming Together

> Because the work of the married woman, in caring for her household, was supposed to be a labor of love, and of no economic value… women were at first content to sell their work at far below its real value…. Perhaps no group of women has suffered more from this condition of affairs than Farm women. Certainly no group of women has labored so hard [,] so ungrudgingly and so unselfishly. And yet we know for a fact that in many instances, not even the produce that they raise by their own labor, can be sold and claimed as their own.[xliii]

A woman who settled on the prairies, to farm with their husband, would soon learn that family survival became dependent on her efforts and abilities. Other concerns that arose for women were the lack of adequate medical care and when childbirth or serious illness occurred they had to depend on their neighbors for help. "As economic conditions became more secure and more and more emigrants arrived, women began to meet, first for company, and later for community improvement and social reform." [xliv] Women who were isolated were left with their thoughts while they worked; this provided them with time to think about their experiences and their legal and social status. They began to ask themselves questions about their circumstances; how they could work alongside their husband but not be allowed to share in the owning of the money and land? Magazines such as the *Grain Growers' Guide,* the *Western Producer*, and *Free Press Prairie*

*Farmer*, gave a voice to their readers that provided insight into women's situations. Female labor was brought to the attention of the public through surveys in farm magazines. Issues that were debated included improvement of life, birth control, suffrage, equal rights, dower law, healthcare, and homesteading. "Even a quick inspection [of these magazines] confirms the deep preoccupation with all aspects of women's work, a reality in which women engaged in housework, care of children and adults, paid work within the home, and, not infrequently, extensive outside work both on and off the farm."[xlv] Reports about women's movements in Europe and the United States that appeared in farm newspapers, such as the *Grain Growers' Guide,* caused women to work towards reforming laws; these laws related to the home, guardianship, married women's property rights, and for women's suffrage.[xlvi]

Farm women had worked alongside of the men to settle the land and they too wanted a share in farm organizations. Farm women across the prairies came together and became members of organizations for farm women. The prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba had started organizations called United Farmer Women's and Women's Grain Growers Association. The benefits for farm women in the Women's Grain Growers Association were education, cooperation, and power through organization. Conventions also were held for prairie women to get together. When the government for United Farmers of Alberta (U.F.A.) was elected in 1921 it helped women of rural communities achieve their needs. "We had a great deal more cooperation for the activities of the women were most interested in, the educations and social welfare of various kinds, and in the health field…"[xlvii] The U.F.A. appointed Irene Parlby, a farm

women of British background, as cabinet minister. She worked to improve the political status of women throughout the country, she stating:

> If politics means as I take them to mean, the effort to achieve better conditions of life for the people then politics is most assuredly a women's job, just as much as it is a mans job. But there is of course still discrimination, conscious and unconscious. Eternal vigilance is needed if women are not to lose some of the things they have gained. But there are still too many women whose mental horizons bound by the four walls of their home at their social activities. There are still too many who like to keep them content within these boundaries as a break on human progress. But time and events move on and gradually more are coming to see that those who would satisfy the lives of women by holding them to an inferior position in civil and political life are doing an ill service to society.[xlviii]

Once women started getting together to talk, it did not take long for them to work together to achieve goals, which were to improve life for pioneer women. In a farmhouse from the Rocanville district of Saskatchewan the first farm women's organization was started on February 6, 1907. This was the Prosperity Homekeepers' Society, its purpose was to provide farm women with an activity outside their daily workload and so that they could become acquainted with other community women. Perhaps they gathered together to be with other women who experienced and lived through the same trials and tribulations. With someone to identify with, prairie women could give each other support and encouragement; they could voice their concerns and wants without having opposition. The Association of Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan identified that women in rural communities suffered from social isolation and saw a need to help alleviate the problem. They also wanted to improve home and community life by assisting in their "women's work". "For many decades the Clubs did just that, and so enhanced the fabric of rural life."[xlix] In 1913 the Women's Section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association (WGG) emerged as a result of the growing awareness among farm women that they had a valuable contribution to make to the farm movement. The

