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Mary Henderson: A Super Woman Of Yesterday

— Donita Lucas Shields



One of the most interesting and accurate chronicles of Western Oklahoma pioneering can be found in *HOMESTEADING IN OKLAHOMA TERRITORY, DIARY OF MARY HENDERSON-VOL I*, edited by Gloria Bish Hetherington of Hobart, Oklahoma.

Mary Henderson, great-grandmother of Gloria Hetherington, kept a diary for forty years. She began her daily entries on November 12, 1901, when she, her husband, Alphonse, and five of their nine children moved to a farm between Lone Wolf and Hobart. Mrs. Hetherington's first publication of her great-grandmother's diary contains an authentic, day-by-day history of how the Hendersons lived until December 31, 1906.

Saturday, October 7, 1905, might be described as a typical day in Mary Henderson's life. After getting breakfast for the family, Mary milked three of their seven cows, gathered vegetables and prepared some for lunch, scoured the kitchen and dining room, baked light bread and teacakes, washed for baby Marion, and finished the ironing.

After doing the housework, she cut a big lot of cane which she carried from the field to the cows and calves. She then watered the hogs and walked a half mile to a pasture where she drew water for 14 head of cattle. While there, she mended the fence where their calves had been getting out.

When Mary returned home, she made her husband a pair of work gloves and did some mending while she rested. Of course the other family members were as busy as she was. Alphonse gathered three loads of corn, and the four older children picked cotton to take to the gin at Lone Wolf.

After reading Mary Henderson's diary, a person realizes that pioneer women had equal opportunities and equal rights in the male-oriented working world--be it mending fences, milking, or tending livestock. If Mary's chickens and turkeys became over-populated for their poultry houses, she capably built more shelters for them. If rats and rattlesnakes invaded her flocks, she was as handy with the shotgun as with the hammer and saw.

Mary supplemented their meager farm income with her buttermaking and egg sales. Her attractively molded butter and the week's supply of eggs were taken to Hobart every Saturday and delivered to the homes of her town customers. During the early 1900's, a pound of butter sold for twenty cents, and a dozen eggs brought eight cents. Mary's eggs and butter sales usually amounted to \$200 to \$300 annually. The Hendersons lived on this income if their crops failed.

Gloria Hetherington must be commended for her efforts in preserving and sharing these memories of her pioneer relative. From these records, it is readily

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too well and just kept talking about how the time would come when all property would be equally divided among the citizens. He had been married to a grass widow who had a little boy, but the marriage didn't work out.

The time came that Mama had her fill of Bill, and Papa had to protect him. As usual, we went to town one Saturday afternoon. After we got home, Mama started supper. She was making one of her favorite desserts--Floating Island. Really upset, she called Papa into the kitchen. She questioned, "Do you know what Bill did while we were gone? He drank my whole bottle of vanilla extract just like he did before!" Mama always bought vanilla in a pint bottle from

the man who came around peddling Watkins Products, and the flavoring was 80% alcohol. "I wish you'd let him go," Mama pleaded.

"You'll just have to keep it hid out," Papa said. "What else can we do? He's a good hand. I don't want to lose him."

"I'll tell you something else he's been doing. He's been eating my eggs. I thought the dogs were sucking them, but it's Bill. I saw him go into the henhouse several times and come out with eggs. He breaks out the end on the fence and then shakes the egg into his mouth. The hens aren't laying too well anyway, and I need the egg money to buy groceries."

Bill worked for Papa off and on for a good many years. His cards had short messages like a "greetin'": "Well, Ed, i have got hear all rite and doing

bisnes. your friend" and "i will be back soon, Ed." All were signed W. B. Daley. They were postmarked 1909 or 1910, but he worked for Papa long after that. I know he was there in 1919 when my little brother was three. One summer he went north with a threshing machine crew. He married a widow he met in Kansas. Later his sister went for a visit and came back exclaiming, "I can't believe it! That wife of Bill's sure leads him around by the nose. When she says frog, he jumps; he also doesn't use bad language anymore."

We never saw Bill again; but as was the case with our other hired hands, he brought some vitality into our lives. *(first published in the THOMAS TRIBUNE--June 2, 1982)*



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understood that the early-day woman in Western Oklahoma was truly a super woman--a human dynamo fueled with dogged determination which undoubtedly generated a personal frontier optimism that never failed her.

For without such inner strength and faith, the pioneer woman could never have had the endurance to survive the prairie's harshness and heartbreaks--the floods and droughts, the hail and dust storms, the scorching heat and numbing northers plus the added terrors of smallpox, typhoid fever, diphtheria, and pneumonia--while living in primitive dugouts and one-room box shanties.

It's because of people like Gloria Bish Hetherington who strive to keep these powerful memories alive that we today gain insight into Western Oklahoma's promise first illustrated in our colorful past. *(first appeared in the SENTINEL LEADER--August 30, 1984, in the column "The Farmer's Daughter")*



Homesteading in Oklahoma Territory, a diary of Mary Henderson, can be purchased by sending \$31.50 (includes postage) to

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