

ALICE C. NICHOLS

by

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"(Kansas) is so often referred to - or rather used - as a synonym for all that is mediocre in thought and scenery. I know the beauties of both because they are a part of me. Someday I must express them some way - it is a debt I owe."

The above is one of the first entries in a 1931 diary belonging to a most remarkable Kansas woman - Alice C. Nichols. Few people have ever heard of her though she penned one of the best-written historical accounts of Pre-Civil War Kansas, a book called Bleeding Kansas. Nichols was a remarkable woman who exemplified all the best qualities generated by her Kansas heritage. She is one of thousands of Kansas-born women of the past century who, though never singled out for historical distinction, has shared with the world unique talent, ambition, strength and courage.

Another unique aspect of Nichols' personality was her fierce independence - her need to be a self-defined woman. At the time Alice was writing her 1931 diary there existed a unique climate for professional women. The vote was recently won with all the associated social and political repercussions, and the post-war backlash effects of the 50's were yet to come. Her profession as a journalist and an editor afforded Nichols the respect of her colleagues, freedom of movement, a good salary and regular opportunities to devote time to her private passion - writing plays and novels. This was an enviable position for any woman of any time. However, even she was not exempt from commonly held sexist attitudes and beliefs as will be detailed later.

Nichols was born in Kansas on August 22, 1905, and died in New York City on January 6, 1969. She was independent from the first as she describes in her diary: "I pitched the baseball games and the boys liked it, I rode bull calves that went wild, horses that reared, I held 17 offices in high school at one time and the kids thought it right..."

Alice's first claim to fame is described in a yellowed newspaper clipping dated January 28, 1921:

J. C. Zimmerman, representative of the Pathe Film Company...came to Liberal a few days ago to secure pictures of Alice Nichols, 15, who is perhaps the youngest editor of a newspaper in the United States, and whose fame along this line is spreading to other states...Miss Nichols first published a paper known as the Tiny Town News, which was printed with a

pencil, when she was only 9 years old. The Nichols Journal was launched four years ago, when Alice was 11.

Alice had started the paper in 1916 as a means of communicating with her father who was a major in the medical corps during World War I. Soon the job became too big for typewriter and carbon paper, so Alice purchased two cases of type. The owners of the Liberal Democrat allowed her the use of their job press and, there, every Saturday afternoon for four years, she would set and print the 125 copies needed for her subscribers. Even President Woodrow Wilson was a regular subscriber.

The following are a few excerpts from Alice's newspaper which give a sense of the times, as well as a clear image of Alice's already strong, well-developed character:

"The editor is going to raise the price of the paper this week to 5¢ per month." March 30, 1918.

"Buy Thrift Stamps with your quarters instead of buying candy and going to the movies. You can both help your country and save your money..." May 4, 1918.

"One of Pershing's men who has been in France 6 months spoke in the New Star Grocery building today. He gave saluting lessons and other such things to the Home Guard..." May 26, 1918.

The following poem was written and printed by Nichols in her August 10, 1918 edition. It perfectly describes the conflict between her love of the silly, inane things in life and her well-developed sense of responsibility and devotion to duty. Thirteen year old Alice writes:

Oh, why should I sit at a desk all day,
 When the whole outdoors say 'Come and play'.
 I do it because,
 All the great people there ever was
 Wouldn't be what they are if they had not stuck
 When they were having the worst of luck.

The tenacity expressed in this poem was a well-integrated part of her character - she never gave up on anything she started. It is this very quality which many friends felt was partly responsible for her death 51 years later as she stubbornly refused to give up on a business which was ruining her health.

It is known that Alice was devoted to her father, Dr. Roscoe Nichols. He was a jolly, humorous man who loved telling jokes and making others laugh. He and Alice shared their wonderful sense of

humor. It is difficult to determine the true nature of Alice's relationship with her father for, being a doctor, he would have been absent from the home a great deal. After Alice's parents divorced during her teens, Dr. Nichols and his daughter lived in different towns. But even after this separation, she and her father remained very devoted.

