

## **Jewish Women Homesteaders on the Plains**

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“The Jewish immigrants who came to North Dakota as homesteaders were path finders.” Sophie Trupin (1984, 91)

### **Abstract**

The homesteading experience is being revisited with the regrowth of Midwestern Studies. What has been ignored and is now being investigated are the women homesteaders, who worked with their men (husband, brother, or father) to build farms on the wild plains. However, often forgotten among these women are the Jewish women who battled to keep their religion in an environment that was unknown to them. By understanding this minority in the western expansion experience, a greater understanding of the American experience can be uncovered.

### **Introduction**

Jewish homesteaders are not often remembered as part of the Western Expansion period. This is unfortunate as there are not only towns, like Muskogee and Oklahoma, that were founded by Jews, but Jewish farmers and merchants helped open middle America. These homesteaders were not farmers before their arrival on the Great Plains, most were merchants, but the idea that Jews could own and farm land was appealing.

While there are few publicly available homesteader memoirs or diaries, there are even fewer written by women. Neither men nor women had spare time to write and few had more than a rudimentary education. There are even fewer Jewish memoirs that are available to the public, and fewer still Jewish women's memoirs. However, these few women's memoirs give particular insight into the deprivations that homesteaders suffered, the loneliness that women felt, and the difficulties of religious observance that could make survival nearly impossible. Thus it is through these stories that the overlooked Jewish homesteader experience can be reinserted into American and Jewish American history.

This paper will focus on the experience of three Jewish women homesteaders: Sophie Trupin, Rachel Calof, and Sara Thal. These three are the only published works by Jewish women

homesteaders on the Plains specifically about their homesteading experience and it is the purpose and value of these works that will be investigated here.

The popularity of memoirs as family stories to recount and remember their family's beginnings is attested to by the fifty unpublished manuscripts listed by Linda Mack Schloff in her groundbreaking "*And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher*" (Schloff 1996, 225-227). Linda Mack Schloff, the director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, calls Trupin and Calof's books "the only comparable published account[s]" of the Jewish woman's homestead experience (Schloff 1996/1997, 180). Both are memoirs edited for publication, though Trupin tells the story through a child's eyes, while Calof came as a bride. Thal's is a nine-page essay created from an oral history about her arrival as a young mother (Thal 2006, 78-85).

### **The Purpose of a Memoir**

The purpose of a memoir is to recount what has happened as the author remembers, so that future generations can experience the event(s) as the author remembers it. A published memoir can have an entirely different purpose: to influence the reader to view events in a certain way. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series of books is considered a classic and is used in classrooms, especially in Missouri where Wilder lived her adult life and wrote the series, to teach about the homesteading period, which was the early part of white settlement in Missouri and Kansas. However, the *Little House* series was not the memoir Wilder initially wrote. *Pioneer Girl* was the title of her original draft, but that was intended for adults and was adapted into the series for children. Rose Wilder Lane, Wilder's daughter, assisted in preparing the original draft of *Pioneer Girl* for publication in 1930 and it was rejected (Wilder 2014, xxvi-xxvii). Lane edited away what she viewed as childish and embellished stories that were part of the manuscript. She had a habit of "fictionalizing what she published as nonfiction" (Hill in Wilder 2014, xxx). Even after the well-publicized and awaited annotated version of *Pioneer Girl* in 2014, the place of honor that the *Little House* series has in American Literature as a treasure of homesteading

experience has not been shifted, despite the understanding that it is more historical fiction, than memoir. Scholars like, Katheryn Adams, at the College of St. Catherine, draw examples of women and their jobs and roles in the homesteading experience from Wilder's *Little House* series (Adam 1987, 95-110) despite its fictionalized portrayal of life.

These works by Calof, Trupin, and Thal should also be considered treasures. Trupin is explicit in her dedication that her work is a tribute to her "parents...and their neighbors, who braved the unknown and unfamiliar in search of a life with dignity" and her children, so they would maintain a "link...with their grandparents" (Trupin 1984, front piece). Sara Thal dictated her story to her great-niece Martha Thal (Thal 2006, 74) most likely to have her experiences remembered by her family. These authors give an honest presentation of the homesteading experience from adult's and children's perspectives.

