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A Case Study: the Role of Women in Creating Community on the Dakota Frontier, 1880 to 1920

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A CASE STUDY: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CREATING COMMUNITY
ON THE DAKOTA FRONTIER, 1880 TO 1920

by

Ruth Page Jones

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

A CASE STUDY: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CREATING COMMUNITY ON THE DAKOTA FRONTIER, 1880 TO 1920

by

Ruth Page Jones

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015
Under the Supervision of Professor Genevieve G. McBride

During the Dakota Boom years of 1878 to 1887, Dakota Territory welcomed droves of new families, adding close to 400,000 people in the 1880s. Creating new homes on the treeless prairie, many people faced the challenge of sustaining life without the benefit of an established community. The conditions were too harsh, the weather too unpredictable, and the economy too fragile for anyone to live in isolation. By researching the history of one rural county, Aurora County, from 1880 to 1920, this study examines how women experienced new lives in that area, and how they participated in shaping their societies and developing community.

Aurora County was typical of many South Dakota counties east of the Missouri River that were settled during the “boom” era. The rural character of those counties greatly influenced the experiences of the women and the ways in which they shaped their societies. While documenting a new local history, this study also broadens our understanding of women’s lives and their role in building community as they moved onto the South Dakota frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Time and Place	1
<i>Historiography: The Contemporary Debate</i>	3
<i>Aurora County: A Rural Frontier</i>	10
Chapter Two: The Woman's Role	39
<i>Pioneer Woman</i>	41
<i>A Good Neighbor</i>	55
<i>The Employed Woman</i>	58
Chapter Three: The Women's Role	71
<i>Church Ladies</i>	72
<i>Crusading Women</i>	83
Chapter Four: Conclusion	112
Bibliography	122

LIST OF FIGURES

Map 1: Physiographic Map of South Dakota Showing Aurora County	15
Figure 1: Civil Townships and Municipalities in Aurora County	22
Figure 2: Aurora County Population, 1880-1930	23
Figure 3: Aurora County Municipal Populations and Percentage of Change, 1890-1920	23
Figure 4: Township Populations and Percentage of Change, 1890-1920	24
Figure 5: South Dakota and Aurora County Woman Suffrage Votes	95

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I dedicate this paper to my father Hershell Page, a lifelong resident of Aurora County, South Dakota. His ability to tell delightful stories about the past and his commitment to community inspired me to research and write this story about community in Aurora County.

Chapter One

Time and Place

HO, YOUNG LADIES, You are wanted in Aurora County. The demand for girls in Dakota is unsurpassed. The demand is for women, young ones, especially, healthy, hearty, wholesome, practical and jolly ones. The demand is not wholly for the purpose of taking timber claims and pre-emptions and much less homesteads, although many have done so, and are among our most enterprising and attractive citizens; nor is it solely to prevent the young men from staying away from dances for want of partners; but we don't really intend to give the boys away, but it is a fact that they [the girls] are in demand for wives.¹

Boosters for new railroad towns in Dakota Territory in the early 1880s knew their frontier communities could not grow and thrive without women. Newspaper editors wrote the news, not just for the local residents, but for prospective ones as well, both men and women. Recognizing that single men would outnumber single women, and that married men would need to convince their wives to move, the editor shrewdly included items of interest for the ladies. A woman reading the March 31, 1883, issue of the *Plankinton Dakota Free Press* would be reassured that sewing machines were available from a local merchant, that churches held regular services, that the town boasted good hotels, that her children could be educated at a local high school, that two doctors were busy saving lives, and that she could purchase feminine items at a local millinery store. Reassured or not, women came to settle Dakota Territory. While they called that place home, those women played a fundamental role in the development of community within their neighborhoods, their churches, their towns, and their kinship networks.

By researching the history of one rural county, Aurora County, from 1880 to 1920, this study examines how women experienced new lives on the frontier, and how they participated in shaping their societies and developing community. During the Dakota Boom

¹ "Ho, Young Ladies," *Plankinton Dakota (DT) Free Press*, March 31, 1883.

years of 1878 to 1887, Dakota Territory welcomed droves of new families, adding close to 400,000 people in the 1880s.² Creating new homes on the treeless prairie, many people faced the challenge of sustaining life without the benefit of an established community. The conditions were too harsh, the weather too unpredictable, and the economy too fragile for anyone to live in isolation. Reinforcing recent scholarship that acknowledges the value of women's roles in establishing a sense of community, this study gives concrete examples of how women engaged in behaviors that were essential for nourishing and sustaining the lives and spirits of the men, women, and children in that raw and unpredictable environment. Traditionally, historians have judged community leadership based on male-dominant behaviors, such as transforming the wilderness, acquiring land, holding elective office, and establishing successful businesses and social institutions. Because women approached community differently, using a less formal and more intimate style, their contribution to community often was ignored. By examining how women interacted with others in their communities, this research concludes that, within the constraints of their gender, geography, and cultural background, women, working together and as individuals, actively nurtured communities of shared values by building bonds with their neighbors, supporting their churches, and extending hospitality to strangers. As single women, teachers fostered community by organizing events at the schoolhouse for everyone to attend. While some women did advocate for the right to vote, for an end to public drinking and the abuse of alcohol, and for farming people to enjoy greater economic freedom, their roles as farm wives and lack of organizational structure prevented most women from

² Gary D. Olson, "Cities and Towns," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2009), 171. Dakota Territory population included both North and South Dakota until 1889.

directly engaging in formal political advocacy. By documenting the contributions of the women, this study enriches and expands the historical record to recognize women's active participation in building community on the frontier.

The first chapter of the thesis provides background and context for the lives of rural women on the Dakota frontier between 1880 and 1920. The chapter begins by examining the historiography as it relates to building community on the frontier, women's role in that era, and women's role in building community. The chapter then reviews the history and demography of Aurora County and discusses the challenges people faced living in that environment. The second chapter describes special challenges faced by women and documents how those women participated in community life as individuals, placing a strong emphasis on the sustaining value of neighborhoods and women in the workplace. The third chapter investigates women's collective role in developing and supporting churches and schools. The chapter also examines women's public engagement in the political movements of woman suffrage, temperance, and populism. The fourth chapter summarizes and synthesizes the argument that women played a valuable role in creating community on that frontier.

Historiography: The Contemporary Debate

To analyze community on the frontier requires definitions of both frontier and community. The frontier, in the context of this paper, is a place in time where the leading edge of Euro-American expansion was pushing into uncultivated land most recently occupied by American Indian tribes. In that era, the new arrivals considered themselves settlers in a new country. As a result, they ignored or discounted the land's value as a grassland and home to native people and animal species. They were building new homes

and new lives in a land never before occupied in any way familiar to their culture. This paper focuses on how the Euro-Americans, especially the women, worked to build community during the early years of westward expansion into Dakota Territory.

For more than a century, American historians have debated the concept of creating community on the frontier, in scholarship ranging from narratives of rugged male individualists alone on the frontier, as a place hostile to community, to depictions of places where communities thrived. In his famous 1893 essay on the significance of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner speaks of a place where men transformed the wilderness into civilization in stages, from a land with buffalo and Indians to one with fur traders and hunters, and then ranchers, and later farmers, giving women little credit for taming the wilderness.³ Almost a century later, Robert V. Hine, in his 1980 study, also highlights the dominance of the individual. He defines the ideal community, but then fails in his effort to find evidence of the ideal. Because the frontier glorified the individual, he argues, communities could not succeed. Hine's ideal limits discussion on community-building, as settlers either met the ideal of a known environment, small size, voluntary membership, and shared values that always placed common good before the individual, or they did not.⁴ But a less rigid and more nuanced definition is more useful for describing and evaluating communities. Contradicting studies that place the individual in primacy on the frontier, other historians find evidence that communities did thrive in certain situations, dependent upon factors such as size of settlement, kinship, and a sense of mutual concern. In his

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1921), 4, 14, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm>.

⁴ Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 22, 232–58.

important study published in 1978, three years before Hine denied the existence of community on the frontier, Thomas Bender explored the changing structure and meaning of community in America. Bender argues that community-building was changing in the late nineteenth century, the period of this study, as local life became more complex, and social networks formed independent of geography. His definition, while allowing for community life based on locality, places human relationships at the center of community. Bender explains that “economic and political elements of social life were torn from their communal context,”⁵ producing a different social experience independent of territory, especially in urbanizing areas.⁶

However, in this study of a rural community, other works might be more useful. John Mack Faragher finds community in his history of Sugar Creek, Illinois, published in 1986, and he identifies family and household as essential in building community. Although people always were moving in and out of the Sugar Creek community, the descendants of a small group of original landowners continued to own land and participate in local institutions. Kinship, neighborhood, religion, and persistence of the original families were key factors in maintaining stability and community rituals during changing times. Even after the first generation, “community continued to be constructed from the relations among kinship, neighborhood, and church,” Faragher writes.⁷ More recently, Richard White, in his 1991 study, also highlights the value of kinship and prior connections, with small settlement size and mutuality as the key characteristics of success in creating a sense

⁵ Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 108, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108–11.

⁷ John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 237.

of community. White defines mutuality as the sharing of experience, property, or emotions.⁸

In sum, the historiography on building community leaves open questions about rural communities on the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century. The historians who found evidence of community on the frontier define community as small, local, and relying on families, kinship, and a sense of mutuality, a definition that can provide a basis for evaluating success or failure of community in rural areas. New research on building community will enhance scholars' understanding of women's social networks in rural townships and how those networks influenced the establishment of local communities.

While some scholars portray women at the end of the nineteenth century as submissive and passive, others question the validity of that interpretation, contending that the role of women was evolving and that women were gaining more independence. In her influential 1966 essay describing the cult of true womanhood, Barbara Welter argues that the popular and religious literature of the mid-nineteenth century confined married, middle-class women to the home, where they were expected to uphold civilization. Women were judged according to the virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Selfless women controlled the private world of the home, while men occupied the competitive public world.⁹ Agreeing with Welter's domesticity framework, W. Elliot Brownlee and Mary M. Brownlee argue in their 1976 study that the nuclear family and division of work by gender solidified in the 1800s, as the late Victorians emphasized the

⁸ Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 326, 298.

⁹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 152, doi:10.2307/2711179.

domestic role of women in nurturing children.¹⁰ Several years after these studies, scholars still applied the domesticity framework to explain women's engagement in political and reform movements. Sara M. Evans in 1989 cited domesticity as a major influence on women's role in the temperance and Populist movements in America. Evans writes that Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) transformed domesticity into a demand to shape public behavior on maternal values.¹¹ Theda Skocpol, writing in 1992, relates the domestic ideal to the changing role of women by arguing that the ideal helped set the stage for women to expand their sphere. By connecting their efforts to the home, women were justified in pursuing maternalist social reforms in the Progressive Era.¹²

In sum, the domesticity framework strongly influences scholarship on the role of women. In that ideology, characterized by the patriarchal nuclear family, with men and women occupying separate spheres, women were assigned the role of domesticity and the keepers of moral and religious values. The domestic ideology justified the extension of women's housekeeping role beyond the home.

Some scholars argue that the story of women in new settlements west of the Mississippi River is more complex than can be explained by the domesticity framework. Rejecting a completely submissive role for women and disputing their restriction to the home sphere, some of the historiography credits these women with more public roles, recognizing that women helped to build churches and schools and also attempted to shape public behavior through political activism. In a 1980 essay that marked a change in

¹⁰ W. Elliot Brownlee and Mary M. Brownlee, *Women in the American Economy: A Documentary History, 1675 to 1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 11–19.

¹¹ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 129.

¹² Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 321, 337.

historical approach toward the role of women in the West, Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller question the stereotyped images of western women as “gentle tamers, sunbonneted helpmates, hell-raisers, and bad women.”¹³ Jensen and Miller argue that these women cannot be found in the past, because their lives were more complex and nuanced than can be conveyed in these stereotypes.¹⁴ In the case of women in new communities on the frontier, Elizabeth Jameson, writing in the 1980s, also questions the validity of interpretations of women as genteel civilizers, domestic and submissive to male authority. By enforcing the distinction between public roles for men and private roles for women, Jameson contends that historians have given less credit to women for the work that they did in establishing communities, schools, churches, and social groups and in organizing and participating in partisan political movements.¹⁵ Noting that recent scholarship has expanded the story of western women since their initial study, Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, in their introduction to a 2004 book of essays on women in the West, claim that “representations of women’s experiences in the West are immensely more varied, more complex, and more intriguing than they were twenty-five years ago.”¹⁶ Published that same year, Barbara Handy-Marchello’s study of rural women in North Dakota argues that women, individually and collectively, played important public roles in shaping “their

¹³ Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (May 1980): 178–79, doi:10.2307/3638899.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178–82.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Jameson, “Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984): 1–8, doi:10.2307/3346233.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks, eds., *Women and Gender in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 3.

communities according to their own moral and cultural standards.”¹⁷ A 2011 essay by Andrea G. Radke-Moss, while subscribing to the domestic ideology theory, does suggest that, because the land was sparsely settled, the desire to overcome that distance might have been a motivation for Great Plains women to pursue interests outside of the home, including the temperance and woman suffrage movements.¹⁸

Far from the urban centers, where white middle-class women were using domesticity as an excuse to enter the public realm, immigrant women and American women from midwestern and eastern states were creating homes and communities on the frontier. Because women faced the rural challenges of primitive living conditions and distance between neighbors, the domestic ideology may only partially explain women’s role in creating community on the frontier as the nineteenth century ended. The historiography on western women suggests that there is potential for new research to investigate the reality of how rural women performed a crucial role in building community, to seek a fuller, more complex explanation than that offered by the theory of an ideology of domesticity.

The contemporary debate on women’s role in creating community identifies the need for more detail on the reality of western women’s lives, as argued by Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, and for women to be given more credit for the work that they did in establishing communities, schools, churches, and social groups, as identified by Elizabeth

¹⁷ Barbara Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870-1930* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁸ Renee M. Laegreid and Sandra K. Mathews, eds., *Women on the North American Plains* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 49.

Jameson.¹⁹ Jensen and Miller discuss the value of the case study approach in a limited geographical area, seeking new images of women to replace old stereotypes.²⁰ The story of rural women's role in creating community on the South Dakota frontier is difficult to find, suggesting that a study examining the role of women creating community in rural townships in South Dakota is a fertile area for scholarship.

Aurora County: A Rural Frontier

As Sarah Page was giving birth to her eighth child in Greene County, Iowa, her husband Hiram was nearing the end of his three-hundred-mile trek to a new homestead in Dakota Territory. Forced out by a grasshopper infestation and persuaded by glowing reports of free and productive land to the west, they made plans to relocate. Hiram, travelling by lumber wagon, a dairy cow hitched behind, reached his destination on March 1, 1882. One week later, he drove to the land office and registered a homestead of 160 acres in Dudley Township, Aurora County.²¹

Later that year, Page, aged thirty-five years, boarded a train headed west, keeping a close eye on her seven children, Huldah, Sara, Mary, Lottie, Lida, Steward, and baby Emma. The oldest was only thirteen years old. One daughter had died three years earlier. Almost derailing the Pages' effort to establish a new life, the railroad company lost the train car loaded with the family's household possessions and farm supplies. Lacking the items that she had packed, and living sixteen miles from the nearest town, Page set to work turning

¹⁹ Jensen and Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited," 182; Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," 1-8.

²⁰ Jensen and Miller, "Gentle Tamers Revisited," 182.

²¹ Scrapbook of Page family history, n.d., Page Family Papers, Private Collection; June Page Goldammer, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: Page Family History," *Plankinton South Dakota Mail*, May 13, 1976; *Aurora County History* (Stickney, SD: Aurora County Historical Society, 1983), 328-29.

her new house, built from stones gathered in the fields, into a home. In the next eight years, Page gave birth to another daughter and three more sons. In the winter months, when her husband, trained as a blacksmith, augmented the family income by traveling the country and setting anvils, Page managed the home and farm by herself.²²

Surviving terrible blizzards, searing heat, dusty windstorms, crop-destroying hail, and a fire that destroyed a barn and part of the house, Page raised her children, socialized with her neighbors, and provided leadership in her community. She served as midwife for other neighbors, kept the custom of inviting the minister, neighbors, and local bachelors for Sunday dinner, and helped to charter a new church, serving on its first board. Setting a priority on music, the family traded a horse and an organ for a Kimball brand piano in 1898.²³

Life was not without loss. Two of her daughters and her oldest son died as young adults. Her older daughters married and moved to Vermont, Canada, and Sioux City, Iowa. Her youngest daughter married and moved to a town twenty-five miles from the family homestead. After her husband died in a farm accident in 1906, Page continued to live on the farm with her three sons. Later, the two youngest married and moved to their own farms, only a few miles away. Almost eighty-five years old, Page died in 1932, honored by her children, beloved by her grandchildren, and held in high esteem by the members of her community. Compiled by her granddaughter in the 1970s, based on family lore and newspaper accounts, Page's story epitomizes the legend of the hearty pioneer woman, capturing the joys and sorrows of a woman's private and public life amid the challenges of

²² Scrapbook of Page family history; Goldammer, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: Page Family History"; *Aurora County History*, 328–29.

²³ Scrapbook of Page family history; Goldammer, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: Page Family History"; *Aurora County History*, 328–29.

rural life on the frontier.²⁴ Page's experience, that of a married woman moving from one Midwest farming community to another, arriving in the early years of settlement, and remaining until she died, is only part of the history of women in that area.

Responding to a national westward movement, those women left their homes for an unknown environment during an era when the country was advancing in industrialization and urbanization. They came to a place where the buffalo once roamed to establish a compatible society in an incompatible land with an unpredictable climate, devoid of trees, mountains, and rivers. They said goodbye, maybe forever, to parents and siblings, adult children, and lifelong friends. They left behind comfortable homes in established communities to live in barely adequate homes in towns or on farms that only recently had been untouched grasslands. Some of those women, whether married, single or widowed, adult or not yet women, native-born or European immigrant, lived there only briefly. Others stayed many years before moving on, and some remained until the end of their lives. While their primary role was that of mother, daughter, or sister, regardless of their marital status, their ethnic origins, or how long they stayed, women in rural communities also assumed public roles, individually and collectively, to build a close community of shared values as they settled Dakota Territory, from 1880 to 1920. Survival required community on that new frontier.

The frontier came to Aurora County just before 1880. As railroad companies laid tracks across Dakota Territory, a land trickle became a land rush. Flowing into Dakota Territory were farmers and their wives seeking more productive land, speculators anticipating quick riches, and others, including single women, also pursuing economic

²⁴ Scrapbook of Page family history; Goldammer, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: Page Family History"; *Aurora County History*, 328–29.

opportunity. Many staked claims in newly opened public lands and started cultivation. Others built businesses. Those newcomers completely and irrevocably transformed that area, unchanged for centuries, in a stunningly short period of time.²⁵ In the five years between 1880 and 1885, the population in the part of Dakota Territory that became South Dakota almost tripled, growing from just under 97,000 to a little more than 262,000 residents. Aurora County, with no permanent inhabitants prior to 1879, boasted close to six thousand residents in 1885. Two small towns boomed briefly in the first decade, as they supported the newcomers' need for land, housing, home goods, and farm equipment, in addition to basic living and farming supplies.²⁶

The era from 1880 to 1920 was one of boom and bust and churn. In those forty years, more people lived on farms than in the three towns, as of 1905, with almost all of the land dedicated to agriculture. In 1920, 75 percent of the people lived on farms that occupied 93 percent of the land.²⁷ The flush of homesteaders and speculators boosted the population through 1885. Soon after, tough times drained the population. All of the public land in Aurora County had been claimed by 1887, eliminating the incentive for cheap land and diminishing the profits of merchants who catered to the needs of newcomers.²⁸

Compounding the situation, several extreme weather events, including multiple years of

²⁵ A. T. Andreas, *Andreas' Historical Atlas of Dakota* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley, 1884), 183–84.

²⁶ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, "Table 1: Inhabitants," *Monthly Bulletin of the Commissioner of Immigration for the Territory of Dakota* 1, no. 6 (January 1886): 12.

²⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921), 606; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Agriculture*, vol. 6, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1922), 654.

²⁸ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, *Resources of Dakota: Vacant Public Lands and How to Obtain Them* (Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory: Argus-Leader, 1887), 275, 293.

devastating drought, raging prairie fires, and crop-destroying hail, forced many families to abandon the area, broke and disheartened.²⁹ That exodus caused the population to fall by more than one-third in the ten years ending in 1895.³⁰ When the rains returned, so did the optimism. Aurora County began to recover in 1900, and the population rose steadily until peaking in 1920 at 7,246 people, as farmers basked in the glow of the “golden age” of agriculture. Illustrating the rural character of the county, density ranged from 5.4 to 10.1 people per square mile between 1895 and 1920.³¹ After 1920, a dramatic drop in crop prices, bank failures, drought, and the Great Depression once more forced many families to abandon Aurora County.³² Life finally improved, but the county continued to lose population in each census, recording just 2,710 people in 2010 and a population density of 3.8.³³ The first forty years, then, established the community associations that survive, in some form, even today. And women played an important part in building those associations.

Aurora County, South Dakota, is one of the betwixt-and-between places on the North American continent, occupying the space where the Midwest prairies transition to the Great Plains. Situated between the James River and the Missouri River, the eastern portion

²⁹ Donald Dean Parker, ed., *History of Our County and State: Aurora* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1960), 14–A.

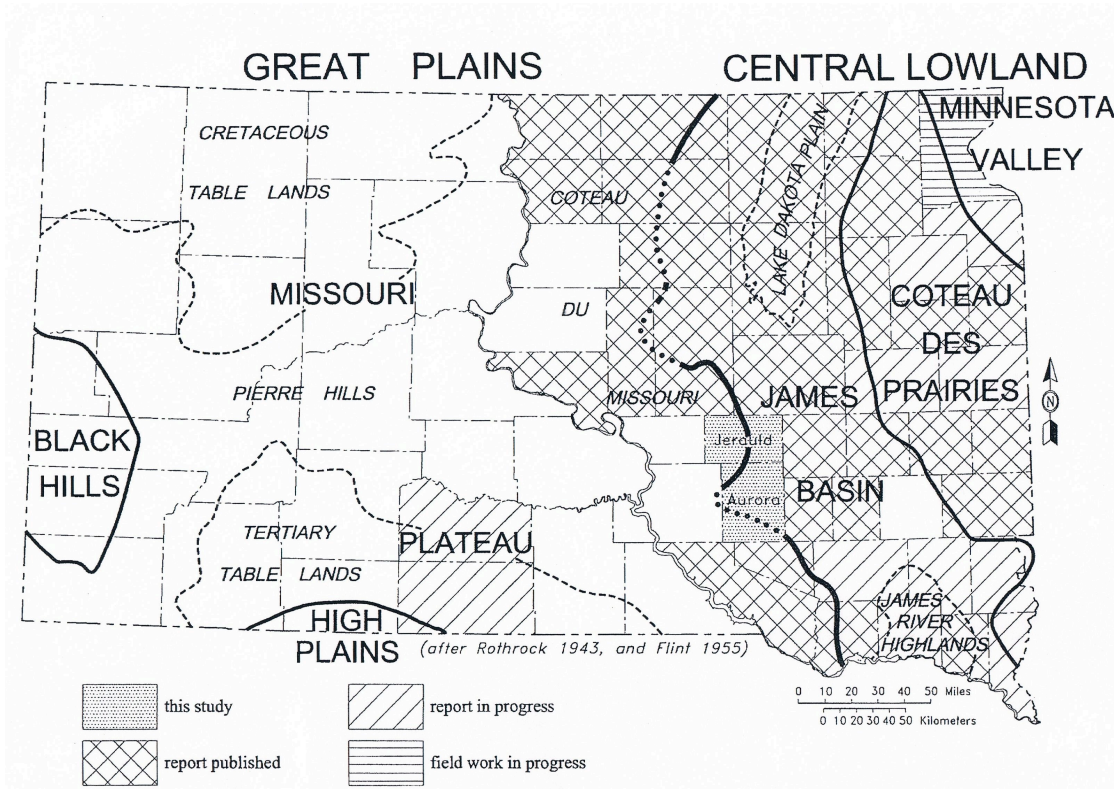
³⁰ South Dakota State, *Census Report of South Dakota for 1895*, 12. This report contains no publication information and was found on the public reference shelves at the South Dakota Historical Society, Pierre, SD.

³¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 1:127–28.

³² *Aurora County History*, 419.

³³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2010 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Characteristics, CHP-1-43, South Dakota* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), 264.

of the county lies in the James River Basin, and the western portion lies in the Coteau du Missouri of the Great Plains physiographic province. (See map 1.)



Map 1: Physiographic Map of South Dakota showing Aurora County. Reprinted from *Geology of Aurora and Jerauld Counties, South Dakota*, Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources (Vermillion, SD, 2001).

The treeless land is mostly flat, with some rolling hills in the northeast corner, and is 1,300 to 1,400 feet above sea level, a little lower than areas to the west and the east. The climate produces four distinct seasons, with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees in the summer and dropping as low as 30 degrees or more below zero on winter nights. While there is plenty of sunshine in all seasons, there is always the risk of powerful storms. Because three climate zones converge in that particular area of South Dakota, the weather produces extremes that can result in violent events, such as thunderstorms, tornadoes, hail,

and blizzards.³⁴ The county is rectangular, close to 24 miles wide by 30 miles long, covering a total area of 719 square miles. A few small lakes and streams scattered amid the rolling prairie occupy less than 4 square miles of the total.³⁵ With the eastern border on the 98th meridian, the county sits in the transition area between the tall grass prairies of the Midwest and the short grass prairies of the Great Plains.³⁶ That is where waving fields of grain give way to roaming herds of cattle, where crucial rainfall changes from plentiful to scarce, where the American Midwest shifts to the American West. While Aurora County today is on the western edge of the American Midwest, at one time that area was at the western frontier of American expansion.