Alice Nichols acquired many qualities and characteristics from her mother, Osa. One, her appearance, Alice describes in this manner: "...that's one thing I've never wanted to be - beautiful - terrifically interesting-looking and charming, of course, but never what you would call beautiful." A picture of Alice and her mother show two remarkably similar women. Both have dark, Indian eyes and hair, high cheekbones and small, narrow jaws. While Alice's father rarely is mentioned in her diary, there are frequent entries devoted to her mother. They shared a special relationship based on their similar interests, their need to be independent and strong, and their mutual respect for the other's individuality. Osa's response to her daughter's decision to move to New York is described by Alice: "Thank God my mother was the right sort. I didn't even realize when she said, 'I hate to have you go so far away, but everyone has to lead his own life' how really fortunate I was." Osa seemed always willing to allow her daughter to be whatever and whomever she needed to be.

When Nichols first moved East, she sent home one-fourth of her monthly income to help support her mother. She says,

This sending a week's salary home a month rather gets me sorry for myself at times... My mother is impoverished but gallant... I have a career to carve and a very dull knife to carve it with... I weaken too and think of how unfair it is that I should send home money when the boys don't.

Even after their deaths Alice and her mother remained close as they were buried side by side in the Liberal cemetery. Each stone bears only one mark in addition to dates of birth and death, and that is the distinctive signature of each, preserved forever in granite.

Dale, the elder brother, began working when he was still in school. His absence from the home is reflected in his relationship with Alice as they were, apparently, not very close. He was a career service man as an adult, so again, he and Alice were separated by great distances. This is in direct contrast with Alice's relationship with the younger brother, Billy. They were very close as children. Billy shows up frequently in the Nichols Journal. But both brothers spoke lovingly of Alice and cherished her memory.

Shortly after moving East, Alice had acquired many friends and

the first of many jobs in her long, successful career life - as an associate editor for Crowell Publications on a magazine called Country Living. Tracking down Alice's career is like playing hop-scotch as she bounced from publicist for the Soil Conservation Service at Rutgers University, to manager of the national Nutrition and Food Conservation campaign for the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the war, to editor of Pathfinder magazine, to managing editor of Men's Wear, to editor for Golden Books and, finally, to president of her own company, I.S. Ltd, Inc., which marketed games and toys. In addition to all this she was, at one time or another, a ghost writer, a free-lance writer, a playwright and a novelist.

The "debt" Alice felt she owed to her beloved Kansas was finally repaid when she began writing Bleeding Kansas in the mid 40's. She worked on the book for 10 years and, in that time, the originally planned novel evolved into an historical account of Kansas' most dramatic era - 1854-61. Alice abandoned the novel format when she found she could not create her characters to please her. She then switched to her more familiar journalistic approach and began searching through the old newspaper clippings stored at the Library of Congress. She poured over the old newspapers, comparing the accounts presented in the Eastern press and those written in the local Kansas papers of the day. What she discovered confirmed the long held suspicion (first generated in her 6th grade history class) that the commonly accepted Eastern press version was somewhat one-sided - painting the North as savior and the South as dastardly black-guard. Actually, as Nichols says, "...both the North and the South were rascals," and her book proves it.

In addition to providing a well-written account of Kansas' most exciting period, Nichols finally had an opportunity to share her love and appreciation of Kansas with the world. She describes the terrain, the vegetation, the colors and smells, the weather, and the people of Kansas - all with genuine love and appreciation. The following quote from her diary (prior to writing her book) is a small sample of her reverence for Kansas: "I can't forget the day, Mother, Bill and I drove into southwest Kansas - and how we stopped on one of the Cimarron breaks and drank in the smell of sage brush, the sight of soapweed, sage, bunchgrass, and the brightly colored, lowlying beauty of the prairie flowers."

Nichols' writing career was not limited to journalism and Bleeding Kansas. Her papers donated to the Kansas State Library include an unpublished work entitled "D. A. Day", a children's story and several plays. Alice wanted badly to write a great play. A great admirer of Beatrice Lillie, Nichols and a friend, Lockie Ingel Nickles, took a year's sabbatical to write a play specifically for Ms. Lillie called "Just Relax". They also collaborated on a play called "Mirage", but neither was ever produced.

