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# “PRIVATE” LIVES AND “PUBLIC” WRITING RHETORICAL PRACTICES OF WESTERN NEBRASKA WOMEN

CHARLOTTE HOGG

The library in the western Nebraska town of Paxton (population approximately 500) is small, and my grandmother was president of the library board for many years. When I was younger, I learned about the history of the library from her research and writing published in the local county newspaper. In write-ups for both the library’s twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries, she described how women “were found to be very handy with hammer and saw” when starting the library.<sup>1</sup> I saw my grandma frequently and had been hearing her stories

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for years, but here were her words in a newspaper, which to me was identified as a place for public consumption. This was one of the first examples I recall of the boundaries of public and private writing converging. My own grandma was only one example. In the community in which I lived, older women contributed memoirs to the town library, wrote for the newspaper, and wrote histories of the town, churches, and school. These women not only shaped my writing life but were responsible for the rhetorical education of others in the community through these literacy practices. In my explication of the kinds of literacy practices of women in Paxton, I show that in this particular setting, their rhetorical practices do not fit our definitions of the private sphere so often used to situate women’s reading and writing lives, though that sphere does offer an important space where rhetorical education is undertaken.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars in the field of composition and rhetoric have long investigated the role of public vs. private lives; the study of rhetorical figures from antiquity involved the Greek *polis*, and the legacy of the “separate spheres” is traced from that historical period. However,

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FIG. 1. *Downtown Paxton Nebraska, May 2002.* Photo courtesy of Todd Kerstetter.

as Kate Ronald points out, it is scholars' reading of history that created these binaries: "[C]lassical rhetoric did indeed value personal discourse, but finally . . . the distinction between personal and public discourse is one that would not have made sense to classical rhetoricians, nor is it useful to us today."<sup>3</sup> She explains that persuasion of the self was often an integral part of persuading an audience; thus the personal and public were intertwined.

For women in Paxton, their merging of public and private both creates and reflects Great Plains culture—much of the reading and writing they did focused on the western Nebraska region and can, I believe, tell us much about life for women on the Plains. Cary W. de Wit notes in a study on women's sense of place that few studies of contemporary Plains women of any ethnic background currently exist.<sup>4</sup> Over the past quarter century, while scholarship on Great Plains women has greatly increased, much of the work has focused on the experiences of 19th century white women and their settlement and travel across the overland trails.<sup>5</sup> Images from this time are reinforced in the enduring prairie women from

literature: O. E. Rølvaag's *Beret*, Willa Cather's *Ántonia*, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Of course, adding to our understanding of what has become the defining period in Plains history and culture is critical; similarly, exploring the ways contemporary Plains women respond to and exist within the context of that history is necessary. Studying the ways in which women's writing practices have been at work in the Plains at any time in its history is one way to understand how the culture is shaped for and by them.

In this article, I show how women in Paxton, shaped by their rural Plains lifestyle, challenge limited conceptions of "public" and "private" literacies in written rhetorical moves that provide them a kind of power in their patriarchal communities. Their writings illuminate the ways in which the public and private spheres can overlap and merge in real, literate lives that are messier than academic constructs sometimes make them out to be. After a brief discussion of my ethnographic methodology, I provide an overview of the way the separate spheres are described and sustained by many theorists and explain how the privileging of

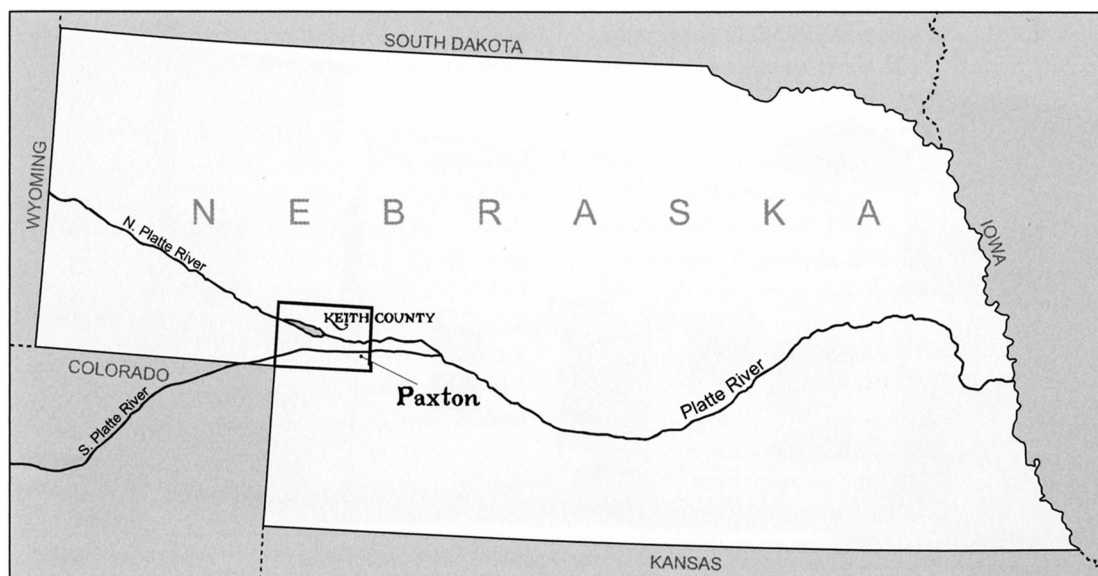


FIG. 2. Map of Nebraska showing Paxton in relation to the Platte River. Map by Tracy Ellen Smith, Mapsmith, etc.

the “public” leaves the two spheres not only separate but hierarchical. I then show how the rigid construct of dichotomous spheres doesn’t apply in Paxton within local rhetorical contexts such as the newspaper and the collection of memoirs housed at the village library. In their writings that meld public and private, these women created a rhetorical space that allowed them to negotiate their identities in an agrarian culture.

#### METHODOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC CHOICES

In 1981 anthropologist John F. Szwed made the claim that “ethnographic methods . . . are the only means for finding out what literacy really is and what can validly be measured.”<sup>6</sup> To him, other methods of data collection and inquiry that are more broad and comprehensive must rely on generalizations in ways that often do not account for the social and cultural nuances of people’s lives. For composition theorists, this kind of inquiry is the foundation of our ethnographic practices. Beverly J. Moss, a composition scholar who

conducted an ethnographic study of three African American churches, including one she had attended, explains that “while ethnography in general is concerned with describing and analyzing a culture, ethnography in composition studies is generally topic oriented and concerned more narrowly with communicative behavior or the interrelationship of language and culture.”<sup>7</sup> These nuances are of particular relevance regarding women’s rhetorical practices where much of their literacy work has been relegated as “extracurricular” (i.e., social) because it is not produced in the “public” sphere. The kinds of literacy work the Paxton women engaged in would not appear in the traditional data that quantifies educational experience and other “measurable” aspects of literacy knowledge. Part of what brought me to this research in the first place was my resistance to the idea that there was nothing about Paxton women to study because they were “only” housewives. From living in the town, I knew these women led complex lives and that the locus of their work and lives was through social and cultural engagement that shaped their writings. I also

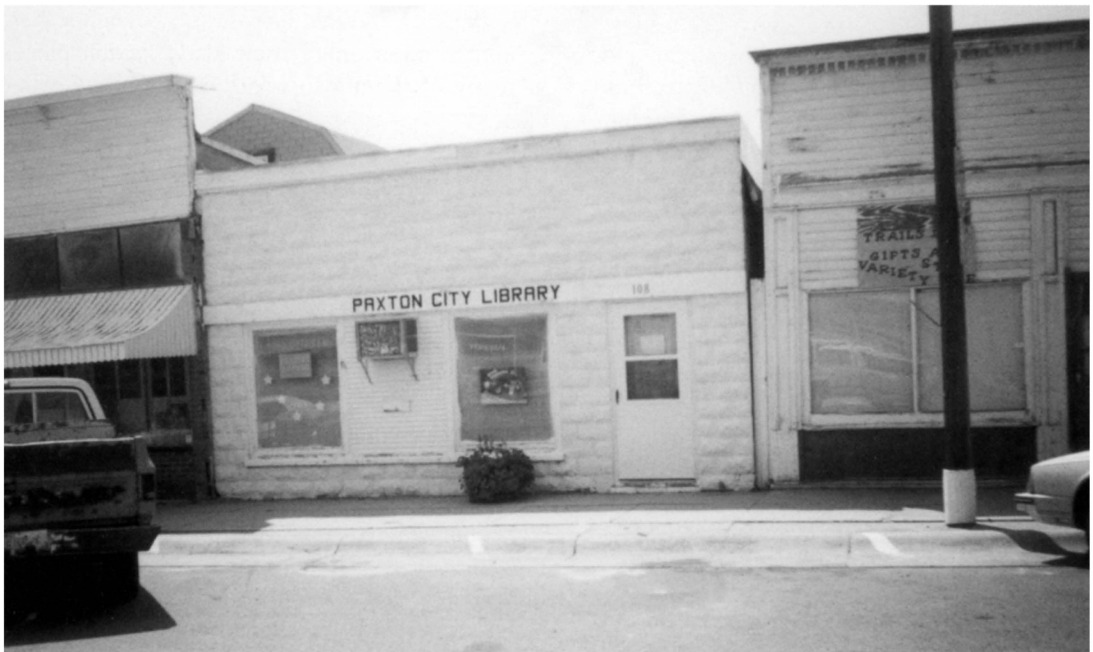


FIG. 2: Paxton Public Library, March 1999. Photo courtesy of author.

knew that the best way to access the social and cultural facets of their lives was through specific and local study—talking with them about their literate lives and participating in town activities as I did throughout my teens.

In *A Thrice-Told Tale*, anthropologist and ethnographer Margery Wolf calls into question assumptions made by many postmodern theorists of ethnography and takes up the issue of form. Her book raises issues about how reflexivity “has made a good many of us take stock of who is now in our audience.”<sup>8</sup> As a feminist, Wolf claims that “if our writings are not easily accessible to those who share our goals, we have failed.”<sup>9</sup> The research I describe below is best considered essayist-ethnographic in that it employs many of the methodologies of ethnography—thick description from immersion, participant observation, and inquiry into a specific site in order to help readers understand the rhetorical practices of a culture. However, my immersion into a place comes only partly by participant observation

so central to ethnographies and also from my own lived experience from when I resided in Paxton, Nebraska. By thinking of this study as ethnographic and essayistic—and by that word I mean writing as searching for more complicated understanding—I am better able to foreground my own biases and unique perspectives as a researcher and former member of the community. Those biases and perspectives play a key role in how I conducted my interviews and made my observations. In addition, my purpose in constructing the text in such a manner is meant not only to challenge the often-unquestioned masculinist argumentative academic conventions but also to more closely embody the kinds of writing valued by the women in my study.