Before 1880, buffalo, antelope, coyote, and prairie dogs roamed freely on the unbroken prairie that became Aurora County. Grasses grew in rich soil atop ancient lakebeds covered by prehistoric rocks and the fill of glaciers from an earlier age. Small creeks and lakes created a welcome habitat for fur-covered mammals, several types of waterfowl, and an abundance of fish.³⁷ A thousand years earlier, Firesteel Creek, in the northwestern corner of the county, likely was the site of a small Indian village whose

³⁴ Edward P. Hogan, "Physical Environment," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (see note 2), 14–27. Aurora County, in the extreme northwestern portion of the Humid Continental "A" climate zone, is just south the of the Humid Continental "B" climate zone and just east of the Dry Continental zone bordered by the 100th Meridian.

³⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "2010 Census Gazetteer Files" 2010, National Counties Gazetteer File, <http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/gazetteer2010.html>. When the surveyors mapped the area, their adjustment for curvature of the earth reduced the actual county size from 720 to 719 square miles.

³⁶ Hogan, "Physical Environment," 29–30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13, 30.

people cultivated corn until they moved farther north, after having depleted all of the wood found along the creek.³⁸

Before the land rush, there were no roads, no towns, no homes, and no schools. There were no farms, no crops, no cattle, and no sheep. The rhythms and cycles of that area encompassed hot summers, cold winters, mosquitoes, prairie fires, thunderstorms, drought, hail, blizzards, and the endless wind. Occasionally, Native tribes passed through, the women setting up temporary campsites while the men hunted the buffalo that fed on the rich prairie grasses.³⁹ Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to claim ownership of that land as part of a much larger territory, followed by a French furtrader who secured the region for France in 1730. After losing the territory to Spain, France recovered ownership in 1800 and soon sold the region to President Thomas Jefferson in 1803. Later that same year, the Lewis and Clark expedition set out to explore the new acquisition, the Louisiana Territory.⁴⁰ The first adventurer to record traveling in the area that became Aurora County was George Catlin, an explorer journeying by land from Yankton to Fort Pierre in June 1832.⁴¹ Dakota Territory, which included today's North and South Dakota, as well as parts of Montana, Nebraska, and Wyoming, was created in 1862 but was reduced to most of today's North and South Dakota in 1863, until both became states in 1889.⁴² Formally established in 1879, Aurora County was organized in 1881, and the current borders were

³⁸ Ron Robinson, *The Village on the Bluff: Prehistoric Farmers/Hunters of the James River Valley* (Sioux Falls, SD: Archeology Laboratory, Augustana College, 2011), 7.

³⁹ Hogan, "Physical Environment," 30.

⁴⁰ Rex C. Myers, "Exploration and the Fur Trade," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (see note 2), 47–57.

⁴¹ Parker, *History of Our County and State: Aurora*, 19–A.

⁴² Stephen Sargent Visher, *The Geography of South Dakota* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1918), 9, <http://books.google.com/books?id=dy56AAAAMAAJ>.

set in 1883.⁴³ The only county in Dakota Territory named for a woman and by women, Aurora County was named for Aurora, the goddess of the dawn in Roman mythology, signifying the hopes and dreams of the women and men poised at the dawn of a new age.⁴⁴

By 1880, both the buffalo and the Indians were gone from that area. The Indians who had camped and hunted there most likely belonged to the Yankton tribes, specifically the Nakota Sioux. Under the terms of the Yankton Treaty of 1858, the Yankton people ceded a little more than eleven million acres east of the Missouri River to the United States government. That land was then placed in the public domain. Along the Missouri River, 400,000 acres were reserved as reservation land for 2,200 tribal members. In 1866, two other reservations were established near the river, Crow Creek, about forty miles northwest of the county and Lower Brule, about fifty miles to the west.⁴⁵ In addition, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 set aside sixty million acres for the Great Sioux Reservation west of the Missouri River. The establishment of tribal reservations effectively removed any Indians from Aurora County.⁴⁶ With the Indians removed, government land offices opening, and the railroads planning their routes, the area was perfectly poised for a boom.

The Dakota Boom of 1878 to 1887 did not happen only in Aurora County. The land grab was a phenomenon throughout the eastern half of Dakota Territory. As the Missouri River divided the territory, east and west, the river also divided government land open for settlement from Indian land closed to settlement. People started moving into new counties

⁴³ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, *Resources of Dakota*, 315.

⁴⁴ Writers' Program (U.S.) South Dakota, *South Dakota Place Names*, comp. Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of South Dakota. (Vermillion: University of South Dakota, 1941), 4.

⁴⁵ Herbert T. Hoover, "Missouri Valley Culture," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (see note 2), 69–71.

⁴⁶ Herbert T. Hoover, "Native Americans in Dakota Territory," in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (see note 2), 90–94.

in anticipation of railroad tracks that promised effective transportation to bring in life-sustaining supplies and ship farm products to distant markets. When the government declared all but forty square miles of Aurora County as public land, people rushed to claim that acreage, in tracts of 160 acres or less, under three federal land laws: the Pre-emption Act of 1841, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the Timber Culture Act of 1873.⁴⁷ Not everyone planned to keep their land, creating a brisk business in real estate transfers as soon as clear title was obtained. The easiest way to acquire title was to file a pre-emption. Before filing, the person had to make some improvement on the land and then declare intent to purchase within three months of settlement. The pre-emption law required the applicant to live on the land for six continuous months and to begin cultivation. After meeting the requirements, one could purchase the land for \$1.25 per acre, \$200.00 for 160 acres. Under the Homestead Act, a person could obtain land for free after paying a small filing fee and living and farming the land for five years. After only six months of residence, the homestead could be commuted for cash and completed in a similar manner as a pre-emption. The timber culture law required the applicant to cultivate at least ten acres of timber on 160 acres, often called a “tree claim.” The applicant could apply for final title after eight years with proof of planting a certain number of trees on ten or more acres and proof of a certain number of living trees.⁴⁸ In Dudley Township, sixty-two people acquired

⁴⁷ Lynwood E. Oyos, “Protestant Faith and Learning,” in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (see note 2), 345–46; Gary D. Olson, “Yankee and European Settlement,” in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Henry F. Thompson (see note 2), 117. Two one-mile-square sections in every township in Dakota Territory were reserved to generate funds for public education. With twenty townships, Aurora County school lands occupied forty square miles.

⁴⁸ South Dakota Dept. of Immigration, *The State of South Dakota: The Statistical, Historical and Political Abstract* (Aberdeen, SD: Daily News Print, 1889), 88–89, <http://archive.org/details/1889territoryofd00sout>.

patents by filing pre-emptions or commuting homesteads for cash; fifty-three people acquired patents by meeting the homesteading requirements; and twenty-three people acquired patents by meeting the timber culture requirements.⁴⁹ Within five years, 41 percent of all of the real estate in the county had moved into private hands and onto the tax rolls.⁵⁰

The first people to claim land in Aurora County arrived in 1879. More came in 1880. By October of that year, a new municipality named Plankinton was laid out, a post office authorized, main-street businesses established, and the train depot built. Oxen-pulled wagons brought the earliest settlers.⁵¹ Starting in 1881, the rail cars on the new tracks of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company brought the rest.

That same year, as the railroad continued to lay tracks westward toward the Missouri River, a town, eventually named White Lake, was built ten miles west of Plankinton, establishing the second municipality in the county. When the county officially organized in 1881, officials designated Plankinton as the county seat.⁵² Plankinton and White Lake incorporated as cities, with elected mayors, during the territorial years.⁵³ In

⁴⁹ U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, General Office, Land Patents, Aurora County, SD, <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov> (hereafter cited as BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD). All records for land patents in Aurora County were downloaded between 2013 and 2015. I tabulated information about Dudley Township patents using Microsoft Excel.

⁵⁰ Dakota Territory, *Biennial Report of the Territorial Auditor to the Governor of Dakota for the Period Ending Nov. 30, 1886* (Bismarck, Dakota Territory, 1886), 152.

⁵¹ Andreas, *Andreas' Historical Atlas of Dakota*, 183–84.

⁵² Parker, *History of Our County and State: Aurora*, 13–A.

⁵³ Dakota Territory, Town of Plankinton, Ordinance Book, 1887; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee* (White Lake, SD: Jubilee Committee, 1960), 5; George Martin Smith, Clark Montgomery Young, and Burke Aaron Hinsdale, *History and Civil Government of South Dakota* (Chicago: Werner School Book Co., 1898), 138, 164, <http://archive.org/details/historycivilgove00smit>. The difference between a town and city was the ruling authority, with an elected mayor and common council signifying the status

1887, there were nine post offices in the county, but only two of those, in Plankinton and White Lake, were located in organized cities. Plankinton's population, as reported in a territorial promotional pamphlet that year was 1,200, and White Lake's was 550.⁵⁴ Those counts are much higher than the official census numbers of 1890, after the boom, when Plankinton's population was listed as 604 and White Lake's as 366. The county was divided into twenty minor civil divisions, called townships, each six-by-six miles square.⁵⁵ Civil townships operated as separate governmental units, managed by a board of officers elected at an annual meeting. The 1887 township populations ranged from 80 people in Cooper Township to 356 people in Belford Township.⁵⁶ A third municipality was created in 1905, when the Milwaukee Road extended a line from Armour, a town south of the county, to the new town of Stickney.⁵⁷ Location of townships and municipalities are depicted in figure 1. County, municipal, and township population changes, as well as township density figures for 1920, are depicted in figures 2-4.

of city. White Lake elected the first mayor in 1887. With ordinance 34-64, Plankinton changed to a city form of government at the end of 1887. Although incorporated as cities, town was the term commonly used when referencing either of those small localities.

⁵⁴ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, *Resources of Dakota*, 317.

⁵⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1895), 310.

⁵⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population*, 1, pt. 1:310.

⁵⁷ *Aurora County History*, 15; August Derleth, *The Milwaukee Road: Its First Hundred Years* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1969), 295.

Patten	Pleasant Valley	Bristol	Belford
Lake	Cooper	Firesteel	Palatine
White Lake  <i>White Lake</i>	Eureka	Plankinton  <i>Plankinton</i>	Hopper
Gales	Crystal Lake	Pleasant Lake	Dudley
Washington	Center	Truro	Aurora
		<i>Stickney</i> 	

Figure 1: Civil Townships and Municipalities in Aurora County.

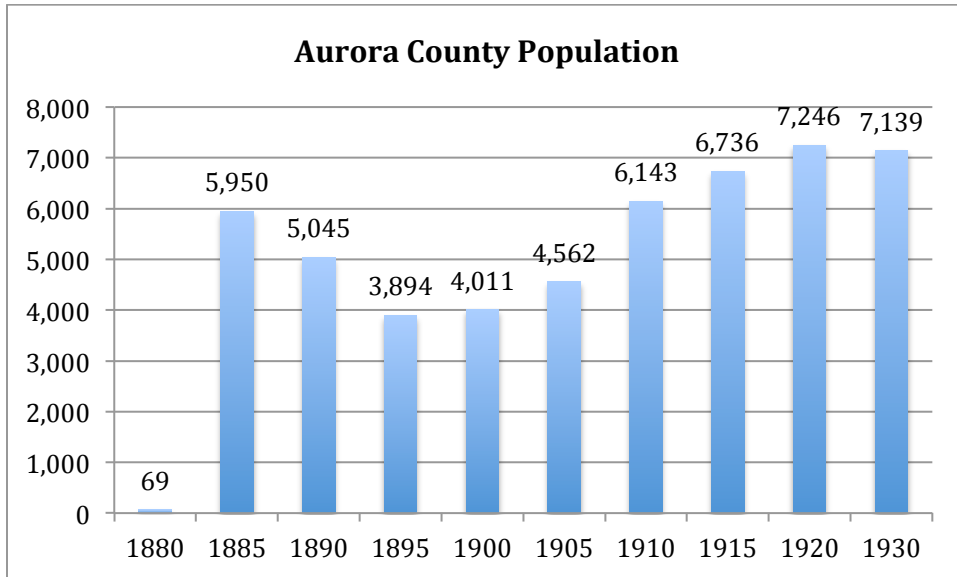


Figure 2: Aurora County Population, 1880-1930, U.S. Census Data.

Plankinton			Stickney			White Lake		
Year	People	% Change	Year	People	% Change	Year	People	% Change
1890	604		1890	0		1890	366	
1900	465	-23%	1900	0	0%	1900	264	-28%
1910	712	53%	1910	310	0%	1910	507	92%
1920	803	13%	1920	386	25%	1920	610	20%

Figure 3: Aurora County Municipal Populations and Percentage of Change, 1890-1920, U.S. Census Data

Patten			Pleasant Valley			Bristol			Belford		
Year	People	% Change	Year	People	% Change	Year	People	% Change	Year	People	% Change
1890	124		1890	156		1890	171		1890	356	
1900	76	-39%	1900	86	-45%	1900	87	-49%	1900	281	-21%
1910	165	117%	1910	193	124%	1910	153	76%	1910	281	0%
1920	227	38%	1920	212	10%	1920	197	29%	1920	342	22%
Density	6		Density	6		Density	6		Density	10	
Lake			Cooper			Firesteel			Palatine		
1890	122		1890	80		1890	260		1890	268	
1900	129	6%	1900	43	-46%	1900	173	-33%	1900	206	-23%
1910	190	47%	1910	74	72%	1910	271	57%	1910	251	22%
1920	257	35%	1920	121	64%	1920	311	15%	1920	289	15%
Density	7		Density	3		Density	9		Density	8	
White Lake			Eureka			Plankinton			Hopper		
1890	258		1890	178		1890	288		1890	268	
1900	181	-30%	1900	154	-13%	1900	292	1%	1900	241	-10%
1910	280	55%	1910	163	6%	1910	411	41%	1910	310	29%
1920	341	22%	1920	209	28%	1920	454	10%	1920	328	6%
Density	9		Density	6		Density	13		Density	9	
Gales			Crystal Lake			Pleasant Lake			Dudley		
1890	271		1890	227		1890	117		1890	211	
1900	152	-44%	1900	172	-24%	1900	112	-4%	1900	214	1%
1910	206	36%	1910	219	27%	1910	193	72%	1910	264	23%
1920	256	24%	1920	247	13%	1920	204	6%	1920	292	11%
Density	7		Density	7		Density	6		Density	8	
Washington			Center			Truro			Aurora		
1890	287		1890	165		1890	151		1890	117	
1900	193	-33%	1900	140	-15%	1900	196	30%	1900	154	32%
1910	219	13%	1910	235	68%	1910	250	28%	1910	286	86%
1920	270	23%	1920	268	14%	1920	297	19%	1920	325	14%
Density	8		Density	7		Density	8		Density	9	

Figure 4: Township Populations and Percentage of Change, 1890-1920; Density, People per Square Mile, 1920, U.S Census Data. Township population numbers do not include municipalities.

One of the first women to arrive was Isabella Todd Diehl, a twenty-nine-year-old newlywed from Scotland, who had crossed the ocean to marry a man whom she had never met. Diehl and her husband, Martin, settled on a claim in Hopper Township on May 2, 1881. Occupying a nearby claim with her husband and children, Louisa Gardner, aged thirty-nine years, arrived the same day as did Diehl. The two women had no other female neighbors for the first two years. They arrived at an ideal time. A record snowmelt in the spring of 1881 filled streams, lakes, and ground depressions with water, creating excellent conditions for abundant crops that lasted many years. Once the house was built and a well dug, Diehl and her husband planted the food that they needed for themselves and their farm animals, including feed corn, sweet corn, potatoes, beans, root crops, squash, pumpkin, and melons. Because the well water was too hard to even cook beans, Diehl collected soft water for washing by placing water barrels under the eaves. By 1887, the Diehl holdings had increased by another 160 acres, and the family had grown by two sons and a daughter. The couple added new buildings, cultivated more land, made improvements to the home, and increased their livestock holdings. The creeks were full, and the “rains were plentiful during the first few years and the soil fertile, so they harvested beautifully,” recorded her niece, Ella Todd Wilson, in Diehl’s biography.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Ella Todd Wilson, “Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd),” 1942, 1–3, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD (hereafter cited as Pioneer Daughters Collection); The following resource was used to determine a first name for Mrs. Gardner. Ancestry.com, “Louise J. Gardner,” Year: 1900; Census Place: *Hopper, Aurora, South Dakota*; Roll: 1546; Page: 1B; Enumeration District: 0007; FHL microfilm: 1241546. The Pioneer Daughters Collection, also known as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, Pioneer Daughters Collection, is organized by married name and cross-referenced to maiden name, if known. Dates of document creation are not recorded in the collection but were either known or estimated in this paper, based on clues in the content of the papers.

The area attracted a number of immigrants from Europe, predominantly Germans and Norwegians. In 1890, the foreign-born comprised 23 percent, a little less than one-fourth of the county's population. Of those born outside the United States, 46 percent claimed Germany as their place of birth, 22 percent were natives of a Scandinavian country, mostly Norway, and another 16 percent were born in a country ruled by Great Britain.⁵⁹ Immigrants from Germany settled most densely in the southeastern townships, while those from Norway settled in the northeastern townships. The ethnic influence was strong, though, with one-half of all children in 1900 living in a home where the head of household claimed a foreign birth. Although some came directly from the old country to Aurora County, many others gathered first in nearby midwestern states and then travelled with family and neighbors to settle in the county. In 1900, four out of five American-born adults living in Aurora County were born in midwestern states, predominantly Iowa, with a significant number born in Illinois, Wisconsin, or Ohio. New York was the most common birthplace of the older members of the county, with a little more than one-fourth of those aged fifty years and older born in that state. Almost all of the younger members of the county, 97 percent of those younger than the age of twenty-one years, were born in the United States. Most of the children were born in South Dakota, with one-fourth born in another midwestern state, and barely one percent born in an eastern state. There was only a handful of people born in southern or western states. The population was close to 100 percent white in every census.⁶⁰ In the very early years, though, a Chinese man ran a

⁵⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population*, 1, pt. 1:655.

⁶⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900, Population*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), 599; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Twelfth Census of the United States" (Washington, DC, 1900), National Archives and

laundry.⁶¹ By 1900, there were only eight individuals of another race living in the county in 1900. Four of those, two African Americans and two Native Americans, were inmates at the South Dakota Reform School, located one mile northeast of Plankinton.⁶²

Margret Hjelmeland Knutson was one of those immigrant women who came with neighbors to homestead in Aurora County. Twenty-one years earlier, in 1861, she and her husband had left Norway and journeyed across the ocean, a voyage that took the lives of their two young sons. Settling in Illinois, Knutson gave birth to nine more children and mourned the death of two of them. When the youngest child was only two years old, Knutson's husband died, leaving the widow to raise seven children on her own. In her memoirs, Knutson's daughter, Martha Knutson Allen, wrote about her mother's decision to homestead in Dakota Territory: "Rumours of the wonderful climate, soil, and opportunities for home making reached Pontiac and Rowe, Illinois. Many families prepared to venture into the wilderness to make their fortunes and brave the Indians and coyotes."⁶³ Knutson hoped that the beneficial climate would heal her daughter, diagnosed with tuberculosis, and provide a good home for her family. Waiting one year, until some neighbors had established their homes in Aurora County and could provide advice, Knutson, now aged forty-six years, borrowed two hundred dollars and, with another family, chartered a

Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls, <http://www.familysearch.org>. All Aurora County individual census records were downloaded from familysearch.org on February 14, 2015. I tabulated Aurora County census information using Microsoft Excel. Inmates of the reform school were removed from the calculations regarding origins of birth, as inmates were involuntary residents and do not reflect the local population.

⁶¹ Florence B. Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 1956, 16, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD. As of July 2015, none of the items collected by the Aurora County Historical Society had been catalogued into specific collections.

⁶² U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Twelfth Census of the United States." (See note 60.)

⁶³ Martha Knutson Allen, "Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland)," 1955, 1, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection.

railroad car to transport their belongings to Mitchell. From there, she transferred her possessions to a wagon, tied her two cows to the back, and travelled another eighteen miles to stay with friends before settling on her homestead in Hopper Township, near other Norwegian immigrants. Knutson, like other widows, came to take advantage of the federal land laws that allowed any head of household, male or female, to claim 160 acres of government land. Her neighbors from Illinois helped her to get started in 1882, and she, in turn, helped other neighbors who arrived later.⁶⁴

While some families settled near neighbors with a shared ethnic background, others moved in large family groups. The Irish Catholic Ryan and Clark families of Iowa settled as a kinship network in Dudley Township, acquiring ten tracts of public land among them. Each tract was 160 acres covering one quarter of a one-mile square section of land, often referred to simply as “a quarter.” Catherine Clark Ryan, from New York, had married Irishman Michael Ryan in 1856. In 1880, when Ryan was forty years old and the mother of nine children, the family relocated to Dakota Territory, where her husband registered the first claim in Dudley Township. By 1890, he had acquired title to three quarters of government land, for a total of 480 acres. Their children, Mary, James, and Joseph, each homesteaded their own 160 acres. Son James also completed a timber claim. Between them, Ryan’s two brothers, James and Thomas Clark, claimed three parcels, each covering 160 acres, of neighboring land. Those families were able to rely upon one another in those early years, providing resources and support to help them to meet the challenges encountered in their new homes.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1–5.

⁶⁵ M. I. Lee Messinger, “Our Irish Ancestors,” 1996, 6–8, Ryan Family Papers, Private Collection; U.S. Bureau of Land Management, *Dakota Territory Land Tract Book, 1820-1908*,

The history of those first years reveals a heady era of settlement and town building, changing the broad, rolling prairie into two bustling towns and hundreds of working farms. In 1880, the census reported sixty-nine people and twenty-one farms in Aurora County. Five years later, the population had jumped to 5,950, and the farms numbered 1,278. By 1887, farm families were harvesting mostly corn, wheat, and oats, while also planting small amounts of rye, buckwheat, barley, and flax. Average farmland, purchased from the government at \$1.25 per acre, now was valued at \$3.29 per acre. The county boasted two growing towns, Plankinton and White Lake, five banks, six newspapers, seventy-two schools, many churches, and numerous business establishments.⁶⁶ Providing legal services during the Dakota Boom, twenty-eight attorneys practiced law in the county between 1883 and 1889. In those years, Plankinton was the market center for many settlers, some living more than fifty miles from any town. By 1882, stagecoach mail routes, originating in Plankinton, delivered mail to scattered communities as far as fifty-five miles away.⁶⁷ On March 31, 1883, the *Dakota Free Press* newspaper, reporting on the flurry of newcomer activity, noted, “emigrants are coming into Aurora County at a booming rate. About 30 carloads of emigrants movables and stock arrive daily.” When the legislature of 1883 was selecting locations for new territorial institutions, a member of the territorial Council, E. H.

vol. 15, 61–66, <https://familysearch.org>; Kathleen Ryan Wolf, “Clark Family Summary,” 2014, 1, Ryan Family Papers, Private Collection.

⁶⁶ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, *Resources of Dakota*, 315–17.

⁶⁷ “One of First Attorneys in County Still in White Lake,” [1930s?], folder of loose, copied scrapbook pages containing newspaper clippings with sources and dates seldom noted, compiled by Ella Todd Wilson, donated in 1955, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection (hereafter cited as Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection); “Views of Yesterday,” [1931?], story about early fires and difficulties of first months, Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection.

McIntosh of Plankinton, helped his city to secure the territory's new youth reform school.⁶⁸ That same year, booster fever and railroad support placed Plankinton in the running for the new territorial capital.⁶⁹ The future looked bright and prosperous.

Then came the bust. Once the land was claimed, and the houses and barns built, the growth ceased. Many people had come only to acquire land and then sell it as quickly as possible and move on to some other venture. Even those who came with intentions to stay found themselves driven out by harsh conditions caused by extreme weather events and a protracted drought, especially severe in the James River Valley. Starting in 1885 and lasting until the rains returned in 1896, the distress was most severe in 1889 and 1894.⁷⁰ For too many people, hope could not survive the lack of rain, a terrifying and deadly blizzard in 1888, a massive prairie fire in 1889 that swept west to east across the county, and the frequent wind and hailstorms that destroyed homes and crops and, sometimes, even lives.⁷¹ The "Panic of 1893," a nationwide economic failure, combined with those extreme weather events and the long drought, forced many families to leave the county in poverty and despair. Farm prices fell, debts went unpaid, and banks failed.⁷² Speculators swooped in when mortgage foreclosures became common and purchased a significant amount of property. Land deeds sold at public auction transferred title on 278 pieces of property in the six years before 1895, with 65 sales in 1891 and 64 in 1892. By 1895, the number had

⁶⁸ George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory, South Dakota: Its History and Its People*, ed. George Martin Smith, vol. 2 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing, 1915), 1294, 1342; North Dakota State, *Legislative Manual* (Bismarck, 1899), 99. Kingsbury references C. H. McIntosh, but his name actually was E. H. McIntosh. The Council was a territorial legislative body.

⁶⁹ "State Capitol," *Plankinton (DT) Dakota Free Press*, March 31, 1883.

