

## A FARM WOMAN ON THE MINNESOTA PRAIRIE

# *The Letters of Mary E. Carpenter*

Sara Brooks Sundberg



"I WOULDN'T GO BACK where we lived before for anything," wrote Mary E. Carpenter from her family's southwestern Minnesota homestead in 1873. "We have a good well of water here. We have 80 acres of good land with plenty of hay." This positive assessment of farm life on the prairie, written by a 33-year-old farm woman, is interesting because of the contrast with the words she would write some 14 years later: "I don't think, in all these years, I have become accustomed or attached, to life on a western farm—but it is my *home*. . . . But all my youthful air castles have tumbled about my ears." Mary Carpenter's apparent loss of optimism is intriguing. What happened to force this change? Even more important, what can be learned from her experience to help us understand other farm women's lives on the prairie frontier?<sup>1</sup>

Mary's story is richly told through letters kept by her family. Most of them were written to aunts and cousins; a few were written by her eldest daughter Mammie and Mary's mother, Sylvia Lovell. But it is Mary's personal letters that eloquently document her experience. Over a period of 18 years, between 1870 and 1888, she frankly revealed both the details of her frontier experiences and her emotional responses to them. "I should not have troubled you with all this," Mary confessed in the midst of a difficult period for her family, "only I could not tell you truthfully *how* we were situated without." Such letters, as historian Elizabeth

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Jameson reminds us, provide "subjective entry into women's lives," allowing us to explore their personal views about their pioneer experience.<sup>2</sup>

Mary Carpenter's correspondence provides "entry" to the personal world of a female pioneer in an area and time when pioneering on the North American agricultural frontier was perilous: southwestern Minnesota in the 1870s. In addition to the typical grassland farming obstacles of drought, prairie fires, and depressed markets, farmers in southwestern Minnesota between 1873 and 1878 endured devastating hail and grasshopper storms.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Mary's letters reveal that her

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<sup>1</sup> Mary to [Aunt Martha, Aug., 1873?]; Mary to Cousin Lovell, Mar. 26, 1887, in Mary E. (Lovell) Carpenter and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. All letters cited in this article are from these papers; punctuation and spelling follow the original. In several cases, last names of family members are not known.

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference at Omaha, Nebraska, in March, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873; Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, v. 7, no. 3 (1984): 2.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gilbert C. Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier, 1865-1900* (Reprint ed., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 55-74; Fite, ed., "Some Farmers' Accounts of Hardship on the Frontier," *Minnesota History* 37 (Mar., 1961): 204-211; Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-1878* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1984); C. F. Case, *History and Description of Lyon County, Minnesota including a Farm and Business Directory* (Marshall, Minn.: Messenger Printing, 1884), 76.

experience was shaped by a complex set of factors including gender, family economic status, time and place on the frontier, and strong convictions in the value of land ownership, hard work, and religious faith.

Little is known about Mary Carpenter and her family before the time when the correspondence begins in 1870. The profile of the Carpenter family that emerges from the scant information available suggests that both Mary and her husband, George, were old-stock Americans, originally from Massachusetts. George W. Carpenter arrived in Minnesota about 1855. Precisely when Mary Carpenter migrated from New England to Minnesota is unclear. But in 1860, the 26-year-old George and 20-year-old Mary E. Lovell were married. The couple's first home was probably on rented land in Cascade Township, near Rochester in Olmsted County, Minnesota. We do not know whether George or Mary had experience in farming. Mary's father, Lorenzo Orrin Lovell, was a Baptist clergyman, not a farmer. Both

<sup>4</sup> United States, manuscript census schedules, Minnesota, 1870, Olmsted County, Cascade Township, p. 13, roll 8 and Minnesota, manuscript census schedules, 1895, Lyon County, Grandview Township, p. 1, roll 74, microfilm copies in MHS; Mary to Aunt Martha, Mar. 4, 1888; *Olmsted County Democrat* (Rochester), June 6, 1899.