WGG was more political, radical, and gender conscious than the Homemakers but worked along with them for betterment of community. WGG was concerned with issues of farm women; these included their social and intellectual isolation, and lack of recognition as partners of the farm. The WGG became active in helping to improve farm women's economic contribution to the family farm, and to help them gain more equality. Another goal was to materialize a co-operative method so farm products and staple commodities would be supplied to community members. Some other objectives of the WGG were to establish libraries, literary societies, reading rooms, and to arrange lectures. In addition they wanted to have available suitable halls or meeting places that would be furnished and equipped with necessities for social and educational benefit of community members. Furthermore, they wanted to elevate the standard of living in rural communities by extending the knowledge of the members and their families along economic and social lines.[l] "Although in existence for just over a decade, the WGG left a significant imprint upon the history of newcomer Saskatchewan. A major contribution was its role in helping women attain the right to vote in the province, the official date was March 1916 (Saskatchewan being the second province to grant the vote)." [li] Violet McNaughton, the first president of the Women Grain Growers' Association, knew all to well the hardships and burdens placed on homestead women after she had a hysterectomy which caused physical pain; this led her to campaign for the relief of farm women's burdens. She explained:

> I suffered so much from carrying… pails of water which are so much a part of the burden of the country women that it burned into my mind this water question very deeply. …I met so many women afterwards who were suffering from the effects of this same hard work that I have never been able to get away entirely from this question. [lii]

Women who were partakers in farm women organizations could now let their skills blossom; using their intellectual abilities they advocated fairness for women within the framework of the farm movement and within social, political, and economic spheres. And so these women helped build and develop communities, and in turn they made an impact upon rural and urban environments. Some of the women within these organizations were the "movers and shakers" of their time, and were more affluent and better educated than the average women.

## Fight for Equal Rights of Canadian Women

Other women fought for women's rights in their own sphere and time. In her books *Clearing in the West* and *the Stream Runs Fast,* Nellie McClung writes about true events that show the unfairness to women. She recalls how men believed women belonged in the home raising children, and had no need to benefit from those things provided to men, such as land to own and farm. McClung campaigned across the country to lecture communities about the unfairness for women and the need to bring about equality. She stated that women's contributions to labor on the homestead and the raising of children should earn them the right to inherit land and money. One example that demonstrates the simple unfairness to women and the importance of the suffrage is told by McClung of a mother and her daughter Martha, the eldest of the family. The deceased and well-off farmer had left his three sons his three farms in his will. But Martha

> …who had worked like a slave to give the boys a chance to go to school and received very little education herself, he left a feather bed and a cow, and for the sixty five year old mother who had worked harder than he to acquire the substantial estate he made provision in his will that she would have her "keep" with the youngest son. …It was a good example of the barbaric attitude of the law towards women's work…[liii]

McClung also goes on to write about a response to this story from a man in her audience who claimed that a women of sixty five years of age would have no need for money and that she still had her chair to rock in, flowers to look at, and could continue living in familiar surroundings. The reply from McClung was that a woman wants the ability to purchase items at her own will, whether it be a magazine subscription, donation to a Missionary Society, or to send a gift at Christmas; she would want to do so without having to ask someone's permission to do so. This desire for independence was also made known on the *Prairie Women* video from a pioneer farm woman who discovered the reality that she too owned nothing when visiting a lawyer in the 1930's to draw up a will with her husband. She stated, "Property rights are very important to women if they are going to achieve equality."[liv] These women and others fought for and achieved equality on the home front.

*Suffrage Movement*

While some women fought for property rights, others began to look at other issues such as politics. The women's suffrage movement in Canada had its beginning in 1878 under the leadership of Dr. Emily Howard Stowe, who helped women in early Canada fight for the right to vote. The Canadian Women's Suffrage Association (established in 1883) campaigned across Canada to help women understand the importance of attaining their right to vote.[lv] These women would become known as "suffragettes" and they realized they needed support from other organizations if their voice was to be heard; support was found from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Grain Growers' Association, and the Young Women's Christian Association. Gaining the right to vote was important to these organizations because they wanted to promote family and