⁷⁰ Herbert S. Schell, "Drought and Agriculture in Eastern South Dakota During the Eighteen Nineties," *Agricultural History* 5, no. 2 (October 1931): 163–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3739326>.

⁷¹ *Aurora County History*, 415–18.

⁷² Visher, *The Geography of South Dakota*, 157–58.

dropped to only five sales during the entire year.⁷³ By then, the population was evaporating, falling 35 percent in ten years, from 5,950 to 3,854. Fully one-third of the foreign-born abandoned the county in the five years before 1895, leaving at a higher rate than the American-born population. By 1900, the exodus had removed 47 percent of all those counted a decade earlier in three of the northernmost townships. Aurora County was not alone in its troubles. Many of the counties lying in the James River basin lost population and reduced the acreage under cultivation.⁷⁴

The hard times hit Isabella Todd Diehl in 1887. Lightning killed her husband, and then hail destroyed her crop. Adding to her misery, her husband's relatives demanded immediate payment of a \$300 loan. Diehl's letter to her widowed sister in Scotland brought Jean Todd and her eight-year-old daughter, Ella, to Dakota Territory on a bitterly cold day in December 1887.⁷⁵ In their memoirs, Jean Todd Saville and Ella Todd Wilson depicted the

⁷³ South Dakota, Aurora County Register of Deeds, Plankinton, SD, Sheriff's Deeds, book Q, 1888-1895.

⁷⁴ Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, "Monthly Bulletin of the Commissioner of Immigration," 12; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population*, 1, pt. 1:655; South Dakota State, *Census Report of South Dakota for 1895*, 12. In the 1900 census, Aurora County dropped by 20.5 percent, Jerauld County to the north by 22.4 percent, Hand County, north of Jerauld, by 30.9 percent and Brule County, to the west of Aurora County, dropped by 19.5 percent.

⁷⁵ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 August 1959, "Plankinton, As I Saw It First," 3-5, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection; Wilson, "Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd)," 3-5; Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 16 January 1956, "Jean Todd Saville Story," 1, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection. I was given access to a private collection of letters from Ella Todd Wilson, also known as Mrs. W. H. Wilson, written by Wilson to her great-niece, the editor of the weekly newspaper in Plankinton, SD; the *South Dakota Mail*. The letters, mailed in 1956 and 1959, include her mother's, Jean Todd Saville, autobiography, dictated to Wilson in the 1930s, Wilson's autobiography, and other letters describing life of that time and place. Much of the content of each letter was published in the weekly newspaper soon after the letter was received. In her letters to Van Genderen, Wilson included multiple untitled stories. To distinguish those stories from each other, titles have been assigned. Slightly different versions of Wilson's memoirs and the biography of Isabella Todd Diehl, using the author name Ella T. Wilson,

aftermath of the exodus on the area: "By the time Mother and I came, the first tide of immigration was over. Little claim shacks dotted the landscape, many of them empty, as the owners had 'proved up' and left and their patches of broken land was growing up to fireseed, a weed."⁷⁶ Saville described the poverty and despair of that time in Aurora County.

It was a sifting time for people, only those who had faith and backbone (and those who couldn't leave) stayed. Prairie schooners, with a few thin horses and cows following, were a common sight. Food was a must but clothing was worn to the last patchable shred, and undergarments were often made of flour sacks and the useable parts of worn garments were often pieced together for their children.⁷⁷

In desperation, the town boosters, hoping to promote the area and attract new families, resolved to make Plankinton the first city in the new state of South Dakota to build a palace of grain, featuring an external façade decorated with all types of locally grown grains. The first Grain Palace in South Dakota opened in Plankinton on September 29, 1891. Encouraged by a successful event, the promoters of Plankinton and White Lake planned to build a bigger, better palace in 1892. Several women were recognized by name in the *Plankinton Herald* newspaper for decorating various booths inside the building.⁷⁸ In a Grain Palace special edition, the *Aurora County Standard* newspaper promoted the second annual exposition, advertising a "Grand Harvest Festival of Rejoicing." The only advertisers in that issue were seven real estate agents and one bank, a strong indication of whose interests were being promoted. The special article on local real estate promised cheap land and easy riches, declaring, "there is no fear that crops will be a failure for there has never been a

were obtained from the Pioneer Daughters Collection at the South Dakota State Historical Society. An edited version of those memoirs was published. See Sally Roesch Wagner, ed., *Daughters of Dakota: Stories from the Attic; The South Dakota Pioneer Daughters Collection*, vol. 2 (Yankton, SD: Daughters of Dakota, 1990), 115-35.

⁷⁶ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Ella's Story," 3, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection.

⁷⁷ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 16 January 1956, "Jean Todd Saville Story," 8.

⁷⁸ "Grain Palace at Plankinton, S.D.," *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, September 29, 1892.

failure.”⁷⁹ Desperation can be seen in the overblown articles promising a golden future with nothing to hinder or prevent riches untold. People were leaving. There was land to sell. Plankinton’s Grain Palace exhibition and harvest festival, the showpiece of the boosters’ scheme to keep the good times going, was discontinued after just two years, and times got worse. The county boosters made a valiant effort with the two Grain Palace festivals, but their scheme did not succeed. Too many people had moved on — seeking jobs in larger towns, giving up and returning to their former homes, or chasing the promise of cheap land and easy riches farther west.

One of those who tried to outlast the drought, but finally gave up, was Rachel Gibbs’ husband, George. The couple and their three children had been among the first to arrive by covered wagon in the spring of 1880, when Gibbs was three months pregnant. The harvest was good for about six years, even though hail destroyed crops a few times. In his memoirs, George Gibbs wrote, “then the drought set in and for ten years it was nip and tuck to live.”⁸⁰ Gibbs packed up her household after a six-day hot wind ruined much of the crop in July of 1895, and her husband “got discouraged and concluded to pull out and leave the Dakota country.”⁸¹

Even when the harvest was good, farmers could not make enough profit to pay off mortgages. During that period, men and women joined activist farm organizations to protest low crop prices and the high cost of bringing those crops to market. People joined the Farmers’ Alliance and voted for candidates running as Populists in the People’s Party.

⁷⁹ “Second Annual Exposition!,” *Plankinton (SD) Aurora County Standard*, September 8, 1892, 2006 reprint edition.

⁸⁰ George T. Gibbs, “Dakota Notes from the Memoirs of George T. Gibbs,” 1916, 5, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

⁸¹ Amanda Gibbs Ward, “About a Journey to Dakota Territory in the Spring of 1880,” 1958, 5, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection; Gibbs, “Dakota Notes,” 5.

South Dakota voters elected a Populist governor and several Populist legislators in 1898.⁸² Adding to the misery, two banks in Plankinton failed during that era, the Farmers and Merchants Bank, run by the banker who served on the Grain Palace committee, and the Plankinton Bank.⁸³ In her memoirs, Saville wrote, “these two bank failures were truly a catastrophe to a young and struggling community, which was also fighting a county-wide depression and drought.”⁸⁴ Little hope remained to stem the tide of despair.

But then, the rains returned. By 1900, the drought was over, and the area started recovering. With a combination of new families moving in, established families increasing in size, better weather, and high market prices, the area prospered again. In the county profile of 1904, changing farming methods were also given some of the credit: “Mixed farming and stock raising had taken the place of wheat farming, and the milk pail and farm dairy had replaced the plow and threshing machine.”⁸⁵ By that time, the population had recovered, land values were improving, and “farmers generally are prosperous and contented.”⁸⁶

In the early years of the twentieth century, technological improvements changed the quality of life by improving comfort, reducing travel time, and enhancing communication. Farm families were early adopters of motor vehicles and gas motors for farm operations, as well as telephones. In the early years, when Sarah Page sent someone sixteen miles to the nearest town for the weekly shopping trip, the journey took an entire day by horse and

⁸² Lynwood E. Oyos, “Farming: Dependency and Depopulation,” in *A New South Dakota History*, ed. Harry F. Thompson (see note 2), 225–54.

⁸³ “Settling a Bank’s Affairs,” *St. Paul (MN) Daily Globe*, March 3, 1895, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>; “Plankinton Bank Failure,” *Canton (SD) Dakota Farmers’ Leader*, January 26, 1900, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

⁸⁴ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 16 January 1956, “Jean Todd Saville Story,” 4.

⁸⁵ Parker, *History of Our County and State: Aurora*, 14A.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14a.

wagon, three to four hours in each direction. With a car, that same trip in one direction might take half an hour or less. With cars came better roads. The first cars appeared in Aurora County in about 1909. Two years later, the Stickney newspaper boasted that townspeople owned twenty cars and two motorcycles in that town of 324 people.⁸⁷ The introduction of telephones allowed women the chance to talk to other women on a more frequent basis and to summon help much more quickly. By 1906, the telephone company in the town of Stickney was planning work on rural lines.⁸⁸ In January 1909, local farmers organized to create the Pleasant Lake and Dudley Telephone Co., becoming one of seven rural lines connecting in Stickney.⁸⁹ Several businesses installed gasoline light plants in 1912, and steam heat replaced coal in the Stickney schoolhouse.⁹⁰ While the towns developed infrastructure for indoor plumbing and electrical wiring, farm wives were still decades away from enjoying that technology.

According to the 1915 state census, the people in Aurora County were mostly white, literate, young, religious, and rural. The population of Aurora County was a blend of people who immigrated mostly from midwestern states or Northern Europe. A small wave of immigration after the 1895 exodus added to the population of people born in Holland, Denmark, and Sweden, although the Germans and Norwegians were still the two largest foreign groups. By 1915, the foreign-born had dropped from a peak of 23 percent in 1890 to only 12 percent of the total county population. School and education were a priority for children. Close to 100 percent of those older than nine years were literate, although few

⁸⁷ *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary, 1905-1980* (Stickney, SD: Anniversary Book Committee, 1980), 12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ Minutes of the Pleasant Lake and Dudley Telephone Co., 1909-1963, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

⁹⁰ *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 12.

had pursued education beyond grammar school. Only 11 percent of county residents older than eighteen had earned a high school degree or attended college. Twenty-two individuals claimed a college degree. With one-third of adults over eighteen years old still not married, the population was relatively young and single. The single adult men outnumbered the single adult women by almost two to one, with 890 single men to 465 single women. The ratio of adults to children was close to equal, with children under the age of twenty years representing 47 percent of the total. Three of four persons claimed a religious affiliation, with more than thirteen denominations identified. Close to 40 percent of the population called themselves Roman Catholic or Lutheran. Farming was the main occupation, with 73 percent of all males over the age of ten years, and not in school, listing farmer as their occupation. Of the 1,192 females over the age of ten years, engaged in a useful occupation, and not in school, 35 percent called themselves farmers, while 42 percent identified their occupation as housewife.⁹¹ The populace was, for the most part, homogenous. They were all of the same race, most had the same educational status, their ethnicity was predominately Northern European, their religions were Christian, and farming was the basis of the economy. That is not to say that they were monolithic in their thinking, as will be discussed in later chapters.

Epidemic, war, and fights for suffrage had impact on life in Aurora County in the decade starting in 1910, as they did everywhere in the country. An outbreak of influenza, the Spanish flu, hit the county with a vengeance. In the two years from July 1918 to June 1920, the county reported 1,097 cases of influenza and pneumonia, affecting 15 percent of

⁹¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population*, 1, pt. 1:655; South Dakota Dept. of History, *Third Census of the State of South Dakota, Taken in the Year 1915* (Sioux Falls, SD, 1916), 22, 26–88, <http://archive.org/details/cu31924013753979>.

the population. Twenty-eight people died from the Spanish flu, accounting for two-thirds of all deaths in the county from contagious diseases.⁹² Mothers sent their sons to a war where disease was more fatal to county men than were enemy guns. Twenty-five men from Aurora County were killed or wounded in the twenty months between the time the United States entered World War I and the armistice. Seven died from disease, five from contracting influenza in American camps. Six lost their lives on the battlefields. Another twelve were wounded in action.⁹³ Early in the war, women had actively organized to support the war effort. In South Dakota, women's active involvement enhanced their credibility as citizens and helped South Dakota women win the right to suffrage in 1918.⁹⁴ As the decade ended, and the population reached a peak of 7,246, falling prices, unsustainable debt, failing banks, drought, and depression were still in the future. At the time, war's end, farm profits, and new voting rights were cause for community celebration.

For thousands of years, Aurora County's grasslands served as habitat for animal species and hunting grounds for native people. In 1880, immigrants from midwestern states and Northern Europe changed the area to a land of farms on plots of land about one-half-mile square. The first decade provided adventure and profits, while the second decade brought despair and poverty. Rains, profits, and technology improved the lives of the residents in the third and fourth decades, until the land, the climate, and the economy no longer could support the population. Forty years after the first residents tilled the virgin soil, the population was in a decline, from which there would be no recovery. The following

⁹² South Dakota Board of Health and Medical Examiners, *Third Biennial Report* (Pierre, SD, 1920), 136–291.

⁹³ "Great War Memorial," *Mitchell (SD) Sunday Republican*, April 6, 1919, 57–59.

⁹⁴ Dorinda Riessen Reed, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota* (Brookings: State University of South Dakota, 1958), 116.

chapters examine how women in those first four decades developed and nurtured associations that helped provide the foundation for community, a community that was essential to sustaining those families and their descendants, along with new families, who continued to farm the land through many more cycles of profit and loss, success and failure, joy and despair

Chapter Two

The Woman's Role

Blanche McGovern, aged seven years, squirmed with excitement as she watched her mother starch and iron their dresses and petticoats one afternoon in 1894. McGovern's father was to stay home with the two little boys that night so that her mother could take the three older children to a Valentine's Day party at the school four miles away. After enjoying the entertainment, McGovern's mother lost her way home for hours on the dark prairie. Eventually, the horses found their way home. However, having caught pneumonia from standing in the bobsled in the frigid night air for hours, McGovern's mother died two days later. Neighbors Fred and Elizabeth Belding cared for the three youngest that winter. But, the next summer, tragedy again befell the McGovern family.¹

Many years later, Blanche McGovern Meoska recounted the events of that sad day, "One summer Father had the boys herding the cows along the creek. After a while Clint, the youngest, came to the house and told me, "The boys' hats are in the creek and I can't get them [the boys] out!"² When four-year-old Clinton saw his two brothers struggling in the water, he tried to help James, aged ten years, and Rulef, aged six years, but then rushed to the house to summon aid. The closest neighbor drove horse and wagon to alert others who

¹ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 13.

² Ibid. The following resources were used to determine a first name for Mrs. Fred Belding: *Aurora County History*, 293; Ancestry.com, "Elizabeth W. Belding," Year: 1920; Census Place: *Plankinton, Aurora, South Dakota*; Roll: T625_1714; Page: 15B; Enumeration District: 8; Image: 211.

hurried to the creek to offer assistance. There was nothing they could do. The young boys' bodies were later recovered in eight feet of water.³

Life and death on the harsh prairie were shared community events. In life, McGovern's mother, also names Blanche, had been a good neighbor, contributing her considerable musical skills at community events and teaching the local children. Belding, in turn, opened her home and heart to care for the motherless children.⁴ Both women exemplified their gender's role in creating community on the treeless prairie.

Community on the rural frontier was defined as a small group of people, living near each other and sharing a sense of mutuality.⁵ Women's social networks, enabled by neighborhood and kinship connections, helped people to feel welcome and created a sense of belonging. Unless employed as teachers or servants or working in a town business, women spent most of their time and energy in the private spaces of their homes, and less often occupying the more social public spaces on an irregular basis. The spaces where rural women interacted with others included neighbors' homes, church and school buildings, and other locations hosting holiday events. This chapter first describes the lives of women in their private spaces experiencing and responding to challenges of frontier life, including loneliness and rural isolation. The chapter then examines women connecting with neighbors to overcome challenges and build a community. The chapter concludes with discussion that some women also contributed to community as wage earners, such as hotelkeepers, nurses and midwives, and teachers.

³ Ibid.; *Aurora County History*, 293.

⁴ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 12–13; *Aurora County History*, 293.

⁵ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 326, 298.

Pioneer Woman

When families built homes and farms on separate plots of land in Aurora County, most women set up housekeeping. They kept house, fed and clothed the family, cared for the children, and nursed the sick. Women tended large gardens, canning and drying much of the harvest to feed families during the long winters. Women helped to butcher cows, pigs, and chickens for winter meat. Many women also produced household income by raising chickens and milking cows to sell eggs, butter, and cheese.⁶

On occasion, women also worked as field hands. In her memoirs, Ella Todd Wilson described her experience stacking bundles of wheat in 1905.

We could find no help, so I was elected. We put our two babies on a blanket and I started out to learn how to make a good stack, as stacking isn't a one-man job.... I did fine, with much coaching, but I still ache when I think of it. I'm sure it isn't woman's work. My stacks survived a heavy windstorm that tore down many in the area. His [her husband's] constant urging had been "tramp it good" and I tramped. It was so good to return to being just a housewife and mother.⁷

With so much work to do, the daily life of a woman on that frontier kept her busy in the home and in the fields.

The 1888 assessment report for Dudley Township provides a glimpse into the living situation of families in that area, six by six miles square, at the close of the Dakota Boom, 1878 to 1887. The assessment indicated that, on average, the fifty-five homes listed were less than one mile apart, that adult women lived in 75 percent of the homes, and that the number of children in each household where women lived, although ranging from none to nine, was most often fewer than four. Only two of the homes contained more than one adult woman. The only woman who lived in a home without an adult male was the widowed

⁶ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days," 1-2, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection; *Aurora County History*, 405-06.

⁷ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days," 3.

Sarah Elsey.⁸ Aged sixty-nine years, she homesteaded on the quarter adjacent to her daughter and within a mile of three sons, each one living on his own homestead in nearby Hopper Township.⁹

The 1900 census for the county provided additional detail about family composition. Average household size was 4.7 people, with extended family members, boarders, and employees living in one-fourth of the 829 households. Women headed 10 percent of those households. Of the 1,192 adult females, 66 were widows. Only 12 widows were under the age of fifty years. To provide a sense of actual family size, 207 households with married women, ages thirty-five to forty-four years, were analyzed. In those homes, the average number of children was 4, with 8 percent of the homes listing no children, 67 percent listing between one and five children, and 25 percent listing six or more children. There were 10 women who mothered nine or more children. Women, ages thirty-five to forty-four years, who had been born in Germany or a Scandinavian country, tended to have more children. German-born women, 19 percent of the 207 households, had an average of 4.5 children per family, and the Scandinavian-born women, 12 percent of the total, averaged 5.1 children per household.¹⁰

Some women, head of household and at least twenty-one years of age, took advantage of the three federal land laws, the Pre-emption Act of 1841, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the Timber Culture Act of 1873, to become landowners, but few remained to

⁸ South Dakota, Aurora County, Dudley Township, Assessor's Report, 1888, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD. I tabulated information from the assessor's report using Microsoft Excel.

⁹ *Atlas of Aurora County* (Watertown, SD: Centennial Atlas, 1990), A20, A28; Ancestry.com, "Sarah Elsey," *1860 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009. Images reproduced by FamilySearch.

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Twelfth Census of the United States." (See note 60, Chapter One.)

farm.¹¹ Based on first names, it is estimated that 237 female homesteaders in Aurora County obtained title to about 9 percent of the total public land available. Only 21 obtained more than one title. Generally, widows and single women registered and obtained title, but sometimes, marital status changed during the process. There were 32 women who married before filing final papers and 18 women who received title to lands that were originally registered by their husbands, possibly due to husbands dying or abandoning their wives.¹² Women often sold the land soon after obtaining title. Of the eight women who obtained public lands in Dudley Township between 1883 and 1892, only one female homesteader, Mary Ryan, was listed in the 1900 census for Aurora County.¹³ Some women became property owners by purchasing land or through title transfer. In 1888, six women who had not homesteaded owned land in Dudley Township. Four of the forty-seven absent landowners in that township were women, indicating that property ownership sometimes served an investment purpose. Sarah Page, whose husband transferred title to her name

¹¹ Olson, "Yankee and European Settlement," 19; South Dakota Dept. of Immigration, *The State of South Dakota: The Statistical, Historical and Political Abstract*, 88–89.

¹² U.S. Dept. of the Interior, BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD. All records for land patents in Aurora County were downloaded between 2013 and 2015. I tabulated information about female homesteaders using Microsoft Excel. Some individual patent records were obtained from the National Archives in Washington, DC. I derived the change in marital status by comparing the land patent information from the Bureau of Land Management web site with a list of original homesteaders found on <http://files.usgwarchives.net/sd/aurora/homestd.txt>. Number of male homesteaders was not counted, as a person could obtain more than one title. More than 2,700 names were listed as homesteaders, with many names duplicated due to acquiring land in different townships and sections. Therefore, percentage of land acquired provides better insight into the portion of women who homesteaded.

¹³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Twelfth Census of the United States." (See note 60, Chapter One.)

just days after he obtained his final certificate, was one of two female landowners living in Dudley Township in 1888.¹⁴

Women faced a number of challenges learning to adapt to life on the prairie. One of the first challenges women tackled was trying to make homes and raise families in inadequate housing that was small, had little insulation, and often no floors other than dirt. Some housing was quite primitive, merely a dugout or sod house, built from bricks made by cutting strips of sod from the prairie. A few women settled into nicer frame homes, with papered walls, wood floors, windows, and doors.

Ella Todd Wilson described the interior of many of the homes.

Because they had to bring their own building materials besides livestock and seed, the new homes were generally small, the furnishings scant, just the necessities of living—bed, stove, table and a few chairs, a “milk safe,” which was a small cupboard to set milk pans in. The doors were tin, perforated in patterns to let air in to the milk. There was always a shelf or two for food and groceries. There might be a dresser too. Quite often a small pantry was built in one corner, where were stored the iron kettles, iron frying pans—often called “spiders”—and bread pans, dishpan, and groceries.... Trundle beds, that were pushed under the big bed by day, were common.¹⁵

Some first homes were even more primitive. A pregnant Elizabeth Stahl Teesdale started housekeeping in a dugout when she and her husband brought their three children to Aurora Township in 1882. Following a miserable winter in inadequate housing, the family moved to another homestead, again living in a dugout, until they built a claim shanty. Teesdale gave birth to nine more children in that shanty before her husband built them a retirement home in Stickney. She died at the age of seventy-five years.¹⁶ The widowed Margret Hjelmeland Knutson first lived in a twelve-by-fourteen-foot shanty described by

¹⁴ South Dakota, Aurora County, Dudley Township, Assessor’s Report, 1888; South Dakota, Aurora County Register of Deeds, Plankinton, SD, Deeds, book B, 1882, 369.

¹⁵ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, “Early Days,” 1.

¹⁶ *Aurora County History*, 374.

her daughter as “built from 12-inch boards which had shrunk considerably, leaving wide cracks in the roof and walls, roof having no shingles but the 12-inch boards. No door was made to be hung, nor any windows cut out.”¹⁷ When a blizzard hit just days after moving into the shanty, Knutson hung quilts from the ceiling to the floor and brought the chicken crate and twelve chickens into the shack.¹⁸ Some homes served dual purposes. Peter McGovern built his bride, the former Blanche Brady, a house with two rooms, one to function as a combination grain bin and bedroom, with the bed placed atop the grain.¹⁹ The widow Sarah Elsey enjoyed a much nicer home, probably built by her three adult sons who lived nearby. In Elsey’s Homestead Proof, the final affidavit required of all homestead claimants, the house, valued at five hundred dollars, was described as one and one-half stories, twelve by eight feet in size, with a brick fireplace and “all frame, boarded, papered, sided, and painted inside and outside, lathed and plastered, windows and doors.”²⁰

Acquiring sufficient water and fuel challenged families who attempted to build lives on a treeless prairie with few lakes or streams. With only four square miles of surface water in the entire county, water for both household and livestock use was collected in barrels placed under the eaves to catch rain, obtained by melting snow, or hauled for miles from the closest stream. Sometimes, children were responsible for driving cattle several miles daily to a water source. Shallow surface wells, dug with spades, helped until dry

¹⁷ Allen, “Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland),” 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁹ Payne, “The History of Aurora County,” 11.

²⁰ Homestead file no. 8614, Sarah Elsey, May 28, 1888, Mitchell, Dakota Territory, Land Office; Records of the Bureau of Land Management, Record Group 49, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

weather evaporated the water.²¹ By 1895, prosperous farmers were hiring well-diggers to install artesian wells and windmills that supplied plentiful soft water to homes and farms.²²

In the early years, residents built fires using buffalo chips, twisted straw or hay, or hard coal. They needed fires for cooking and also for heating homes up to eight months of the year. Entire families gleaned the fields for buffalo and cow dung, storing the collected piles for winter fuel. Some people ordered just enough hard coal to endure blizzards and other emergencies. When burning with twisted hay, family members kept busy all day, twisting the hay tightly, cleaning ashes, and refilling the stove, leaving the house filled with dust. At times, those dangerously hot fires escaped the stove and consumed the house.²³

While housewives struggled to maintain an adequate supply of water and fuel, weather created the greatest risk to survival in an agricultural area. Weather supplied the sun and rain needed for good crops or let loose destructive forces that led to economic ruin. In the transition area of three climate zones, the pioneers in that area of South Dakota frequently suffered from violent weather events, such as lightning strikes, prairie fires fueled by strong winds, hail storms, blizzards, frigid temperatures, and droughts, putting families at risk of losing their homes, their livelihoods, and even their lives.²⁴ Often, a sense of community and shared sacrifice brought people together in such events and their aftermaths. Women were often called upon to provide extended care to those who suffered

²¹ Wilson, "Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd)," 7; Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 19; Gilbert Courtland Fite, *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, 2005), 15; *Aurora County History*, 404; Lillie Scott, "My County," Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection.