#### THE DATA

At the inception of my ethnographic project, I spoke with older women who contributed to *Early Paxton*, a collection of mem-

oirs about life in Paxton before 1925, housed at the place where rhetorical and literate practices most thrived, the Paxton Public Library. The collection was edited by Joyce Lierley, a farm woman who told me when I interviewed her in July 1997 that she got the idea for the anthology of memoirs from a book she saw on a friend's table on "ladies writing about their past." She decided the book should consist of people who lived in Paxton before 1925 so it wouldn't "become too modernized" and recalled that "I think I maybe just went to the telephone book and reminded myself of what names, what ladies, have been here for quite a while, and I went to see them. Actually I didn't care how many people were in the book or even if men were too, it's just that that was a starting point." Eventually twenty-nine women and four men shared their memoirs for the *Early Paxton* collection, which Joyce put in a leather-covered binder so more authors or more information could be added at a later time. Individual authors' manuscripts range from one to forty-four pages and describe memories of being raised on the farm, social activities in the country or in town, country school, genealogical listing of relatives, and memories of the town, often reflecting deep nostalgia. Contributor Ruth Burton, for example, writes:

Then there were the winter bobsled parties and the skating parties down the river. Always a Big Bonfire. How cozy after skating up and down the river to roast wienies and marshmallows in the fire and drink hot chocolate that had been brought in gallon tin pails and heated in the bonfire.<sup>10</sup>

At the inception of my larger ethnographic project from which this research is drawn, I chose to interview older women who had made this common literacy contribution to the town, because it provided a distinct sample of women who, while perhaps not considering themselves writers, fostered connections between their place and their rhetorical practices. Many of the authors were also very visible members of

community clubs, organizations, and churches, and in addition to their *Early Paxton* pieces many of them also wrote within these other community contexts. The number of contributors with whom I could speak was limited in that quite a few of the authors of the memoirs had passed away, and a few were male, which was beyond the scope of my study; some who were still alive were not able to be interviewed due to their health. I eventually conducted individual interviews with nine older women for my project, all of whom contributed to *Early Paxton*. Because of this small number, there are limitations to this research. Joyce selected contributors based on longevity as a resident in and around Paxton, and often these residents have some kind of privilege within the town from that longevity. These women cultivated a stature in the community and therefore may have been considered—and considered themselves—authorities in constructing histories of their families, churches, and organizations; initiating and participating in rhetorical activities reinforced, and often created, this authoritative space. Other voices, consequently, were left out, such as those who did not have generational ties to the place, those who may have been overlooked in putting *Early Paxton* together, or those who may have chosen not to be involved. This sample of older women with enduring ties to the community, while limited as any ethnographic project is in its generalizability, did enable me to consider the ways in which this particular group uses literacy to sustain and evoke a sense of place through their reading and writing lives.

These older women in Paxton were between the ages of 76 and 100 when I began my research in 1997. They have lived all of their lives in and around the town first settled by whites in the 1860s during the building of the railroad on land promised to Cheyennes and Arapahos in the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. Many of the women are second- or third-generation family members of the community; my grandma writes in her memoir that her grandfather bought land sight unseen before he

moved from Wisconsin. Of the nine older women I spoke to, one never married and the remainder are widowed. All who married had children. All are white, some live on farms, some on ranches, and each attends one of the churches (Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic) in or around Paxton. A few worked outside the home as telephone operators or grocery store clerks. I had known all but one long before I began conducting interviews on their literate lives for the purpose of research.

I also spoke with seven women from the next generation, those in their fifties and sixties, who have participated alongside the older women in community work for years and are now carrying on that work in the Paxton area. I contacted every adult child of the women (twenty-one people) to inform them of my project and my interview and data collection involving their mothers. I tried to interview at least one adult child of each older woman who had children, eventually interviewing six adult children (some of whom I spoke to while they were visiting their mothers in Paxton from out of town) and receiving a letter from a seventh. The adult children range in age from their forties to their seventies. The majority of interviews with all participants were conducted in July 1997 and March 1999 with some sandwiched between when participants were available. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by me. Most names in this article are pseudonyms.<sup>11</sup>

Much of my participant observation took place during frequent trips to Paxton, where in addition to partaking in everyday activities such as walking to the grocery store or post office, I attended meetings and events that are important to Paxton culture, such as funerals, Sunday church services, Friends of the Library meetings, book club sessions, the Labor Day Weekend festival and parade (including a 10K run, a pancake feed put on by the Lion's Club, sand volleyball tournament, a Brazilian embroidery display at the Community Center, and activities at the Paxton Park like a nickel-scramble for children), and the 1999 Paxton Consolidated School All-School Reunion and

Banquet (which any graduate of Paxton can attend). I traveled the four hours to Paxton on an average of five times a year. When I went to Paxton, I stayed with my aunt (my grandma's daughter), and we informally discussed various aspects of my research throughout this time in addition to the formal interview I conducted with her about her reading and writing life in Paxton. I kept notes and research journals of these informal and more explicit research moments.

I also conducted archival research at the Nebraska State Historical Society, reading newspapers from the Keith County area. In March 1999 I visited the Keith County school superintendent's office to research school consolidation records and to search county school records and enrollment for Keith County. This article specifically draws upon archival research, interviews with older women in my study, and literacy artifacts they had in their homes.

#### PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

As Jean Bethke Elshtain notes in her book *Public Man, Private Woman*, "to tell the full story of the public and the private would be the work of a lifetime."<sup>12</sup> Audience, or the absence of one, as well as the cause of that absence, marks the basic distinction between public and private. Generally, private writings by women are journals, diaries, and letters written for a very specific person or group of persons, while public writing is often composed with the intent to be published or presented in some form, such as magazine and newspaper articles or speeches for an unknown and/or broader group of people.

But the spheres of public and private also represent a complicated discussion of gender and the activities and lifestyles available to women. Throughout Western history, men created and had access to the "public" sphere—simply put, that of political and civil action, speech, and writing—while women were positioned in the "private" sphere—that of domestic concerns, household and parental

duties—and denied a public voice on many levels, from being withheld the right to vote to being kept out of the workplace. Aristotle is just one rhetorical figure in a line of public male voices who denied women access to the realm of politics or oral or textual spaces in public.<sup>13</sup> The separate spheres of public and private defined and described within scholarship have become the markers to examine and critique the patriarchal constructs of our world. Within postmodernity the terms “public” and “private” have been unpacked and analyzed in various ways. Still, these terms for the most part connote the “political” and the “domestic” dichotomously to illustrate the ways women have been (and are still) denied access. As Seyla Benhabib explains,

Any theory of publicness, public space, and public dialogue must presuppose some distinction between the private and the public. In the tradition of Western political thought down to our own days, the way in which the distinction between the public and private spheres has been drawn has served to confine women, and typically female spheres of activity like housework, reproduction, nurturance, and care of the young, the sick and the elderly, to the ‘private’ domain, and to keep them off the public agenda in the liberal state. These issues have often been considered matters of the good life, of values, of non-generalizable interests.<sup>14</sup>

In relying on the terms “public” and “private” the academy sets up binaries that often simplify the more complicated and nuanced rhetorical contexts of people’s lives.