However, Calof's work is far more problematic. J. Sanford Rikoon, who served as the editor, acknowledges that Calof's youngest child, Jacob, "adjusted the translation...to maintain the faithfulness of the text to his mother's voice" (Rikoon 2005, xii). Rikoon insists that Jacob "adhered to the substance, sentiment, and style of his mother's writing as closely as possible" (Rikoon 2005, xii). However, Kristine Peleg, at Century College, has done extensive research with the original and published manuscript and has concluded "it was...untrue to the original manuscript" (Peleg 2004, 103). She sees the work Jacob Calof did as an attempt to create "a narrative of Americanization" (Peleg 2004, 105). As a Jew who had suffered anti-Semitism in St. Paul and was first generation, much of Jacob Calof's alterations to his mother's manuscript were to erase the Jewishness in them. What Rachel had done was write "for a Jewish audience," specifically a European Jewish audience, so that Jewish terms were not explained, but English ones were (Peleg 2004, 106). This does not render *Rachel Calof's Story* as inauthentic or unusable. There is much to be garnered from this text about a Jewish homesteading experience.

In fact, scholars, like Kathleen Nigro of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, not only consider Calof's memoir and Wilder's series as the same genre, children's books, but see them as honest retelling of their experiences (Nigro 2008, 23-33) despite the warning that Peleg gives in her dissertation about Calof's manuscripts that it is "a text intended only for the family is inherently a different text from one prepared with the public in mind" (Peleg 2003, 20).

### **The Jewish Population**

Little research has been done on Jewish homesteaders. That Jewish homesteaders have been overlooked by scholars and the public is forgivable, after all the percentage of Jews in the United States between 1860 and 1920 was amazingly small. There were an estimated 15,000 Jews in the United States in 1850 ("Jewish Statistics" 1899, 283) making them 0.02 percent of the population around 1850 ("*POP Culture*" 2015). The Jewish population for the Plains states was estimated for the first time in 1900 as 45,500 ("Jewish Statistics" 1899, 283). Thus, Jews were only 0.57% of the population of the region ("Table 1" n.d.) and easily ignored. Elizabeth Hampston, of the University of North Dakota, notes that even though the majority of homesteaders in North Dakota were immigrants, they were mostly from Scandinavian and northern European countries and so the Jewish immigrants were ignored, even by the Ku Klux Klan (Hampston 1990-1991, 148). The number of Jewish immigrants to American shores between 1885 and 1900 is estimated to be around 473,540 ("Jewish Statistics" 1899, 284), and clearly not all of these stayed in the crowded east when opportunities abounded further west. However, with an entire Jewish population of the United States estimated at 1,058,135 in 1900 ("Jewish Statistics," 1901, 157), only 4.3% of the American Jewish population lived on the Plains. It is understandable that scholars overlooked this part of the American Jewish population. Even recent scholars like Barbara Handy-Marchello, professor of American Western History at the University of North Dakota, focus on the churches and the power women gained from church work during this period and ignore the Jews, even though she uses a Jew woman as an example in her text (Handy-Marchello 2005). It is Glenda Riley, past president of the Western History

Association, almost twenty years earlier than Handy-Marchello, who provides insight into this minority group in her study of women on the frontier. She not only mentions the Jewish agricultural colonies in the Dakotas and Kansas, but bemoans the lack of research on these colonies because

certainly, the lives of Jewish rural women must have resembled those of other immigrant women on the Plains in some respects and must have dramatically differed from them in others. Because of the context of Judaism in which these women lived. (Riley 1988, 39-40)

Hall K. Rothman, at Wichita State University and then University of Nevada at Los Vegas, in 1993 decried “the conventional histories...for what they omit. The wave of settlement in the late nineteenth century is depicted as a homogeneous process” (Rothman 1993, 77). Schloff was one of the first scholar to focus exclusively on Jewish women and their experiences in her 1996 work (Schloff 1996).

