

Found in Her Suitcase



*Famous author's family discovers sequels to **Land of the Burnt Thigh***

BY KATIE HUNHOFF

“I remember when my mother handed me a suitcase 57 years ago and asked me to get rid of Edie’s junk because it had a moldy, old papery smell,” recalls Cliff Ammons of Elizabeth, Colorado. He was in high school when he took possession of his aunt’s Edith’s suitcase, and ever since it has been shuffled between rooms, houses and states.

But Ammons always kept his aunt’s effects because they included drafting tools belonging to her husband, Aaron Wesley Kohl. “I had wanted to become an architect and his drafting instruments were priceless to me,” he says. “My dream never materialized, but I worked for architects and structural engineers for many years.”

Ammons served in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. He met his wife, Margie, and they married in 1970. They raised two children and he built a photography career over four decades. He kept possession of the suitcase all those years, but he never took time to sort through the contents until 2015.

“I was down on my knees going through the old stinky suitcase to see if there was anything worth saving,” he says. “Otherwise I was going to throw away all the contents and the suitcase.” Then he came across a pile of papers.

Edith Ammons Kohl (opposite) wrote six books and started several newspapers in her lifetime. She left behind two novels hidden in the suitcase pictured above.



LITERARY SCHOLARS know Ammons' aunt, Edith Ammons Kohl, as the much-heralded author of *Land of the Burnt Thigh*. The 1938 novel is based on her homesteading journey that began in 1907 when she and her sister, Ida Mary, traveled from St. Louis to start a claim about 30 miles from Fort Pierre.

In her very first chapter, she explained how homesteading worked: "Well, all you had to do to get a deed to a quarter section — 160 acres of land — was to file on it at the nearest Land Office, live on it for eight months, pay the government \$1.25 an acre — and the land was yours. Easy as falling off a log!"

The book, written in first person, is considered a fictionalized memoir. Kohl included details and stories from other women homesteaders. In the preface she explained: "This is not my story — it is the story of the people, the present-day pioneers who settled on that part of the public lands called the "Great American Desert," and wrested a living from it at a personal cost of privation and suffering."

Born in Illinois in 1884, Ammons was an unlikely pioneer. She was tiny and slight, and described as frail and in poor health. After her mother died, her father, Tom, moved the girls to St. Louis, where they grew up in the city. But both dreamed of pioneering. Ida Mary eventually



Cliff found this photo, titled “Ammons Residence, Ammons, SD,” in his aunt Edith’s suitcase. The women are unidentified, but they represent the community spirit the sisters benefited from while homesteading in Dakota Territory.

traveled westward and then returned for her older sister, Edith, who was then 23.

Years later, Edith Kohl wrote, “So it was that we, the two Ammons girls, had settled out on the Brule Reservation (the Indians called it ‘the Burnt Thigh’) and staked our all for a homestead, and against the primitive. Except for a few hundred dollars our ‘all’ was ourselves. We were fresh from the city, and had not the training or physique to combat the hardships of a raw frontier. Neither [of us] weighed a hundred pounds,” Ammons wrote.

Her book, one of the best-known accounts of homesteading from a woman’s point of view, is still studied today. “Over the years I have assigned Kohl’s *Land of the Burnt Thigh* to my students to debunk the all-too-familiar “prairie-wife” caricature and the many myths of the West found in mass culture,” says Paul Baggett, an associate professor of English at South Dakota State University in Brookings.

He says Edith understood that the legends handed down from her pioneering ancestors, combined with the turn-of-the-century popular press, had influenced her and Ida Mary in the years before they homesteaded. In the opening pages she explained, “It was from [Cousin Jack’s] highly colored yarns that we had learned all we knew of the West and from western magazines which pictured it

as an exciting place where people were mostly engaged in shooting one another.”

Baggett believes the Ammons women learned the values of cooperative living and social bonds as they confronted unforgiving weather, fires and rattlesnakes. “Such examples challenge readers to think more critically about the “go-it-alone” individualism and the cliché rhetoric of self-sufficiency that continues even today,” he says.