<sup>5</sup> Mary to [Aunt Martha, Aug., 1873?], Jan. 1, 1882; *Rochester City Post*, May 16, 1863; *News Messenger of Lyon County* (Marshall), July 12, 1889. Information gleaned from the Carpenter correspondence, newspapers, and census schedules suggests the following birth and death dates for the Carpenter children: George, b. 1861, d. 1863; Mamie, b. 1863; George, b. 1865; Henry, b. 1869; Laura, b. 1870, d. 1870?; Lorenzo, b. 1873, d. 1874; Lucy, b. 1876; Willie, b. 1878; Francis, b. 1881. Two more female children were born and died before December, 1873, probably between 1865 and 1869. Their names are unknown.

he and Mary's mother, Sylvia, as well as at least one of Mary's brothers resided in nearby Rochester during the early years of the family correspondence.<sup>4</sup>

George and Mary Carpenter's first child, a son, was born in 1861. At the age of one and a half he died from measles. The Carpenters would have 10 more children during their 29 years of marriage; four more of the 11 would die a premature death. Large families were considered an economic necessity on the American frontier with children providing much needed labor. Yet, Mary and George Carpenter clearly cherished their roles as parents. By 1873 Mary had already lost four children to early death and was expecting her eighth child. "A house seems lonely without a baby," she confessed to her aunt, Martha Lovell Hall. "It is one of the greatest comforts we can have. George is so fond of children, too especially little babies. He is one of the best of hands to help take care of them, nights." The Carpenters' last child was born in 1881, just eight years before Mary's death.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Carpenter's story begins with her correspondence in the summer of 1870. The Carpenters and their three children—Mamie, 6, George, 5, and Henry, 17 months—were farming a small prairie homestead in Cascade Township. On July 14 of that year Rochester "and portions of the surrounding country were visited with the severest and most destructive wind and hail storm ever known" in that area. "[I]t is certain," the local newspaper reported, "that many farmers in the vicinity have entirely lost their crops." Indeed, in that year Mary sadly informed her aunt that as the result of the hailstorm, they lost all hope of ever owning their rented farm. "We had about seventy-five acres in to grain. . . . The grain we expected would help clear our farming [lists?], reaper &c one horse from

*THE GROWING  
community of  
Rochester in  
southeastern  
Minnesota as it  
appeared in 1868  
when the Carpenters  
farmed in nearby  
Cascade Township*



mortgage. . . . It [the storm] utterly destroyed our crops, excepting potatoes. Everything is utterly cut off—even the garden. So now we have not even wheat for our bread.” Apparently, hard times were familiar to the Carpenter family. “Our prospects seemed dark enough before, now the way seems all blacked up.” A month after the storm, Mary gave birth to a baby daughter who died within the year.<sup>6</sup>

The Carpenters continued to have bad luck the following year: “George is putting in his seed, but his team was necessarily kept so short all winter that they are really not fit to work. I hope they will not give out entirely. . . . It takes a long time to recover from the effects of that . . . hailstorm of last summer.” To make matters worse market prices for grain were depressed during this period.<sup>7</sup>

DESPITE THE ODDS against the Carpenters making a success of their Rochester farm, Mary’s letters to relatives during this period and later difficult times express more than painful accounts of her family’s economic plight. Her letters also reveal several convictions that sustained her hopes for the future. First, Mary affirmed her belief in prevailing gender-defined roles for women. Like many other 19th-century women, she cast her lot with that of her husband: “We have had discouraging times financially, and loss after loss, but I wouldn’t go back and be single for anything. It is worth a great deal to have a strong, true, noble, heart all your own to lean upon. . . . Better adversity together than prosperity apart.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, deep religious conviction sustained her through hard times. Writing about their desperate condition following the hailstorm, she remarked, “All we can say is The Lord sent the storm or allowed it and we must trust in Him to provide. . . . but He is powerful he can provide for us and we must trust Him.”<sup>9</sup>

Mary’s own more earthly solution for her family’s economic situation is the third belief important for continued optimism. She expressed her desire to “earn something. . . . I have my hands full now,” she admitted, “but would try to do more if I could get it to do.” The conviction that hard work was a prerequisite for success was a common understanding among pioneer farmers. Hard work was especially rewarding on one’s own land. “I hope we will sometime be settled on a farm of our own and have things in better trim,” she penned from Rochester in 1871. It was the Carpenters’ conviction in the value of land ownership, along with the promise of free land offered through the Homestead Act, that drew them to the prairie frontier in southwestern Minnesota.<sup>10</sup>

