

LAND of the BURNT THIGH

By Edith Eudora Kohl, first published in 1938 by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Less than 100 years ago—in 1907—Edith and her sister Ida Mary Ammons took up a homesteading claim in the area between Pierre and Presho, South Dakota. (Girl homesteaders were given very little attention from historians in spite of the fact that about 12% of the homesteaders were women; also, 42% of the women proved up their final claims and only 37% of the men did so. The object was to own a piece of land, not necessarily to live there the rest of their lives. The biggest problem was the cash needed to hold on to and prove up their claims.)

Strange name: BURNT THIGH. Where did that come from? When some Indian boys were caught in a prairie fire, they threw themselves on the ground, turned their faces away from the fire, wrapped themselves in their robes, and waited for the fire to pass. So all of them were burned on the right thigh, otherwise unhurt!! That tribe was hereafter known as the people of the burnt thigh, which a French trader translated into BRULE—burnt.

Edith and Ida Mary Ammons had lived in St. Louis. Their mother died when the girls were young and their father remarried and was raising a new family. Now in their early twenties, the girls decided they would have to take care of themselves. They bought a claim which had gone back to the government. They had \$300. They had everything except the final payment of \$200 due when they had made proof—and they heard that a person could get \$1,000 to \$1500 for a claim after getting a deed.

So here they are, arriving at their 10 by 12 foot shack, a small window on each side, a rickety bunk attached to the wall, and 2 home-made chairs. Their hearts fell as the driver went off, leaving them alone on 160 acres of desert!! Off in the distance were shacks of other homesteaders. Days were hot and nights were cold! They wrote to Father to send them the box of supplies: \$20 to deliver and not \$10 worth of stuff. They bought tar paper to line the walls, made pillows of prairie grass, made a table and bookcase, etc. They found they were paying lots of money for hauling; so they bought an old horse for \$25. Everything cost more than in St. Louis. Coal cost \$20 a ton. They learned to improvise: they dug a hole in the ground to set the water can in; this kept the water cold at night and cool all day. Also, it took

twice as long to cook food in this altitude than in St. Louis, and dried meat kept indefinitely. Fortunately, the former owner had planted corn.

One blessing of the plains was the absence of vermin: NO bugs, potato bugs, or cockroaches, until one day after a short rain, worms 1 inch long were everywhere: walls, doors, and the ground was alive with bugs! They tried burning sulfur inside the house and made torches of prairie grass to burn the bugs outside of the house. But as one group burned, another came. Some people were thinking of leaving when suddenly the worms disappeared!!

The girls' financial situation was getting worse when people in the area decided a school was needed—and Ida Mary had taught a semester or two. And the pay was \$25 a month. A schoolhouse was built at the edge of their land and Ida Mary was a teacher with 12 pupils!

About 4 miles from their shack was McClure: a combination general store, post office, restaurant and news center. Nearby was the McClure Press—to publish the proof notices of the homesteaders. By government rule, every settler must have published for 5 consecutive weeks in a newspaper his intention to make proof (secure title to the land) with the names of witnesses; and for the final proof the newspaper must be paid \$5. The lady who ran the newspaper had won title to her land and was returning home. She offered the job to Edith at \$10 a week!! The money was welcome!!

The first BIG news item was that the government was going to open a nearby Indian Reservation to settlers to homestead. To prevent problems encountered in Oklahoma, a new plan was provided: seekers registered at the Land Office in Pierre. Each received a number. On October 12, 1907, the numbered envelopes containing the affidavits were drawn by lot. The first person had his choice of the land.

Pierre was the center of the mob of people coming to see if they could get a chance to get some free land. All the settlers already here tried to profit by the horde of newcomers: selling sandwiches, food of every kind, anything to make money. Edith wrote some poems about the land opening, drew some pictures and sent them to a printer in Pierre. She hoped to sell them as postcards at 10 cents each. Some settlers made belts and hatbands of snake skin to sell as souvenirs. Reporters and magazine writers rushed around to get material for their stories. The Big Drawing took place a week after the

entry closed and the winners had six months to establish a residence. Edith earned \$50 from selling her postcards!! (She sold 500 postcard!)

The following spring some of the settlers (including the Ammon sisters) had "proved up" in 8 months and were now going back home. What are the girls going to do? Should they go back to St. Louis to look for an office job? NO! They will stay because they could not go back to the dreary life in the city. They decided to borrow \$900 on their land; and with \$400 of it they will buy a relinquishment on the reservation right in the middle, buy new printing equipment and promised the lenders that by selling proofs at \$5 each and printing 400 notices as collateral, they are a good risk. Ida Mary would run the post office. They hired men to move their home on to their new property and made additions to make it more comfortable. And they bought lumber on credit for a building to house both the print shop and the post office. They had a side door on each building so that they could slip easily from home to business.

