



## Land of the Burnt Thigh

*Edith Eudora Kohl*

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## **Land of the Burnt Thigh** Edith Eudora Kohl

This tale of two sisters courageously homesteading on the prairie in 1907 provides a lively portrait of frontier life.

"Interesting in its spirit and atmosphere, and it is told simply and well. . . This is an unusual record, well worth reading."--New York Times Book Review

"Mrs. Kohl has told this story of South Dakota with a simplicity, a directness, and an understanding of its quietly heroic element which make her book an appealing as well as a significant contribution to the latter-day history of the pioneers."-Saturday Review

## **Land of the Burnt Thigh Details**

Date : Published October 15th 1986 by Minnesota Historical Society Press (first published 1938)

ISBN : 9780873511995

Author : Edith Eudora Kohl

Format : Paperback 332 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, History, Nonfiction, Historical, Biography, Biography Memoir

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## From Reader Review Land of the Burnt Thigh for online ebook

### Robyn says

This book is an incredible insight into the lives of the men, women and children who "conquered" South Dakota. Centered around "Women Homesteaders", this book is not only educational but also humorous. When you're feeling like life's not being fair because your computer has crashed, your car has broken down or your ATM card was eaten by a machine, try reading "Land of the Burnt Thigh" and realize just how lucky we are in this era! ;D Definitely a very good book which I would recommend to anyone interested in history, and in particular to family historians whose ancestors lived during this time in South Dakota! :D

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### Mackenzie Roebuck-walsh says

The spirit of the pioneer - specifically the pioneer woman shines through in this true tale of adventure and life!

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### Debbie Zapata says

Usually a book written about pioneer days and homesteading takes place in the 1800's, with covered wagons, horse teams or oxen, and wary settlers keeping an eye out for hostile Indians.

This book, written in 1938, tells the story of another type of pioneer homesteader. The people who went into South Dakota during the early 1900's. I must have missed this topic in my school history classes. I remember reading about the Oklahoma Sooners, but nothing at all about this later settlement of lands in South Dakota, let alone the parts about how the US government took 'waste' land from the Indian Reservations and opened it up for homesteaders. Typical, isn't it. Shove the people that are in your way out of the way, and then steal even more from them when you decide you need a little more elbow room. After all, if the white man is not on the land forcing it to become field and farm, the land is just being wasted, right? Grr.

In her preface the author states:

*I have not attempted in this book to write an autobiography. This is not my story—it is the story of the people, the present-day pioneers, who settled on that part of the public lands called the Great American Desert, and wrested a living from it at a personal cost of privation and suffering.*

But her story is of course part and parcel of the whole. Edith and her sister Ida Mary took a claim on 160 acres in South Dakota, intending to sell it after staying long enough to earn their deed of title. Edith shares their adventures, and at times it is difficult to remind yourself of the date of their grand adventure. It was 1907! And yet conditions were just as harsh and primitive as they had been for pioneers everywhere years earlier. Except for the fact that many homesteaders arrived in gas-powered vehicles instead of horse drawn wagons. But the essentials were the same. Food, fuel, water: the basics necessary for life were just as problematic to find as ever before.

On one hand I did enjoy the book, and had to admire the endurance of Edith and her sister in their day to day struggles. But there is such an attitude of....of....I don't know what to call it. Hubris seems like a good word.

There was definitely the idea that the land was only worth something once the homesteaders arrived and tore it up with their plows. Never mind the ecosystem that was destroyed in the process. Never mind that lands with regular drought years were never meant to be huge farms. Never mind that there were people who were supposedly owners of the land already. Just let the homesteaders arrive and NOW the land is finally valuable.

I know at the time none of that would have crossed the minds of anyone involved. Edith herself saw the settling of the area as a grand movement.