Nichols writes in her diary about her desire, her need to write

which was always coupled with the fear of writing, the fear of failure. She wrote, "...all day long I wanted to be home writing. I could feel the delicate balance of the characters, the restrained drama of their every contact with each other. Had I been home, I likely would have paced the floor and felt-done nothing." It is obvious that Alice conquered this conflict satisfactorily with her successful completion of her book years later.

It was after the release of Bleeding Kansas in 1954 that Nichols' career took a dramatic shift as she left the field of journalism and writing to form, along with her partner, Felecia Parker, her own company, I.S. Ltd., Inc. Their job was to develop and market new toys and games. Alice invested all her own savings, plus money acquired from family and friends. With the strength and determination of a Trojan, and with characteristic Alice Nichols energy, she worked to make the business a success. Their highest hopes were pinned on a new word game called "Bali". Alice even appeared on TV to promote the game.

Finally in late 1968 after years of sacrifice and struggle, business began to brighten as a big game company, Selchow and Righter, (the company packaging Scrabble and Parcheesi) showed an interest in marketing Bali. On the eve of this fortuitous event, disaster struck. Alice fell, fracturing her spine and breaking a rib. She found herself flat on her back, strapped to a board in a hospital room with two noisy roommates, where she was not allowed to smoke and had neither a phone nor a television. And she knew she would remain there for many weeks. Alice, needless to say, found the whole situation intolerable.

While sympathizing deeply, quietly her friends rejoiced for Nichols had long neglected her health and they saw this as the perfect opportunity for her to get much needed medical aid. Alice hated going to doctors and when she did, usually failed to follow their instructions. The following is extracted from a letter written to Alice's cousin by Felecia on December 28, 1968 - nine days prior to Nichols' sudden death:

It (her hospital confinement) may be a blessing in disguise as she has severe arthritis - never remembered to take her pills...run down from not eating because of teeth (Alice had an oddly shaped jaw which prevented her dentures from fitting properly)...Just as business was getting so good! We have licensed Bali to Selchow & Righter for 3 years. That cuz of yours got everything she asked for and the men on our board, all big men, applauded her like mad - it was all her doing...I took the contracts over to hospital today; poor Alice couldn't raise her head but signed!

On January 6, 1969, Alice Nichols died of malnutrition. Her friends felt that the toy business had killed her. She had absolutely refused to give up on a business that was ruining her health and draining her finances - for Nichols had never given up on anything

in her life. The only appropriate aspect of Alice's death was its drama - it was the sort of ending Alice might have written in one of her own stories.

There are many gaps in Alice's life - questions unanswered, stories untold. However her diary of 1931 presents a perfectly preserved, well-written documentation of one year of Alice's life. It draws a portrait of Alice at age 26, sharing glimpses into her private life, her career aspirations and conflicts, her political and social philosophies, and, most interestingly, into her feminist tendencies. These feminist embers were being fanned by the times and historical changes, but, either through lack of support or need, they never evolved into full-fledged feminist philosophies.

Nichols did have a world teeming with rich, rewarding relationships - male and female, adult and child. In fact, she sometimes complained that she made friends too easily and they were a drain on her time and energy. She questions in her diary, "How is a person who loves both people and solitude to choose?"

Nichols loved children. She says, "Grown-ups can be such sterilizing bores but there is something vitalizing in a child's annoyance." Children loved her because she so enjoyed playing with them. Children of visiting friends would be whisked away by Alice to the local penny arcade to spend hours at the various machines and games.

Why did Alice Nichols risk social ostracization by never marrying? It surely was not due to a lack of suitors. She had many male admirers and friends. There was at least one special man in her life - sometime in the years 1927 to 1929 - a man oft referred to but unnamed in her diary. Alice had a year long affair with this man - full and passionate - an affair which ended, apparently, due to a certain complacent, unthinking attitude on Alice's part which she regretted for years afterward. The following diary entries describe some of her feelings about this man and their relationship:

I am haunted tonight by those eyes which are so much the color of the haze over hills in the high country at dusk...the thought of those eyes which are the seismograph of such a rare soul makes music in me - melody and strong-recorded consonance. Those eyes alone can reach the range of my emotional harp.

It isn't the sexual part of love that is vitalizing, beneficial, but the ego satisfaction of being the most precious person in the world to some individual.