²² Ella Todd Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)," [1930?], 8, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Fite, *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman*, 15–22.

²³ John A. Dickson, "Tales of the Pioneers," [1976?], 1, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

²⁴ Hogan, "Physical Environment," 14–21, 26–27.

losses. However, healing the injured, sheltering the homeless, and sharing only added to the work and stress of women's daily lives.

Fires posed great danger, especially in the dry years when, pushed by high winds, they consumed the dry grass covering the "vast, seemingly endless prairie."²⁵ Women and children, working beside the men, fought fires by wetting old sacks and battling the flames.²⁶ Ella Todd Wilson described the communal aspect of fire fighting. "A prairie fire brought neighbors from miles around, with barrels of water and the favorite weapon, the 'gunny sack.'"²⁷ Suffering great losses in a devastating fire that swept through Truro Township on October 19, 1884, members of a German Lutheran community relied upon each other to survive and rebuild. Louise Assmus' two-year-old son, lost track of during the confusion of that fire, burned to death in the barn. Buildings were destroyed on several farms, and fire consumed much of the prairie grass and most everyone's recently harvested animal feed. Although late in the season, they cut "the few patches of grass which the fire had spared."²⁸ They were not able to harvest enough grass, though, and many animals died that winter from lack of feed. After losing both house and barn in that fire, the Fuhrman family sought temporary shelter with Louise Matzner and her husband. Because they were part of a close community, those families did not leave in defeat, but rather helped each other, rebuilt with lumber or sod, and planted their fields the following spring.²⁹

²⁵ L. R. Schultz, "History of the Ev. Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation of Stickney, South Dakota," 1929, 2, Historical Documents, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Stickney, SD.

²⁶ Estella Hanson Watland, "Early Life of Estella Hanson Watland, 1872-1950," n.d., [4-5], Friends of the Middle Border, Inc. dba [doing business as] Dakota Discovery Museum, Mitchell, SD.

²⁷ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Ella's Story," 3.

²⁸ Schultz, "History of the Ev. Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation," 2-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; *Aurora County History*, 288-89.

Violent summer winds, called cyclones by early settlers, destroyed buildings and lives. Sometimes discouraged families packed up and abandoned their claims.³⁰ Early settlers were especially vulnerable in their shacks and flimsy frame-construction houses. While thunderstorms brought needed rain, powerful storms unleashed hail and high winds that could wipe out entire fields of crops and force families into economic ruin. Heavy rains washed out fields, and lightning strikes started fires or took lives.

Isabella Diehl was widowed on August 29, 1887, when lightning killed her husband, Martin, on their homestead in Hopper Township. Diehl's story, written by her niece, Wilson, vividly depicts the circumstances of Martin's death.

The house had been built hurriedly, with no foundation, so he was walling up the cellar under it and putting in a foundation with the help of a young Norwegian, just arrived, who spoke no English. A bad wind storm was coming.... He was standing in water pushing a pole and the first lightning came down the chimney, through the floor, and hit him.... Isabella was caring for her sick child when she heard a report like a gun shot. She rushed out and saw the boy standing as if dazed, rubbing his ears and making strange sounds. Martin was dead when she reached him. The boy rode a horse to Lou Mabbotts' ...but all he could say was, "Diehl, Diehl!"³¹

Wilson explained why that death was so devastating to the young widow, "The storm that took her husband also hailed out her crop, so Isabella was left with three small children, in a strange land, with no crop and little money. She had been to town only a few times, had never driven a team, and had never conducted any business."³²

The settlers spent months suffering as temperatures fell below zero, and blizzards made travel impossible. The first homesteaders in Aurora County experienced a brutal winter in 1880-81. A four-day blizzard with fierce winds and flour-like snow hit a wide

³⁰ Ward, "About a Journey," 3-4. In the memoirs, people called those winds cyclones, although tornado is a more accurate term for that area.

³¹ Wilson, "Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd)," 3-4.

³² Ibid., 4-5.

area of Dakota Territory in mid-October, followed by a series of blizzards that added snow to a depth of ten to twelve feet. Nothing thawed until April, after a long, hard winter for families isolated for months in barely adequate homes with diminishing supplies of food, kerosene for lamps, and fuel for heat. They ground flour and corn meal in coffee grinders and twisted hay or cut up railroad ties for fuel. The Nye family, four miles west of Plankinton, prudently purchased two train cars loaded with groceries before the snow blocked the tracks, and thus kept themselves and their neighbors from starvation.³³

The most memorable and destructive blizzard occurred on January 12, 1888. In his book, *The Children's Blizzard*, David Laskin describes the low-pressure system that brought arctic air to the barren prairie, with numerous accounts throughout the Midwest of that frightening blizzard that killed more than two hundred people, many of them schoolchildren.³⁴ According to Aurora County accounts, the day began warmer than usual, about 25 degrees above zero, with black clouds on the northwest horizon. By mid-morning, the weather changed suddenly and drastically, dropping the temperature with forceful, freezing winds whirling the new, blinding and suffocating snow. Some reported that the temperature dropped to 40 degrees below zero. Teachers kept stoves burning and held students in schools overnight, ensuring that no schoolchildren died in Aurora County in the storm. Many people without fuel or stranded outdoors survived the storm but lost toes, fingers, legs, and feet. Some adults froze to death; others died later from complications.³⁵

³³ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 1; Gibbs, "Dakota Notes," 1-4; Robert F. Karolevitz, *An Historic Sampler of Davison County* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning, 1993), 26-27.

³⁴ David Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard* (New York: Harper, 2004), 6.

³⁵ *Aurora County History*, 416-18; Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 27-34; *100 Years of Progress: Still Growing through Time; 1882-1982* (White Lake, SD: Centennial Book Committee, 1982), 10-11.

Caught in the storm for hours, John Jensen, a Danish farmer, eventually found shelter at his neighbor's house, so frozen that his clothing had to be cut off him. Jensen wrote a letter to his sister in Illinois, one week after the storm, to tell her what happened the next morning when he went home to his wife, Nikoline, his twenty-one-month old daughter, Alvilda, and his one-month-old daughter, Anna.

I knew there was plenty fuel for the stove all day, and that I was glad over.... When I came home I found my loving wife frozen to death, and then I went into the house and there lay Alvilda on the floor frozen to death. The little one in the wagon was living. So I have much sorrow.... She was a good wife and it makes me feel I wish I were dead.³⁶

A few months later, Jensen left the baby with his brother and wife in Aurora County when he moved north to find work. Baby Anna died of polio four years later.³⁷

That storm occurred very early in the history of Aurora County. The wide-open land and distance between homes, combined with rapidly changing weather conditions, produced a unique and harrowing episode in the lives of those pioneers. The event was commemorated for decades afterward with an annual dance that also celebrated survival on the prairie.³⁸

Fire, wind, lightning, hail, cold, and snow forced some to give up and move on, but nothing challenged the young settlements more than drought. Years with no rain meant no crops to sell, no feed for livestock, and no produce from gardens. Small lakes dried up, and wells went dry. Fields and the newly planted trees shriveled up and died. People left en masse, dispersing neighborhoods and disrupting communities.³⁹ For some, an extreme

³⁶ *Aurora County History*, 21. The letter was translated from Danish to English.

³⁷ Richard Alex Jensen, *The Comets of Aurora: A Personal Journey* (Sioux Falls, SD: Pine Hill, 2009), 44–47.

³⁸ *Aurora County History*, 416.

³⁹ Visher, *The Geography of South Dakota*, 157–58.

weather event was the signal to abandon their dreams in that location and find easier and safer places to live. For others, it was a test of their resolve and their faith in better times. They never forgot, writing about weather catastrophes in numerous memoirs about that time and place.⁴⁰

In addition, some women, far apart from loved ones and comfortable homes, also suffered from feelings of isolation and loneliness. A close examination of the geographical spacing of houses and a careful reading of local memoirs reveal that isolation was not universal and, for some, loneliness often was only temporary. The sense of community fostered by shared optimism and by kindly, helpful neighbors prevented or helped to stem feelings of being alone. Everyone faced dangers, so community made them more bearable.

Distance was experienced in a different way than in the modern era. During the peak of the Dakota Boom in Aurora County, 1882 to 1887, four houses might be located within one square mile, with an average walking distance of less than twenty minutes between them. The 1888 assessment report for Dudley Township reported fifty-five occupied homes within the township's thirty-six square miles, an average of more than one home per square mile, with every adult woman but one living in near another adult woman on an adjacent quarter.⁴¹ Names and locations of more than fifty families mentioned in the memoir of Amanda Gibbs Ward, who lived as a child in Palatine Township between 1880 and 1895, reveal the Gibbs' neighborhood network extended up to six miles in some

⁴⁰ *Aurora County History*, 19, 21, 35, 40, 71–72, 77, 415–18; *100 Years of Progress*, 10–11; Ward, "About a Journey"; Schultz, "History of the Ev. Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation"; Allen, "Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland)"; Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)"; Wilson, "Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd)"; Gibbs, "Dakota Notes"; Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days"; Watland, "Early Life of Estella Hanson Watland, 1872-1950."

⁴¹ South Dakota, Aurora County, Dudley Township, Assessor's Report, 1888.

directions.⁴² However, when the population had declined in 1900, due to the drought, occupied homes in some townships were spaced, on average, more than two miles apart. In that year, four townships reported a total of 282 residents. With an average family size of 4.7 people, the townships of Bristol, Cooper, Patten, and Pleasant Valley averaged only fifteen families each, possibly increasing a sense of isolation among women there. By 1915, the average number of farms per township exceeded eighty-three.⁴³ In 1920, Cooper Township, with 121 residents, reported the lowest population in the county.⁴⁴

People were accustomed to traveling several miles to conduct business or gather with friends and neighbors. Ward walked two to three miles to school every day, even in the winter, through deep snow.⁴⁵ Margret Hjelmeland Knutson often walked eight or nine miles to town to buy groceries, and sometimes, when low on cash, purchasing only butter and matches.⁴⁶ Some women from Dudley Township found the most inventive ways to manage distance, as told in the history of the Dudley Ladies Aid. "Mode of travel to meetings in the early days was a horse hitched to a stone boat. One lady went to a meeting on a hay rake."⁴⁷ Once, when the hay rake was unavailable, one of the charter members, Catherine Williams, hitched a ladder to a horse to visit her friend Mary James Parry.⁴⁸ Lulu

⁴² *Atlas of Aurora County*, A24–A36; Ward, "About a Journey," 1–17.

⁴³ South Dakota Dept. of History, *Third Census of the State of South Dakota*, 94, 155.

⁴⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 1:606.

⁴⁵ Ward, "About a Journey," 9; Dickson, "Tales of the Pioneers," 6.

⁴⁶ Allen, "Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland)," 3.

⁴⁷ "Stickney Golden Jubilee," *Stickney (SD) Argus*, August 18, 1955, Special edition.

⁴⁸ Julia Decker Cook, "Mrs. P. A. Decker," [1942?], [1-3], Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection; *Aurora County History*, 52, 114, 329. The following resources were used to determine a first name for Mrs. Perry A. Decker: Homestead Accession Number SDMTAA 136910, "Perry A. Decker," September 28, 1888, BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD; Ancestry.com, "Emily Jane Johnston," Decker Family Tree, <http://person.ancestry.com/tree/52024930/person/13289067926/facts>, accessed 11/13/2015.

Saville, who came as a child, remembered riding eight miles in a lumber wagon every Sunday to attend church services in Plankinton.⁴⁹ In a culture accustomed to walking or driving long distances, physical isolation does not appear to have created insurmountable barriers.

Poverty, homesickness, and poor health might have been more isolating than distance in breaking women's spirits. Emma Miracle, wife of J. D. Miracle, the first newspaper publisher in the county—but only briefly, as he was a poor businessman—suffered from her husband's lack of preparedness, as recalled in 1931.

The family were “holding down a claim” amid such poverty as was seldom the lot of even those first settlers. They had absolutely no furniture, not even a bed or table. Mrs. Miracle, who was his second wife, was a lady of much culture and refinement and was so depressed by their financial circumstances that she became a veritable recluse.⁵⁰

Sometimes, the loneliness was only temporary, as described in Ella Todd Wilson's story of Isabella Todd Diehl, the bride from Scotland.

The vast prairie was a strange and lonely place to Isabella, so far from home and loved ones. At times she was very homesick. Martin had to go to town, and often, that first year.... The loneliness and homesickness would completely overcome her and she would rush out of her tiny house, and run madly down the two little tracks that were their only connection with the rest of the world, screaming at the top of her voice, 'til finally the awful tensions would let up and she would wander back, looking at flowers and bird nests..., and after Henry was born, she never felt the loneliness again.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Aurora County History*, 442.

⁵⁰ J. C. Palmer, “Views of Yesterday,” 1931, Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection. The following resources were used to determine a first name for a Mrs. J. D. Miracle: “Views of Yesterday,” [1931?] story about a trip to Wessington Springs, Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Ancestry.com, “Emma M. Miracle,” Year: 1880; Census Place: *Mitchell, Davison, Dakota Territory*; Roll: 112; Family History Film: 1254112; Page: 473D; Enumeration District: 035; Image: 0251.

⁵¹ Wilson, “Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd),” 3.

The young and healthy were better equipped to leave their homes and to meet the challenges than those in their twilight years suffering from ill health. In a story about his mother coming to Aurora County in 1883 as a child with her parents, her uncle, and her elderly grandparents, John Dickson explains why his great-grandmother could not adjust. "My great[-]grandmother was not happy in the new country. There were no trees, it was hot and the wind blew and in failing health she became so despondent that her husband took her back to Wisc." After his wife's death, Dickson's great-grandfather returned to South Dakota to live with his son.⁵²

The few women who documented life in Aurora County seldom expressed concerns about isolation or loneliness. The difficult conditions might have served as a strong motivation to seek out community as an antidote to isolation. Perhaps, memories of loneliness faded by the time they wrote memoirs, and they preferred to remember their successes on the frontier. Or, perhaps, they were optimists, having lived to recall enjoyable times in Aurora County. Or possibly, the positive aspects of life on the prairie, a strong sense of community, and the resourcefulness of the women mitigated any temporary feelings of isolation or loneliness.

Some women found beauty and inspiration from the newness of the prairie. Mary Ellen Cleaver Clark, aged forty years, homesteaded near Plankinton in 1883, only three months after giving birth. Her son noted her positive attitude.

The pristine freshness of the prairies delighted her, and she often told me of those first days on the claim. The incredible richness of the waving grasses, grasses which had never been mowed except by the buffalo herds whose wallows still pitted the prairie, the sunrises and sunsets and the wide glory of the sky, the "Boom! Boom! Boom!" of the courting prim prairie chickens, the melodies of the meadow larks and

⁵² Dickson, "Tales of the Pioneers," 1.

all the weird, wild cry of the plovers – all these and the utter newness and cleanness of the whole country gave her a feeling of beginning life over again in her forties.⁵³

Memoir writers appreciated neighbors and social gatherings. Margret Hjelmeland Knutson often told her children, “the happiest days of her life were spent in South Dakota.”⁵⁴ Diehl and her unmarried daughter even repeated the homesteading experience, heading west in 1905 to take up new claims near Kadoka, west of the Missouri River.⁵⁵ Community, fostered by good neighbors, provided a strong antidote to the hardships people experienced.

A Good Neighbor

Good neighbors helped to create a sense of community, and women excelled as good neighbors. Women fostered a sense of mutual sharing when they opened their homes to those in need, shared belongings, knowledge, and workloads to help others cope with the difficult environment. Women provided birthing and nursing care, hosted social events, and provided food to eat at public and private gatherings. Wilson captured the essence of a good neighbor in describing Louisa Gardner.

She was a wonderful person, kind and efficient, and life in this new land would have been hard indeed without her sympathy and wisdom, for even the foods they lived on were strange to Isabella. Mrs. Gardner showed her how to make corn bread and pancakes, and to cook many of the vegetables that were strange to her. Mrs. Gardner also taught her [Diehl] how to make bread, which was strictly a bakery product in her [Diehl's] own land. They also made hot bread, much in the same manner as corn bread, out of a very coarse graham flour, which was very good.⁵⁶

Another woman who fostered community through many acts of kindness was Minnie Saville. In the fall of 1880, the Gibbs family built a lean-to on the south side of the Saville

⁵³ Badger Clark, “‘Mother and Dakota’: Mary Ellen Cleaver Clark, Aurora County, 1883,” in *Daughters of Dakota: A Sampler of Stories from the South Dakota Pioneer Daughters Collection*, ed. Sally Roesch Wagner (Yankton, SD: Daughters of Dakota, 1989), 39.

⁵⁴ Allen, “Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland),” 6.

⁵⁵ Wilson, “Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd),” 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

house so that the families could be close for that first winter in Aurora County. Rachel Gibbs gave birth that November, and years later, her daughter Amanda Gibbs Ward described Saville as “quick to do something to relieve pain or distress in anybody. She was community minded. She had a turkey dinner for all her neighbors, the house full, quite a treat for a country yet new.”⁵⁷ The widow Knutson relied heavily upon neighbors to cope with the challenges of creating a home for her many children. When she first had arrived, Knutson stayed for three weeks with the Reverend Ole Tjomsland family, hosts at the time to three other families. The quarters were cramped, and all guests slept on the floor. Knutson’s daughter explained how the camaraderie of friendship and a good sense of humor helped the families make light of their situation: “The elders did much laughing and joking about leaving their comfortable homes and feather beds to come to Dakota Territory to sleep on the floor and burn twisted hay.”⁵⁸ Not long afterward, Knutson provided a home to three bachelors, while they built their shanties. In return, the men dug a basement under Knutson’s house, plowed her land, and helped the widow in other ways.⁵⁹

Women often cared for neighbors in times of childbirth and sickness. Some neighbors became midwives from necessity. Louisa Gardner, Diehl’s only female neighbor for two years, attended the birth of Diehl’s three children, “which service she returned when Mrs. Gardner’s last two boys were born.”⁶⁰ When a mother died in childbirth, a neighbor or relative sometimes raised that child. Anna Kelly Magonegil, a Dudley Township mother with three of her own children, provided a home to two other children, the son of her husband’s brother and the daughter of her sister, whose mothers died soon after giving

⁵⁷ Ward, “About a Journey,” 5–6.

⁵⁸ Allen, “Mrs. John Knutson (Margret Hjelmeland),” 1–3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ Wilson, “Mrs. Martin H. Diehl (Isabella [Elizabeth] Todd),” 1–2.

birth.⁶¹ Many women, without formal training, nursed neighbors through illnesses. Emily Jane Decker nursed the local minister through a bout of typhoid fever, as told by her daughter Julia.⁶²

Neighbors helped each other achieve financial goals. During harvest time, the men worked together in the fields for several days at each others' farms. Feeding the hungry men was the women's job, which required cooperation. Women brought plates and cutlery from home and helped prepare vast quantities of food for the men, as well as the cooks and the children. After the lunch dishes were washed, preparations started again for supper.⁶³ By cooperating, the women contributed to the economic success of their communities. In another example, Jean Todd Saville, a midwife and nurse, taught herself to make cheese for income, then shared that knowledge with other farm wives.⁶⁴

When people gathered for fun and camaraderie at each others' homes, the schoolhouse, or the church, they were building community. People also celebrated national holidays, such as Washington's Birthday, Decoration Day, and Independence Day in a nearby grove or the nearest town. Ella Todd Wilson described one of those events.

There were horse races, sulky races, footraces of all kinds, for all ages and both sexes. The sock race, three-legged race and potato race, as well as the fat men's race, were part of every Fourth program. There were the picnic baskets. The finest fried chicken and everybody eating together.... If it was in town, there would be lemonade and ice cream stands.... The stands were usually run by various Lady's Aids.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Scrapbook of Page family history.

⁶² Cook, "Mrs. P. A. Decker," [1]. The following resources were used to determine Mrs. Perry A. Decker's first name: Homestead Accession Number SDMTAA 136910, "Perry A. Decker," September 28, 1888, BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD; Ancestry.com, "Emily Jane Johnston," Decker Family Tree, <http://person.ancestry.com/tree/52024930/person/13289067926/facts>, accessed 11/13/2015.

⁶³ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days," 3-5.

⁶⁴ Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)," 7.

⁶⁵ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days," 13.

Visiting and exchanging Sunday dinner was a common practice. Sarah Page's daughters remember "getting up in the wee morning hours to butcher chickens because it was a regular custom to invite the minister and neighbors for Sunday dinner."⁶⁶ Other social activities included preacher meetings, barn dances, church suppers and ice cream socials, literary societies, debates, basket socials, and Christmas programs.⁶⁷ Attesting to an active social life, Jacob Weick, interviewed in 1956 about the early days, declared, "Phoo! Folks had more entertainment then than now!"⁶⁸ However infrequent, all of those events, with women bringing food to enhance sociability, added joy and laughter to people's lives, making them feel less alone and more part of an inclusive community.

The Employed Woman

While many of the women in Aurora County created community by being good neighbors, other women helped build community as a result of their paid employment. By 1915, the workforce included 270 women, not counting women who listed housewife or farmer as occupations. That number represented 23 percent of all adult women over the age of twenty years. Of those women, 36 percent listed their occupation as servant, and another 25 percent designated no specific profession. The sixty teachers represented 8 percent of all women, but 22 percent of employed women. The remaining forty-five women were either retired or worked as saleswomen, stenographers, dressmakers, hotelkeepers, milliners, nurses, journalists, telegraph or telephone employees, merchants, or photographers.⁶⁹ Professional women often contributed to community by providing

⁶⁶ Goldammer, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: Page Family History."

⁶⁷ Dickson, "Tales of the Pioneers," 12; Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 21.

⁶⁸ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 21.

⁶⁹ South Dakota Dept. of History, *Third Census of the State of South Dakota*, 58–89.

services that connected people, facilitated communication, and brought aid and comfort in times of need. Several stories illustrate how some professional women, such as female hotelkeepers, nurses, and teachers, influenced the community.

Female hotelkeepers served an important role in welcoming transient visitors, newcomers, and those living alone into a warm and welcoming space, easing the transition into the new community. Although wives provided a significant amount of the labor, the named proprietor was often only the husband. Five Plankinton hotels were advertised in the *Dakota Advocate* newspaper in March of 1884, including the Plankinton House, opened by T. C. and Adelia Granger in 1880, and the Mansion House, built the next year and operated by John H. Brooks.⁷⁰ Confirming the important partnership of proprietors and their wives, Wilson wrote in her memoir that Brooks closed the Mansion House when his wife Lucy died.⁷¹ In 1884, the newspaper listed E. H. Nelson as proprietor of the Iowa House, but four years later, Mrs. E. H. Nelson was proprietress of another hotel, the Commercial House. In an 1888 advertisement in the *Plankinton Herald* newspaper, Nelson claimed that recent improvements and clean beds made her establishment “the leading Hotel of the city.”⁷² In White Lake Township, before the town was established, William H. and Mary Alice Hoopers’ home, with a sod addition, became known as the “sod hotel at 36.” One of the first to arrive, they built their home near the railroad siding, thirty-six miles

⁷⁰ “Plankinton’s Business Directory,” *Mitchell (DT) Dakota Advocate*, March 1884; Andreas, *Andreas’ Historical Atlas of Dakota*, 183–84.

⁷¹ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 August 1959, “Plankinton, As I Saw It First,” 1. The following resources were used to determine first names for a Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Brooks: “Views of Yesterday,” [1931?], story about a trip to Wessington Springs, Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Ancestry.com, “Lucy J. Brooks,” Year: 1880; Census Place: *Fredonia, Chautauqua, New York*; Roll: 816; Family History Film: 1254816; Page: 525C; Enumeration District: 066; Image: 0273.

⁷² “Commercial House,” *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, August 10, 1888. No first name was found for a Mrs. E. H. Nelson.

from Mitchell, and that home quickly became a popular rendezvous point. Mary Alice Hooper, no doubt, contributed to the hospitality by doing much of the cooking and cleaning.⁷³ Four hotels were built in the early years of White Lake, but no wives are mentioned in the historical accounts.⁷⁴ In 1906, one year after Stickney was established, John Bourret built the first hotel and, again, no wife was mentioned.⁷⁵ As the influx of visitors slowed, many of those establishments ceased to operate or changed ownership.

The women who fed and housed visitors played an important role in welcoming newcomers. Granger, the first woman to move to Aurora County during the homesteading years, operated the first hotel in Plankinton with her husband, and was recalled in a 1931 newspaper for her kindness.

For Mrs. Granger, recently passed to her reward, was one of the most motherly women whom we have ever met. Not one of the myriad of young women and young men claim-holders ever appealed in vain to her for physical aid and comfort. She never was lacking in sympathy nor was she tired or out of sorts and many a chronically depleted larder was made to show a semblance of prosperity through her beneficence.⁷⁶

Ella Severson Sweep moved to Aurora County as a newlywed in 1882. Several years later, after teaching in rural schools, parenthood, and operating restaurants in different locations, Sweep and her husband rented a small hotel in Plankinton. In 1906, the couple bought the

⁷³ Andreas, *Andreas' Historical Atlas of Dakota*, 183–84. The following resources were used to determine first name for a Mrs. William H. Hooper: Ancestry.com, “William Smith Hooper,” <http://person.ancestry.com/tree/22258170/person/29342938285/facts>, accessed 11/15/2015. Ancestry.com, “William Horatio Hooper,” <http://person.ancestry.com/tree/22258170/person/1228740903/facts>, accessed 11/15/2015.

