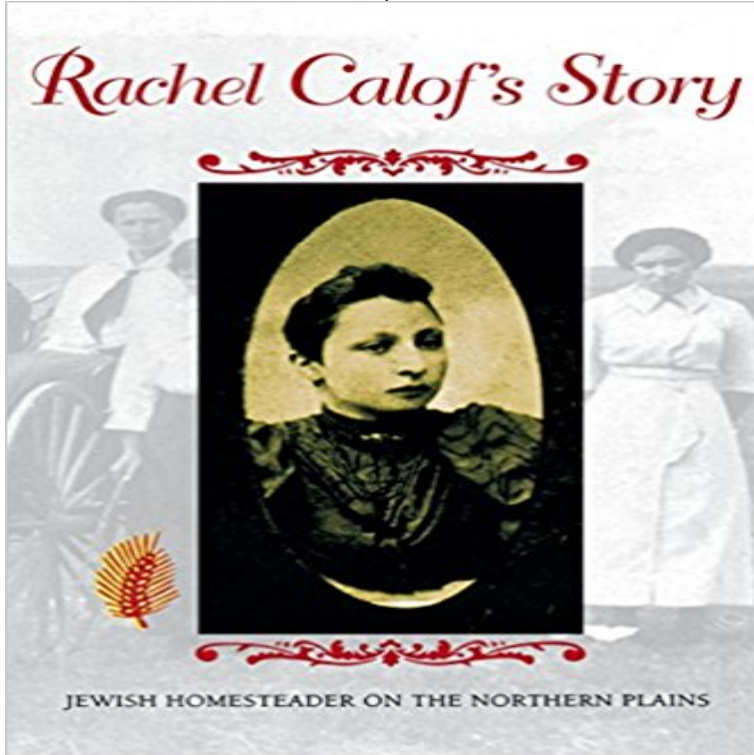


## Rachel Calofs Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains



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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