They were the first to build on the new land—Land of the Burnt Thigh; but soon there were new shacks going up and frantic activity. There were 3 basic needs: food, water and fuel. Almost every settler scooped out a dam at the foot of a slope for water supply: these were 12' to 15' in diameter and 2' to 3' deep.

Ida Mary wrote to the Post Office Dept. for a mail carrier and was told she had to *find* one herself. So they bought a team of horses and set up a mail route, hauling mail 3 times a week from the stage line in McClure.

Some of the settlers knew how to farm, but many knew very little. So the newspaper would print instructions. The subscription rate was \$1 per year. Many people subscribed for friends and relatives because that was easier than writing letters.

Providing food, shelter and fuel were needed by everyone and small towns could not ship in supplies fast enough. People wanted a local store! So—an addition was made to *the building* for a store.

They were living on an Indian Reservation, but they had forgotten about the Indians. One day they came, riding on horses and wagons. The girls were petrified and locked their doors and windows. The Indians pounded on the door and yelled "How kill 'em?" So they opened the door and 2 large

savage-looking men entered. They pointed at the shelves—they wanted tobacco and sugar! The next day 2 Indians came by, leading an old horse. They held up 10 fingers: they wanted to trade the horse for \$10 worth of merchandise. Later, Ida Mary found out the horse was blind and crazy. Soon the women had a corral filled with lame and blind horses!

One day a young Indian came in saying “How kola” and he explained that it was a friendly greeting. He was a college-educated Indian. (Remember that the women in the past thought the Indians wanted to kill them!) He said he would like them to open an Indian Trading Post. He explained that Indians had wood and berries and wanted to exchange them for merchandise and subscriptions to the newspaper. Also, as the Indians were on a reservation, they were receiving cash allotments from the government. So—the women added on to their business building and became an Indian Trading Post. In a short time, the Indians had legal work to be done—Ida Mary became a notary public!! The women had hired Mrs. Wagor to help in the store. Now the Wagors wanted to buy the store. They had no money, but could pay on a percentage basis. The sisters accepted their offer.

The Ammons sisters’ financial situation was going from bad to worse. Just in time, the government opened up new land—the Rosebud Opening. Edith made more postcards for the land rush. Within 4 days 60,000 people came! She made \$400 from the sale—that means she sold 4,000 postcards.

One day a young settler ran into the print shop, white as a sheet because he had seen a long rattlesnake in front of the store. And as more and more land was plowed, more and more rattlesnakes appeared. What to do? Edith went to see the Indian Chief to ask for advice. He knew how to treat a bite, but there was no way to get rid of the snakes. Edith printed this advice in the newspaper, and called on the cowboys and Indians to join forces to get rid of the rattlesnakes. This they did, killing hundreds. The menace of the snakes was one of the hardest things the frontier had to endure—harder than drought or blizzard. Edith thought that printing news about rattlesnakes would scare people away. Quite the opposite was true: the problem created interest because people were subduing the frontier!

Water was becoming scarce. Whatever water was available was used not once or twice, but 3 times. Water drained from cooking potatoes was used to wash one’s face or dishes; and then it went into the scrub bucket. Life was discouraging. Then someone noticed that the grass on Indian land was

greener than on settlers' land. Why? Because the Missouri River ran through their land. The Ammons went to visit the chief: the white man would pay to have some of their water. Edith pointed out that if the white man had to leave, there would be no Trading Post. So—the Indians allowed settlers' animals to graze on Indian land and Indians hauled loads of water to the print shop to be sold. One day Halbert Donovan, an eastern business man who had visited before, came by, and saw the situation. He put up \$50,000 to be loaned to settlers. More good news: It began to rain! Now the people of the Brule again planned for the future, unafraid to look ahead.

Ida Mary married in 1909. She and her husband took over a ranch and store outside the reservation gate. Edith proved up and got her patent. She borrowed \$1,000 and paid back the government and financial backers who had gambled without security. Now, Edith was going to Wyoming to help colonize it. In 1920 she married Aaron Kohl and they moved to Denver where she worked as a feature writer for the Denver POST and became well-known as a Colorado author and historian. She wrote many books, but this one was the most popular. She died in 1959 at the age of 75.

I think you will agree with me that this book is not only interesting, but educational. It is hard for me to believe that in less than 100 years life in South Dakota—which I consider to be the Midwest—could have changed so much—from being offered to settlers as virgin land to become the breadbasket of the United States!