⁷⁴ *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 4.

⁷⁶ Palmer, “Views of Yesterday.”

Commercial House in Plankinton and changed the name to the Sweep Hotel. Although her husband died in 1914, Sweep continued to run the hotel until 1920.⁷⁷

Ella Todd Wilson wrote about Sweep's ability to create a warm and hospitable environment.

Ella's cleanliness and exceptionally fine cooking soon attracted many boarders and roomers, also railroad men who soon became their very good friends and advertisers, so that many traveling men also ate there. Many of the townspeople ate Sunday dinner there, also, and news of her fine meals spread.⁷⁸

She was a wonderful manager. In the pioneer days she fed most of the people round Plankinton at one time or another, and her hotel was home to many young couples until they were able to get their own.

Many of the early day teachers, also bachelors, stayed with her till they left or married. None of them ever forgot her as she made them all feel at home and they kept in touch with her as long as she lived.⁷⁹

By helping people to cope in a new environment, women in the hospitality business also fostered a sense of community to transition to life in Aurora County.

When Aurora County women nursed the sick, assisted in childbirth, or attended a deathbed, they brought comfort and care to those in need, strengthening the bonds of a compassionate community. While many women provided nursing and midwife care as a neighborly act, some women delivered a higher level of skill to the community. Sarah Guindon, a woman with prior nursing experience, provided those services to her neighbors after she and her husband moved to Belford Township in 1883, where they lived in a sod house for close to sixteen years and raised ten children. While her level of training is

⁷⁷ Ella Todd Wilson, "Mrs. Egbert Matteson (Ella Severson)," [1950?], 1-2, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection. Ella Severson Sweep married Egbert Matteson after she sold the hotel.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.

unknown, Guindon's impact on the community was documented in her obituary: "Her kindly ministrations eased many a bed of pain or softened the harshness of death."⁸⁰

Jean Todd Saville believed that she was the first trained midwife and nurse in Dakota Territory, having trained at the Dundee Royal Infirmary in Dundee, Scotland, from 1881 to 1884.⁸¹ The following year, Saville, as Jane Todd, earned a Nurse's Midwifery Diploma from the School of Medicine in Edinburgh.⁸² Completing her course of study at the age of thirty-eight years, Saville was among the earliest of trained nurses in the world. In 1860, twenty-one years before Saville entered her nursing program, the era of modern nurse's training started with the opening of one of the first modern schools of nursing, St. Thomas Hospital in London.⁸³ By 1883, the estimated number of graduates of nursing schools in the United States was only six hundred, increasing to ten thousand by 1900.⁸⁴ Responding to a plea from her recently widowed sister in 1887, forty-one-year old Jane Todd, also a widow, immigrated to Dakota Territory with her young daughter, hoping to find work in her profession. Now calling herself Jean Todd, she married George Saville in 1890.⁸⁵

When Saville started practicing her profession in Plankinton, physicians were primarily general practitioners who hitched horse to buggy at all hours of the day and night to attend their patients in their homes. Nine doctors registered to practice in the county

⁸⁰ "Early Belford Settler Dies in Plankinton," [1946?], scrapbook of newspaper obituaries from 1930s and 1940s, compiled by Ella Todd Wilson, Ella Todd Wilson Papers, Private Collection.

⁸¹ Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)," 2–3.

⁸² *Todd, Jane (Diploma)*, April 30, 1885, GB239 GD1/35, Lothian Health Services, University of Edinburgh.

⁸³ Richard H. Shryock, *The History of Nursing: An Interpretation of the Social and Medical Factors Involved* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1959), 304.

⁸⁴ Minnie Goodnow, *Nursing History*, 9th ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953), 192–222.

⁸⁵ Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)," 1–2, 6.

before 1892, but some had already moved away, leaving only a few to cover the entire county.⁸⁶ Most doctors had never worked with a trained nurse and, at first, the two doctors in Plankinton were reluctant to work with Saville. Before and after marrying, Saville provided nursing care in a wide area around Plankinton, attending births and caring for the sick. Saville continued nursing occasionally until she fully retired in 1918 at the age of seventy-two years. Saville also offered her services laying out the dead. In Saville's memoir, she wrote, "I made no charge for this friendly service, but I met many nice people and made many friends through it."⁸⁷ Guindon, Saville, and the many other women, paid or unpaid, who ministered to the health needs in Aurora County, served their communities by giving of their time, skill, and compassion during life and death events.

With more than seventy one-room schools distributed throughout rural Aurora County, the teachers who managed the classrooms, mostly women, performed important roles in the local communities. They were not only responsible for educating children of all ages, but also often developed and hosted activities that brought neighbors together to share in the achievements of students or to participate in fun and educational activities. The rural schools, referred to as common grade schools, offered instruction for all eight grades in one-room schools with one teacher, while the town schools separated some of the grades. The enrollment in each of the one-room rural schools between 1897 and 1909 ranged from three students to twenty-seven.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ South Dakota, Aurora County Register of Deeds, Plankinton, SD, Record of Licenses to Practicing Physicians, 1885-1911, 82-89.

⁸⁷ Wilson, "Mrs. George Saville (Jean Todd)," 2, 4-7, 10.

⁸⁸ South Dakota, Aurora County Superintendent of Schools, Plankinton, SD, Superintendent's Record, book 1, 1897-1909.

School districts aligned with township boundaries, and each of the twenty townships in Aurora County built several one-room schools within walking distance of a cluster of families. By 1886, the county boasted twenty-one organized districts educating 1,703 students in seventy-two schools.⁸⁹ The desire to build schools at regular distances created a seating capacity of 2,390 for 1,146 children in 1890.⁹⁰ The effects of the 1890s drought and resulting exodus of families were reflected in the 1897 school census numbers that reported only 889 students in sixty-eight schools. Thirteen school buildings closed.⁹¹ Starting in 1914, school consolidation reduced the need for so many one-room schools, and the consolidated schools became centers for community gatherings that now included the entire township. Although the town schools offered some high school classes, none of them provided a four-year high school education in the first two decades of settlement. The county's first four-year high school class graduated from Plankinton in 1906. White Lake's first four-year class earned diplomas in 1913. Between 1921 and 1923, the town of Stickney and three of the consolidated rural schools started their own high schools, graduating, at most, seven students each year.⁹²

Providing an adequate education was challenging in poorly constructed buildings with few supplies and books. For many years, families supplied the schoolbooks used in the classrooms, until the state of South Dakota passed a law in 1919 requiring school districts

⁸⁹ Andreas, *Andreas' Historical Atlas of Dakota*, 183.

⁹⁰ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 6; South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *First Annual Report, 1890* (Pierre, SD, 1890), 75–78.

⁹¹ South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Sixth Biennial Report, 1901-1902* (Aberdeen, SD, 1902), 42.

⁹² *Aurora County History*, 65, 72, 77, 97, 99, 101.

to supply free books.⁹³ Wilson described her first experience in a rural school in the 1890s, when she was about nine years old and recently arrived from Scotland.

School in this new land was also a strange experience. From the big stone building of many big rooms, rich in maps, charts, pictures, and other aids, in Edinburg, to the little, barren, wooden building, heated by the big volcano stove, which roasted those who sat near it, while those in the far corners almost froze, was a contrast indeed. There school ran eleven months, here not over six. Standards were low and good teachers rare in those early days, but attendance high because most of the pioneers were young people with families. Books were not furnished so each child was supposed to have them, but many families couldn't, or wouldn't, buy them, so books were loaned back and forth and often the owners were the ones who didn't have the lesson.⁹⁴

Estella Hanson Watland recalled both the positive and negative aspects of teaching in a Dudley Township school in 1892, when she was twenty years old.

Many were the experiences and hardships of that eight months: \$25 a month, do my own janitor work; rustle my own kindling; no dictionary; no water, but coal was provided. The Welsh children were glad and very cooperative so we got along fine until the cold weather came.

Watland then explained about the cold weather

On one occasion a strong wind came up after I started [for school], filling the air with snow. I thought of turning back but that some of my pupils might be there so kept struggling on. When I reached the schoolhouse, my left ear and foot were so frozen. My hands too were numb. I almost perished.... No one came to school that day. While the blizzard raged outside, I raged and walked the floor inside—tears and loud cries of agony.... Finally about five o'clock when no one came for me, I managed to drag myself back to my boarding place. All the sympathy I got was that I was a big fool for trying to go in such a storm.⁹⁵

Watland took two weeks leave to recuperate from the ordeal.⁹⁶

⁹³ Payne, "The History of Aurora County," 17–18; *Aurora County History*, 35, 60, 97, 440; "Free School Books," *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, July 22, 1919.

⁹⁴ Ella Todd Wilson, "Mrs. Ella T. Wilson (Ella Todd)," 1952, 6–7, Box 6828, Folder Aurora County, Pioneer Daughters Collection.

⁹⁵ Watland, "Early Life of Estella Hanson Watland, 1872-1950," [7].

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, [7]. The memoir was transcribed with little punctuation, which was added for clarity.

A school year was two terms, lasting three to four months each, starting in September or October, and ending in March or April. By 1896, most of the Aurora County schools operated for at least six months.⁹⁷ By 1901, twelve weeks attendance, six weeks consecutive, was compulsory for children ages eight to fourteen years.⁹⁸

The teachers in Aurora County were mostly young, female, and inexperienced in the classroom. Female teachers outnumbered male teachers, as elsewhere in the United States, with women comprising 60 percent of the county teaching staff in 1890, increasing to 79 percent in 1901. The average teacher pay between 1890 and 1902 ranged from twenty-six to twenty-eight dollars per month, with male teachers earning about two dollars more per month.⁹⁹ Firesteel Township paid the teachers thirty dollars per month in 1884. In 1915, Plankinton Township paid fifty dollars per month to teachers with a first-grade certificate.¹⁰⁰ Many teachers were seventeen or eighteen years old with only a common school education. After attending one summer session of a teachers' academy and passing an examination, they were certified to teach. A teacher was issued one of three levels of teaching certificates; first-grade certificates indicated a more qualified teacher, at least eighteen years old. The Second- and third-grade certificates were temporary, expiring in

⁹⁷ South Dakota, Aurora County Superintendent of Schools, Superintendent's Record.

⁹⁸ Smith, Young, and Hinsdale, *History and Civil Government of South Dakota*, 145.

⁹⁹ Brownlee and Brownlee, *Women in the American Economy*, 267; South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *First Annual Report, 1890*, 75–76; South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Second Biennial Report, 1893-1894* (Sioux Falls, SD, 1894), 152–160, 180–190; South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Third Biennial Report, 1895-1896* (Pierre, SD, 1896), 22–32; South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Fourth Biennial Report, 1897-1898* (Pierre, SD, 1898); South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Sixth Biennial Report, 1901-1902*, 196–209, 210–28. I tabulated information about teachers and teacher's pay using Microsoft Excel.

¹⁰⁰ South Dakota, Aurora County, Minutes, Firesteel Township School Board, 1884-1890, 1884, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD; South Dakota, Aurora County, Minutes, Plankinton Township School Board, 1893-1919, 1915, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

two years or less.¹⁰¹ Educational skills were not necessarily the highest priority for some school boards. Belford Township, a Norwegian Lutheran community, advertised for a teacher in the *Plankinton Herald* newspaper, detailing moral requirements. The district specified that the young lady “must not dance, nor have fellows; must not chew gum, nor drink ice cream sodas or have any social ills that the present generation is addicted to.”¹⁰²

In 1895, one third of teachers held first-grade certificates, and only two held third-grade certificates, indicating that two-thirds of teachers were inexperienced, teaching with a license that was less than two years old.¹⁰³ Some young teachers might have felt so overwhelmed that they just quit. Firesteel Township fired one teacher in 1892 after she failed to open the school for eight days and failed to notify anyone.¹⁰⁴ While most teachers were single, some districts did hire married women. Matilda A. Snow, a married woman, taught twenty students at a Palatine Township school in 1883, bringing her own books from home to use as textbooks.¹⁰⁵ Charlotte Rexford, the Congregational minister’s wife, taught in Plankinton in the 1890s, and Anna C. Wind, also married, was the first principal of Patten Consolidated School, in 1914.¹⁰⁶ Many teachers only taught one year for a given township, either moving to another township or giving up the profession. In four to five schools in Dudley Township between 1891 and 1909, thirty-seven teachers taught for only

¹⁰¹ Smith, Young, and Hinsdale, *History and Civil Government of South Dakota*, 152.

¹⁰² Payne, “The History of Aurora County,” 18.

¹⁰³ South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Third Biennial Report, 1895-1896*, 11.

¹⁰⁴ South Dakota, Aurora County, Minutes, Firesteel Township School Board: 1884-1890.

¹⁰⁵ H. Richard Christopher, ed., *Midway: 1882-1982* (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill, 1982), 4.

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, “Mrs. Ella T. Wilson (Ella Todd),” 8; *Aurora County History*, 72.

one year, eight teachers taught for two years, and five teachers taught for more than two years.¹⁰⁷

A teacher often took on the role of community organizer, creating a variety of programs and entertainments for local families to attend at the school building, as described by Wilson.

Life then wasn't all work, however, and they took advantage of every opportunity to get together. The school house was not only the educational center but recreational as well. In many of them Sunday schools were organized and there were ministers who brought church services to many neighborhoods in the afternoon. Then, too, the Fri. evening "Lyceum" flourished and the entire neighborhood turned out for an evening of fun, group singing, often a debate, "speaking pieces" by the children, dialogs and small plays. And anyone who could play an instrument or sing was sure to be on the program. Sometimes there was a lunch, but it was the fun and chance to talk and group a bit that mattered. These of course were for the winter season. The teacher was the organizer.¹⁰⁸

In 1897, teachers at White Lake School put together a school entertainment program with forty-nine performances that included recitations, vocal and instrumental songs, dialogues, essays, orations, and tableaux. In addition, sixteen girls performed a Hoop Drill and March.¹⁰⁹ Teachers sometimes advertised to attract a larger audience, as did teacher Myrtle C. Lundgren when she advertised a box social in a Belford Township school for February 9, 1917.¹¹⁰ Not every event ran smoothly, especially when parents kept their children home from those carefully planned programs. Sephora Parry, a teacher in Pleasant Lake Township, wrote to her brother about how disappointed she was that one family failed to attend, forcing Parry to leave out an important part of the program. She also noted that the

¹⁰⁷ South Dakota, Aurora County Superintendent of Schools, Superintendent's Record, 7, 27, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Ella Todd Wilson to Adeline Van Genderen, 13 February 1959, "Early Days," 12.

¹⁰⁹ *100 Years of Progress*, 67-68.

¹¹⁰ "School Entertainment," *Storla (SD) Tri-County Journal*, February 1, 1917.

program raised \$5.95.¹¹¹ Minutes from the Finlayson Literary Society indicate meetings were held twice a month at Finlayson school house on Friday nights during winter months, with leadership provided by one female and one male teacher. Membership drew from young adults living in the area, and activities included lively debates and preparation of a humorous newspaper called “The Bristol Blizzard.”¹¹² When the Aurora County Centennial Committee interviewed the county’s oldest residents in 1982, many of them remembered the schools as centers of social life in the neighborhoods. They remembered participating in or attending children’s programs, picnics, literary and lecture societies, musical events, plays, debates, and spelling matches. While those events might have only occurred a few times a month, they clearly were enjoyable and memorable.¹¹³

The one-room schoolhouse also served as the public hall, bringing community together for a variety of activities. A teacher’s role as event coordinator for many of those activities placed her in the center of community. In the years leading up to 1920, more than eighty-five rural schools dotted the landscape. Unless consolidated, each one of those schools was under the administration of one teacher, usually female.¹¹⁴ That woman, whether in her first or her tenth year teaching, actively participated in bringing a community together by preparing students to perform, organizing a social event, or creating opportunities for people of all ages to come together and to build relationships of mutual interest.

¹¹¹ “Sephora Parry,” 1907, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD. Story was part of a Dudley Township poster.

¹¹² Minutes, Finlayson Literary and Debating Society, 1893-1897, Private Collection.

¹¹³ *Aurora County History*, 50, 60, 67, 85, 102–03, 440.

¹¹⁴ South Dakota Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Fifteenth Biennial Report, 1918-1919* (Madison, SD, 1920), 72–76.

As neighbors, hotelkeepers, nurses, and teachers, women in Aurora County established and nurtured relationships that brought joy and comfort to other families and children struggling to survive in a difficult environment. The individual actions of those women fostered a sense of mutual concern and helped to build community among their local societies.

Chapter Three

Working Together for a Cause

THE PRESB. LADIES AID
SENDS GREETINGS

On this the first of Nineteen-eight
Our hearts with love are beating.
So to our friends both small and great,
We send a New Years greeting.
We wish for all, this coming year,
Blessing rich and manifold;
The gift of life and health and friends,
These with love bring wealth untold.
To satisfy the inner man,
A feast of good things we prepare,
Of just the food you like to eat;
Come one, come all and with us share.
At the old bank beside the new
Is where you'll find the table;
Wednesday the first of twelve o'clock
And eat all you are able.

*January 1, 1908, at the old First National Bank
Building, White Lake, Price 25 cents.¹*

When women stepped outside of their homes and joined forces with other women to achieve shared goals, they entered the public sphere. Working together to build a social network, to sustain a church community, or to influence public opinion, those women helped to shape their societies. This first part of the chapter reviews the collective role that women played in the development of faith communities in Aurora County and the role that Ladies Aid societies played in building and sustaining those communities. The second part of the chapter reviews the formation of women's organizations in the county and the united efforts that women made to support their communities and to influence public policy, especially in the areas of prohibition and woman suffrage.

¹ White Lake Presbyterian Ladies Aid, "The Presb. Ladies Aid Sends Greetings," 1908, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

Church Ladies

Women, working together in church-affiliated Ladies Aid organizations, played an active and a public role in the religious life of their local communities. After the area opened for homesteading in 1879, newcomers quickly set about organizing faith communities and establishing worship spaces. As early as 1881, traveling preachers held services in Aurora County. At the first recorded religious service, a visiting Catholic priest celebrated mass in the dining room of the Plankinton House on Plankinton's Main Street. Later that year, Protestant members of the community sat on beer kegs in a local saloon while enjoying the sermon preached by a traveling Congregational minister, a graduate of Yale University.² By 1882, two Catholic and three Protestant congregations had been established, including the Evangelical Lutheran Wessington Congregation, founded by a Norwegian immigrant community in rural Belford Township, with eighteen charter members.³

In 1890, the people of Aurora County worshiped in one of ten denominations that had built a total of eighteen churches. Membership, defined by the census as number of enrolled communicants, numbered 1,114 people. The Roman Catholics dominated in the county, with a membership of 600 in only two churches, more than half of the total of all church membership. The Methodist Episcopal congregation, with 113 members, ranked second in size. Memberships of most congregations numbered fewer than one hundred,

² M. Claudia Duratschek, *Builders of God's Kingdom: The History of the Catholic Church in South Dakota* (Yankton, SD: Diocesan Publications; Sacred Heart Convent, 1985), 91; Newspaper clipping about first Catholic church service, Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection; Palmer, "Views of Yesterday."

³ *Storla Lutheran Church Centennial History: 1882-1982* (Letcher, SD: Storla Lutheran Church, 1982), 3; *Aurora County History*, 105-118.

with the smallest group, Protestant Episcopal, numbering only four.⁴ In the county's first two decades, from 1880 to 1900, the settlers established at least twenty-one places of worship, including two Jewish settlements, three Catholic parishes, and a number of Protestant congregations. The Protestant congregations included one Baptist, one Welsh Calvinist, one Congregational, one Presbyterian, one Quaker, two Evangelical, three Methodist, and six Lutheran faith communities. The Lutheran denominations included two General Council churches, two German Synod of Iowa churches, two United Norwegian churches of the Missouri Synod, and one Danish Church of America of the Missouri Synod.⁵

Although some congregations quickly built churches, other small faith communities attended services in homes or schools on an irregular basis. Preachers, covering an assigned circuit on horseback, ministered to many communities. Six members of the Methodist Episcopal Church established an official society in Plankinton in 1882, obtained the services of a pastor, and enrolled fifty-nine members that first year. Although the members signed a contract to build a place of worship one year later, the church dedication ceremony did not take place until January of 1885.⁶ Small congregations often received financial assistance from missionary societies and the church authority to build churches

⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Statistics of Churches*, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1894), 155, 245, 269, 338, 387, 451, 461, 474, 479, 517, 525, 642, 675, 717. Each church provided its membership count. The count only included those who were enrolled communicants, not everyone who attended that church.

⁵ *Aurora County History*, 27, 47, 105–22, 230; Minutes, St. John Lutheran Church of Crystal Lake, "Golden Jubilee," September 13, 1936, 121, Historical Documents, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Stickney, SD; Endre D. Hanson, "Pioneers, O Pioneers: A History of Friends in South Dakota," *Plankinton South Dakota Mail*, December 4, 1975; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Statistics of Churches*, 9:451–79. Documentation was found for twenty-one congregations, but others may have existed briefly.

⁶ *The First Methodist Church, Plankinton, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary, 1882-1957* (Plankinton, SD: The First Methodist Church, 1957), [1–2].

and pay the pastors' salaries. Between 1883 and 1905, the Congregational Building Society of New York City loaned \$800 to the Congregationalists in Plankinton, and the Congregational Home Missionary Society granted them a sum of \$9,415.⁷ Started by just six German Lutheran families in 1883, the Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul congregation in Truro Township worshipped monthly in the home of Alois and Louise Matzner. After thirteen years, services were held in a nearby public school until a church was constructed in 1902.⁸

While religion played an important role in the lives of people in both the towns and rural areas of Aurora County, the nature of religious affiliation changed over time. The two Jewish settlements in Aurora Township had dissolved by 1885. Five years later, the Baptist church had disbanded, and the Welsh Calvinist Church in Dudley Township had adopted the English language and changed its name to Dudley Methodist Episcopal Church.⁹ The South Dakota Census of 1915 showed that 75 percent of Aurora County's population affiliated with a church. As in 1890, more people, 1,351, stated affiliation with the Roman Catholic faith than with any other denomination. Lutherans numbered 1,203, and Methodists numbered 835.¹⁰ From 1910 to 1920, six more congregations were established in the county; one Catholic, one Lutheran, two Methodist, and two Presbyterian. In addition, some residents of Aurora County attended church in neighboring counties. The Congregational Church of Plankinton, having difficulty repaying a church loan, merged with the new Presbyterian Church in 1913. A number of families of Dutch descent moved to

⁷ "Another Bartow Shrewd Business Management," *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, November 20, 1906.

⁸ Schultz, "History of the Ev. Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation," 8; *Aurora County History*, 113.

⁹ *Aurora County History*, 27, 108, 230; "Dudley Methodist Episcopal Church 50th Anniversary," *Stickney (SD) Argus*, 1933.

¹⁰ South Dakota Dept. of History, *Third Census of the State of South Dakota*, 54, 56.

Center Township and established the Aurora Reformed Church in 1913 in a small, unincorporated village called Aurora Center. In 1918, the First Presbyterian Church in Stickney became the last new congregation to form in the county for sixty years. Churches that could not continue operating either merged or closed their doors forever.¹¹

By 1920, the county accommodated twenty-four churches, with some still reflecting the immigrant origins of the churches' founders. While each town supported one Catholic, one Lutheran, one Methodist, and one Presbyterian Church, the rural townships hosted another ten churches, including one Quaker, one Methodist, three Lutheran, one Catholic, one Evangelical, and one Reformed church.¹²

Immigrants had built many of rural churches and some town churches, and the immigrant culture remained strong. For several years, German-language services took place in two Lutheran churches in White Lake and in the townships of Truro, Gales, and Crystal Lake. The Catholic churches in White Lake and Washington Township served a large population that had originated in Luxemburg, while the Catholic Church in Plankinton originally served those of Irish descent.¹³ The Norwegians and Dutch lived in strongly gendered societies, in which men held all leadership positions in the church, and only men could vote on church issues. In Norwegian churches, men and women sat on separate sides of church during services. In the Dutch community, women did not teach Sunday school.

The Norwegian Storla Lutheran Church still held one-third of its services in the Norwegian

¹¹ *Aurora County History*, 105–22; “Another Bartow Shrewd Business Management,” *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, November 20, 1906; *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 67; *100 Years of Progress*, 56–62. In 1978, a small group of people formed the White Lake Community Church, meeting in the home of one of its members. In 2015, there are still three churches in each of the towns and two rural churches, one in Belford Township and one in Center Township.

¹² *Aurora County History*, 27, 47, 105–22.

¹³ *Ibid.*; Minutes, St. John Lutheran Church of Crystal Lake, “Golden Jubilee,” 121.

language as late as 1923. The Dutch Aurora Reformed Church also did not change services to English until the 1920s.¹⁴ Some churches offered greater leadership opportunities for women. Two women solicited funds to build the Beulah Methodist Church in 1904, and another woman, Sarah Page, served as a member of the board that contracted for construction.¹⁵ The large membership in Catholic churches in Plankinton and White Lake, and later Stickney, consisted of people living in town and distant rural areas, while the Catholic church in Washington Township and numerous Protestant churches served a much smaller and more local population.