In late June of 1873, Mary notified her kin of their intention to move. “We had our wheat rot in the bin last winter so we are very ‘hard up’ for money, but it is

best we should go now and have a place of our own, if ever.” Two weeks later, the Carpenters arrived at their new homestead in Grandview Township, near Marshall in Lyon County. The 200-mile journey between Cascade and Grandview townships was strenuous. Mary drove the wagon while George and the children herded the stock. “We camped in our wagon & cooked our meals by a camp fire. I was not romantic enough to enjoy it much, but endured it better than I feared.” She was six months pregnant at the time.<sup>11</sup>

The inconveniences of the trip presaged the hard times ahead for the Carpenter family. By the second week in July, 1873, they had set up limited housekeeping on their new homestead. Mary explained to her aunt that they were unable to afford the freight charges on their belongings, shipped separately to Marshall. “Most of our clothing &c is there. The bureau, & large . . . cupboard & several barrels crowded full of clothing, household stuff &c—All my baby clothes are in the bureau.” Lyon County had recently suffered grasshopper infestations, destroying food supplies and leaving little possibility for George Carpenter to find wage-earning work nearby. “We have everything to buy,” complained Mary, “we can raise something excepting our meat and potatoes for awhile, and not a bit of money. Our appetites are good which *seems* rather unfortunate.” Mary, her children, and a neighbor woman stayed on the homestead while George returned to Rochester for six weeks to find work.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of these hardships Mary managed to be optimistic. Most farmers understood it would take time to establish a productive homestead. Mary was no exception. “The first two years here will be hard very probably,” she explained. “If we struggle through them, then we stand a chance to do pretty well I think.” About the prairie she observed, “The country here is very pleasant in Summer. We have the [railroad] cars in sight for miles. The children are well and hearty.” She was optimistic about the prospects for the town of Marshall as well: “There will be a paper published in Marshall soon. . . . One year ago Marshall consisted of one sod house, now it is quite a thriving railroad town.”

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<sup>6</sup> *Rochester Post*, July 16, 1870; Mary to Cousin Laura, July 19, 1870, Aug. 18, 1871.

<sup>7</sup> Mary to Cousin Laura, April 24, 1871; Case, *Lyon County*, 76.

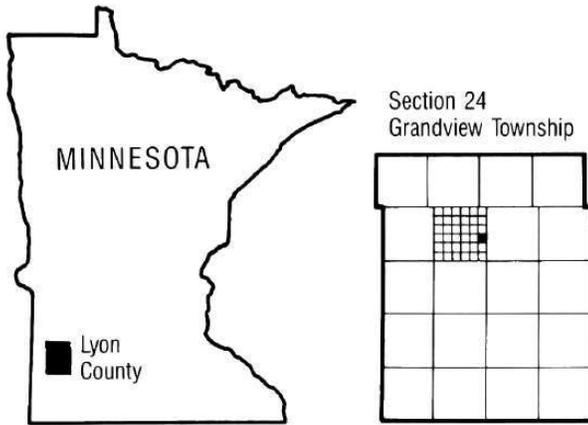
<sup>8</sup> Mary to Cousin Laura, June 1, 1873; Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer, 1966): 151–174.

<sup>9</sup> Here and below, see Mary to Cousin Laura, July 19, 1870.

<sup>10</sup> Mary to Cousin Laura, April 24, 1871.

<sup>11</sup> Mary to Cousin Laura, June 1, 1873; Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873.

<sup>12</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873; S[ylv]ia Lovell to her sister, Martha, Aug. 4, 1873.