Other scholars have also called for researchers to question assumptions about the “separate spheres” as they are known in academic writing and the tendency to view “public” and “private” as monolithic ideas.<sup>15</sup> In *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in US Women’s Clubs, 1880-1920* Anne Ruggles Gere explains that she identifies women’s clubs as “one of the *competing* publics at the turn of

the century,” a move that “calls into question the category of ‘separate spheres’ common in academic feminism, urging instead more complex interpenetrations of women’s clubs and other social formations.”<sup>16</sup> And Anne Bower acknowledges in *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* that “What we may designate as fairly private activity or discourse (sewing, the writing of letters, contributing to a cookbook) may actually have been seen by women of the past as forms of public participation.”<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in her article on correspondence between two women in the nineteenth century, “Writing Themselves into Consciousness: Creating a Rhetorical Bridge Between the Public and Private Spheres,” Lisa Gring-Pemble defines what she calls “pre-genesis”: “a transitional space between private and public expression in which women, who were largely excluded from public discussion, shared, tested, and refined their ideas in a manner that compelled them to articulate their views in a powerful public document.”<sup>18</sup> She further argues that to discuss the few public acts of courageous women in history only serves to “highlight an artificial dichotomy between the public and the private and to ignore intermediary and highly significant processes of transformation.”<sup>19</sup> I would contend that words like “transitional” and “transformation” imply a hierarchy between the two spheres, that to move from private into public suggests an evolution, and that the “private” work done to move to the “public” space is valued for its eventual public result, not for the rhetorical processes and contexts that enabled that result.<sup>20</sup> To highlight women’s moves *toward* public spaces throughout history continually privileges that sphere, meaning that the private is less valuable. As I studied the rhetorical practices of Paxton women, I searched for theoretical models that applied to my research, but things weren’t matching up. The rural women I grew up with dwelled in—and created through their writing—different spaces and contexts than the spheres I read about. In her study of the women of Block, Kansas, Carol



K. Coburn has also noted the ways in which the spheres of public and private can oversimplify culture in the rural Great Plains, noting “it is not always helpful in describing rural or ethnic women’s experiences because for many women a clear separation of worlds does not and never has existed.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, it seems the women in Paxton, informed by their regional context, manipulate their own spaces for “public” and “private” discourse.

RHETORICAL PRACTICES IN PAXTON  
MERGE “PUBLIC” AND “PRIVATE”

NEWSPAPERS

In the seven years I lived in Paxton—through junior high and high school—my perceptions shifted as I adjusted to the scale of small-town life. Later I understood that my hometown and particularly the women who lived there did not match the abstract or urban or often historical examples used to delineate public and private. In my life in Paxton the terms did not really apply. There was an intimacy to living there that was unlike anything I’d experienced or seen in media representations of small town life. And, conversely, my life felt available and public to everyone; walking downtown to get the mail at the post office meant becoming involved in conversation—there was none of the anonymity found in suburban and urban areas. The owner of Hehnke’s Grocery Store knew how much we charged for food each month, the bank president knew how much money our family (nuclear and extended) had; before moving to Paxton from a larger city we were not used to also socializing with people privy to our family’s more private affairs.

But nowhere is the blurring of “public” and “private” more visible than in observations of my grandma. When I visited Paxton as a young girl, she seemed a celebrity to me, participating in the Centennial Queen Pageant and, when my granddad was still alive, riding together in a convertible as Grand Marshals in the Labor Day Parade. She knew everyone

down at the grocery store. Her key to the library meant to me power. Yet she also typified what I now know is described as domesticity—bragging about how often she made pies for her husband, tending to their household and yard, not working outside the home. All of the traditional markers of domestic (“private”) activities were visible at my grandma’s house: sewing, cooking, and gardening. Since she was, to me, both a definitive housewife and a public authority, I always assumed the identities conjoined.

It was through my grandma’s rhetorical practices that these identities were made visible. Months before she went into the nursing home, my family went through her desk drawers to make sense of what was in them. Among the cards, letters, funeral programs, and quick jottings of notes, her drawers were largely filled with newspaper clippings from the two newspapers in the area, the *Keith County News* (serving all of Keith County including Ogallala, the county seat, Brule, Big Springs, and Paxton) and the *Courier Times* (serving the small towns of Sutherland, Hershey, and Paxton).<sup>22</sup> One day, before I had officially identified myself as a researcher of these artifacts, she and I sat in the living room on the beige loveseat and put the clippings and other items in manila folders. I labeled them, since at this point her eyesight was poor from macular degeneration. By the time we were done, there was an envelope of newspaper clippings about my dad, one of me and my brother, one of cards from her friend who had died just a few years before, and one filled with clippings about her. In many of the clippings, she had previously highlighted names and key words so she and others who saw them could easily spot the reason the article had been cut, dated, and saved.

During those few days I helped my grandma organize her clippings, I began to realize how sifting through her articles was much like looking through a personal photo album or scrapbook. When I looked at the clippings of me and piled them on top of each other, it was like seeing a journal of my years in Paxton.

And yet, this was a newspaper, a document that to me usually represented the public media, the space that was supposed to be filled with what was happening “out there” in the rest of the country. In my experience, the media didn’t have much to say about my place. But it was different with the *Keith County News*.