The role that Catholic women in Aurora County played in the life of their churches differed from that of Protestant women. Other than four Benedictine nuns, recruited by the White Lake church to run a parochial school that closed after only one year, no other women religious lived in the county.¹⁶ Many Catholic women lived in rural areas, miles from their churches. While no formal reports documented the organized activities of Aurora County's Catholic women before 1920, the history of St. John's Catholic Church of Plankinton did recognize their efforts in 1923 to raise funds for a new church: "They served dinners, held bazaars, card parties and sold chances on various things. Since they had no hall, dinners had to be served in halls downtown. At one time they served dinners during a three-day celebration in town. Dishes and tables were brought in from their own homes,

¹⁴ Lucille Fraser and Shirley Mickelson, "History of Storla Congregation," April 2007, http://storlalutheran.santel.net/history_of_storla_congregation.htm. Shirley Mickelson (local historian of Storla Lutheran Church) in discussion with the author, July 2014; Rev. Dan Ebbons (Pastor of Aurora Reformed Church) in discussion with the author, July 2014.

¹⁵ *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 62.

¹⁶ M. Claudia Duratschek, *The Beginnings of Catholicism in South Dakota* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1943), 181–82; Duratschek, *Builders of God's Kingdom: The History of the Catholic Church in South Dakota*, 91.

many of these from the country by team and wagon.”¹⁷ The women likely also had done such fundraising prior to 1920.

In the small, local, and Protestant churches, women also played a significant role in building community within their church organizations in Ladies Aid societies. In addition to providing a social outlet for women, Ladies Aid societies helped to raise funds to support religious education, meet building needs, and support missionary work. By organizing fundraising and social events that brought people together, those women entered the public sphere, gained leadership skills, and contributed to a sense of shared community.

In Aurora County, Ladies Aid societies organized in Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches. Some societies formed among ethnic communities; others reflected the non-immigrant background of their members. The societies operated under written constitutions and kept detailed records describing meetings, attendance, purchases, and sales. The women organized before or soon after the congregation formed, their activities met critical needs of the church, enhanced the social life of their communities, and often took place in public spaces. The Methodist ladies in Plankinton organized early, making two pledges, each for one hundred dollars, in December of 1883 to build a church.¹⁸ That same year, in White Lake, both the Presbyterian women and the Methodist women established Ladies Aid societies.¹⁹ Anxious to finance a multi-week summer parochial school for their children, the Norwegian women in Belford Township formed a society called Mission Ladies Aid on March 15, 1888. In 1905, when the church

¹⁷ *Aurora County History*, 106–07.

¹⁸ Membership Records, United Methodist Church, December 30, 1883, Historical Documents, United Methodist Church, Plankinton, SD. The book includes a page listing all pledges and amounts to apply towards building a church.

¹⁹ *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 17, 19.

split into two factions to build two churches, the ladies in the west group called themselves Zion's Ladies. The other group, which included Aurora County women, organized in a new church just a few miles east in Davison County.²⁰ Recognizing and documenting their desire to organize socially, ten women started Dudley Ladies Aid in Dudley Township in 1899, associated with the Welsh Calvinist Church. Early members wrote their minutes in the Welsh language. Starting in 1906, three years before they officially organized a Ladies Aid society, the Methodist women of Patten Township raised funds to build the Underwood Methodist Church.²¹ Seventeen women established the Tabitha Ladies Aid Society of St. Paul Lutheran Church, started by German immigrants, in Truro Township in 1907.²² The Ladies Aid of the United Brethren Church in Stickney organized in 1910.²³ Twelve women of the Aurora Reformed Church in Center Township organized the Dorcas Society on September 16, 1913. As part of a Dutch speaking community, the ladies called themselves *Vrowen verenning*, loosely translated as meaning a women's association.²⁴

The ladies met regularly, sewing and spending time in prayer and song. The Norwegian women in Belford Township held meetings once a month in homes, lasting a full day in winter and half a day in summer. Each full-day meeting included a half hour of devotion in the morning and another half-hour in the afternoon. In the early years, they spoke Norwegian at their meetings, and the hostess served a simple lunch of bread, butter,

²⁰ "History of the Ladies' (*sic*) Aid of the Storla Lutheran Church," 1929, [1-3], Historical Documents, Storla Lutheran Church, Letcher, SD.

²¹ *Aurora County History*, 120.

²² *St. Paul Lutheran Church, Stickney, South Dakota: 125th Anniversary, 1883-2008* (Stickney, SD: St. Paul Lutheran Church, 2008), [8, 16].

²³ *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 62.

²⁴ *Dorcas Society: Celebrating 100 Years; 1913-2013* (Stickney, SD: Aurora Reformed Church, 2013), [5]. Possibly misspelled, the Dutch translation for *vrouwenvereniging* is women's association, as found in the online translation dictionary at www.interglot.com.

syrup, and coffee. Underscoring the priority that women placed on those gatherings, one woman once walked three miles to a meeting carrying her child on her back.²⁵

In a memory book assembled by Phyllis Salmen in 2006, she explained how the Underwood Methodist Ladies Aid meetings centered around prayer and quilting.

The women were always aware of mission work at home and away. According to the minutes they kept in their record book, they quilted quilts for members and others; as well as making quilts to sell. While they quilted someone would read from the bible and say prayer and the group would sing hymns while quilting or someone would grace them with a solo. Whenever they made a quilt for a non-member or to sell each member brought 20 cents to pay for the quilt materials besides the bits and pieces of fabric they had at home.²⁶

The Dudley ladies met twice monthly, except for some winter months, in someone's home. They kept careful minutes. At most meetings, with about six to eight women present, members pieced or tied quilts and planned the social events. Although they attempted to meet regularly, bad roads and influenza kept Dorcas Society members at home during the winters of 1918 and 1919.²⁷

Women in those societies combined their religious zeal with their domestic skills to support their church communities. They sewed and cooked and hosted social events. They organized fundraisers and sold handmade goods to pay ministers' salaries, to fund summer religion schools, to build or improve churches and parsonages, and to support foreign missions. The 1933 history of Dudley Ladies Aid reveals how women worked together in those organizations to build and sustain community.

Dudley Aid was famous for its ice cream socials through the years and all members with the help of young people and men of the church worked untiringly to make these socials such a success. A bazaar was also held in the fall season to help raise

²⁵ "Storla Lutheran Church," 1929, [1-3].

²⁶ Phyllis Salmen, ed., *Memories of the Little Church That Could*, (White Lake, SD, [2006?]), [11], Private Collection.

²⁷ *Dorcas Society*, [5].

funds for the church. In closing— here we find the spirit of friendliness, cooperation and hardy good will. And we have tried to help not only the local church, but in other ways, as sending clothing to the children's home, quilts or food to those who have lost their homes by fire, and flowers and cards to sick or bereaved ones.²⁸

The record book for 1907 indicates that Dudley Ladies Aid held seven events that year, including three ice cream socials, a necktie social party, a bazaar, and three other events raising a total of \$213.70 during the year. Money raised by the group paid the minister a \$93.00 salary for three months in 1908.²⁹

A week after their organizational meeting, the Presbyterian Ladies Aid of White Lake hosted a music and literary social at the school. From 1884 through 1888, members organized a mush and milk social at one of the local hotels, hosted several other types of socials, served an oyster supper for 50 cents per plate, gave the church \$200.00, held a three-day fair that earned \$237.00, purchased an organ, and paid to install hitching posts at the church.³⁰

As part of their society's ongoing fundraising efforts, the Norwegian-Lutheran women, in Belford Township, cooperated to make home spun yarn to sell mittens and stockings. Some of funds raised helped to purchase supplies, such as yarn, shirting, and calico. Sewing items during their meetings or working on them at their homes, the ladies made practical articles of clothing and also fancy articles to sell at auction events that sometimes included the sale of homemade ice cream, a program of entertainment in the Norwegian language, and a variety of contests and races. The first such auction raised \$9.43

²⁸ Leila Williams, "History of Dudley Ladies Aid," 1933, [1], Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

²⁹ Minutes, Dudley Ladies Aid, 1906-1921, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

³⁰ *100 Years of Progress*, 8; *Aurora County History*, 117-18; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 19.

in 1895. In addition to setting aside money to build a church, they sent money to the general fund of the Norwegian Lutheran Church and foreign missions, including a donation in 1917 of \$1115.00 to help purchase an X-Ray machine for a mission hospital in China. In 1916, having raised \$1,485.27 at a Fourth of July event and a Thanksgiving dinner, the group purchased an empty building for \$995.65 to be used as a community gathering space.³¹

In Truro Township, the Lutheran ladies of the Tabitha Ladies Aid Society raised funds to beautify the church interior. Supporting the group's missionary goal, members sewed aprons and shirts for children at the Orphan's Home at Waverly, Iowa. Some of the money raised by selling quilts provided funds to purchase supplies. In addition, the group sent Christmas boxes to New Guinea.³² In 1918 and 1919, the Plankinton Methodist Ladies Aid Society funded improvements to the parsonage, including a porch and a furnace.³³

At their meetings, the Dutch ladies of the Dorcas Society sewed aprons, nightgowns, and embroidered, knitted, and crocheted items. They also cut rags and made layettes for new babies. The ladies sold the goods they made and served lunches at the Mission Fest, Thanksgiving services, and Christmas services. Their records prior to 1926 do not indicate how Dorcas Society spent their money, but in the late 1920s, most of the income purchased items for the parsonage and the church.³⁴

³¹ "Sales and Suppers," 1929, [1-4], Historical Documents, Storla Lutheran Church, Letcher, SD.

³² *St. Paul Lutheran Church, Stickney*, [16].

³³ *The First Methodist Church, 75th Anniversary*, [3].

³⁴ *Dorcas Society*, [5].

The ladies of the Underwood Methodist Church in Patten Township hosted turkey dinners, oyster suppers, and box socials.³⁵ In the 2006 church memory book, Phyllis Salmon described how those meals and socials contributed to the community; "All these meals and socials were held in the homes until the church was built. Some of these events had the homes bursting at the seams. Some told of the piles of coats being covered by sleeping children. Everyone worked together to make them fun while at the same time uniting the Community."³⁶ Desiring music for church services, then held in a schoolhouse, the Patten women obtained a pump organ for their first purchase. In 1912, the women hosted a chicken supper to pay for a new stable built behind the church, bringing all tables, seats, and eating utensils from their homes to temporarily furnish the new, and not yet used, stable.³⁷

Concerned about religious education, especially for their own children, women also participated in organizing and teaching summer religion school and Sunday school. After organizing and raising fifteen dollars in 1888, Zion's Ladies in Belford Township hired a teacher and located the Norwegian school in an empty granary. A church history, read at a dedication festival in 1929, described the granary as "indeed very inconvenient, but the parents were thankful for even such a place to assemble their children and have them instructed in the word of God."³⁸ Members of Dudley Ladies Aid managed the religious education of their church. Their report for 1906 shows them holding lessons twice per month, except in August, with about fifty people in attendance. Some classes consisted of adults only. Married and single women delivered most of the lessons. The society collected

³⁵ *Aurora County History*, 120.

³⁶ Salmon, *Memories of the Little Church That Could*, [6].

³⁷ *Ibid.*, [11].

³⁸ "Storla Lutheran Church," 1929, [1].

pennies from students, bringing in eighty-three cents in October of 1906.³⁹ Once again, women moved into more public spaces to further the work of their communities.

The women of Aurora County, whether living in town or on farms, worked collectively, through their churches, to advance causes important to them. Ladies Aid societies brought women into the public arena by extending their domestic skills of sewing and cooking beyond their homes. They helped to organize and teach religion classes. In addition, through organizing and hosting public events, those women gained new skills beyond those needed to manage a home. Women in Ladies Aid societies contributed to community-building by bringing women together to socialize with each other, to work as a team to pursue a cause, and to provide leadership within the larger community at public events. Their financial aid contributed to the success of their religious organizations, and the social aspect of their fundraising helped to foster communities of mutual interest. In Aurora County, the church offered a welcoming environment for women to work collectively outside their homes to shape their communities.

Crusading Women

1906 Woman's Christian Temperance Union Annual Report: Fourth District, White Lake; Thirty-one paid active members with L.T. L. just organized. Visited by State L.T.L. Secretary Miss Cogan. Entertained the district convention. Town license but traffic diminishing because our specific work has been an effort to remove the saloon by creating public sentiment. All women use right of school suffrage and by their efforts secured a clean man on the school board. Have a curfew. Four Signals taken. Helped to organize the union at Plankinton. Money raised \$128.17.⁴⁰

³⁹ Dudley Methodist Sunday School Secretary's Report, 1900-1907, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

⁴⁰ Woman's Christian Temperance Union (hereafter cited as WCTU), *Minutes of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Parker, SD, 1906*, 51, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1901-1906, Woman's Christian Temperance Union Collection, Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD (hereafter cited as WCTU Records at CWS).

Ladies Aid societies and other social or benevolent organizations, while facilitating community and giving women opportunities to work for a common cause, also provided a training ground for women to learn skills they needed to enter the public sphere and collectively advocate for political change. Reform organizations provided the structure for women to influence laws that limited the abuse of alcohol, protected women and children, and gave women full voting rights. The following section provides an overview of women's organizations, social, benevolent, and reform-minded, that formed in Aurora County in the years from 1880 to 1920, followed by a discussion regarding the political role played by women in Aurora County as they took advantage of their right to partial school suffrage and fought to limit the abuse of alcohol and to win full voting rights.

Aurora County provided opportunities for women to organize in strictly local groups and groups with state or national affiliations. The earliest organizations centered around benevolent or social causes, providing opportunities for women to practice group leadership and public speaking skills. Some groups catered exclusively to women. Others included men. Civil War veterans' wives and widows organized the first formal women's organization in the county, the Woman's Relief Corps, about 1883. An auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic, the corps promoted patriotism and assisted veterans and veterans' families. As the sixth corps out of sixty-eight corps established in the state before 1900, Plankinton reported thirty-eight members in 1900, with Adele Granger, the Plankinton hotelkeeper, serving as installing officer.⁴¹ Popular in the early years, literary clubs often included both men and women. Minutes of the Finlayson Literary Society from 1895

⁴¹ Woman's Relief Corps, *Journal of Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Convention of the Dept. of South Dakota Woman's Relief Corps*, 1900, 42, 45. Date established was estimated, based on 1900 being the seventeenth convention and Aurora County being the sixth corps. See Chapter Two for Granger's story. Granger is listed as "Addie" in the report.

indicate such societies organized socials, wrote newsletters, and held debates, thus providing women occasions to participate in public conversations regarding issues of public interest.⁴²

Some groups organized to provide a community service or to form a women's auxiliary to a men's fraternal organization. In March of 1892, thirty-two women in Plankinton organized a Ladies Cemetery Association to ensure care of the local graveyard, with thirty additional women joining by June. With membership open to anyone in the county, the organization's work involved raising funds to plant trees and to build a perimeter fence, engaging women in a common cause, regardless of religious affiliation. When White Lake organized a cemetery association in 1915, charter membership included both men and women.⁴³ A chapter of the fraternal organization, the Order of the Eastern Star (OES), formed in May of 1895 in Plankinton. Associated with the local Masonic Lodge, the rules limited membership to the male members of the lodge and their female relatives, subject to a vote. With a focus on sociability and some charitable activities, women provided leadership, with both women and men serving on committees. A White Lake chapter of OES did not organize until 1914.⁴⁴

While some groups organized for purely social reasons, those social clubs contributed to community by giving women a mechanism for strengthening bonds of friendship. Posing for a photograph in 1895, six young, married women from Plankinton, calling themselves "The Sillie Six Club," signaled the social nature of their group by the

⁴² Minutes, Finlayson Literary and Debating Society, 1893-1897.

⁴³ Minutes, Ladies Cemetery Association of Plankinton, SD, 1892-1911, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD; *100 Years of Progress*, 71.

⁴⁴ Minutes, Order of the Eastern Star, Lacotah Chapter #30, 28 May 1885, Plankinton, SD; *100 Years of Progress*, 74. There may have been other female lodge organizations, but no definitive documentation was discovered.

name they selected.⁴⁵ A photo of fourteen women posing in a farmyard and labeled “The Jolly Hens of 1908” documented farm women participating in their own social groups in the early years of the twentieth century.⁴⁶

Prior to 1920, some Aurora County women participated in reform-minded organizations that affiliated with state and national associations. Campaigning to close local saloons, the most politically active women in Aurora County belonged to the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, a national organization with state and local affiliates. In 1874, a year when women in several states organized temperance crusades and marched in the streets to close saloons, the national Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) emerged as a female-only organization, drawing from a predominantly native-born, white, and Protestant population, working to transform domesticity into “a demand that maternal values shape public behavior.”⁴⁷ A woman involved in the temperance crusade in Ohio helped to organize the first territorial union in 1878, in Elk Point, a city in the far southeastern corner of the territory. The state organization was not officially established until the first Dakota convention four years later. By 1893, the WCTU was issuing its own publication, *The White Ribbon Journal*, to unify efforts throughout the state. Local WCTU unions organized by departments and worked to influence legislation in a number of areas. Local unions also performed educational and charitable works in their communities.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Sillie Six Club, Plankinton*, Photograph, 1895, White Family Scrapbook, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

⁴⁶ *The Jolly Hens of 1908*, Photograph, 1908, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 127–29; Genevieve McBride, *On Wisconsin Women* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 58–61.

⁴⁸ Emma I. Swartz, ed., *History of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Dakota* (Rapid City, SD: Daily Journal, 1900), 7–10; Alvin John Brunn, “The History of the Temperance Movement in South Dakota to 1917” (master’s thesis, University of South Dakota, 1948),

As early as 1886, three years before statehood, WCTU women in Aurora County actively participated in prohibition efforts, as reported in the *Mitchell Daily Republic*: “The ladies of the WCTU would be on hand today with a ticket, with a hope of getting in a prohibition council and rooting out the saloons.”⁴⁹ The WCTU organization of 1886 likely disbanded, as no local union from Aurora County appeared in the WCTU annual report of 1895.⁵⁰ In 1906, two new unions organized in the county, one in White Lake and one in Plankinton. Stickney women created a union in 1912, and a year later, a union named Underwood joined the state WCTU. The local unions engaged in a number of public actions in their efforts to influence the moral character of their communities. Local WCTU activities will be examined later in this chapter during the discussion on prohibition and woman suffrage ballot measures.⁵¹

In the early 1880s, when the Dakota Farmers’ Alliance organized to advocate for improving economic conditions for farm families, the organization welcomed both men and women. Active female members entered the public sphere to organize meetings, speak in public, and write articles. The Alliance embraced the Populist movement and supported the People’s Party to elect lawmakers and legislation favorable to farm interests. Providing

48. The South Dakota WCTU annual reports referenced the local organizations as unions, which was the term used in this paper.

⁴⁹ “Plankinton,” *Mitchell (SD) Daily Republican*, April 15, 1886.

⁵⁰ WCTU, *Minutes of the WCTU of South Dakota: Pierre, SD*, 1895, 97-98, Box 2, Folder 4, Annual Convention, Jane Rasker Breeden Papers, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD.

⁵¹ WCTU, *Eighteenth Annual Convention*, 1906, 74–75, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1901-1906, WCTU Records at CWS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-fourth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Pierre, SD*, 1912, 33, Box 7021, Folder F1, Woman's Christian Temperance Union Records, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD (hereafter cited as WCTU Records at SDSHS); WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-fifth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Watertown, SD*, 1913, 115–16, Box 7021, Folder F1, WCTU Records at SDSHS.

evidence that some women aligned with the Populist movement, the membership roster of the South Dakota Farmers' Alliance lists the names of eighteen women, most of them married, from Aurora County. Although the Populist movement was short-lived, ethnic and rural voting blocks helped South Dakota to elect a Populist governor in 1896, when the Democrats and Populists merged into the People's Party.⁵²

Aurora County women did not participate in the national club movement until 1918. Founded in 1890, the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), a national organization of women's clubs, first appeared in South Dakota in 1900, with the state reporting a membership of 2,000 women by 1914. While not generally reform-minded at first, those groups provided opportunities for women to gather outside of their homes and discuss public issues. The clubs later became more civic-minded, focusing on benevolent efforts concerning women and children.⁵³ By 1913, the state federation officially supported full woman suffrage, with its name appearing on the letterhead of the state suffrage organization, the Universal Franchise League, along with the Woman's Relief Corps and the WCTU. The first Aurora County club to affiliate with the national GFWC, the Fortnightly Club of White Lake, organized in 1915, but did not join the state federation until 1918.⁵⁴

⁵² R. Alton Lee, *Principle Over Party: The Farmers' Alliance and Populism in South Dakota: 1880-1900* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, 2011), 20–23, 69–71, 131–32; "South Dakota Farmer's Alliance Due Paying Members, 1890-1894," *South Dakota State Historical Society*, accessed October 4, 2015, <http://history.sd.gov/archives/farmers/Search.aspx>. The web page title is spelled in the footnote as it appears on the web site.

⁵³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 150; South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, *Annual Report of the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs* (Aberdeen, SD: American Publishing, 1914), 7, Women's Clubs, Vertical File Collection. South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD.

⁵⁴ Alice Pickler to Mary Noyes Farr, 8 October 1913, Box 1, Folder 2, Woman Suffrage Movement Papers 1889-1925, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD (hereafter cited as Woman Suffrage Movement Papers); *100 Years of Progress*, 74–75.

While women in Aurora County, mostly those living in towns, found some opportunities to organize, they were slow to join state organizations and joined more for social reasons than to pursue reform efforts. Club membership provided an opportunity for women to develop networks of common interest, work on collective projects, and discuss public topics, building skills to engage more fully in the public sphere. Women in the WCTU unions pursued the most political agenda of any women's groups in that time, actively engaging in temperance and woman suffrage activities.

Woman suffrage and temperance emerged as political issues early in the history of the territory, with many men and women supporting woman suffrage as a means to limit the sale and distribution of alcohol. In 1872, three years after Wyoming Territory became the first state or territory in the United States to fully enfranchise women, the Dakota territorial legislature came within one vote of approving the right of full woman suffrage. In 1885, when the only fully enfranchised women lived in the territories of Wyoming, Utah, and Washington, full woman suffrage lost to the veto pen of the territorial governor. After statehood, in 1889, woman suffrage appeared on statewide ballots seven times, once as full school suffrage, before being approved in 1918, making South Dakota one of the early states to fully enfranchise women. Only eleven states and the Territory of Alaska had granted full woman suffrage prior to that year, and all but Kansas and New York were located to the west of South Dakota.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Sally Roesch Wagner, ed., *Fighting for the Vote in South Dakota* (Aberdeen, SD: Sky Carrier Press, 1995), 90, 98; Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, Revised Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 368. By 1887, Congress had annulled woman suffrage in the Territory of Utah, and the Supreme Court of Washington had declared the law granting woman suffrage unconstitutional.

Attaining some voting rights, Dakota Territory women won, lost, and regained partial school suffrage before statehood in 1889. Women in the territory achieved partial suffrage in 1879, with a bill that allowed them to vote at school meetings and run for school offices. Prior to that year, only seven states had passed any type of school suffrage law that gave women a voice in school matters. The state abridged those rights in 1883, when a new township law required a private ballot rather than special meetings, effectively disenfranchising women. The legislature of 1887 restored partial school suffrage for women. In the 1894 election, voters failed to extend school suffrage, which would have allowed women to vote, not only for school trustees but also for state and county superintendents. By 1895, more than half the states had enacted some type of law permitting women to vote on school matters.⁵⁶

Several years before finally winning full suffrage, a few women in Aurora County took advantage of partial school suffrage to enter the public arena. The voters, men and women, elected Anna Lamp to a three-year term as clerk for Cooper Township schools in 1899. Maggie W. Nelson won the vote for chairman in 1904 and served four years in the same township. In 1913, several women met and selected Maud Bray and Agnes Sullivan to run for school board in Plankinton. Although unsuccessful that year, both Sullivan and Martha Bakewell achieved seats on the school board in 1918, serving three years and nine

⁵⁶ Reed, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in South Dakota*, 114–17; Wagner, *Fighting for the Vote in South Dakota*, 90–91; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 365; Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, vol. 1 (B. F. Bowen, 1904), 597, 601, <http://archive.org/details/historyofsouthda01robi>.

years, respectively. By winning elective offices, those women occupied the public sphere and provided leadership in their communities.⁵⁷

Although the law prevented women from voting for county superintendent of schools, they could run for that office, and in the three decades before they achieved full suffrage, four women in Aurora County held that office for a total of fourteen years.⁵⁸ Two of those women, Kate Taubman and Alice Shouse, exemplified rather remarkable women for that era. Taubman became the second woman to run for a statewide office in South Dakota, and Shouse won her first election at the age of twenty-one years.⁵⁹

Taubman came close to being the first woman elected to statewide office when she lost the election for state superintendent of public instruction in 1896 by only 270 votes. Running as a Populist on the People's Party ticket, Taubman received 49.6 percent of the state vote and 59.4 percent of Aurora County's vote. In an article profiling all People's Party nominees on the 1896 ticket, *The Dakota Farmers' Leader* newspaper of Canton, South Dakota, praised Taubman's qualifications for the position.

⁵⁷ South Dakota, Aurora County Superintendent of Schools, Superintendent's Record, 131, 152, 173; No title, *Plankinton South Dakota Mail*, June 5, 1913; Lennis J. Long, "A History of the Plankinton School, Plankinton, South Dakota: 1882-1954" (master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 1954), 80–81. The list of female school board members was not comprehensive, as school election records were not found for all years and all locations.