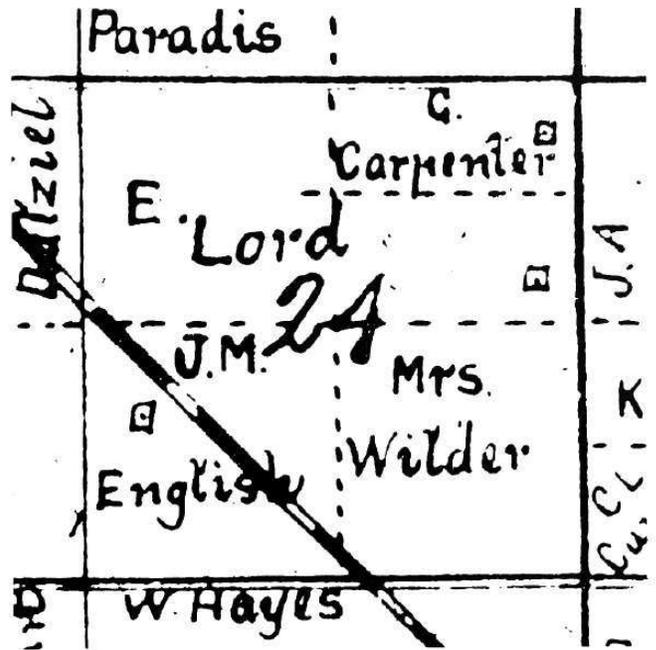


THE 1884 plat of Grandview Township, section 24, shows the Carpenters' 80-acre site; note the nearby railroad tracks.

And it was at this time that she stated emphatically, "I wouldn't go back where we lived before for anything."<sup>13</sup>

THE CARPENTERS were among the earliest farmers to settle in Grandview Township, arriving only two years after the first settler broke the rich, tall-grass prairie soil and erected a "slab 'dugout'" covered with sod in 1871. Mary would have preferred a sod house to her own first home, "a leaky ten foot shanty" with a dirt floor. Confronting primitive living conditions, Mary faced the difficult task of reconstructing the domestic sphere that was her primary place of work. "[W]e spread green grass over it [the floor] for a carpet & change it occasionally. It saves sweeping and mopping," she admitted. "But I would rather have a chance to do both." Later that fall Mary acknowledged, "When we get a house I shall enjoy living here." The Carpenters' impoverished economic condition undoubtedly added to Mary's frustration over their living situation.<sup>14</sup>

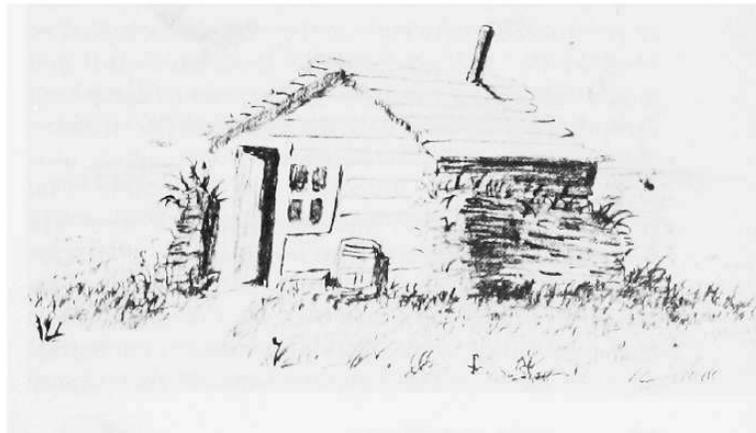
The family's poverty throughout their years in Minnesota may have affected Mary's participation in community activities. Writing soon after they arrived about what was probably a revival meeting in Marshall, she confessed, "My shoes were too poor to go, & I had no



gloves." In this case, Mary "put aside scruples" to attend the meeting. But in another instance when her eldest daughter was without shoes Mary would not enroll her in school until the money was found to purchase some. Her contemporaries described Mary as "a lady of high culture and refinement, and of superior musical abilities," and she described herself as "socially inclined." Just three months after their arrival she wrote, "We have found good friends here & like the neighborhood much." Yet she spoke very little about frontier women's traditional spheres of church, school, and neighborhood and cultural gatherings.<sup>15</sup> One can only guess the reasons why, though the Carpenters' extreme poverty was probably a limiting factor in her participation and enjoyment of such activities.

In fact, the Carpenters' situation during the sum-

A TYPICAL claim shanty of the 1880s



<sup>13</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873, [Aug., 1873?].

<sup>14</sup> Case, *Lyon County*, 69; S[ylvia] Lovell to her sister, Martha, Aug. 4, 1873; Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873; Mary to Aunt Lucy, Oct. 26, 1873.

<sup>15</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873, Nov. 22, 1873; *News Messenger*, July 12, 1889; Mary to Cousin Lovell, Mar. 26, 1887; Mary to Aunt Lucy, Oct. 26, 1873. For discussions of frontier women's roles in bringing culture from the East to the frontier, see Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 167-212; Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 42-75.