*There was a depression in the East and jobs were hard to get; with the growth of factories many young men and women had flocked from farms and villages to cities, and they were not finding conditions to their liking. They wanted to return to the life they knew best, the life of the farm. In the more populous sections the price of land was rising and was already beyond the reach of many pocketbooks. There remained only Public Land—land which was allotted to the Indians.*

*The government, accordingly, began to withdraw from the Indian Allotments great tracts, by further treaties and deals, slashing boundary lines, relegating the Indians to the unceded part of the land. The great tracts thus acquired were then surveyed into quarter-sections and thrown open to homesteading. In order to prevent the violence which had attended the Oklahoma land opening, a new method was hit upon. A proclamation was issued by President Theodore Roosevelt, announcing the opening of land on the Lower Brulé Indian Reservation.*

This explains the title, as this area was called the Land Of The Burnt Thigh. Edith does not tell us about this until chapter 13 of 16, but the reason for the name was a huge prairie fire many many years before. A fire in which three young Sioux managed to survive, but were left with burns on their legs, which earned the area its name. Ida Mary and Edith were not content with their first plot of land, they upped and moved themselves to this new section and established a post office, general store, and newspaper, eventually becoming the center of the new settlement.

There are blizzards, fires, drought, everything the prairie could throw at the homesteaders. Many left, many more stayed and stuck it out. They created a community. But I still felt sorry for the Indians, who were given a raw deal once again and portrayed as lazy, dirty, ignorant creatures with no sense of any kind. I hated that. And I hated the idea that the land had to be 'subdued'. This has been the problem since day one: you get to a new country and instead of learning how that country works, learning how to live with the country on its terms (like the Indians did) you force it to be something you remember from your past. And then you wonder why life is so hard, with invasions of snakes who have lost their homes and hunting grounds, and fierce storms that eventually blow away all the topsoil that the prairie grass used to hold down.

Okay. Deep breath. This was a good book for the style of writing, and for telling the history of a section of American past that I knew nothing about. It may have made me angry and disgusted, but in my younger days I would have been proud of what the homesteaders accomplished. I am afraid I am too fed up with governments and people in general these days to be proud of such things.

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## **Lin says**

Ms. Kohl writes her story, but it's also a land promotion for western expansion. I'd like to know more about the author.

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## **Bonnie\_blu says**

This semi-autobiographical book tells the story of Edith and Ida Mary Ammons, two young women, who set out to homestead in South Dakota in 1907 when the land was opened by the U.S. government. I say "semi-autobiographical" because Edith wrote about Ida Mary and her experiences as two single women on the prairie, but also included events from the lives of other single women who became homesteaders. I was surprised by how many women took on the challenges of homesteading by themselves. According to the introduction by Glenda Riley, at least 11% of homesteaders were women without men. And of all homesteaders, significantly more women stayed on the land than men. Even though I was awed by the sisters' experiences in a 10' x 12' shack made with 1" thick boards covered with tarpaper in the harsh climate of S. Dakota, it was their resilience and ingenuity that stood out. I can't help but wonder how modern people would fare in a similar situation. Would we be able to endure the oppressive heat, freezing cold, drought, and wild fires and still get up the next day and carry on? Those who went into the unknown with little more than their determination, fortitude, and hope for a better future were truly a unique breed.

A last thought: one aspect of the sisters' lives stood out harshly, that is, their attitudes towards Native Americans. They were very much a product of their times. Their views of Native Americans fluctuated between naive and callous. They held many of the prejudices of the time, seeing Native Americans as dirty, lazy, primitive, and unwilling to accede to the march of "progress." They saw the government's continuous appropriation of lands guaranteed to Native Americans as unequivocally good, and the effects on the Native Americans as not really worthy of consideration. Therefore, not only did the book bring the lives of women homesteaders to life, it also highlighted a horrible episode in American history.

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## **Sarah says**

Oh this book! So many things to think about. Two young and very tiny sisters move out west for the last round of homesteading in the United States during the early 1900s. I always love the independent woman success story, which this is, in its way. They leave Chicago unprepared, with no money, little supplies - just the overwhelming desire to start a new life and have something of their own. The book is long, although the majority of it covers just two years. I kept looking back - all of this happened in such a short time span? These women hustled in every way conceivable (well, they never succumbed to the oldest profession...) to survive and make a dollar to stay afloat another month. I spent half my time reading being shocked at how much they had to endure. "I think it occurred to them for the first time that this was a land where one had to begin at the beginning."