These local papers exemplify the ways in which conventional distinctions of public and private are blurred in a small town. Before I moved to Paxton, my grandma would send me small newspaper articles when I returned to Fargo, North Dakota, after visiting her. The article from her local paper told of my family’s visit to her house for our vacation. During the years I lived in Paxton, I found my name in the paper frequently. A *Courier Times* article, 24 February 1983, notes: “Charlotte Hogg, daughter of [Mr. and Mrs. Hogg], represented Paxton sixth grade in the KNOP Spelling Bee. She went down on the word ‘nacelle’ when there were only three contestants remaining.” Every time my brother and I made honor roll, performed in a play, became a class officer or member of the Honor Society, there was a dated, labeled, highlighted clipping. So intriguing it was to be in the newspaper that after one of my brother’s friends visited, we submitted the following to the 30 August 1984 *Keith County News*: “Mike — of Fargo, N.D., was a visitor in the Hogg residence in Paxton for four days. Mike is a very good friend . . . and a former schoolmate.”

Under the headline “Reception,” the *Keith County News* of 11 June 1986 reported below my confirmation article that “[Mr. and Mrs.] Hogg served lunch at their home Sunday, June 9, in honor of the confirmation of their daughter, Charlotte, earlier in the day.” In October of 1989 the *Keith County News* announced the many students who returned to Paxton for homecoming from the various colleges around the state. Grandma had even cut out the article that told of how I won a free bag of fertilizer from Kildare Lumber at a fundraiser. When my grandma moved into the nursing home I told her I would keep these artifacts; thumbing through and unfolding these clippings she’s

saved over the years, I am reminded that her collection and preservation of these clippings not only serve to demonstrate what is deemed newsworthy in Paxton, but also highlight the rhetorical purpose the paper served in acting as a published timeline of activities and events for those who live there.

My grandma not only collected and contributed to the information on the pages of the newspaper, she produced it, sometimes through giving information or write-ups to the newspapers from her work as the Methodist church historian or library board member. If she didn’t send the article herself, she and other older women in the town would often supply information to the current Paxton correspondent of the newspaper. Since these women organized and ran many of the clubs mentioned in the paper, like the Just-For-Fun Club or the Garden Club, they were responsible for reporting their news to the papers and thus controlled the information conveyed. A typical Just-For-Fun Club meeting was described in detail in the paper, as in this *Courier Times* article from 12 September 1991:

Several members of the Just-For-Fun Club gathered at the Community Center Wednesday morning to work on club scrapbooks started by [Clara] in 1974 when the club was organized. At 1 p.m. President M—— called the members to order for the monthly business meeting. On behalf of the Garden Club, Dorlis Hogg thanked the Just-For-Fun members who presided at the Silver Tea table on Labor Day. . . . Hogg is the only member who belongs to the Garden Club and her beautiful entries rated awards. The quilt made by the Just-For-Fun Club and donated to the Ambulance fund was won by Stella —— . Charles —— recently sent the Club a gift of \$100. The members were surprised and delighted and made him an honorary member and urged him to share their food and fellowship whenever he wished. There was a discussion of the need for some sturdy wooden

chairs for the members who have disabilities that render the folding chairs unsafe. . . . Convalescent cards were signed for Kathryn ——— and Raymond ———. Fae Christensen has the box of new clippings left by the late Marie ———. Club members voted to sort these and make scrapbooks.

Just-For-Fun was comprised of senior citizens in town—couples and single women and men—who opted to make their informal gatherings a designated group and met at the Community Center for potluck meals and to play cards or Scrabble, in addition to the activities described above. The information submitted to the paper, like this Just-For-Fun clipping, best demonstrates traditionally “private” information found in a “public” space, in which the women made the assumption that the work of their meeting should be described in detail in the ways a village board meeting’s business might be shared.

In the summer of 1997 I also interviewed and recorded Clara, another older woman who had contributed to the *Early Paxton* memoir, and I asked her about writing for the paper and learned she was still writing articles to send to the current correspondent for the *Courier Times* and *Keith County News*. She told me she planned to write an article for the newspaper about her recent birthday party and the Sparkling White Grape Jell-O she served her guests (she and Jell-O were both turning 100). She explained during our interview that although she was no longer officially a writer for the paper, she composed pieces and gave them to the current correspondent to use, receiving no byline or money for it. It should be noted that this was not a new practice; past correspondents to the *Keith County News* and *Courier Times* (which often printed the same articles each week) have been women, when the correspondent’s name was listed as a byline at all. Often, the news from Paxton did not list the contributor until more recent decades, signifying the way in which this work was devalued as “only” women’s work and

therefore not important in the agrarian context.

Nonetheless, Clara told me as we sat in her living room near her family’s century-old bookcase that the editor of the *Courier Times* sometimes requested historical articles or facts that she indicated she was happy to write:

Well, I felt flattered I was asked. Maybe that’s the secret—that somebody would think that I could write for publication, because Mr. and Mrs. M—— came and called on me to see if I would write the Paxton page for the *Courier Times*, and I didn’t think I’d last very long. I thought, “What do I know?” But it suited them.

In some ways, the agrarian ideologies subscribed to by people in Paxton reflect the lifestyle of separate spheres as they are commonly known. Men run the largest businesses in town and they hold typical positions of power, such as mayor. But through their “extracurricular” activities involving writing, older women in Paxton decided what Keith County residents read in the Paxton section of the newspaper, constructed histories of the town, library, churches, and cemetery, and they began and maintained the public library. They believed the work of their lives warranted discussion and space in a forum often designated for the “public arena.” To them, there was no question that the daily activities in which women like my grandma and Clara took part deserved attention. There was an assumption among the older women in town that because they deemed stories from their childhood, a 100th birthday party, or the history of a building or school significant and worthy of attention, it *was* worthy of attention, of readership by an audience—and they literally knew who made up that audience. With this assumption came discernment, the power to selectively choose the kinds of materials submitted to the paper (although with people sending in items to the correspondent, this power was sometimes part of a larger collaborative effort to put the Paxton page together in the news-

papers). When I asked Clara whom she envisioned as the audience for the paper, she said, "Well, I knew it was folks like me who didn't want every other paragraph about a bridge party."