Scholars of American Judaism have ignored this region as well. Until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Jewish American history focused on the eastern seaboard's urban areas. Then the American South and small Jewish communities became popular to study, which opened an understanding of small-town Jewish communities. It really wasn't until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when Schloff's examination of women in the Upper Midwest was published that scholars of Judaica began to see the homesteading experience as part of the American Jewish experience.

### **The Reason for Homesteading**

Men became homesteaders because they wanted land to farm (Fink 1992, 41). Women followed their men. Some men moved with their families to the Plains, like Solomon Thal who came with his wife Sarah and daughter Elsie. While he left his wife for six weeks in Milwaukee to find land, Sarah recovered from their trip with family (Thal 2006, 47-48).

Others, like Harry Turnoy (Sophie Trupin's father), came to the New World first and brought their families later (Trupin 1984, dedication). Turnoy was insistent when he emigrated that for “too long had Jews been identified with trading and dealing” and so “Jews must work

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with their hands” (Trupin 1984, 15) and so purposely chose agriculture as his occupation in his new life. He left his wife, two sons, and two daughters in Seltz, Russia in 1904. The youngest, Sophie, was not yet two years old (Trupin 1984, 23). In 1908 (Trupin 1984, 25), the family followed and arrived at Ellis Island (Trupin 1984, 27).

Still other men staked their claims and then got a mail-order bride, which is how Rachel Bella Kahn arrived in the New World (Rikoon 2005, 9-10). By happenstance, a tenant of Rachel’s great-uncle was searching for a bride for her brother, who was in America. This great-uncle convinced Chaya, his tenant, that Rachel would be a suitable match for her brother. Pictures and letters were exchanged. Rachel was anxious because she realized that “no other avenue was open” for her and she “was already eighteen” (Rikoon 2005, 10). She traveled steerage from Hamburg under the name of her intended’s first fiancée and arrived at Ellis Island twenty-three days later where she first met her fiancée (Rikoon 2005, 10, 14, 16).

### **Women and Homesteading**

The role of women during the homesteading period of 1860 – 1920 was, as scholars like Carl Degler and Lillian Schlissel emphasized, “essential to the success of the enterprise [of western expansion]” (Schlissel 1982, 3). Women were in great demand as partners on a homestead. It was nearly impossible for a single person to care for the home, the animals, and the crops, so men sought a wife to help. Men frequently left home to find work to bring some cash to the farming venture, as homesteading was often subsistence living. A homestead claim left abandoned would be jumped, occupied by someone else, and the investment would be lost. Thus, while the husband left to make money, the wife would stay behind to manage the homestead and ensure no one took the property (Schlissel 1982, 60-61).

Labor on homesteads was divided with women doing the housework, while the men did the field work. Both Calof and Trupin discuss this. Trupin explains that “my mother was initiated into the ritual of feeding thrashers” shortly after her arrival by Mrs. Pollack, Mrs. Edelberg, and Mrs. Luper (Trupin 1984, 36). Mrs. Turnoy made the Chanukah candles, baked the hamantashen

for Purim, and woke early on Friday to make sure the *challah* was prepared for the Shabbat dinner (Trupin 1984, 56). From her mother, Trupin learned "how to cook and bake, wash and iron, keep house and clean" (Trupin 1984, 72).

Although Trupin does at one point break this mold. She milked cows and rounded up them up. She "enjoyed doing 'men's work'" because it brought "a feeling of accomplishment, and camaraderie" (Trupin 1984, 61). She was not the only girl to work in the fields. When Rabbi Abraham R. Levy did his tour of rural Midwestern Jewish communities in 1903 he commented that at the first farm he visited he

found these two young people in the field 'haying;' the son on the mower, and the girl on the hay rack, and they were at it with a readiness as if they had been accustomed to it from early childhood. (Levy 1978, 8)

Even Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote about working in the fields with her father, though "Ma did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that" (Wilder 1940, 24). Clearly, not only were there gender roles on the homestead, but divisions between Americans and immigrants, with immigrants being less in the eyes of the American homesteader.