I was always rooting for them, but I recently had watched the documentary on the great depression and couldn't help but wonder. These homesteaders thought they were being patriotic and performing their American duty to civilize this land. As the author states, "The buffalo and the Indian had each had his day on this land, and each had gone without leaving a trace." "After all, anyone can file on a claim. It's the people who stay who build the country."

Their homesteading was really setting the stage for a decade of the dust bowl and a century of water shortages. They were hauling in water for miles, and none of the wells were producing any water. The author notes that water soon became the primary issue of living in the west:

"And, ironically enough, it occurred to no one to ask about the water supply."

"Thirst became an obsession with us all, men and animals alike."

"Then one scorching afternoon the drillers gave a whoop as they brought up the drill. 'Oil! Oil! There's oil on this drill. Damned if we ain't struck oil!'"

Tim Carter's straight portly figure drooped. He put his hands in his pockets, staring aghast at the evidence before him. 'Oil', he shouted. 'Who in the hell wants oil? Nobody but Rockefeller. It's water we want!' A discouraged, disheartened group, they turned away."

I live out west in a town that was conceived around that same time. Water and the lack of it is never far from my mind. New development only worsens the issue. After I read this book I realized that my happy little town had displaced Native Americans and put undue stress on the land. Do I want to move? No - just like the author and her sister, I love this place and want to make it work.

I highly recommend this book for all of the levels of discussion it brings: independent women, entrepreneurship, Native American history, ecology, a history of homesteading just four generations ago.

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### **Kim says**

Found this book on the shelf when we visited Badlands National Park. I really didn't know anything about the women who homesteaded and were so critical in settling so much of the west! This story was incredible - two completely unprepared young white women from Chicago brave challenges I can't begin to imagine and become important figures in the settling of South Dakota. WOW! From thin air, they built a newspaper, ran the USPS, opened a store / trading post and certainly most impressive of all, lived through South Dakota winters, horrific drought, and a terrible prairie fire. Just amazing. Next time I think I'm having a bad day...

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### **Cindy says**

This book is set about 30 miles south of my hometown. I am not sure if it is a fiction or non fiction story. I would lean towards fiction. The author introduces the book by writing, this is not my story - it is the story of the people, the pioneers that settled on the public lands called the Great American Desert. This book is about the Ammons sisters. They traveled west from St. Louis to make a home in South Dakota. Making a homestead claim was hard work. They battled drought, prairie fires and brutal winter blizzards. Through it all they started a post office, print shop, grocery store and general trading post. I love her descriptions of the prairie. It made me homesick. I gave the book 3 stars instead of 4 because the ending seemed tacked on. I never knew if one of the sisters left for Wyoming.

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### **Marilyn says**

#### **Against All Odds**

My great-grandparents emigrated to homestead and farm in Minnesota, South Dakota, and Nebraska. My family lived with wood heat, no electricity nor plumbing, until I started school which by today's standards

seems uncivilized. But in comparison, these women braved much more primitive conditions in order to homestead central South Dakota land in 1908, and without the knowledge of how farm. They were city girls, with minimal financial wherewithal, who purchased a claim only to discover it was a tarpaper shack. Foolhardy but determined, they battled -30 degree winter temperatures, blizzards, prairie fires, and drought. Frail but stubborn, they learned how to set type and publish a newspaper, and rallied their fellow homesteaders to cooperate in order to survive. One has to give credit to their pluck!

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## **Elisabeth says**

This book is probably the most amazing and engrossing memoir I've ever read. First published in 1938, it is Edith Eudora Kohl's account of homesteading in South Dakota with her sister in the first decade of the 20th century. One point that she stresses in this book is that the American frontier lasted much longer than is usually acknowledged—a fact I'd noted before in the late setting of many Western novels by authors who lived at that time. The last wave of pioneers, one of the largest, continued right up until the U.S. entry into World War 1. This book is a story of those later homesteading days, which were every bit as challenging as the early ones.