Marshall, Minn July 10. 1873-

Dear Aunt Martha,

Your long and very acceptable letter came to hand last Monday. I had one from Mother the same day, also one from Mrs. Walker an intimate friend in our old home. Excuse my using pencil, as our ink is packed with goods we have not got out. This paper is dirty and wrinkled but it is all I have at present, and no means to get more with.

AN EXAMPLE of Mary Carpenter's usually pencil-written correspondence

mer and fall following their arrival in Lyon County was life-threatening. Mary was both resigned and defiant: "I try to trust in God's promises, but we can't expect him to work miracles nowadays. Nevertheless, all that is expected of us is to do the best we can, & that we shall certainly endeavor to do. Even if we do freeze & starve in the way of duty, it will not be a dishonorable death."<sup>16</sup>

"Pioneering on the last agricultural frontier was characterized by a mixture of high hopes and bitter disappointment; successes and failures," writes frontier historian Gilbert Fite. Mary Carpenter typified this experience. Her responses to the predicament of the Carpenters' initial homestead juxtapose the role of pioneer optimism against fear and discomfort on the frontier. She was not a stoic or a reluctant pioneer. She recognized and disliked the loneliness and physical hardships. "You hope a double portion of the pioneering spirit descended to me. I am endowed with very little of it. My *taste* runs the other way to conveniences, elegancies, comforts and all the paraphernalia [*sic*] of civilized life." Still her hope that land, hard work, and God would bring prosperity was central to her overall acceptance of the frontier. "You recomend [*sic*] a diet of 'hope' . . . and it is wholesome."<sup>17</sup>

HARD WORK, land, and religious faith were not enough for the Carpenters to overcome the poor start on their new homestead, at least not for that year. By October 26, 1873, their new baby had been born, and they were out of money, provisions, and wood. Suffering from the cold, Mary and the baby left their shanty

for refuge at a neighbor's until money from Mary's Aunt Lucy enabled the entire family to return together to Rochester.<sup>18</sup>

This money was not the only type of assistance Mary received from female kin. At various times she gratefully acknowledged the receipt of reading materials, household goods, and clothing for her family. Dependence on female kinship networks in times of crisis was not unusual for 19th-century women, even between those who were geographically separated from one another. Given the emotional and material bonds, it is not surprising that pioneer women expressed loneliness for female kin left behind. Mary was no exception. "How I wish I could see you all!" About her mother Mary lamented, "It would have been much pleasanter for me . . . to have lived near Mother . . . but there was no place for us there."<sup>19</sup>

The statement "but there was no place for us there" points up Mary's view of herself as a wife and mother, as well as daughter and sister. Even though she was lonely for her mother and other kin, Mary accepted the

<sup>16</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873.

<sup>17</sup> Fite, *Farmers' Frontier*, 221; Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873, [Aug., 1873?].

<sup>18</sup> Mary to Aunt Lucy, Oct. 26, 1873.

<sup>19</sup> See Mary to Cousin Laura, July 19, 1870; Mary to Aunt Martha, July 10, 1873; Mary to Cousin Lucy, July 9, 1874. On female kinship networks, see Marilyn Ferris Motz, *True Sisterhood: Michigan Women and Their Kin, 1820-1920* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 14; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in 19th-Century America," *Signs* 1 (Autumn, 1975): 1-29.

responsibility of caring for her immediate family, needs that were best met on a farm of their own. "George could not endure the kind of labor he had, to get just a meagre [*sic*] living last winter [in Rochester]," she argued. "He thinks he would not have lived two years." "A farm is the best place for boys too," she added. "[W]e had no means to buy one there." On a frontier that promised economic opportunity Mary found value and felt satisfaction in the care of her husband and children. Viewed from this perspective, her loneliness for distant family was not devastating to her prairie frontier experience as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

These sentiments also make it easier to understand why Mary was able to advocate leaving Rochester and her mother, once again, to return to the homestead in Marshall. During the winter of 1873–74, while in Rochester, the Carpenters scrimped and saved George's earnings as a wood hauler in anticipation of their return to the homestead. Mary worried, "If we are not there by May 1 we stand a good chance to lose our claim. We hoped when we came here to lay aside half of George's earnings to go back with, for a house &c but we have barely lived in the cheapest way." These setbacks underscored the Carpenters' determination to return. "We shall be glad when we can get back to our claim again."<sup>21</sup>

