



Nancy Boyd, Kansas Pioneer
photo courtesy Gary Mormino

O KANSAS PIONEER

by

C. Robert Haywood

One of the best and rarest rewards a professor of history can have is for a student to bring to him, as a gift, historical material of value from the family's attic that had gone for years untouched. I was given such a reward recently when Gary Mormino, a student of mine in a class thirty-five years ago, sent me a packet of letters written the latter part of the 1890s and a photograph. The writer of the letters was a authentic pioneer, Nancy Boyd of Edwards County, Kansas.

Pioneer women of the West have been the subject of so many literary and historical interpretations that it is difficult to know what is myth and what is reality. In Kansas even the statues cannot agree on whether the Kansas Pioneer woman was the "Madonna of the Prairie," "Sunbonnet Sue," or the Victorian housewife standing with rifle in hand at the soddy door. Capturing the essence of the "Pioneer Woman" seems to clude all who try. They fail, of course, because each individual woman brought with her unique talents, her own historical and social baggage, and her own expectations of the venture. One such woman was Nancy Boyd of Edwards County. If she may not have met any of the folk images, she did represent the reality of the type who did survive the settlement period.

There is little record left of Nancy Wheeler Boyd and her family. She was born in Kentucky in December 1859 and with her parents moved west to Macon County, Illinois. Other members of the extended family

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had already settled in and around Decatur, Sangamon, and Zion.

Another extended family living in the same area was to have a major role in Nancy's life. Among that family's members was a young man four years older than Nancy who had returned after mustering out of the 8th Illinois infantry at the end of the Civil War. Shortly after Robert Boyd returned, he and Nancy married and joined the wave of young families who responded to the lure of free land.

The Civil War had cut many families adrift from their roots and the prospects of a homestead seemed to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Other members of the Boyd family continued the pattern of moving west and settled in Kansas. Their stories of the richness of the land made easy the decision of where to settle. Later Nancy was to write back to Illinois relatives with the same descriptions, enthusiasm, and positive endorsements of Kansas that she and Robert had responded to. She also reported on other members of the family who had located nearby. "Your uncle John and his famile is heare today they live a bout a mile from us there are Cosins out heare you neaver saw."¹

The Boyds had chosen to settle in Edwards County located some eighty miles northwest of Wichita. The arrival of the Santa Fe Railroad in the region made access to the area attractive and the new immigrants encouraged branch lines to be established. These new lines fanned out from the Santa Fe Railroad and encouraged towns to spring up like mushrooms.

Edwards County was organized in 1873 and shortly after that the Wichita Northwestern Rail Line brought in a new town, Fellsburg, to serve as an intermediate shipping point.²

The Boyds lived about seventeen miles from Fellsbrug and considered it their home town although there was a country store much closer. The new settlers in the vicinity believed the future was bright and growth assured. Located as they were, only a few miles from Wichita and even closer to Kinsley and the much publicized cattle town of Dodge City, citizens of Fellsburg seemed to have every right to be optimistic. The weekly *Kinsley Mercury* that began as a daily expanded to 25,000 copies along with a European issue. The editor exalted in a rhymed headline:

Oh hear the boom, the rumbling boom!
A shower of golden wheels to dissipate gloom!³

Fellsburg boasted of several stores and businesses, a school house, a cooperative butter factory and, as a sign of certain progress and a social respectability, a literary society.

Robert and Nancy's 160 acres was near a flowing stream and just three quarters of a mile down the road from a rural school house. At one time they had 150 acres under production and an orchard of 50 trees. But over time the farm was to provide scarcely more than a subsistence living. The Kansas Census of 1895 indicated that the Boyd's major production for that year was 100 pounds of butter sold to the Fellsburg Butter Factory.