Clara's dedication to the work she provided for the community disrupts the assumptions I bring from years of acquired scholarship. While it seems unfair that Clara sometimes did not receive credit for her work (though she told me that when she had a byline she did receive payment), in terms of the local rhetorical context, most people knew it was Clara submitting to the paper—they gave her their news items and she was the person asking for information when attending events. Later, when she was not the correspondent, she still wanted to participate in providing the news for Paxton and, in what could be interpreted as a collaborative gesture, chose to do work for the current correspondent without receiving money. It seemed that for her what mattered most was making news available for people, which, according to her, is a powerful position to have.

#### MEMOIRS

Many of the women involved in the newspaper—whether they wrote for it, submitted information, or were mentioned in the articles—were the same women who contributed to *Early Paxton* in the library. The memoirs in the collection, like the newspaper, demonstrate the intricacies existing within "public" and "private" categories.

During my study, I located two valuable books on writing done by rural women that clarified the distinctive rhetorical context of the *Early Paxton* collection. Memoirs and histories fill the pages of *Writings of Farm Women, 1840-1940*, edited by Carol Fairbanks and Bergine Haakenson, some by such well-known authors as Elinore Pruitt Stewart and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Many of the women in the anthology were previously published in magazines or books. The comment made about one author characterizes the writing in the whole collection: "[L]ike most who recorded their

memories, [she is] less interested in a sociological analysis than in describing everyday experiences."<sup>23</sup> And like the women in Paxton, a number of the contributors to this anthology composed their memoirs later in life, like Jennie Stoughton Osborn, who in 1935 typed her memories at age eighty-seven.

To imagine the sense of audience these women writers maintained is difficult—Elinore Pruitt Stewart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (excerpted in the collection), for instance, is framed as letters to Mrs. Coney back in Denver, yet Stewart may well have known that Mrs. Coney was sending these pieces to *The Atlantic Monthly* for publication, and most certainly knew by the time she wrote her sequel, *Letters of an Elk Hunt*. The recipient of Hilda Rose's letters reprinted in the anthology also submitted them to *The Atlantic Monthly*. Were these pieces, then, what has been traditionally considered "private" correspondence? Was part of their more public appeal the intimacy of the voice, even if the events told are not extremely revealing (e.g., pregnancies not being mentioned)? The pieces "describe both the ordinary and extraordinary" while sustaining a sense of nostalgia, going from the classic prairie hardship stories of fires and drought to descriptions of chores and churchgoing.<sup>24</sup> Jennie Stoughton Osborn writes: "Drought and hot winds did not seem to retard the crop of children that grew up here in those early days. They flourished like the Russian Thistles of today."<sup>25</sup> The women in the Fairbanks and Haakenson book seemed compelled to write their memories on the page, though the intended audience is not clearly known.

The second edited anthology of women's writings, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910*, focuses on letters and journals of North Dakota women. When the book was published in 1982, author Elizabeth Hampsten lamented the lack of attention given to women's private writings: "If memorable events or notable persons are referred to, or if the writer participated in a public drama, then her papers will pass for history. . . . If nothing else were to



FIG. 3: Dorlis Hogg, Paxton, Nebraska, 1985. Photo courtesy of author.

persuade me that reading private writings by ordinary women is not a whimsical exercise, it would be the seriousness with which these women took their own writing."<sup>26</sup> Hampsten obtained texts from North Dakota archives and personal collections, writing more obviously intended for self, family, or friends as its only audience. The journals and letters in this anthology are more sparse with less attention to detail and story, shown in a typical journal entry from Rosa Kately: "May 19, 1900. Came to the claim at 1 PM yesterday. Went to Erwin's in the afternoon. Went to Mrs. Johnson's after the milk and flour."<sup>27</sup> The sense of audience is clearer in these bare but important texts.

When I think of these collections in relation to *Early Paxton*, it again seems that the older women from my hometown were melding public and private. In my interviews with

older women who contributed to *Early Paxton*, I asked them about issues of audience in putting together their memoir—whom they were writing for and to. During our interview at the nursing home I asked my grandma about the audience she had in mind when she wrote her forty-four pages for *Early Paxton*, pages filled with memories from her childhood ("The privy was also a place to secretly dispose of unwanted things, which I did with my portion of bananas"<sup>28</sup>) as well as of the town itself ("On the west end of the depot was the loading platform. That's where we would take our large cans of cream to be shipped to the creamery and would pick up the empty cans"<sup>29</sup>). She, like the other women I interviewed, told me she didn't really have a specific audience in mind beyond wanting to share history, that in fact she wrote the ideas as they came to her, which she states explicitly in her text: "The memories I have of my first years are many, but I have no idea of the chronological order as they come rushing back."<sup>30</sup> But contributors did know of Joyce's intent as editor to place the collection in the library and that the writing would not likely be read outside of Paxton. These texts were visible to a known readership—most of the contributors to the book could probably name who would read *Early Paxton*, as they also served on the library board.

The memoirs themselves provide clues about the audience and purpose of the writings. At first, when my conceptions of public and private were more static, I assumed that because the women in the Fairbanks and Haakenson book had been published that the manuscripts in *Early Paxton* would more match the North Dakota private writings. But the women in Paxton constructed their pieces in ways that seem most similar to the published works, perhaps because of their sense of intended audience.