They returned to their homestead in 1874, and by midsummer Mary was able to say, "George thinks our prospects more hopeful now. The grasshoppers seem to have passed over without injuring our crops materially." But, in the same letter Mary reported a miscarriage, an occurrence she attributed to "worriment" and "irregular diet." Her grief was manifest in depression. "[S]o I wish to answer your letter now, for fear if it is delayed I may feel less and less like writing till I may not write at all." Mary resigned herself to the loss. "But it is all right. The Lord knew what was for the best. It makes one less thing to worry about in the future." The local newspaper reported that in September of that year the Carpenters suffered yet another loss when their 11-month-old son died.<sup>22</sup>

WITH A FAMILY of four at that time, three children and a husband dependent upon her continued good physical and emotional health, it is doubtful whether Mary could dwell for too long on her sorrow. Daily life on a farm homestead was a continual round of neces-



MARSHALL, photographed in the spring of 1881

sary chores for both men and women. The appellation *farmer* was generally applied to men's work. Not so for farm women. Mary's occupation is recorded in census registers as "keeping house."<sup>23</sup>

At harvest time on their farm near Rochester, "the great *drive* of the year," Mary's numerous chores tell a different story: "I got up before four, got breakfast . . . skimmed milk, churned, worked over the churning already on hand, did a large washing, baked 6 loaves of bread, & seven pumpkin pies, while I was baking put on the irons & did the ironing got supper &c—besides washing all the dishes, making the beds[,] sweeping &c." And, later in the same letter, "I made 100 pounds of butters in June. Have not kept account since. Sold 28 doz of eggs at 10 cts a doz one week lately." Her efforts were not unrewarded. "Our cows have done well this summer[.] We have bought everything we have had with butters." Thirteen years later from their farm in Marshall she reported, "I have been busy lately putting up fruit for winter, in addition to the rest of the work. . . . I have one jug of ground cherries four of wild plums, and one of . . . crabapples—also a gallon jar of plums, and nearly a gallon of preserved peaches. I have more ground cherries and green tomatoes to put up yet."<sup>24</sup>

In addition to household and farm chores, the constant care of family was time consuming. By 1884, the Carpenters had six children. Mamie, their eldest daughter and Mary's most experienced help, was now

<sup>20</sup> Mary to Cousin Lucy, Feb. 10, July 9, 1874.

<sup>21</sup> Mary to Cousin Lucy, Feb. 10, 1874.

<sup>22</sup> Mary to Cousin Lucy, July 9, 1874; *News Messenger of Lyon County*, Sept. 10, 1874.

<sup>23</sup> U.S., manuscript census schedules, Minnesota, 1870, Olmsted County, Cascade Township, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Mary to Cousin Laura, Aug. 18, 1871; Mary to Aunt Martha, Sept. 30, 1884.

21 and no longer at home. George, now 19, may also have been gone. That still left Henry, 15; Willie, 10; Lucy, 8; and Francis, 3. In 1885 George Carpenter's invalid sister arrived with her two children, adding to Mary's workload. For the next several months of that winter Mary provided nursing care for her sister-in-law, as well as for Lucy, also sick at that time. Mary's response to these added burdens was modest: "so it all rested on my shoulders. But they are broad, and have not failed me yet, tho' I get very tired sometimes."<sup>25</sup>

Given the heavy physical workload and endless tasks associated with prairie farm women's work, it is easy to sympathize with Mary's situation. In an era when hard work was the norm, rather than the exception, farm women's labor did not necessarily translate into dissatisfaction or unhappiness. Mary's work both maintained the household and helped to sustain the farm as a whole financially. Her careful enumeration of chores reflects pride in those accomplishments. Mary Carpenter cared for her family and worked to realize a better future for them. Moreover, she recognized and appreciated that she did not work alone. Her children contributed: "Mamie, Georgie & Henry have helped their father plant potatoes, drop corn, &c and they have our cows to watch." She sympathized with her husband's workload: "He is working very hard, and has so much on his mind, thinking of so much to be done before winter by his unaided arm, excepting what the children and I can do, that it wears on him much." Clearly, Mary did not see herself as uniquely oppressed; everyone was working hard.<sup>26</sup>