Nancy's letters to her grandchildren in Illinois were filled with the typical farmer's laments: If the corn had not rotted this year and appeared to be doing well the wheat was not, the erratic shifts of the weather made farming unpredictable, either too much or too little rain, accompanied by a "terrible sand storm." By the time Nancy was writing letters to the Wheeler grandchildren, the burdens of farming were weighing heavy on the old couple. Robert was well into his 80s when Nancy wrote her grandson in 1896: "we air living all a lone an have no one to take care of our things." Two years later she wrote of herself: "I think you are getting old fast to have to ware spectikls."

By then the old couple had survived the scorching heat of summers and the hlizzards of winter, including the one in 1886 that destroyed the open-range cattle industry, a drought so severe that the river went totally dry, coal shortages so prolonged that they had to burn their corn crop for fuel, the death of relatives, and the sad parting of other kinfolk who moved on west.

Through it all she kept track of both Kansas and Illinois families, and remained a loyal booster of western Kansas. In her concern for her grandson George, who was preparing to become a school teacher, she urged him to "Come see us in Kansas it is a fine Country if you will come maybe you can get a school here...the School house if just a little way from our house...and another one at Zales." Later she wrote: "myby you

think there is no one living in Kansas but there is lots of people.” She continued to urge him to come west and praised his diligence, “I was glad to hear you maid your self So usful a teaching school in winter and farming in the summer,” and repeated her urging to find a school in Kansas. It was not to be. Shortly after graduating from Valparaiso College, George Boyd unexpectedly died in June 1899.⁴ Nancy’s hope for one of the family to come help on the farm was shattered.

The great expectation of Kansas prosperity was also gone for many of the other settlers. When the railroad and land boom burst in the late 1880s Kansas plunged into a deep depression that became part of the national Panic of the 1890s. Fellsburg was to die a slow, prolonged death but by 1888 even the optimistic *Kinsley Mercury* had to admit that the boom in that part of Kansas was over. The proof, he wrote, was clear when the paper ran a nine column listing of delinquent taxes.⁵ Fellsburg slipped into ghost town status as one by one the businesses, including the butter factory, moved on and the rails of the Wichita Northwestern Railroad were taken up from the road bed.

Nancy Boyd never gave up on the country and was to live out her life on the Kansas claim.

Nancy’s story as a frontier settler was not much different from that of hundreds of other hopeful dreamers who, after Herculean effort, failed. Miriam Colt was one such defeated Kansas pioneer who fled from the struggles and ravages of homesteading. She wrote: that only “Ye noble few! Who were here unbending stand beneath life’s pressure.”⁶ Nancy was one of the noble few. There was not an ounce of quit in Nancy Boyd. She possessed what the *Kinsley Graphic*’s editor said were the rock-bottom characteristics needed to survive: “Strong Minds, Great Hearts, True Faith, and Ready Hand.”

Her letters that came down to us are an interesting record of one pioneer woman’s life on the prairie. But the photograph that came with the letters is what is most intriguing.

During the “hard times” of the Great Depression of the 1930s a photograph by Dorothea Lange fixed the meaning of the Dust Bowl’s misery and courage. The portrait entitled “Migrant Mother” was to be for millions of Americans the living representation of the Great Depression.⁷

The photograph of Nancy Boyd gives the same emotional association for the homesteading era. As you look at this woman, she looks straight back at you, unflinching, stark, unadorned, solid as chiseled granite, asking no quarter, seeking no sympathy. Clearly there is iron in her soul. You know she will stand unbowed whatever comes her way, depending only on her own will. This is the face of a person who has survived when the blizzards were too formidable, the sand storms too destructive, the death of those most loved too wounding, the destruction of crops too costly, and the wrong choices made too often. This is the image of a Kansas woman, a settler who did not win but was never defeated. She is that person who was given the highest praise by the other settlers when they said of her: "She is a staycr." She is not myth. She is reality.

NOTES

1. Spelling and punctuation in the letters are left as written.
2. Kansas Dead Towns List. Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas, Volume 7.
3. *The WPA Guide to the 1930s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 397.
4. Gary Mormino, August 6, 2000.
5. *Kinsley Graphic*, January 25, 1895.
6. Miriam Colt, *Went to Kansas*, Readex Microprint, 121.
7. T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1999), 456.