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Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader On The Northern Plains



Synopsis

"Calof's [story] has the 'electricity' one occasionally finds in primary sources. It is powerful, shocking, and primitive, with the kind of appeal primary sources often attain without effort.... it is a strong addition to the literature of women's experience on the frontier." —Lillian Schlissel

In 1894, eighteen-year-old Rachel Bella Kahn travelled from Russia to the United States for an arranged marriage to Abraham Calof, an immigrant homesteader in North Dakota. Rachel Calof's Story combines her memoir of a hard pioneering life on the prairie with scholarly essays that provide historical and cultural background and show her narrative to be both unique and a representative western tale. Her narrative is riveting and candid, laced with humor and irony. The memoir, written by Rachel Bella Calof in 1936, recounts aspects of her childhood and teenage years in a Jewish community, (shtetl) in Russia, but focuses largely on her life between 1894 and 1904, when she and her husband carved out a life as homesteaders. She recalls her horror at the hardships of pioneer life—especially the crowding of many family members into the 12 x 14' dirt-floored shanties that were their first dwellings. "Of all the privations I knew as a homesteader," says Calof, "the lack of privacy was the hardest to bear." Money, food, and fuel were scarce, and during bitter winters, three Calof households—Abraham and Rachel with their growing children, along with his parents and a brother's family—would pool resources and live together (with livestock) in one shanty. Under harsh and primitive conditions, Rachel Bella Calof bore and raised nine children. The family withstood many dangers, including hailstorms that hammered wheat to the ground and flooded their home; droughts that reduced crops to dust; blinding snowstorms of plains winters. Through it all, however, Calof drew on a humor and resolve that is everywhere apparent in her narrative. Always striving to improve her living conditions, she made lamps from dried mud, scraps of rag, and butter; plastered the cracked wood walls of her home with clay; supplemented meagre supplies with prairie forage—wild mushrooms and garlic for a special supper, dry grass for a hot fire to bake bread. Never sentimental, Calof's memoir is a vital historical and personal record. J. Sanford Rikoon elaborates on the history of Jewish settlement in the rural heartland and the great tide of immigration from the Russian Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe from 1880 to 1910. Elizabeth Jameson examines how Calof "writes from the interior spaces of private life, and from that vantage point, reconfigures more familiar versions of the American West." Jameson also discusses how the Calofs adapted Jewish practices to the new contingencies of North Dakota, maintaining customs that represented the core of their Jewish identity, reconstructing their "Jewishness" in new circumstances.

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Customer Reviews

In 1894, the 18-year-old Calof, a Russian Jew, was shipped to the U.S. to marry an unknown man and stake a homesteading claim with him in North Dakota. She later set down her memories of that time in fluid prose that occasionally reveals a biting sense of humor. Although her circumstances were often pathetic, Calof never is. She writes matter-of-factly about her 12'x 14' dirt-floored shanty, her husband's unappealing family and their unsanitary living arrangements. Each winter, her husband Abe's parents and brother would join them in their home in order to save fuel-an arrangement revealed only on her wedding day. There are pleasurable moments here too, like an impromptu supper of wild garlic and mushrooms (Calof does a taste test to see whether they are poisonous-"It didn't burn or taste bad, so I swallowed it"). Childbearing is particularly difficult: Calof seems to be constantly pregnant, and her superstitious mother-in-law keeps her secluded after the birth of her first child until she begins to hallucinate about demons. An epilogue by Calof's son, Jacob, picks up the courageous author's story in St. Paul, Minn., in 1917, while an essay by J. Sanford Rikoon on the phenomenon of Jewish farm settlements provides fascinating background. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Although Calof published her life story in 1936, it deals mostly with her time on the prairie between 1894 and 1904 and the hardships she encountered. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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Excellent. A translation by the son of a Russian Jewish 18 y/o woman who contracted to marry a

rooky pioneer and homestead on the North Dakota prairie. The winters were every bit as grueling as the first storms of 2016 and perhaps worse considering they were living in an overcrowded 12 x 14 ft shack (a frame and no insulation). It gives meaning to the phrase "true grit".

Well written and opened up the terrible conditions the settlers dealt with. I also grew up in this area so was of great interest to me.

I have an entire bookshelf and Kindle full of women homesteader's stories. Rachel arrived about 10 years before my relatives arrived, and because of our similar backgrounds, her story caught my attention immediately. I cannot believe what she and thousands of other women went through on the lonesome plains of America. Bad enough to have to try and raise a family on an isolated farm but she had to endure the constant presence of a fanatical mother-in-law and indifferent and often callous in-laws. I have nothing but admiration for this amazing woman.

I read this in hopes of understanding more about my mother's childhood on a farm in Michigan between 1924 and 1940, and this book delivered. Rachel Calof was an earlier Jewish homesteader and North Dakota sounded positively brutal. The essays at the end of the book were very informative and helped me figure out how my grandfather (born in 1886), who was a tailor in Russia close to where Rachel Calof was born, chose to become a farmer around 1913.

Women homesteaders have a special fascination for me. I have many homesteaders in my family. Ethnic homesteading women bring a whole new perspective to the subject. This book helped me understand the difficulties they faced being a minority. Well written. A nice journey to the past. Geat book and fast shipping.

I bought this for a friend because I had read it. An outstanding and unique story. I'm amazed that this lady having lived and survived what she did was able to recall and record the events of her life in a meaningful and articulate way. Future generations will be able to understand the life of early homesteaders, in particular immigrant Jewish homesteaders in America. I believe this is an important historic document because of the rarity of its kind.

such an interesting story. Love hearing about how other people live.

A very interesting first person account of the hard life of a Jewish homesteader. What a hard life they had.

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