This does not mean she was fully satisfied with her circumstances. Mary complained about the "leaky ten foot shanty" in which she performed much of her work. She sometimes lashed out against the monotony of her chores: "Those who live where wood is cheap, & plentiful, little know the inconveniences that many prairie settlers have to put up with. I call tending straw fire one sort of slavery, for someone must stay right by the stove & feed it constantly. It makes life seem long sometimes."<sup>27</sup>

The family was deeply in debt at this time. As early as 1882 Mary reported, "If we had had an ordinarily good crop we could have been entirely out of debt this last fall. We had 150 acres of wheat, but it did not even pay expenses." The next year they considered selling out and moving farther west to Dakota Territory. Besides the incentive of a clean start, Mary's parents were probably also already there. Instead, for reasons Mary does not explain, they stayed in Minnesota. Two years later, in 1885, there was still no improvement in their economic condition, despite the fact that Lyon County as a whole reported excellent crops. "Our crops did not turn out so well as we expected this year and there was so much that had to be put over last year, that must be

paid this that it made us very short of money, but (as usual) we live in hopes for another year."<sup>28</sup>

With each passing year Mary's letters reflect an increasing loss of optimism. In 1886 George Carpenter purchased more land, assuming a heavy mortgage. Mary was dismal. "George thinks this will be better than renting. . . . But it all looks to me like hard work and poor pay. We have been hoping for too many years." To make matters worse Mary's health was failing. She complained of a "humor" in the groin. Most of her teeth were gone and they could not afford to buy dentures. It was at this time that she openly acknowledged her disappointment with life in southwestern Minnesota.<sup>29</sup>

After 14 years of farming in Lyon County, Mary Carpenter fit one historian's description of "nineteenth-century Americans [who] believed that hard work never hurt anyone, and on this score frontiersmen were not prone to self-pity. They only complained after their toil failed to produce a decent living." As late as 1883 the Carpenters still owned only 80 acres of land—not enough, according to Mary. In 1887 she lamented, "If I only *could* have a half way convenient house & wood to burn I fancy I would be a great deal more contented." She continued: "we have had no *new* calamity befall [*sic*] us. It is the same old thing *debt* & being trammelled on account of it." The Carpenters' economic condition was nearly the same as it had been in 1873. Mary's pessimism was characteristic of pioneer farmers who struggled with an unusually harsh set of economic circumstances. Like many farmers in southwestern Minnesota during this period, the Carpenters never fully recovered from their debt-ridden early years of low prices, hailstorms, and grasshoppers.<sup>30</sup>

Mary's pessimism apparently resulted in depression, a symptom of hysteria that is a "socially recognized behavior pattern" among 19th-century women. In her study of hysteria among women of that time, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg found that depression commonly afflicted those who experienced, among other calamities, "a death in the family, a miscarriage, some financial setback." It is likely, based on Mary's writings, that she experienced depression around the time of her children's deaths and miscarriages in 1870 and 1874. In 1887 she acknowledged, "I have spells of being 'very

<sup>25</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, Dec. 17, 1885.

<sup>26</sup> Mary to Cousin Lucy, July 9, Aug. 5, 1874.

<sup>27</sup> Mary to Cousin Lovell, Mar. 26, 1887.

<sup>28</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, Jan. 1, 1882, May 26, 1883, Dec. 17, 1885; *Olmsted County Democrat*, June 9, 1899; Case, *Lyon County*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Mary to Aunt Martha, July 7, Nov. 21, 1886, Mar. 4, 1888.

<sup>30</sup> Fite, *The Farmers' Frontier*, 40, 217; Mary to Aunt Martha, May 26, 1883, Mar. 31, 1887.

blue' but have not been way down for several years."<sup>31</sup>

Mary Carpenter died July 9, 1889, at the age of 49. The cause of death listed in her obituary was "melancholy, tending to derangement." Mary's mother described the sickness as "nervous prostration" just a month before her daughter died. She attributed Mary's illness to overwork brought on by the fact that all the Carpenter family, including Mamie and her two children, were home for Mary to take care of the previous winter when four of the Carpenter family were sick with measles. Mary's depression and untimely death

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<sup>31</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America," *Social Research* 39 (Winter, 1972): 663, 659; Mary to Aunt Martha, Mar. 31, 1887. For a related study concerning insanity among Minnesota prairie farm women, see Sara Brooks Sundberg, "A Study of Farmwomen on the Minnesota Prairie Frontier: 1850-1900," (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 1984), 57-61.