Thal was left alone in the house a few days after her arrival on the prairie on a farm. She "learned to make bread with dried yeast and flap jacks and biscuits and pies" to feed the farmhands (Thal 2006, 76). The rest of the experiences she relates are about cooking and childcare.

### **Experiences on the Plains**

What these Jewish families experienced was typical in many respects. Wilder wrote frequently about drought, fire, grasshopper plagues, and the pressure of poverty (Wilder 2014). Trupin too wrote about drought and hail that destroyed crops, and being lost in a blizzard (Trupin 1984, 73-74, 83-84). Calof's memoir is rife with descriptions of the terrible conditions they lived in, though not so much about farming (Rikoon 2005). Thal not only told her great-niece about the prairie fire and getting lost in a snow storm, but also their house burning down (Thal 2006).

Most settler wives felt the deprivation of loneliness. The frequent moving for some meant that friendships were short lived. For immigrants, they had to also suffer with the fact they had

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left their families behind in uncertain conditions. Trupin remembered her mother say, “God is punishing me for deserting my mother” (Trupin 1984, 45). Thal does not focus on the loneliness, although she does mention that “we had few neighbors...[and] only one near neighbor...and getting mail was a big event” and “I was still unable to realize the completeness of our isolation” (Thal 2006, 51). Calof, however, was part of the community at Devils Lake, so while they were spread out, they were mostly family and not as dispersed as other homesteaders.

Marriage on the Plains was a difficult proposition. Poverty and relentless physical labor made maintaining a happy home challenging. Trupin believed her “mother lived more in the Old World than she did in the New” (Trupin 1984, 40) and this resulted in quarrels between her parents (Trupin 1984, 41). While Harry Turnoy was proud “in his cleared fields and house and barn” that he had built himself, Gittel, his wife, “was dismayed and horrified” at the crudeness of her new life (Trupin 1984, 35). She had led a pampered life and Trupin believed that if “she had known what awaited her in ‘Nordakota’...I doubt that she would ever had taken that journey” (Trupin 1984, 12). This was probably the case with many women pioneers.

Rachel Calof (nee Kahn), on the other hand, had little choice. She was a burden to her family and aging quickly. Even in the censored published version of her memoir, her horror of the living conditions cannot be masked. Her brother-in-law meets her “with rags on his feet in place of shoes” and the women of the family “wore men’s shoes and a rough looking garment” (Rikoon 22). Her examination of the “shack” into which she moved brought her, a woman to whom “shock and deprivation were not strangers” to “tears” (Rikoon 2005, 23). What she may not have known at the time, but certainly by the time she had written the memoir, was that her in-laws had only arrived three months before she did (Peleg 2003, 16).

Both Trupin and Calof mention over-crowding. Because of the weather and poverty, there were times when too many people resided in small houses. Calof believed it “was probably the greatest hardship of the pioneer life” (Rikoon 2005, 24). Her first night on the homestead was spent at her in-laws’ twelve by fourteen shack where they lived with a son, daughter-in-law,

grandson, and Rachel's intended (Rikoon 2005, 25-26). Trupin did not live in such terrible conditions, but did comment on their neighbors, the Pollacks. This family of two parents, one grandmother, and "four small boys...lived in complete harmony" in "this tiny house" (Trupin 1984, 44-45).