The most precious of all memories is that of the mysterious and exciting way in which we

used to awaken simultaneously and move into each others arms without thought, without words. It was infinitely sweet, gratifyingly inexplicable.

This makes Nichols singleness rather puzzling. One particular entry gives a clue as to part of the reason. "I wish I were in love again - or rather with another. But everyone seems so pallid, so insipid - so utterly lacking in so many things I've known."

Another entry shows even more of her attitude towards relationships with other men:

"Years ago I had a dog of dogs - Shep - a huge dog - half St. Bernard and half Collie. We were inseparable. . . I've been fond of dogs since yet I've never loved one, never really desired to own one. I wonder if that's going to be the way with my human relations, too. Will I ever love again with my whole soul and body?"

Apparently she did not. But it is difficult to ascribe 50 years of singleness to one forsaken love affair. Surely other factors were operating.

It would seem that another source for her decision not to marry might have been Nichols' own independent lifestyle and her need to be a "free soul". She had to be her own boss, design her own lifestyle, she was ambitious and in need of ego recognition. She says, "...striving is absolutely necessary to my personal well-being." It is questionable as to whether a marriage relationship could have withstood the rigors and strains of Alice's career and her personal writing ambitions. Obviously a most exceptional man would have been required and, either Alice never met him, or she simply decided that marriage was not for her.

Whatever feminist tendencies Nichols might have entertained were certainly encouraged by the sexist attitudes of her career associates and her private acquaintances. The following are all excerpts from her diary: "Today I won the editorial controversy with T.C. - if I were a male or even an older female this rut I am in might have a chance of spreading itself into a road."

She hated the heat of summer. Perhaps that had something to do with this "heated" August entry:

Men boast of their largeness of nature, their lack of pettiness - My God! - I can read Schopenhauer's essay 'On Women' and smile. Why is it that we always smile inwardly at the damn fools instead of making reasonable reply? Well, it is the simplest

thing to do. Why is it, too, that even the liberalist of men speak, in their writing, just a bit condescendingly of women? What are they afraid of? - a superior person does not need to forever be alluding to his superiority.

Nichols seems a bit calmer in this entry of November of the same year:

...he told me of his philosophical conclusions in a very explanatory manner (male to female, you know). Mine are just as good. He talked of how the biological difference in women makes it impossible for them to think impersonally. Men are brutes (how they love to say that!) uncouth, base and all of that - Love - what is it to them? A pretty word. And they use pretty phrases to obscure their own aims...I would like to take a man inside a woman's mind sometime, hear us laugh at them or think quite impersonally when they think we are in the throes of pleasure from their touch.

She describes another incident with the same man:

As I was leaving I stuck out my hand to shake hands with Imukai and he gave it a sudden, awful grind. Such a totally unexpected action that, of course, I cringed in pain. And he said 'Afterall, I am the male species.' A resort of small men, I suppose. Rather fortunate for the consummate conceit of the sex that females have a maternally humorous condescension toward men.

Next Nichols quotes her good friend, Mona Smith, who was the lover of Mr. Imukai: "Her theory is: Since men admittedly are out to get as much sex as possible for as little money as possible, women should be out to get as much money as possible for as little sex as possible. And fair enough. But it will never work. The centuries have made women too generous."

Last, but certainly not least, comes this most important statement:

I wonder if I am going to become a militant feminist. I don't want to but men really get so much more than they deserve and have for centuries - controlled the press to the extent of becoming highly over-rated - their unreasonable jealousies, their pouting in pain, their quick misogyny after they have been exploited by a female, their

absurd possessiveness, their unfairness in business - and all of the rest.

Alice Nichols did not become a militant feminist. She carried no placards, shouted no slogans, joined no protests. But the classification of feminist certainly applies to Alice in many respects. She sought to live a lifestyle close to her own nature rather than that imposed by society. She never tried to immerse her own identity in that of a man's. She was successful in her chosen career both prestigously and financially. She felt free to explore new avenues of expression and new behaviors. She was daring and adventure-prone. She was respected and admired by both males and females. She was loyal to her own needs for freedom and never sold out to the pressures of convention more than was necessary for survival. And she was happy.

This Kansas born and bred person was a well-educated, articulate, independent, strong-willed dynamo of a woman of whom this state can be proud.