community health by changing legislation of dower laws, prohibition, and labor.[lvi] There were other women's organizations too who saw the importance for women to have a right to vote. "Feminists argued both that women brought a much-needed maternal view point to public life and that justice demanded an inclusive citizenship. Their opponents, in contrast, believed that the 'fair sex' would pollute and be polluted by political life."[lvii] Laws to support women's rights were not being passed by the British Parliament and Sir John A. MacDonald could see this would not change in the near future. As a result MacDonald introduced a Canadian bill in 1884 into parliament for the suffrage. MacDonald had anticipated objection since previous proposals had been defeated, so he limited the proposed bill to unmarried women and widows; however, this bill to was defeated.[lviii] It would take four decades and many petitions from the Canadian Women's Suffrage Association and other supporting women's organizations before women would receive equality with men. "A change in the Electoral Act, which made the Dominion and provincial voters' lists coincide, rendered further effort useless in the Dominion legislature, and made of woman suffrage a provincial issue."[lix] On a provincial level rights for women moved forward; it started on the prairies in 1916, first in Manitoba followed by Alberta and Saskatchewan, bills were passed for the suffrage of all women. A result of the suffrage movement was that many women's organizations gained momentum; they represented their sex within their own community and at a national level becoming involved in politics.

*Persons Case*

In 1916 Emily Murphy was the first woman magistrate in Alberta, but her rulings had been challenged by the opposition based on the British North America (BNA) Act of

1867 that declared “women are persons in matters of pain and penalties, but are not persons in matters of rights and privileges”;[lx] this lead to the start of the “persons case”. Murphy decided to investigate this matter and in 1927 consulted with several lawyers and found that “any five persons could initiate an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada for clarification of any part of The British North America Act.”[lxi] Murphy would appeal the BNA Act along with four other Alberta women: Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Irene Parlby who became known as the “Famous Five”. They asked the question “Does the word ‘person' in Section 24 of The British North America Act include female persons?”[lxii] To their disappointment the appeal was turned down by the Supreme Court which stated that individuals must be “fit and qualified” to be appointed to a public office and therefore only men were eligible. “Nellie McClung expressed it, ‘This ruling leaves us abashed, but not despairing: humbled but not hopeless. Acts can be amended and we believe they will.’”[lxiii] With this decision handed down, the Famous Five approached the Privy Council of England, at that time Canada's highest court of appeal. On October 18, 1929, the Lord Chancellor of the Privy Council declared that women were eligible to be elected to parliament, and may become Members of the Senate of Canada.

Women who immigrated to Canada had continued to uphold their duties as wife, house keeper, farm hand, and partner with their husband in making a living for their families. This is apparent through personal accounts of women like Mary Hiemstra’s mother, the women in *The Pioneer Years 1895 to 1914,* Nellie McClung, Olive Fredrickson, and Peggy Holmes. Along with the men that emigrated they were determined to face the challenges of the Canadian climate and overcoming the hardships

of not always having provisions to live. They worked hard, using their intelligence and physical abilities to provide for themselves and their families. Even though women on the prairies had their challenges of surviving harsh winters, prairies fires, loneliness, and living in less than adequate log or sod houses, they had not anticipated the hardest challenge –this being the laws that said they did not share equally in the fruits of their labor on the homestead with men or having a voice at a political level. Prairie women became vocal in expressing their concerns to the public through letters to the editor of newspapers and in organizing farm women groups. The right to equality for pioneer women was made possible with determined women like Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy, and Irene Parlby and the women's organizations that grew across the prairies from rural communities. The challenge offered by these five women provided an avenue to create the social bond of community and to extend their female influence to a larger sphere. They built alliances with other women's organizations, communicated their vision for a society where women could participate in public service equally with men, and refused to take no for an answer, even when they were turned down by the Supreme Court of Canada. To these women, who worked on the homestead and made a voice for women politically, all Canadian women must give thanks for the rights and privileges they enjoy today.

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[ii] The Canadian Encyclopedia, "Homesteading," http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0003824.

[iii] Mary Hiemstra, *Gully Farm* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1955), 3.

[iv] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 4.

[v] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 22.

[vi] Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted: Pioneer Women on the Western Prairies.," Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 37.2 (2000).

[vii] Mary Kinnear, *A Female Economy: Women's Work in a Prairie Province, 1870-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 87.