Elsie Windel's piece in *Early Paxton* described events that shaped her youth for what seems a general readership: "Helen and Ferne . . . were our first callers. They were to become two of my dearest friends. . . . They gave a

party and introduced me to the eighth grade girls and all the girls who went to high school.”<sup>31</sup> Yet many of their memoirs are filled with what Deborah Brandt calls indexical expressions, “liberties that writers take by virtue of an intimate relationship with their readers,” that do make the *Early Paxton* writings distinct from the anthology of writing by farm women.<sup>32</sup> Like many *Early Paxton* contributors, Lucille, for example, uses a local context to frame her narrative: “I was born about one mile straight north of Paxton, Nebraska, in the first house on the east side of the road, where the Bruce —— family now lives.”<sup>33</sup> Though writing a memoir for the library, Lucille assumed a connection with those who would be reading her text—it was published, public, but not quite. And yet, it was possible that people who didn’t know her but knew where Bruce’s family lives would feel included within the text. Other women, like Mary Rundback, referred to family cemetery plots, local names, and homesteads with little explanation or context: “[My mother] is buried in the Glen Echo cemetery.”<sup>34</sup> My grandma and others noted specifics about land, such as “the northeast quarter of Section 6, Township 12, Range 36.”<sup>35</sup> While the Paxton women appeared to be writing to an intimate audience, *Early Paxton* is much more similar to the collection of published writings by Fairbanks and Haakensen, rich with story. Hildred Oberg Lammers writes:

The Diver’s Store was where Virgil ——’s Grocery Store was. John . . . had a soda fountain, also sold candy and tobacco. I would go down in the afternoons and let John take a nap and I would run the store. I was only ten and could hardly see over the top of the counter, but I learned to make sodas, malted milks, and sundaes. Later, John died and willed the store to Mother Oberg. She owned it when 3.2 beer came in. That sure helped the income for awhile.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, even given the level of perceived intimacy with the reader, their writings contain

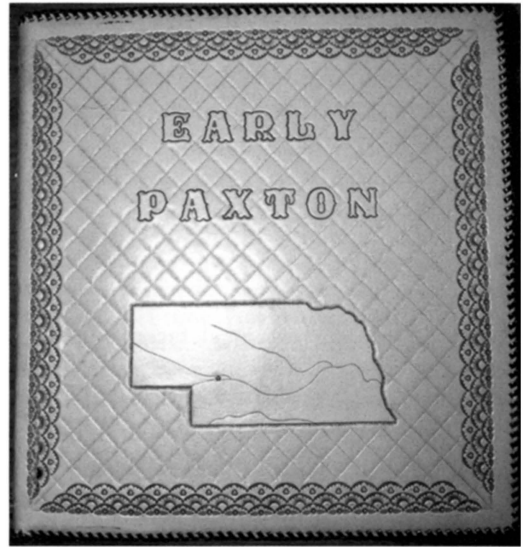


FIG. 4: *Early Paxton* anthology, May 2002. Leather cover made by Robert L. Jorgenson. Photo courtesy of Todd Kerstetter.

little of the kind of clipped narrative in the Hampsten collection, bare and filled with gaps. Hampsten’s guiding definition of journal or letter writing for family and friends as “private”—the thumbnail definition that pervades scholarship—does not adequately describe the memoirs in the Paxton library. But the Paxton writings are, nevertheless, specific and concerned with “private” or domestic matters, and don’t fit the basic descriptions of “public” writing. The characteristics of their memoirs—indexical expressions combined with writing containing stories and rich detail—intertwine public and private in ways that disrupt assumptions about audience often associated with static conceptions of “private” writing.

The purpose of the manuscript, clarified by Joyce, was rendering Paxton life primarily before 1925, but I believe it is also meant to teach residents—patrons of the library—the history, values, and culture of the town. The stories and details of life in Paxton are told generously, if a bit nostalgically, reflecting deep pride in place while informing later generations of a rich history the older women

authoritatively knew firsthand. In a rural community, these women's stories embody the space between public and private because they are some of the few who intimately know this place, unlike the many outsiders with a more public audience who have spoken for the Plains.

#### SILENCES

One of the stereotypical facets of small-town life is the idea that everyone knows everyone's business—it is the most visible and known marker that shows the comingling of public and private. But doing research in my hometown reminded me that within this intimacy that seems both stigmatized and glorified by our culture (the downside: everyone gossips about everyone's business; the upside: people are always there to help in crisis) are more subtle nuances often unseen that illustrate how these rural Great Plains women manipulate public and private literacies in their lives.<sup>37</sup> When I began interviewing the older women I became aware that my position as an insider in the community—though I'd been gone longer than I lived there—changed and complicated the ethnographic tenor of interviewing, which in turn connected with issues of “public” and “private.” When I was about to leave my aunt's house with my tape recorder and interview questions to walk the block and a half to Clara's house on Highway 30, my aunt told me not to ask Clara about what happened with her first husband. After telling me the story of that husband, my aunt said, “It just wouldn't be good to bring that up with her.”

Scholars like Anne Ruggles Gere and Cheryl Glenn are each currently exploring the rhetorics of silence. In a talk given at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Gere referred to deliberate silences in writing and its connection to the writing we ask of our students. Gere pointed out that during a time when the media leaves nothing to be revealed, the choice to remain silent is an important part of how we and our students construct texts. Cheryl

Glenn makes similar claims in her study that reexamines the silences of women in terms of choice—that some women choose silence as a kind of power. The warning I received from my aunt that day on my way to Clara's reminded me that although there is a unique kind of intimacy in Paxton, there exist the gaps and silences, the moments of self-censorship. The fact that Paxton women wrote their memoirs for the library with a closeness not found in other published writing by farm women does not necessarily mean that all was revealed. *Even if they are already known by the community*, family “secrets” are excluded. One contributor to *Early Paxton* who was also my granddad's niece, did not mention in her pages that her father killed himself, which my family and I'm sure older residents were privy to. Sure enough, I checked Clara's memoir and the first husband is barely mentioned. Thus, through silences these women exert a control over their own histories in the town; what may be “public” knowledge is not revealed (thus not recorded and passed down as “official history”) and has the illusion of being kept private.