WHEN CLIFF AMMONS discovered a manuscript in the long-locked suitcase, he figured it was the original draft of *Land of the Burnt Thigh*. Eventually he realized that he was holding another novel by his aunt, one never published. *Sodbreakers* (yes, she’d given it a title) was a continuation of her first novel and told of her settling anew on land near Lusk and Van Tassell, Wyoming.

Ammons immediately told his sister, Ida, who is named after Ida Mary. The siblings are Edith’s only surviving relatives. They immediately read and enjoyed *Sodbreakers* and decided it should be shared with the world.

“After we had it published in 2016, my wife, Margie, and I were going through more paperwork in the suitcase and accordion folder and by chance we came upon what we originally thought was part of a second copy of *Sod-*

breakers. Much to our delight we realized that my aunt had written yet another complete book named *Woman of the Cavalcade*.”

The third book is based on Kohl’s adventures in Montana, where she started her fourth newspaper and began to fight big grain trusts that took advantage of farmers. She garnered support from U.S. senators and was active in The American Society of Equity, now called the Farm Bureau. At the end of *Cavalcade*, readers were introduced to Aaron Wesley Kohl, the author’s future husband and the owner of the architectural instruments in the suitcase with the manuscripts.

Ammons believes all three of the books were written during the same time frame. “The paper, the condition, her typewriting style,” he says. “The manuscripts all look alike.”

He can only guess at why the sequels weren’t published. “It is my opinion that my aunt never had the last two books published because her work at *The Denver Post* kept her so busy that she felt she would publish them once she retired. She died of cancer in 1959 before her dream became a reality,” says Ammons. Kohl wrote for the *Post* from 1929 to 1954, one of her many accomplishments after she moved West. She also started numerous newspapers and post offices.

Ammons and his wife learned more about Kohl’s life as they explored the contents of the suitcase. “We discovered a tremendous amount of important papers, pictures and letters from statesmen, governors and even presidents of the United States.” There was also a signed contract between Edith and MGM Movie Studios that showed intent to make a movie of *Land of the Burnt Thigh*. World War II probably interrupted that project.

After Kohl settled in Denver, she threw herself into public life. Besides her work at the *Post*, she wrote *Denver’s Historic Mansions*, *Denver’s First Christmas* and *A Christmas on the Frontier*. She led an effort to make the columbine the state flower, and facilitated the donation of the house that became the Colorado governor’s mansion in 1957.

Despite her successes later in life, Kohl’s adventures in South Dakota created her legacy. *Land of the Burnt Thigh*

captures the reader’s imagination not only because of the obvious draw of two young women defiantly creating a place for themselves on the prairie, but also because of Kohl’s honest and forthright prose.

Baggett says it’s important that readers of her first novel not gloss over the author’s pioneer perspective of Native

Americans. “She confesses that she and her sister had never seen an Indian ‘outside of a Wild West show,’ and when they first see them approaching their home they quickly retreat to their shanty, locking themselves inside and hiding under the bed while listening to (and completely misunderstanding) the ‘savage mutterings’ of their visitors outside.”

As the book progresses, Kohl’s writing shows a greater understanding of her Sicangu neighbors on the Lower Brule reservation. “Indeed,” Baggett says, “the sisters owed their survival in part to the tribal people who aided them

when they fell victim to a fire a couple of years after they arrived. Nevertheless, the Ammons sisters were very much a part of their generation, and their cultural biases reveal themselves at multiple points in the story.”

Kohl would surely agree. In fact, in a new preface to *Land of the Burnt Thigh* found in the suitcase, she reiterated that the books were written from her limited perspective.

“Converting a million square miles of wasteland into homes and fields was a colossal task,” she wrote. “It was a hodge-podge of humanity in a topsy-turvy world. Constant streams of people to virgin domains. Fighting for survival, falling, rising, failing, conquering. They were as invincible as the West itself. Cowboys and Indians, stockmen and settlers; industry and agriculture, primitive and progress, all mingling for a place in the Scheme of Things but ever the wheels of development turning on.

“It is of this epic in American history with its human drama, and my part in it that I write,” she continued. “The story of a present-day people with whom I trekked into one no-man’s land after another. I am interpreting it as I saw and knew and lived it. The record itself already has been printed indelibly on the sage and sod.”



In their early 20s, Edith and Ida Mary Ammons left city life in St. Louis to homestead 160 acres west of Fort Pierre.