Although it might seem surprising, young single women homesteading alone or in groups was not uncommon. Many different types of people—in fact you might say every type imaginable—filed on homestead claims, for a variety of reasons. The Ammons sisters' reasons for leaving St. Louis for South Dakota, a combination of health and financial reasons, were common to many. For a number of young people, both men and women, homesteading was a temporary affair, a few months of holding down a claim to gain ownership of land that they could sell or mortgage to get a start in whatever life they had chosen. Others saw the value in the land itself, and with the industrialization of the East, land prices had become so high there that homesteading on the Western plains was their only opportunity. The more permanent settlers sometimes looked down on those who got their deed and left the land without improving it, calling them 'landgrabbers.'

But Edith and Ida Mary Ammons stayed—although the first time they saw their isolated claim and tarpaper shack they wanted nothing more than to head back home first thing the next morning. How they slowly became accustomed to their surroundings, made the shack into a home and eventually grew to love the prairie land that seemed so desolate at first, is only a small part of the story. A casual offer of a job, and Edith was running the local "proof-sheet" newspaper—an institution that came into being to publish the settlers' notices of proving up required by law. Then came the opening of the Lower Brule Indian reservation to homesteaders. The book vividly describes the crowds of thousands that crammed into the tiny settlements to register for the huge lottery that awarded claims to the Lucky Numbers drawn. As the new settlers flowed in, the Ammons girls moved onto a homestead in the Brule, and before long were running their own newspaper, the post office, a general store and Indian trading post, becoming influential figures in the new and growing community.

Their story is filled with too many adventures to be briefly described. They barely survived a fierce blizzard, helped to outwit claim-jumpers, lived through a plague of rattlesnakes, a severe drought, and prairie fires—and no matter what happened, the mail had to go through and the newspaper had to be printed. The Land of the Burnt Thigh (the title, by the way, comes from the Indians' name for the Brule, the story behind which is explained in the book) was filled with colorful characters, from cowboys to Indians to the many different settlers who became the Ammons girls' neighbors and friends. The book is well and engagingly written, so filled with interesting detail and incidents that it kept me eagerly turning the pages—well,

clicking away at the Kindle page-turner, to be precise.

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### **Rose Marie Peterson says**

What a wonderful historical account of the land rush to South Dakota. This book is about the Ammons sisters, two young women who left their home in the east to file a claim on a homestead on the "strip" a large tract of land on the prairie. This account isn't just about the Ammon sisters but also of the families, young and older people that uprooted themselves and their families to start new lives homesteading. There were all kinds of struggles the folks faced, adverse weather, rattlesnakes, drought, food, and fuel shortages, and long distances to travel to the nearest towns for supplies. Lack of money was always an issue. Working from sunup and through the evenings to get things done to prepare for winter was a constant struggle for the homesteaders. The Homesteaders were enterprising people with great sense of irony, humor, and adventure. This book was a fast read for me. It was hard for me to put it down.

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### **Kathie says**

I wish I could give this a 3.5. It confirmed my suspicions that I would not have wanted to choose this path in life had I been alive then. I think I would have died, or turned around and gone back from where I came.

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### **Kathryn says**

I just finished reading Land of the Burnt Thigh (Borealis Books) by Edith Eudora Kohl. I found this book on our trip, but didn't have the money to buy it... I bought it from Amazon on payday. It was a really good book... I'm glad I bought it to read. I didn't think of homesteading as something that happened with in the last 100 years... but it was. if you are curious about what it was like... get this book... She really tells the story well. its not just about her and her sister, but also about the other people around them! :) Another worthy read.

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### **Yvonne Desa says**

Great read. I didn't realize there were so many single Pioneer women who had settled the west.loved the humor laced into the book along with the real life harsh conditions. I'm so proud of the strong women who came before me & others who took charge of their lives and gave us all the courage to take charge of our lives and the future of this country.

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### **Linda Bendiksen says**

This volume came to my attention after visiting my Lakota cousins in Lower Brule this summer, but it is a



good read for anyone, and I think an important one.

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