### **Education**

Education has historically been important to Jews and the free public education available to everyone in the United States was one of the reasons Jews were willing to immigrate. Traditional Eastern European Jewish women were minimally educated in school subjects (reading, writing, math, science, and history). Their education was focused on informal learning, on how to run a Jewish home. However, in the New World girls were encouraged to attend school. Abe Calof, quite unusually, was very involved in the education of the children. The local school "was organized largely through his efforts" (Rikoon 2005, 87). The older Calof children, both boys and girls, attend the school (Rikoon 2005, 87) and Trupin notes that "my sister and I started school the spring following our arrival in North Dakota" (Trupin 1984, 51). The Trupin boys went to school in the winter, when there was no farm work, and the girls stayed home during the winter "because the weather was so severe" (Trupin 1984, 51-52). During the summers, the boys stayed home to do the farm work and the girls attended school (Trupin 1984, 51-52).

For the Thal children, schooling was problematic. Sarah "worr[ied]" about it and so in 1890 the town's first school was organized. It only lasted a year. Three years later, Sarah sent her two eldest to the Williams township school that was three miles away. It was several years later before Sarah's children attended a school that lasted a regular term (Thal 2006, 80-81).

Caroline Ingalls, Wilder's mother, had been a school teacher before her marriage. She believed that "education was a prerequisite of civilization" and refused to live where there were no schools (Adam 1987, 100).

What was traditionally the man's purview, religious education, became the woman's in the New World. Jewish men were busy exploring the possibilities available in the United States

that were forbidden to them in the Russian Empire. Therefore, it was the women who took over the desire to ensure a religious education. Trupin explains that her mother “arranged to bring a rabbi from the city...[to] teach Hebrew to their [the various neighbors] children” (Trupin 1984,71). The various rabbis who came to teach would stay with a different family each time (Trupin 1984, 71).

### **Jewishness**

What separates these three Jewish memoirs from the non-Jewish memoirs is the amount of space devoted to religion and culture. Since “the [Jewish] wives and mothers in frontier families were often expected to foster religious identity within the family” (Abrams 2006, 94) and girls, both Jewish and not, were expected to learn homemaking, it should come as no surprise that their memoirs examine religion. These homesteaders were outsiders in their far-flung communities, unless they lived in one of the “small Jewish enclaves” that had formed (Riley 1988, 39), like Calof who lived in the Jewish community of Devils Lake, North Dakota. As Judaism is very much a communal religion and imposes dietary restrictions, what Sophie Trupin describes is that Jewish women had the “added to the burdens of the pioneer woman was the obligation to perpetuate the Jewish tradition” (Trupin 1984, 55). It is her language in her publication that is honest and heavy. Not only did she see the life of a woman homesteader as difficult, she saw the life of a Jewish woman homesteader as even more difficult.

Quite a bit of Trupin’s book is about religion and cultural conflict. She states that:

My mother carried only three *mitsvot* [commandments]; that is all that is expected of a Jewish woman. But in reality she could carry only two of the three. In her baggage were the four brass candlesticks which she polished and lit every Friday at sundown from the day she was married, fulfilling the first *mitzvah*. The second *mitzvah*, as she taught me, was to say a blessing over the piece of dough she tossed into the fire when she was baking the Sabbath loaves. The third *mitzvah*, immersion in the ritual bath once every month she could carry with her. (Trupin 1984, 63)

Trupin’s family “never worked on the Sabbath” even during harvest, though other Jewish farmers did (Trupin 1984, 92). Despite the censuring Calof’s son did to her manuscript, there is reference to the blessing of the Shabbat (Sabbath) candles. Calof suffered from post-partum

depression and culture shock after the birth of her first child. One of her husband's nieces came for a visit and

she had brought candles with her, and at sundown the next evening [Friday] we stood side by side and together blessed the coming of the Sabbath. (Rikoon 2005, 57)

That both these women discuss candle lighting on the Sabbath is significant. It is the most observed women's religious commandment (Abrams 2006, 90). Calof does not discuss the other two *mitzvot* at all.

Trupin, however, devotes a chapter to her mother's *mikvah*. For a religious woman this a serious issue as sexual relations with her husband could not be restored after menstruation without the purification found through ritual immersion in the *mikvah*. The family eventually left their homestead and the only remnant of their ownership of that property was "the cement outline of the old *mikvah*" (Trupin 1984, 63-65).