⁵⁸ South Dakota, Aurora County, *Dedication of the New Aurora County Courthouse, July 9, 1940* (Plankinton, SD: Aurora County, 1940), 14, Aurora County Collection, Aurora County Historical Society, Plankinton, SD. The program for the dedication of the courthouse listed past and present county officials.

⁵⁹ South Dakota Secretary of State, *Fifth Biennial Report* (Huron, SD, 1900), 142; "Alice J. Shouse," in *Memorial and Biographical Record; an Illustrated Compendium of Biography, Containing a Compendium of Local Biography, Including Biographical Sketches of Prominent Old Settlers and Representative Citizens of South Dakota...* (Chicago: G. A. Ogle, 1899), 532–33, <http://files.usgwarchives.net/sd/biography/memor99/shouse.txt>. The first women on a state ballot, Susan Hassell ran as an Independent for superintendent of public instruction in 1892, receiving 32 percent of the state vote.

Miss Kate Taubman, of Plankinton, Aurora County, was nominated for Superintendent of Public Instruction. She is at present principal of the Aberdeen schools, and is well known in various parts of the state as an educator of remarkable ability and thoroughly qualified to handle the responsible duties of the office. Miss Taubman keeps abreast of the times in everything pertaining to advanced and scientific education. She will be an honor to the position and the state.⁶⁰

Taubman, born in 1862 in Iowa, had earned her degree from Iowa State Normal School. She taught school in Iowa before moving to Aurora County in 1882, when she first taught in the Plankinton city school, then served as principal, before being elected as county superintendent of schools in 1890. In her first years in the county, Taubman took advantage of the homesteading laws to become a landowner. By 1884, Taubman had obtained patents to two quarters of land in South Dakota, one in Palatine Township near her father's homestead, and another, just north of Aurora County, in Jerauld County. In 1892, Taubman accepted the role of recording secretary of the South Dakota Educational Association. After serving in that office for three years, she became the first female elected as president of the association. By 1896, when Taubman ran for state superintendent, she had joined the National Education Association and held the position of high school principal in Aberdeen, South Dakota.⁶¹ In an era when few women achieved her level of

⁶⁰ "People's Party Nominees," *Canton (SD) Dakota Farmers' Leader*, July 24, 1895, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

⁶¹ "Proud of an Iowa Girl," *Waterloo (IA) Courier*, October 2, 1896, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>; "High School Items," *Mitchell (SD) Daily Republican*, March 13, 1886, access.newspaper.archive.com; South Dakota, Aurora County, *Dedication of the New Aurora County Courthouse, July 9, 1940*, 14; Homestead Accession Number SDMTAA 140298, "Kate Taubman," December 20, 1884, BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD; Homestead Accession Number SDMTAA 140300, "William P. Taubman," December 20, 1884, BLM Land Patents, Aurora County, SD; Homestead Accession Number SDMTAA 145218, "Kate Taubman," December 4, 1884, BLM Land Patents, Jerauld County, SD; *Biennial Address of Governor Charles N Herreid to the Ninth Legislative Session* (Pierre, SD: State Publishing, 1905), 182; *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Forty-First Annual Meeting* (Minneapolis, MN: National Education Association, 1902), 899, <https://books.google.com/books?id=Idk-AQAAMAAJ>.

prominence, Taubman stood out as a strong woman in a leadership role. In her twelve years of residency in Aurora County, Taubman developed the skills and confidence to run for statewide political office and advance as a leader in the education community.

After Taubman served as county superintendent of schools, voters elected Martha I. Turney for a two-year term, and then elected Alice Shouse, the daughter of a prominent physician in Plankinton. Shouse had received her high school degree at the age of fifteen years and her college degree three years later, in 1893. While teaching in Aurora County, twenty-one-year-old Shouse won election for county superintendent of schools in 1896, assuming the responsibility for supervising seventy-three rural schools with about twelve hundred students. Two years later, the male voters gave Shouse a second term. While serving as superintendent, Shouse attended the Populist state convention of 1898 as a delegate and assistant secretary of the convention.⁶² Her biography, appearing in an 1899 compendium of biographies, addressed the topic of women in public roles.

Alice J. Shouse, South Dakota, in common with many of her sister states of the new west, has shown a commendable inclination to look for merit, and to refuse to be hampered in its search by consideration of sex. Among those who stand as worthy exponents of the capacity of women for duties of a public character an enviable rank is accorded the lady whose name heads this article.⁶³

For both Taubman and Shouse, laws that allowed women to hold elective offices related to schools provided acceptable means to enter the public arena and provide community leadership.

Working to expand school suffrage into full voting rights, pro-suffrage forces continued to advocate for full suffrage while temperance forces pushed for stronger liquor

⁶² South Dakota, South Dakota, Aurora County, *Dedication of the New Aurora County Courthouse, July 9, 1940*, 14; "Alice J. Shouse," 523–33.

⁶³ "Alice J. Shouse," 533.

regulation laws. The two issues of woman suffrage and prohibition, while separate, often engaged the same forces, both in favor and in opposition. Temperance and women's groups that favored prohibition increasingly favored suffrage. Those who opposed prohibition also opposed suffrage, such as the liquor industry and the German-American Alliance, an organization serving new German immigrants. After statehood in 1889, woman suffrage appeared on the ballot seven times, finally winning a majority in 1918. During that same period, the legislature passed numerous laws and proposed several amendments regarding the regulation of alcohol, with state voters approving prohibition in 1889, repealing the law in 1896, and once more approving prohibition in 1916. That same year, a suffrage amendment failed. Two years later, the full suffrage amendment passed with a majority of 63 percent.⁶⁴ The table in Figure 5 summarizes the votes in the state's six elections for full woman suffrage and the 1894 election for partial suffrage.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Patricia O'Keefe Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota: The Final Decade, 1911-1920," *South Dakota History* 13, no. 3 (1983): 208, 212; Chuck Vollan, "'Bone Dry': South Dakota's Flawed Adoption of Alcohol Prohibition," *South Dakota History* 45, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 191, 211; Wagner, *Fighting for the Vote in South Dakota*, 98.

⁶⁵ South Dakota Secretary of State, *Fifth Biennial Report*, 131, 153, 159, 177-79, 189; South Dakota State, *Official Vote of South Dakota by Counties* (Aberdeen, SD, 1912), 158, 191, 193; South Dakota Bureau of Public Printing, *Legislative Manual* (Pierre, SD, 1919), 311-12, 316, 385-86, 429. Both liquor regulation and suffrage measures appeared on the ballots of 1898, 1910, 1914, and 1916. The elections of 1892, 1902, 1904, 1906, and 1912 did not include votes on either of those two topics. I tabulated election results using Microsoft Excel.

Year	South Dakota State Votes				State	County
	Yes	No	Total	Majority	Percent	Percent
1890	22,072	45,862	67,934	(23,790)	32%	37%
1894	17,010	22,682	39,692	(5,672)	43%	44%
1898	19,698	22,983	42,681	(3,285)	46%	46%
1910	35,290	57,709	92,999	(22,419)	38%	34%
1914	39,605	51,519	91,124	(11,914)	43%	45%
1916	53,432	58,350	111,782	(4,918)	48%	43%
1918	49,318	28,934	78,252	20,384	63%	60%
	Aurora County				State	County
	Yes	No	Total	Majority	Percent	Percent
1890	**	**	**	**	32%	37%
1894	284	358	642	(74)	43%	44%
1898	240	279	519	(39)	46%	46%
1910	430	836	1,266	(406)	38%	34%
1914	570	706	1,276	(136)	43%	45%
1916	609	815	1,424	(206)	48%	43%
1918	647	435	1,081	211	63%	60%

** Vote counts not found

Figure 5: South Dakota and Aurora County Woman Suffrage Votes, Election Data.

In addition to their public participation in school issues, reform-minded women in Aurora County engaged in public debates on full woman suffrage and liquor regulation. The first of seven campaigns for full or partial woman suffrage amendments came in 1890, just one year after statehood, and during a period of severe drought, most acutely affecting the James River Valley.⁶⁶ That same year, Wyoming had entered the union and become the first state with full woman suffrage. Women in Montana Territory also possessed full voting rights.⁶⁷ In the 1890 campaign, the state suffrage organization identified five individuals as

⁶⁶ Schell, "Drought and Agriculture in Eastern South Dakota During the Eighteen Nineties," 163-64.

⁶⁷ Holly J. McCammon and Karen E. Campbell, "Winning the Vote in the West: The Political Successes of the Women's Suffrage Movements, 1866-1919," *Gender and Society* 15, no. 1

contacts in Aurora County. A Mrs. Albert Brown represented Belford Township, an area where many Norwegians had settled. Her name also appeared in the Farmers' Alliance Membership roster for that year. Plankinton contact names included T. N. Treat, a strong prohibitionist and editor of the newspaper, the *Dakota Beacon*, and two others, J. V. Willis and a Mrs. C. D. Chase. The report listed a minister, the Reverend A. L. Michel, as the White Lake connection.⁶⁸

Although some letters from the contacts expressed concern that many of those in favor of suffrage had already moved away due to the drought, the letters also mention distributing literature, sending a taxpayer list, and arranging dates for speakers. In communications to the South Dakota Equal Suffrage Association, Mrs. C. R. Waters, wife of a Methodist minister, signed her name as president of the county association. Waters wrote to the state committee hoping to postpone a visit by Carrie Lane Chapman, "as we have just had two excellent lecturers within the past two weeks."⁶⁹ Chapman, later Catt, was working as a South Dakota speaker for the National American Woman Suffrage Association and would later become its president, holding that position when the nineteenth amendment

(February 2001): 56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081830>; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 368. Woman suffrage in Washington and Utah Territories had been revoked by 1890.

⁶⁸ South Dakota Equal Suffrage Association, list of Aurora County contacts, 14 August 1890, Box 6675, Folder 2, 1890 Campaign, Pickler Family Papers, 1865-1976, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD (hereafter cited as Pickler Family Papers); "South Dakota Farmer's Alliance Due Paying Members, 1890-1894"; "Fine Tribute to T. N. Treat," *Plankinton (SD) Herald*, December 9, 1919; *Aurora County History*, 105. The last two sources provided personal information about Brown and Treat. No additional information was found for Brown, Willis, Chase and Michel.

⁶⁹ Mrs. C. R. Waters to Will F. Bailey, 3 October 1890, Box 6674, Folder 5, Pickler Family Papers; Mrs. C. D. Chase to Will F. Bailey, 28 September 1890, Box 6674, Folder 1, Pickler Family Papers; Mrs. M. E. Kline to Will F. Bailey, 6 October 1890, Box 6674, Folder 3, Pickler Family Papers; T. N. Treat to Will F. Bailey, 20 October 1890, Box 6674, Folder 5, Pickler Family Papers. No first name was found for Mrs. C. R. Waters.

passed in 1920, granting all women in the United States the right to vote.⁷⁰ Waters suggested Chapman come on a day nearer to the election or “would she be willing to lecture in the country instead of in the town as there has been but little school house work done in our county?”⁷¹ In the 1890 campaign, with ministers, minister’s wives, and a prohibitionist newspaper editor providing much of the leadership, temperance provided a stronger motivation than women’s rights. In that election, only 32 percent of state voters and 37 percent of Aurora County voters favored woman suffrage.⁷²

When the suffrage question and another liquor regulation clause appeared on the ballot in 1898, Aurora County had just started recovering from the drought that affected the 1890 campaign and a devastating bank failure that exacerbated misery and divisions among the population, especially when the bank lost eleven thousand dollars belonging to the state agricultural college. Having lost one-third of their population, those who remained focused more on recovery than on politics.⁷³ The pastor of the Methodist Church in Plankinton, W. S. Shepherd, lamented the lack of interest, especially among women, in a letter to the state suffrage organization in August of 1898.

An attempt was made to continue the work through the winter, but the interest flagged and so few manifested any enthusiasm whatever, that the work was dropped and has not been resumed since, so there is practically no organization in the County at the present time. It is not the fault of the men above. At the meeting

⁷⁰ Jennifer M Ross-Nazzari, *Winning the West for Women: The Life of Suffragist Emma Smith DeVoe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 11, 70.

⁷¹ Mrs. C. R. Waters to Will F. Bailey, 3 October 1890.

⁷² Patricia O’Keefe Easton, “Opposition to Woman Suffrage in South Dakota” (master’s thesis, University of South Dakota, 1975), 133. County results for the 1890 amendment were not published with other official votes. The Easton paper provided the county percentages number.

⁷³ “Settling a Bank’s Affairs,” *St. Paul (MN) Daily Globe*, March 3, 1895; Lee, *Principle Over Party*, 126; Dakota Territory Dept. of Immigration and Statistics, “Monthly Bulletin of the Commissioner of Immigration,” 12; South Dakota State, “Census Report of South Dakota for 1895,” 12.

for organization presided over by Miss Moore the day following her address, not a dozen women were present and parties were elected to office who were not present, and have done nothing since. Scarcely a woman in this town has put forth a single effort to push the work, hence the lack of interest in general.⁷⁴

In a later letter, Shepherd declined to organize county meetings and even suggested “this work would produce better results in the older and more thickly settled counties east of here.”⁷⁵ When the state committee asked the White Lake minister, the Reverend William Underwood, to host a speaker in White Lake, his wife declined on his behalf, “Our town is very much run down as a great many went away a few years [ago] on account of the drought, therefore we have not many people living here. I don’t think you can do any thing in your line here. You cannot get a crowd out to hear you. It would be better to go some other place where there is a chance to do something.”⁷⁶

Louisa Hunter, using stationery that identified her as clerk of the Hopper School District, wrote more positively, requesting literature, translated into Norwegian, for a local farmer to distribute. Her letter references temperance as a strong motivation for woman suffrage in that area.⁷⁷ Even without a robust campaign, voters came very close to approving suffrage in 1898, with 46 percent of voters in both the state and the county voting yes. In Aurora County, the measure lost by 39 votes, with 519 votes counted.⁷⁸ Woman suffrage did not appear on the ballot again until 1910.

⁷⁴ Rev. W. S. Shepherd to Clare M. Williams, 12 August 1898, Box 6676, Folder 5, Pickler Family Papers.

⁷⁵ Rev. W. S. Shepherd to Clare M. Williams, 20 August 1898, Box 6676, Folder 5, Pickler Family Papers.

⁷⁶ Mrs. W. C. Underwood to Clare M. Williams, 9 September 1898, Box 6676, Folder 12, Pickler Family Papers.

⁷⁷ Louisa Worden Hunter to Clare M. Williams, 25 October 1898, Box 6676, Folder 18, Pickler Family Papers.

⁷⁸ South Dakota Secretary of State, *Fifth Biennial Report*, 177.

Two ballot measures that did succeed in 1898 influenced the next phase of women's political activity. In that election, South Dakota became the first state to adopt the Initiative and Referendum, allowing voters, through petition, to add measures to the ballot. Suffrage forces spent a great deal of effort obtaining sufficient signatures in 1903, only to discover that the new law did not allow for initiation of constitutional amendments.⁷⁹ Also in 1898, voters passed a liquor dispensary clause that placed all sale and manufacture of liquor under exclusive state law, but with no funds to administer, electors repealed the law in 1900, leaving an 1897 licensing law in effect. The licensing law authorized municipalities to issue liquor licenses, but only if approved by voters at the next municipal election, if at least twenty-five voters had petitioned to put the vote on the ballot. A 1903 amendment to that law limited those licenses to one year. Voters, therefore, could decide every year to make their communities wet or dry, and women worked collectively to influence that vote.⁸⁰

During the first decade of the new century, women in Aurora County organized WCTU unions to influence the moral culture of their communities and put an end to public drinking. WCTU women opened a gymnasium and reading room for boys, used the right of partial school suffrage to influence school board elections, fought to deny saloon licenses, erected a public drinking fountain, and worked together to provide charitable aid to those suffering in their communities. White Lake and Plankinton women organized local WCTU unions in 1906, with membership ranging between twenty-seven and thirty-seven women

⁷⁹ Ruth M. Hipple, "History of Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 1920, 1, Box 1, Folder 4, Woman Suffrage Movement Papers.

⁸⁰ South Dakota Secretary of State, *Fifth Biennial Report*, 177-79, 189; Vollan, "Bone Dry," 193-94; George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory, South Dakota: Its History and Its People*, ed. George Martin Smith, vol. 4 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing, 1915), 756, 792.

in White Lake, and between twenty and thirty-four women in Plankinton. Stickney created a local WCTU union with fifteen members in 2012. By 1921, the White Lake union boasted a little more than one hundred members, with no unions reporting from Plankinton or Stickney. An Underwood WCTU union briefly organized in 1913, drawing its members from the rural Underwood Methodist church.

White Lake WCTU women worked to achieve their goals more successfully than WCTU women in Plankinton and Stickney. According to the nine available WCTU annual reports between 1906 and 1916, White Lake members succeeded in their goal to convince the community to vote against liquor licenses five times, failed once, and did not report on licenses twice. Plankinton women succeeded only once in the five reports that mentioned the issue.⁸¹ Perhaps concerned about the German beer-drinking culture in predominantly German townships near White Lake, WCTU women fervently pursued a course to close saloons in their quest to improve the moral character of their communities. In 1900, 61

⁸¹ WCTU, *Eighteenth Annual Convention, 1906*, 75, 87; WCTU, *Minutes of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Milbank, SD, 1907*, 47, 61, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twentieth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Rapid City, SD, 1908*, 64, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-first Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Brookings, SD, 1909*, 28–29, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-second Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Huron, SD, 1910*, 48, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-third Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Aberdeen, SD, 1911*, 43, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS; WCTU, *Twenty-fourth Annual Convention, 1912*, 27, 33; WCTU, *Twenty-fifth Annual Convention, 1913*, 45; WCTU, *Minutes of the Twenty-eighth Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Madison, SD, 1916*, 40, Box 7021, Folder F2, WCTU Records at SDSHS; WCTU, *Minutes of the Thirty-third Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Watertown, SD, 1921*, 41, Box 1, Folder Annual Convention Reports: 1907-1921, WCTU Collection at CWS.

percent of those living in White Lake and Gales Townships claimed German ancestry.⁸² In 1906, White Lake WCTU, with thirty-one paid active members, reported, “Town license but traffic diminishing because our specific work has been an effort to remove the saloon by creating public sentiment. All women use right of school suffrage and by their efforts secured a clean man on the school board.”⁸³

In the 1907 annual report, the fourth district of the state WCTU, with twelve local unions, praised the White Lake women for their efforts to influence liquor licensing.

Three of our towns have closed the saloons during the year, largely through the influence of the WCTU, and other towns are being troubled by those “meddlesome women.” White Lake union was a strong factor in the work of closing the saloons there, where they have had a drinking mayor for twenty years. Besides doing all in their power to create sentiment they donated \$10.00 to the “Law and Order League,” encouraging them in the fight. They report, “Town quieter, less drinking, merchants have more trade.”⁸⁴

Consistent with WCTU women in other states, the 1907 report shows that some women took public positions in opposition to their husbands’ behavior. Sadie Loevinger, married to Ludwig Loevinger — the local banker who was also a German immigrant and the “drinking mayor,” — served as an officer of the White Lake WCTU in 1921.⁸⁵

White Lake WCTU pursued a number of activities to convey their message to their local community. National speakers brought the anti-drinking message to White Lake, as reported by the *Aurora County Standard* 1910, “Carrie Nation, the renowned prohibition

⁸² U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Twelfth Census of the United States.” (See note 60, Chapter One.)

⁸³ WCTU, *Eighteenth Annual Convention, 1906*, 51.

⁸⁴ WCTU, *Nineteenth Annual Convention, 1907*, 47.

⁸⁵ Gail Collins, *America’s Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*, Reissue edition (2003; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 316–18; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 5, 28; *100 Years of Progress*, 120–21; WCTU, *Minutes of the Thirty-third Annual Convention of the WCTU of South Dakota: Watertown, SD, 1921*, 81.

activist, stopped in White Lake in March to deliver a speech. She was termed an extremist and radical, but no more so than other reformers and her message had much worth.”⁸⁶ Julia Closson wrote a newspaper column, often reprinting messages from other sources, in the White Lake weekly newspaper, the *Aurora County Standard*.⁸⁷ When White Lake WCTU published a cookbook, circa 1910, the book included recipes from women of all faiths and published advertisements from the four town ministers, including the Catholic priest. A summary of events in 1911 highlighted the role of the White Lake union within the community, “Local officials were trying to crack down on illegal gambling in the city, and the saloons were the subject of constant discussion. The WCTU was active in trying to have the drinking of alcoholic beverages banned in White Lake. They erected a drinking fountain on Main Street so citizens could drink water instead of liquor.”⁸⁸

The women of the White Lake WCTU formed a close-knit group of women who shared many traits. Similar to the national membership, members were generally white, native-born, and Protestant. Mostly Methodist or Presbyterian, some members lived in the country, but most resided in town. Many of the members in White Lake, or their parents, had been some of the first pioneers to move to the area. Membership consisted of several mothers, daughters, sisters, mothers-in-law, and daughters-in-law. Wives and daughters of some of the most prominent businessmen in the town, the WCTU women’s family relationships included bankers, doctors, ministers, newspaper publishers, merchants,

⁸⁶ *100 Years of Progress*, 18.

⁸⁷ Mrs. C. L. Closson, “W.C.T.U. Column,” *White Lake (SD) Aurora County Standard*, July 15, 1910; The following resource was used to determine a first name for Mrs. C. L. Closson: Ancestry.com, “Julia M. Closson,” Year: 1900; Census Place: White Lake, Aurora, South Dakota; Roll: 1546; Page: 3B; Enumeration District: 0006; FHL microfilm: 1241546; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 28.

⁸⁸ *100 Years of Progress*, 19.

farmers, a county judge, and one former and one and future legislator. Married to newspaper publishers, Anna Hitchcock and Jessie Palmer held positions as local WCTU officers for several years. College educated, Palmer, treasurer of the White Lake union for three years, also headed the WCTU Fourth District Department of Parliamentary Usage for two years and then, in 1916, the Department of Press.⁸⁹

With the support of a core group of established families, the WCTU women successfully influenced the voters in White Lake, a town with a population of 507 in 1910.⁹⁰ The White Lake union fought every year from 1906 to 1916 to ensure the city would deny liquor licenses for any saloon, succeeding some years and failing others. That work ended when state voters approved prohibition in 1916.

In the second decade of the 1900s, as the WCTU women engaged in battles to change the drinking culture, woman suffrage once more became a ballot issue. After losing the woman suffrage vote in 1898, pro-suffrage forces worked to build support in the legislature. When another woman suffrage amendment was defeated in 1910, the South Dakota suffragists changed strategy to counter the major opponent of woman suffrage in many Midwestern states, the well-funded liquor industry. Under the leadership of Mamie

⁸⁹ *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 6–7, 11, 18; *100 Years of Progress*, 3, 22, 28, 43, 47, 49, 53, 74–75, 85–87, 109–10, 131, 135, 145, 156–58; White Lake WCTU, *WCTU Recipe Book* (White Lake, 1910); *Standard Atlas of Aurora County, South Dakota* (G. A. Ogle, 1909); WCTU, *Eighteenth Annual Convention, 1906*, 158–59; WCTU, *Nineteenth Annual Convention, 1907*, 142–43; WCTU, *Twentieth Annual Convention, 1908*, 147–48; WCTU, *Twenty-first Annual Convention, 1909*, 86–87, 94; WCTU, *Twenty-second Annual Convention, 1910*, 113–14, 123; WCTU, *Twenty-third Annual Convention, 1911*, 103–04; WCTU, *Twenty-fourth Annual Convention, 1912*, 88–89; WCTU, *Twenty-fifth Annual Convention, 1913*, 114–14; WCTU, *Twenty-eighth Annual Convention, 1916*, 111–12; WCTU, *Thirty-third Annual Convention 1921*, 80–81. *WCTU Recipe Book* (White Lake, SD [1910?]). The recipe book, publishing date estimated, was missing the front cover. The book included a supporter name with each submitted recipe.

⁹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 1:606.

Pyle Shields, the suffrage and temperance fights were separated, and the new state suffrage organization, the Universal Franchise League, worked only to secure equal voting rights for women. Amendments were proposed in 1914 and 1916, but while gaining support, still failed to win a majority among state voters.⁹¹ Several state women's organizations openly committed to the cause of woman suffrage. In 1913, the letterhead for the state suffrage organization contained the names of three other cooperating organizations: the Woman's Relief Corps, the Federation of Women's Clubs, and the WCTU. The South Dakota Educational Association, with a membership of fifteen hundred teachers, many of them women, also endorsed the suffrage campaign for the 1914 ballot.⁹²

Indicating a stronger interest locally, the fourth district of the WCTU, which included Aurora County, added a suffrage department in 1910, although none of the Aurora County unions reported any pro-suffrage activity. In 1916, Mary Thomas of White Lake served as district superintendent of the WCTU franchise department. Likely the leader of a network of pro-suffrage women, Thomas had helped to organize the first GFWC club in the county the year before, holding the office of president.⁹³ Several of the eleven charter members of

⁹¹ Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 206–08; Hipple, "History of Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 1–2; Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, rev. ed. 1975 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959), 305.

⁹² Alice Pickler to Mary Noyes Farr, 8 October 1913, Box 1, Folder 2, Woman Suffrage Movement Papers; South Dakota Franchise League to National American Woman Suffrage Association, 19 November 1913, Woman Suffrage Movement Papers, 1889-1925, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD (hereafter cited as Woman Suffrage Movement Papers).