[viii] Barry Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years 1895-1914. Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1976), 44.

[ix] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm.* 85.

[x] Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted".

[xi] Kinnear, *A Female Economy,* 87.

[xii] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 177.

[xiii] Olive. A. Fredrickson, *The Silence of the North* (Canada: The Lyons Press, 2000), 68.

[xiv] Peggy Holmes, *It Could Have Been Worse* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1980), 80.

[xv] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 195.

[xvi] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 201.

[xvii] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 53.

[xviii] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm,* 217.

[xix] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 384.

[xx] Fredrickson, *The Silence of the North*.

[xxi] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm*, 274.

[xxii] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm*, 275.

[xxiii] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 48.

[xxiv] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm.*

[xxv] Jane Floyd, *Writing the Pioneer Woman* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 125.

[xxvi] Hiemstra, *Gully Farm*, 300.

[xxvii] Fredrickson, *The Silence of the North*, 66.

[xxviii] Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, 88.

[xxix] Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted"; Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*; Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat and Woman* (Toronto: Bell and Cockburn, 1914).

[xxx] Mrs. Zelickson, "Mrs. Zelickson," Stories Untold: Jewish Pioneer Women 1850-1910 http://www.storiesuntold.org/women/mrs_zelickson.html.

[xxxi] Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted", 228.

[xxxii] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 209.

[xxxiii] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 210.

[xxxiv] Broadfoot, *The Pioneer Years*, 210.

[xxxv] Fredrickson, *The Silence of the North*, 93.

[xxxvi] Fredrickson, *The Silence of the North*, 96.

[xxxvii] Celebrating Saskatchewan's Heritage, "How Woman Won the West," http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/saskatchewan100/womeanwonthewest.html.

[xxxviii] Binnie-Clark, *Wheat & Woman*, 395-396.

[xxxix] Rachel Bella Calof, "Rachel Bella Calof," Stories Untold Jewish Pioneer Women 1850-1910, http://www.storiesuntold.org/womens_roles/homesteader.html.

[xl] Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, 86.

[xli] Kinnear, *A Female Economy*, 86.

[xlii] Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted", 228.

[xliii] Irene Parlby, "Alberta Labor Annual," in *A Harvest Yet to Reap*, eds. Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candice Savage, and Anne Wheeler, 170 (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976).

[xliv] Joan Champ, "The Unenviable Circumstances of Women in Saskatchewan Before 1920," Prepared for Saskatchewan Western Development Museum's "Winning the Prairie Gamble" 2005 Exhibit, (2003), http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/De/saskatchewan100/researchpapers/WDM/SK%20Women%20Pre1920.pdf

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[xlvi]Joan Champ, "The Unenviable Circumstances".

[xlvii] *Prairie Women,* VHS, directed by Barbara Evans (The Film Board of Canada, 1986).

[xlviii] *Prairie Women,* directed by Barbara Evans.

[xlix] Dr. A, Leger-Anderson, "Women's Organizations in Saskatchewan," Report for Culture, Youth, and Recreation. (2005), http://www.tpcs.gov.sk.ca/Women'sOrgs.

[l] Dr. A. Leger-Anderson, "Women's Organizations".

[li] Dr. A. Leger-Anderson, "Women's Organizations".

[lii] Joan Champ, "The Unenviable Circumstance", 5.

[liii] Nellie McClung, "The Stream Runs Fast," in *Nellie Mc Clung, the Complete Autobiography: Clearing in the West and the Stream Runs Fast*, eds. Veronica Jane Strong-Boag and Michelle Lynn Rosa, 405-406 (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003).

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[lv] Karen Stephenson, "Women's Voting Rights Movement. History of Women's Suffrage in Canada: The Right to Vote," suite101.com, http://canadianhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/womens_voting_rights_movement

[lvi] Stephenson, "Women's Voting".

[lvii] Y. Lamonde et al., eds., *History of The Book In Canada, Volume Two,1840-1918*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2005), 349.

[lviii]DuhaimeOrg: Law, Legal information, Justice. "Women Suffrage –Act I," http://www.duhaime.org/LegalResources/LawMuseum/LawArticle-158/Women-Suffrage--Act-I.aspx

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