Anthropologist Deborah Fink contends that the hard work women did on the farm was often considered merely helping out, since it was the male's farm; they define(d) themselves and others define(d) them as “farm wives.”<sup>38</sup> We should acknowledge that Fink's ideas are not only *about* people in rural areas but include opinions *within* the rural culture as well. As she reminds us, “rural people have concurred in attributing greater importance to men than to women.”<sup>39</sup> But through the rhetorical choices made by women in Paxton they were able to create for themselves a legitimate space to share their wisdom of place and teach others in the community through their writing. In constructing texts that merged the public and private spheres that are so tied to gender, they were able to both sustain the agrarian ideologies they subscribe to but also make sophisticated rhetorical choices—in terms of audience and deliberate silences, for

example—that demonstrate their deep local knowledge and thus demonstrate a level of power in the community. Broader implications are also possible, I believe, by examining how a community might be affected by the writing work being done in a rural community, and could even inform some of the most pressing issues facing the Plains today, rural revitalization being one example. More specifically, looking closely at the ways place shaped rural women's reading and writing lives—and vice versa—has the potential to enrich historical and contemporary representations of women from the rural Great Plains.

#### NOTES

1. Dorlis Hogg, "History of Paxton Public Library is Listed," *Courier Times* (Sutherland, Hershey, and Paxton, Nebr.), 16 April 1992, 5.

2. This piece is part of a larger ethnographic research project on the literacies employed by older women in Paxton, Nebr., particularly how their sense of place on the Great Plains impacts their reading and writing lives. I discuss these issues further in "The Space Between Public and Private: Women's Literacy in Rural Nebraska," in the anthology *Multiple Literacies in the Twenty-First Century*, forthcoming by Hampton Press, and in "Settling Down' in Western Nebraska: Grounding Local History through Memoir," *Western American Literature* 37, no. 2 (summer 2002): 223-42.

3. Kate Ronald, "A Reexamination of Personal and Public Discourse in Classical Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 9, no.1 (fall 1990): 36-48.

4. Cary W. deWit, "Women's Sense of Place on the American High Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 21 (winter 2001): 29-44.

5. Several important articles on Great Plains women can be found in *Great Plains Quarterly*, particularly vol. 8 (spring and fall 1988), vol. 9 (summer 1989), vol. 18, (fall 1998), and vol. 21, (winter 2001).

6. John F. Szwed, "The Ehtnography of Literacy," in *Perspectives on Literacy*, ed. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 303-11.

7. Beverly J. Moss, "Ethnography and Composition: Studying Literacy at Home," in *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research* ed. Gesa Kirsch and Patricia Sullivan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp. 153-71.

8. Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 137.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

10. Ruth Buchanan Burton, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, ed. Joyce Lierly (unpublished anthology, 1982), p. 12.

11. For each interview I conducted, I obtained approval to research subjects from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institutional Review Board, and each participant signed an informed consent form. At the time I began interviewing older women, I used the standard Informed Consent Form which states that names will be kept confidential. Later, I realized that the decision to keep people anonymous is a complicated one—people then don't get credit for what they have said or done, as one example. Ultimately, I decided to have an addendum to my original Informal Consent Form for participants whose writing I cite in the text. For those who have passed away or who never signed consent forms, I cited them for their written work as I would any author and wanted to keep that consistent with those who were participants in my study. Therefore, the women whose written work I cite (my grandma Dorlis and Joyce Lierley) have signed the addendum and agreed to the use of their real names so they will receive credit for their written work (though they were given the choice of whether or not to remain confidential). All other participants/interviewees have pseudonyms.

12. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Women: Women in Social and Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 4.

13. See *ibid.*; Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997); and Mary Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," in *Feminism: the Public and Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 45-63.

14. Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in Landes, ed., *ibid.*, pp. 66-99.

15. See Christy Friend, "From the Contact Zone to the City: Iris Marion Young and Compositional Theory," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 19, no. 4 (winter 1999): 657-76, and Anne Ruggles Gere and Aaron Schutz, "Service Learning and English Studies: Rethinking 'Public' Service," *College English* 69, no. 2 (February 1998): 129-49.

16. Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in US Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 13.



17. Anne Bower, ed., *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 6.
18. Lisa M. Gring-Pemble, "Writing Themselves into Consciousness: Creating a Rhetorical Bridge Between the Public and Private Spheres," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 44.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Charlotte Hogg, "The Space Between Public and Private: Women's Literacy in Rural Nebraska," *Multiple Literacies in the Twenty-First Century* (Melbourne: Hampton Press, forthcoming).
21. Carol K. Coburn, "Ethnicity, Religion, and Gender: The Women of Block, Kansas, 1868-1940," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (fall 1988): 222-32.
22. The population of Ogallala is approximately 5,000; the population of the additional villages served by these newspapers range from a few hundred to less than 2,000.
23. Carol Fairbanks and Bergine Haakenson, eds., *Writings of Farm Women, 1840-1940: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1990), p. 79.
24. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
26. Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. viii.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
28. Dorlis Hogg, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, ed. Joyce Lierley (unpublished anthology, 1982), p. 61.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
31. Elsie Lenore Holmstedt Windels, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, p. 226.
32. Deborah Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers, and Texts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), p. 74.
33. Lucille Sedlacek, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, p. 196.
34. Mary Rundback, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, p. 183.
35. Dorlis Hogg (note 28 above), p. 59.
36. Hildred Harriet Oberg Lammers, untitled essay in *Early Paxton*, p. 132.
37. For more discussion on the insularity and rewards of rural life, see, for example, Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Linda Hasselstrom, *Land Circle* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum, 1991); and Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).
38. Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 7-8.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 8.