<sup>32</sup> *News Messenger of Lyon County*, July 12, 1889; Sylvia Lovell to "My dear Sister," June 13, 1889.

<sup>33</sup> U.S., manuscript census schedules, Minnesota, 1900, Lyon County, Grandview Township, p. 1, roll 773, microfilm copy in MHS. Both Mamie and Henry moved to Dakota Territory. Probably, both Henry and his older brother George ultimately settled there. Mamie at one point considered making a homestead claim on her own. Whether she did or not is unclear, though Mamie probably lived in Dakota Territory following her marriage. See Mary to Aunt Martha, July 22, Dec. 17, 1883, Mar. 31, 1887, Mar. 4, 1888; Mamie to "Dear Mother," July 8, 1885. See also *Olmsted County Democrat*, June 9, 1899; Minnesota, manuscript census schedules, 1895, Lyon County, Grandview Township, p. 1, roll 74.

<sup>34</sup> For fictional and historical representations of this view of prairie women's lives, see O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper & Brother, 1927); Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 505-506; Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas to Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954), 232-243 and "Sunbonnet and Calico: The Homesteader's Consort," *Nebraska History* 10 (Mar., 1966): 3-13; June Sochen, "Frontier Women: A Model for all Women?" *South Dakota History* 7 (Winter, 1971): 35-36; Christine Stansell, "Women on the Great Plains 1865-1890," *Women's Studies* 4 (1976): 87-98.

<sup>35</sup> See Carol Fairbanks and Sara Brooks Sundberg, *Farm Women on the Prairie Frontier: A Sourcebook for Canada and the United States* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 38-90; Myres, *Westering Women*; Glenda Riley, "Farm Women's Roles in the Agricultural Development of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 13 (Spring/Summer, 1983): 83-121; Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981) and *The Female Frontier*; Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981). For a related discussion concerning the study of farm women, see Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly* 33 (Winter, 1981): 537-557.

project a pathetic image of the fate of prairie farm women. There is no evidence that Mary's fate was typical. In fact, Smith-Rosenberg makes clear in her study that while hysteria and its related symptoms affected 19th-century rural and lower-class women, this behavior was by no means peculiar to them. We can only speculate about the causes of Mary's death and apparent bouts of depression.<sup>32</sup>

Little is known of the Carpenter family after the turn of the century. George Carpenter and the younger children stayed on the family farm to that time. Even then, the farm was mortgaged. Time has proven the value of the Carpenters' land, for it is productive farmland even today. Yet Mary Carpenter left behind a legacy of more than land. We know that at least two of her children achieved higher education. And Mamie Carpenter Hurd, their eldest daughter, became a teacher, moved to the new agricultural frontier of Dakota Territory, and married a farmer. Whether any other of Mary's six surviving children ever farmed on their own is unclear. But Mamie intended to learn from her parents' experience: "I have a strong principale [*sic*] against debt . . . I hope we may never let it have a chance to drag us down as it has you and Pa."<sup>33</sup>

Chances are Mamie was able to do so. The critical first years of her mother's experience occurred during a period of extreme hardship in Minnesota agriculture, a historical context important in an analysis of Mary Carpenter's fate. Even so, her letters reveal a farming experience that is more complex than the simple negative image of prairie farm women, so often a part of American pioneer legend.<sup>34</sup>

Based on Mary Carpenter's correspondence, it is not accurate to say that she professed any joy in the process of pioneering. But neither is it accurate to say that she was a reluctant, stoic pioneer. Like many 19th-century women, she dedicated herself to her family. Her experience may be understood only when we give full credit to the respect she herself gave to her roles as wife and mother. Moreover, in common with other frontier farmers, she shared certain beliefs that allowed her to express optimism about pioneering. She believed that hard work, religious faith, and the ownership of land were prerequisites for family prosperity. Mary Carpenter's experience is not unique in this respect, for researchers have found similar beliefs and optimism expressed by pioneer women on other prairie frontiers, both in the United States and Canada.<sup>35</sup> The Carpenter correspondence provides a multidimensional view of her as an integral part of a female network. In this regard her letters are a valuable resource for interpreting prairie farm women's lives.

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