⁹³ WCTU, *Twenty-second Annual Convention, 1910*, 111; WCTU, *Twenty-eighth Annual Convention, 1916*, 111; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 25.

that club, including Sadie Loevinger, participated in both the White Lake WCTU and the White Lake Order of the Eastern Star.⁹⁴

Local records reveal little about woman suffrage activity for those three failed campaigns, except for the votes. In 1910, 38 percent of state voters approved woman suffrage, while only 34 percent of Aurora County voters approved the measure. In 1914, the state organization had difficulty recruiting local women to conduct campaign work, concluding that, “for many women, the suffrage issue generated painful memories of previous campaigns of slight, rebuffs, quarrels, condemnations, and defeat. It was easier to let it alone.”⁹⁵ By 1916 though, the state had increased its woman suffrage yes vote to 48 percent, and Aurora County had increased to 43 percent. The suffragists blamed the German-heritage counties for defeating woman suffrage in 1916. Only fifteen counties out of sixty-three voted less favorably on the measure than Aurora County in their support for woman suffrage. Heavily German-heritage White Lake Township gave only a 20 percent approval rate for suffrage, while 67 percent of Norwegian-heritage Belford Township voters approved the measure.⁹⁶

Prohibition had become a national cause by the time South Dakota passed its law in 1916, with fifteen states already dry and two others voting for prohibition that same year. While woman suffrage failed in South Dakota that year, prohibition passed with 55 percent of state voters, but only 48 percent of Aurora County voters. Aurora County was one of twelve counties with a minority vote for prohibition. German-Americans tended to oppose

⁹⁴ *100 Years of Progress*, 74–75.

⁹⁵ Easton, “Woman Suffrage in South Dakota,” 214–15; South Dakota Secretary of State, *Fifth Biennial Report*, 191.

⁹⁶ South Dakota Bureau of Public Printing, *Legislative Manual*, 385; Easton, “Woman Suffrage in South Dakota,” 218; South Dakota, Aurora County Clerk, Plankinton, SD, Election Record, Vol. 2, 1914-1920. I tabulated election results using Microsoft Excel.

prohibition, while those claiming Norwegian ancestry held more favorable views, which can be seen in the voting patterns in Aurora County. In White Lake Township, only 26 percent of the voters voiced approval of prohibition, while 79 percent of voters in Belford Township approved the measure.⁹⁷

When the final suffrage campaign of 1918 started, women in eleven states and one territory were fully enfranchised, prohibition was state law, and the country was in the middle of an influenza epidemic and fighting a foreign war with a German enemy. The suffrage amendment, in addition to striking out the word male, required full naturalization of immigrant voters. At that time, South Dakota was one of six states that allowed alien males to vote before becoming citizens, as long as they had taken the first step in applying for citizenship. In 1915, people of German ancestry accounted for 31 percent of the population of Aurora County, one of nineteen counties with a German-heritage population of at least 25 percent. Concerns about aliens, especially Germans, voting while American-born soldiers could not, caused the legislature to add a citizenship clause. Therefore, the 1918 suffrage amendment, called the Citizenship Amendment, asked South Dakota voters to simultaneously enfranchise women and disenfranchise aliens. The suffragists used the citizenship clause to mute the opposition, calling anyone against the measure a sympathizer of the German enemy.⁹⁸

While the suffrage campaign benefited from a liquor industry silenced by the prohibition amendment of 1916 and the anti-suffragists silenced by the anti-alien clause,

⁹⁷ Vollan, "Bone Dry," 194; Lee, *Principle Over Party*, 73; South Dakota Bureau of Public Printing, *Legislative Manual*, 386; South Dakota, Aurora County Clerk, Plankinton, SD, Election Record, Vol. 2, 1914-1920. I tabulated election results using Microsoft Excel.

⁹⁸ Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 218, 223-25; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 368; Robert F. Karolevitz, *Challenge: The South Dakota Story* (Sioux Falls, SD: Brevet Press, 1978), 246.

apathy among women and their preoccupation with both war and the influenza epidemic created new challenges in finding people to work on the woman suffrage campaign. To address the apathy, the campaign collected women's signatures through a "county-by-county petition drive and then printed and mailed the signed petitions, along with two suffrage pamphlets, to each voter in every county."⁹⁹

Notes prepared by Mamie Shields Pyle, president of the state suffrage association, reference local women active in organizing Aurora County in the 1916 and 1918 campaigns. A list created in January of 1918 identified three county contacts; Ivy Stemler of Plankinton, Anna Hockett of Stickney, and Mary Thomas of White Lake.¹⁰⁰ Stemler's husband served as Aurora County Clerk for more than forty years; Hockett, born in Norway, belonged to a Quaker congregation; and Thomas, district superintendent of the WCTU franchise department in 1916, helped to organize the first GFWC club in White Lake. In February, Pyle corresponded with Stemler, the 1916 coordinator, soliciting help with the pending visit of an organizer, to help the speaker "get in touch with the women of Plankinton, who believe in the right of franchise."¹⁰¹ Pyle then notified Thomas about the

⁹⁹ Easton, "Woman Suffrage in South Dakota," 224. A search through microfiche of local newspapers found no evidence that Aurora County women participated, but not all editions of 1918 newspapers were available.

¹⁰⁰ The South Dakota Universal Franchise League, "County Chairmen to Whom Copy of Editor's Letter Was Mailed," [1918?], Box 1, Folder 1918, January, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD (hereafter cited as Mamie Shields Pyle Papers); Don Furchner, "Veteran Aurora County Court Clerk Soon Begins 21st Term," *Storla (SD) Tri-County Journal*, 1932, Folder Aurora County Scrapbook, Pioneer Daughters Collection; *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 139; *White Lake Community History: Diamond Jubilee*, 25. The following resource was used to determine a first name for a Mrs. C. M. Hockett: Ancestry.com "Anna T. Hockett," Year: 1910; Census Place: *Dudley, Aurora, South Dakota*; Roll: *T624_1476*; Page: *14A*; Enumeration District: *0001*; FHL microfilm: *1375489*.

¹⁰¹ Mamie Shields Pyle to Mrs. J. D. Stemler, 16 February 1918, Box 2, Folder 1918, June 25-30, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers.

coordinator's visit, concluding with the praise that "you are the life of the work in that county and no matter what the plan is that is finally formulated, you must be part of it."¹⁰²

In March, Pyle wrote to Thomas again, confirming that a Mrs. Barnhart of Plankinton would organize the east half of the county and Thomas the west half. Pyle requested names of all the township committee chairs. "We must have a complete machine to work with this time and because of the Red Cross work and all of the war activities, we are doing this work entirely by committees."¹⁰³

In March, Pyle responded to a discouraging letter from Thomas that evidently reported little progress due to competing demands related to the war.

Your letter fills me with regret. I wish that you could be at headquarters and realize just how many exclamations of lack of suffrage work are sent in. Of course, we all know that the war work must not be interfered with and that we are anxious, above all, that suffrage work should not interfere with it.

Now Mrs. Thomas, I hope that you will find a way to carry this work along with your other work, or else that you will get some one to carry the other responsibilities for a time. If you side track suffrage now, you will practically be saying to the people that you do not consider it an important measure at this time.¹⁰⁴

The outbreak of influenza in the last months of the campaign disrupted the suffragists' plans. Not only did Carrie Chapman Catt cancel a visit when she became ill with influenza in October, some of the larger cities in the state placed bans on public gatherings due to outbreaks of influenza. Therefore, message delivery depended upon the county committees. Not specifically mentioning Aurora County, Pyle reported good results with the petition drive. "The response has been very satisfactory. And most of the counties have

¹⁰² M. S. Pyle to Mrs. Harley Thomas, 16 February 1918, Box 2, Folder 1918, June 25-30, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers.

¹⁰³ M. S. Pyle to Thomas, 13 March 1918, Box 2, Folder 1918, June 25-30, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers. No additional information was found about a Barnhart living in Plankinton.

¹⁰⁴ M. S. Pyle to Thomas, 26 June 1918, Box 2, Folder 1918, June 25-30, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers.

done this.”¹⁰⁵ While the letter from Pyle to Catt expressed frustration with local organizers, other communications indicated some women in Aurora County engaged in some level of effort. Other concerns, though, especially the war, held greater priority, and the suffrage work did not consume a significant part of their lives.

Finally, after six ballot campaigns for full voting rights for women in two decades, voters fully enfranchised the women of South Dakota in 1918. Aurora County approved the measure with a 60 percent majority, 3 percent less than the state majority. The German and Dutch-heritage townships gave the lowest levels of approval, with German Catholic Washington Township voting only 31 percent in favor.¹⁰⁶ With no liquor industry to voice opposition and the suffragists campaigning on the issue of women’s patriotism versus a suspect immigrant class, the state’s 63 percent approval rating may have reflected the anti-German sentiment of a country at war, as much as the results reflected strong support for woman suffrage. Upon hearing of the South Dakota victory, Carrie Chapman Catt, who had started her suffrage work as speaker in the 1890 South Dakota campaign, responded with, “The general feeling around [the national office] is: ‘The Lord be praised that South Dakota is out of the way.’”¹⁰⁷

Given that it took until 1956 before women in the United States voted in equal numbers to men, Stickney women made a good showing at the polls when exercising their

¹⁰⁵ M. S. Pyle to Carrie Chapman Catt, 2 October 1918, Box 2, Folder 1918, June 25-30, Mamie Shields Pyle Papers; Karolevitz, *Challenge*, 246; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 1:127. During the influenza epidemic of 1918 and 1919, the South Dakota Board of Health reported 1,093 deaths among 65,839 cases. The number of cases represented about ten percent of the state population in 1920.

¹⁰⁶ South Dakota Bureau of Public Printing, *Legislative Manual*, 429; South Dakota, Aurora County Clerk, Election Record, Vol. 2, 1914-1920.

¹⁰⁷ Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 324.

right to full suffrage for the first time. A little more than half the eligible female citizens of Stickney voted in the 1920 election, as reported by the *Stickney Argus* on November 5 of that year: "On Tuesday there were 152 votes cast in Stickney, 49 of these being by women voters."¹⁰⁸

Although South Dakota engaged in constant public policy battles on the issues of prohibition and suffrage from 1880 to 1920, Aurora County women remained focused on their local communities. Some women took advantage of partial school suffrage laws to run for elected offices related to school governance. In the two woman suffrage elections in Aurora County before 1900, those favoring suffrage as a means to achieve prohibition played prominent roles in coordinating local campaign activities. Ministers, ministers' wives, and prohibitionist men provided much of the leadership in Aurora County in that era, organizing meetings and distributing literature. When state law gave municipalities the option to deny liquor licenses on an annual basis, WCTU women entered the public arena to influence local opinion. While some women engaged in organizing for woman suffrage, lack of interest and other priorities, especially the drought and population exodus of the 1890s and the war effort in 1918, kept women on the sidelines. In almost all of the campaigns, communications with the state suffrage organization indicated efforts were made to organize, but found, as in other counties, a low level of commitment among the women of Aurora County. Prohibition trumped woman suffrage as a public policy issue that engaged the women of Aurora County.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Frost-Knappman, *Women's Suffrage in America: An Eyewitness History*, The Eyewitness History Series (New York: Facts on File, 1992), 319; *Stickney, South Dakota: 75th Anniversary*, 15; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population*, 1:606, 944. Total number of eligible female voters was calculated based on the population of Stickney and the percentage of female citizens of voting age in the county.

Women in Aurora County worked together in a number of different organizations to influence the life of their communities. They joined different women's groups to establish social relationships, build their church communities, and pursue local reform efforts. The women who engaged in public policy battles used their collective power to build sentiment against local liquor licenses and perform charitable works. They used their right of school suffrage to elect school board members that fit their sense of morality, but those women engaged less publicly in the fight for full suffrage. While Ladies Aid societies, often organized by ethnicity, engaged women in both rural and town areas, women's groups that engaged in public policy battles involved more American-born and town women than immigrant and farmwomen. That different level of engagement may have been influenced by distance and ethnic cultures regarding the use of alcohol and the role of women. Wherever they lived, when the women of Aurora County acted collectively, they kept their focus local, choosing to yield their influence within their churches or upon their nearby communities.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

They talk about a woman's sphere,
As though it had a limit;
There's not a place in earth or heaven;
There's not a task to mankind given;
There's not a blessing or a woe;
There's not a whisper yes or no;
There's not a life or death or birth
That has a feather's weight or worth,
Without a woman in it.¹

Kate Field

As families moved west to establish new lives and build community on the rural frontier of Dakota Territory in the 1880s, the women, married and single, played meaningful roles in shaping their societies. By examining the public lives of rural women in a particular time, 1880 to 1920, and in a particular place, Aurora County South Dakota, this study illustrates how women, by themselves or as part of a group, contributed to a sense of community among those who made their homes, however briefly, on one of the last American frontiers. In addition, this thesis captures women's voices in local history. Rather than focusing on political issues, economic structures, and prominent leaders, mostly male, while placing women exclusively in the private spaces of their homes, this study examines the local story from the perspective of women's lives, individually and collectively, as they engaged with their communities in public spaces. By including women, this study broadens understanding of how community was built in a rural area on the frontier of westward expansion. If human relationships are the center of community, as argued by historian

¹ George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory, South Dakota: Its History and Its People*, ed. George Martin Smith, vol. 3 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing, 1915), 788. Written by journalist Kate Field, this verse circulated throughout the state of South Dakota during the fight for woman suffrage.

Thomas Bender, then women must be included in the story of community development. Community did not happen “without a woman in it.”

The conclusion of this study provides a brief summary of each chapter, followed by discussion of how rural women entered the public sphere to build community within the constraints of their gender and their backgrounds. The public sphere involves any place where women interacted with others who were not members of their households. This conclusion also evaluates the results of this study in the context of the historiography of community and women’s role.

This case study surveyed Aurora County, South Dakota, an area of Dakota Territory homesteaded during the land boom of the 1880s. Life presented many challenges on the treeless prairie, with few bodies of water, far from any urban center, in a time with limited means of communication and transportation. In those first years, communities formed quickly among neighbors, who relied upon each other for social interaction and support during life-threatening events, such as thunderstorms, prairie fires, tornadoes, hailstorms, and blizzards. The county, a flat and treeless rectangle covering 714 square miles, remained small and rural, with a population that peaked at 7,246 in 1920.² Based solely on agriculture, the economy suffered ups and downs based on rainfall and crop prices, with a severe drought in the mid-1890s causing one-third of the county’s inhabitants to move out of the county.³ The economy and the population recovered and grew in the first two decades of the twentieth century. While a number of residents were American-born, mostly in the Midwest, the county hosted several ethnic communities, and half of the children in

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, “2010 Census Gazetteer Files,” *National Counties File*, 2010, <http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/gazetteer2010.html>; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Agriculture*, 6, pt. 1:127–28.

³ South Dakota State, *Census Report of South Dakota for 1895*, 12.

1900 lived in homes where at least one parent claimed a foreign birth.⁴ Several ethnic communities, comprised of people of German, Norwegian, Dutch, or Welsh backgrounds, established their own places to worship in their native languages. In 1915, the county profile indicated that people were mostly young, white, literate, religious, and rural, with one-third of adults over eighteen years old still not married, and single adult men outnumbering single adult women two to one.⁵

Between 1880 and 1920, Aurora County changed from a grassland and hunting grounds for native people to a land cultivated and farmed by immigrants from Midwestern states and Northern Europe. In the first decade, the first settlers arrived full of optimism for a bright future. Drought, economic stress, and an exodus of population caused poverty and despair in the second decade. New immigrants, technology improvements, and profits marked the third and fourth decades, until economic conditions worsened, and the land could no longer support its population. In those first forty years, women actively participated in creating the foundation for community that continued to sustain Aurora County families, through good times and bad, long after 1920.

The evidence presented in this study provides numerous examples of women acting, individually and collectively, in ways that contributed to a sense of shared community. Helping Isabella Todd Diehl, a newlywed from Scotland, to cope with a life very unfamiliar to her, Louise Gardner taught Diehl how to bake bread and cook beans and vegetables. Both women also acted as midwives for each other. Jean Todd Saville, Diehl's sister, taught herself and her neighbors how to make cheese. Saville, a trained nurse, also prepared the

⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Twelfth Census of the United States." (See note 60, Chapter One.)

⁵ South Dakota Dept. of History, *Third Census of the State of South Dakota*, 22, 26–28.

dead for burial without charging for her services. A homesteading widow with several children, Margret Hjelmeland Knutson shared her home with new neighbors until their shanties were built. After a devastating fire, Louise Matzner housed neighbors whose home had burned to the ground. Responding to the sudden death of Blanche McGovern, Elizabeth Belding brought the motherless children into her home. During a long, bitter winter, the Nye family shared precious food and kept themselves and their neighbors from starving. In the simple acts of hosting turkey or chicken dinners, Minnie Saville and Sarah Page brought neighbors together to socialize. Ella Todd Wilson, daughter of Jean Todd Saville, was one of many women who worked with others to feed threshing crews and to battle prairie fires threatening homes and fields.

When a woman taught her neighbor to bake bread or make cheese, she contributed to community. When she temporarily housed those who moved to the area or those who lost their homes to fire, she widened the sense of caring. When she helped to deliver children, agreed to raise motherless children, nursed the sick, or prepared the dead for burial, she placed human relationships at the center of community. When she shared her own scarce food to survive a harsh winter, she placed the needs of the group above the individual. When she shared musical skills, brought food to community events, or hosted a dinner, she contributed to the social harmony of the community. When she fed the threshing crew or battled flames approaching her neighbor's home, she showed her commitment to the economic success and welfare of the entire community.

While women helped to build community by being good neighbors, some women also helped to create community as part of their paid employment. In their roles as teachers, hotelkeepers, or nurses, for example, professional women fostered human

relationships that contributed to a strong sense of community. By helping people to cope emotionally and practically, female hotelkeepers, such as Ella Severson Sweep and Adelia Granger, fostered a sense of community for people transitioning to life in Aurora County. Nurses, such as Saville and Sarah Guindon, strengthened the bonds of a compassionate community, bringing care and comfort to those in need. Teachers, most of whom managed one-room schools, played an important organizing role in building community within their school communities. Teachers, such as Sephora Perry and Myrtle C. Lundgren, created a variety of programs and entertainments that brought families together for fun and camaraderie, making the school the social life of the neighborhood and helping those families to build and establish good relationships. The actions of professional women, especially hotelkeepers, nurses, and teachers, contributed to the building of community by their nurturing of relationships that brought joy and comfort to others struggling to survive in a difficult environment.

When women joined organizations, they also entered the public sphere and collectively influenced the development of their communities. By organizing in Ladies Aid societies or women's clubs, women built social networks and expanded their lives outside the home. Working together, they shaped their societies based on their moral and faith traditions. Ladies Aid societies also provided practical support by organizing and teaching Sunday schools and by raising funds to build or improve church buildings, hire ministers, and support charitable causes. Although prohibited by their religious cultures from participating in leadership roles, women still managed to contribute to the success of their faith communities. By inviting people outside their local churches to their fundraisers, the "church ladies" provided a friendly environment for the wider community to meet socially.

Through participation in formally organized groups, such as literary clubs, social clubs, the Woman's Relief Corps, the Order of the Eastern Star, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, women also advanced their skills in organizational management and public debate as they pursued social, civic, and benevolent goals. From that training, a few women moved beyond church and social club participation to engage in public debates regarding political issues.

Because women in South Dakota could hold elective office in the educational system, some Aurora County women, such as Maggie W. Nelson and Anna Lamp in Cooper Township and Agnes Sullivan and Martha Bakewell in Plankinton, were elected to serve on school boards. Others, such as Kate Taubman and Alice Shouse, successfully ran for county superintendent of schools. Taubman and Shouse also participated in the Populist movement, with Taubman running statewide on the People's Party ticket and almost succeeding in her bid to become the state superintendent of schools.

Aurora County women actively engaged in public battles regarding liquor regulation, in an era when a prohibition amendment succeeded, was later repealed, and then passed again in 1916. For example, women who joined the WCTU acted collectively, hoping to shape the wider community to conform to their moral beliefs, especially regarding the consumption of liquor. Part of a strong network of pioneer families and related to many local town leaders, White Lake WCTU women, succeeded in their goal of "closing the saloons" several times in the years between 1906 and 1914. Although Plankinton and Stickney organized local WCTU unions, those unions were less successful and the organizations failed to thrive.

While some women participated in the woman suffrage movement – through seven ballot campaigns in two decades – local organizers often complained that other priorities, such as a long drought in the 1890s and World War I in the 1918 campaign or even apathy, kept women from engaging in greater numbers. Nonetheless, in 1918, South Dakota became one of the early states to pass full woman suffrage when voters approved a citizenship amendment that enfranchised women while also disenfranchising non-naturalized aliens. Mary Thomas, an active club woman from White Lake, lead the district WCTU franchise department and coordinated with the state suffrage campaign to organize Aurora County in 1916 and 1918.

Aurora County often exhibited the traits of community as defined by several historians: John Mack Faragher, who found that family and household are essential in building community; Richard White, who argued that small size and mutuality are key characteristics of success in creating a sense of mutual concern; and Thomas Bender, who stated that human relationships are at the center of community.⁶ In the three small towns of Plankinton, White Lake, and Stickney, business organizations and elective offices provided infrastructure for community. However, in the rural townships of Aurora County, the only business was farming, and the only public structures were one-room schools and churches. In that rural setting, groupings of families created communities. At any given time, a community might be comprised of those who lived in one of the towns, those who called themselves neighbors, those who attended the same church and spoke the same language, or those who sent their children to the same school.

⁶ Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 237; Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*, 5, 108; White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 326, 298.

The sense of community that women fostered helped to stem feelings of loneliness and isolation and left many with memories of happy days, surrounded by caring and concerned neighbors. Although some women may have been excluded from community, may have chosen not to participate, or may have been prevented by controlling male relatives, this study did not uncover such situations. The communities were always evolving, with a number of people moving in and out throughout the era. That sense of community relied upon the more to make the newcomers feel less alone and more a part of an inclusive community, as they faced numerous challenges in creating homes, farms, and businesses on the frontier. While women spent most of their time in the private spaces of their homes, where they kept house, fed and clothed their families, birthed and cared for the children, nursed the sick, and raised chickens and milked cows for cash income to support their families, those women took advantage of their time in public spaces to participate in a mutual sharing community that brought comfort and solace, friendship and care.

Regarding other research on the role of women, this study found that the ideology of domesticity only partially explains the actions of women in Aurora County. That ideology assumes a patriarchal nuclear family, with submissive women occupying the private sphere and men occupying the public sphere, where women were the keepers of moral and religious values.⁷ In that era, when men held most of the power through land ownership, wealth, political office, and a patriarchal culture, women held little formal power. Yet some women did own land, whether they were single, married or widowed; some women entered the public sphere on numerous occasions, whether to host social events or

⁷ Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood"; Brownlee and Brownlee, *Women in the American Economy*, 11–19; Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 129.

advocate for political change; and some women took advantage of South Dakota's partial school suffrage law to hold political office in the county or to run for office on the state ballot. In addition, several widows successfully homesteaded and raised families without patriarchs.

While the ideology of domesticity identifies the extension of housekeeping to shape behavior based on maternal values as the motivation for women to move beyond the home, the challenges of living in the difficult environment of Aurora County provided a different motivation for women to move beyond the home. By helping to build support networks that shared information, skills, possessions, care, and labor, women made their lives and those of others more bearable.

This study supports other historians' arguments, such as Elizabeth Jameson and Barbara Handy-Marchello, that women deserve credit for the work they did in establishing community organizations and engaging in political campaigns, and that women, both as individuals and in groups, helped to shape their communities.⁸ This study shows that, as elsewhere, both immigrant women and American-born women participated in those aspects of community that involved neighborliness and Ladies Aid societies. In addition, paid employment brought females into the public sphere, where they organized community events and assumed leadership roles in elected office to positively influence their community. Mostly Protestant, middle-class, American-born, and living in town, the WCTU women pursued moral reform in a fervent effort to change the "drinking culture" and shape public behavior through political activism. Some women also helped to organize activities in support of full woman suffrage.

⁸ Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers," 1-8; Handy-Marchello, *Women of the Northern Plains*, 8.

When crediting people for building community, historians have traditionally focused on individual leaders, mostly men, who owned land, established institutions, or held elective office. However, when the definition of community goes beyond property, buildings, and laws to include human relationships, then the women who quietly, but consistently, fostered relationships also should be given credit. Their role complemented the men's role, making both roles essential to the success of the community. As neighbors, hotelkeepers, nurses, and teachers, women in Aurora County clearly established and nurtured relationships that brought joy and comfort to other families struggling to survive in a difficult environment. Working together in Ladies Aid Societies, social clubs, or the WCTU, the women of Aurora County wielded their influence within their churches and upon their communities. Individually and collectively, women contributed in a different, but no less valuable manner, than did the men who held financial and political power. While many of those women remain unnamed, and none holds a prominent position in local historical accounts, their actions fostered a sense of mutual concern, establishing a culture of caring for their children to carry forward into future generations.

This study encourages others researching local histories to consider the role that women played in fostering community within the context of their lives and their position in the power hierarchy. By examining individual stories and listening to women's voices, this study discovers numerous examples of rural women moving outside the private spaces of their homes to pursue public activities that contributed to community. In essence, women, expanded on their gendered role as caregivers and nurturers to provide a crucial component of building community, reinforcing networks of mutual concern that benefited all members of their community.

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