Food was a doubly serious problem for Jewish women. Not only because there was a lack of it, and Rachel Calof wrote quite bit about starvation on the Plains, but there was the added burden of keeping *kosher*. The Jewish laws of *kashrut* (the act of keeping *kosher*) require appropriate animals to be slaughtered in a specific way and the separation of meat and dairy (including separate dishes and pots). Calof describes searching her claim for wild garlic and mushrooms to expand a dinner of barley "coffee" and bread (Rikoon 2005, 42-43). However, with limited funds and the great distance to a store, when Abe brought home pickled pigs feet instead of pickled herring, the family ate it (Rikoon 2005, 67)<sup>i</sup> because there was no other source of protein. Thal, at her brother-in-law's farm, also relates how, as a cook, the manager "brought in a crate of pork and asked me, a piously reared Jewess, to cook it" (Thal 2006, 76). Eventually she complied, but it was a hard choice (Thal 2006, 76). Trupin's mother required the itinerant rabbis who came to reach the children also be the *shocket* (ritual butcher) (Trupin 1984, 71).

For the first three years Calof was in North Dakota she ate no red meat. When her first son was born, the extended family decided to slaughter and eat their ox in celebration. A *shocket*

arrived and after killing the ox, declared it unfit for consumption under the laws of *kashrut*. He demanded, however, that Calof eat the meat because she was unwell and had to maintain her health to care for her children. Her mother-in-law not only refused to eat the meat, but was horrified that Calof would consider doing so (Rikoon 2005, 72-73).

Trupin remembered her father venturing to town in the early spring and returning with “a tremendous wooden crate” that “contained provisions for the Passover” (Trupin 1984, 89-90). Her mother would whitewash the walls and scrub the house. She would *kosher* the cooking utensils and scrub the furniture (Trupin 1984, 90). Maintaining a Jewish home was hard, and not all Jewish pioneers succeeded in keeping the laws of *kashrut*. That eventually “discard[ed] the dietary laws and practices” (Thal 2006, 75, 76). However, she never gave up Passover, Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur (Thal 2006, 75, 76).

The High Holy Days were equally important. Calof discussed the gatherings at her home for various holidays. The entire surrounding Jewish community would arrive

some traveling for days by horse and buggy and by horseback. ... We put up tents ... and in the house sleepers occupied all the chairs and covered the floors. (Rikoon 2005, 86)

Trupin’s family would pack the wagon and meet at a designated Jewish farmhouse for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The children slept in the same room in which the adults prayed. During the day, the children would walk outside in the harvested fields and the adults would stay in the farmhouse and pray (Trupin 1984, 93-95).

## Conclusion

These women’s stories not only expand the understanding of the various cultures that were part of the homesteading experience, but also change it from a white Christian experience to the more multicultural America known in the rest of the country. Something Rothman argued in his work on the Jews of Wichita (Rothman 1993, 87) as did Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson in their groundbreaking *The Women’s West* (Armitage and Jameson 1987). They also change the stereotype of American Jews as urban ghetto immigrants who worked in factories and struggled to become suburbanites and middle class. Their struggles were different than those on the coasts.

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Rather than struggling with integration into American culture, these immigrants struggled to learn farming and keeping Judaism alive in the wilderness.

Memoirs are an important source of information for the general populace and scholars. Dates, statistics, maps, and documents do not give the full story of any time, place, or residents. Memoirs provide the missing part of the history – why and how people did what they did. These three Jewish women’s memoirs offer some insight into how Jewish women adjusted to living in a mostly non-Jewish culture in an environment far different than their previous experiences. As Eva Kahn, an expert on American Western Jews, explains, “Even though most of these women’s lives are not recorded in history books, their identities...helped shape” American Judaism (Kahn 2002, 53). The American Jewish experience is not only what has been traditionally portrayed as crowded urban settlements. The rural Jewish immigrant had their own acculturation issues and deserve duly attention.

“I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over.  
Is it not time to write my life’s story?”

Mary Antin (2001, 3)

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