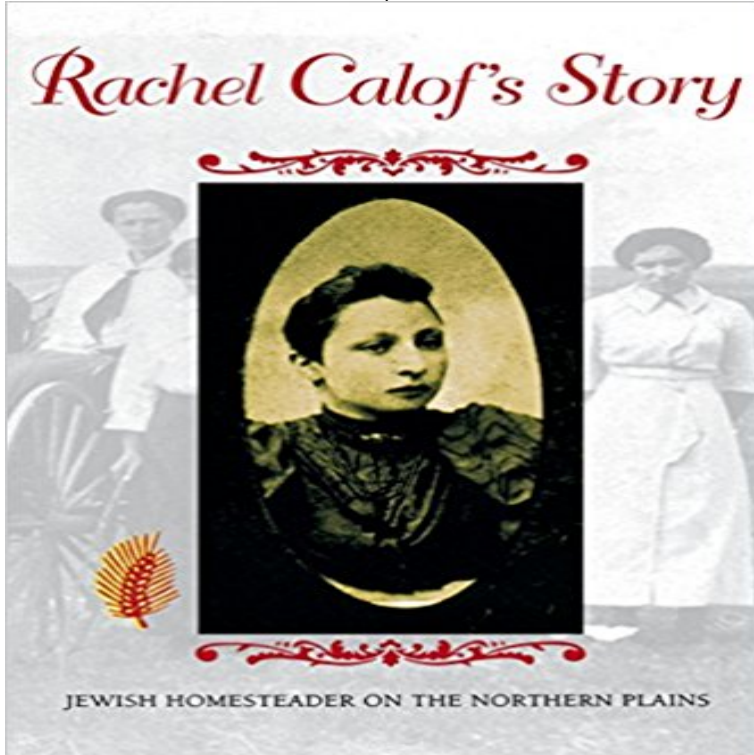


Rachel Calofs Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains



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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