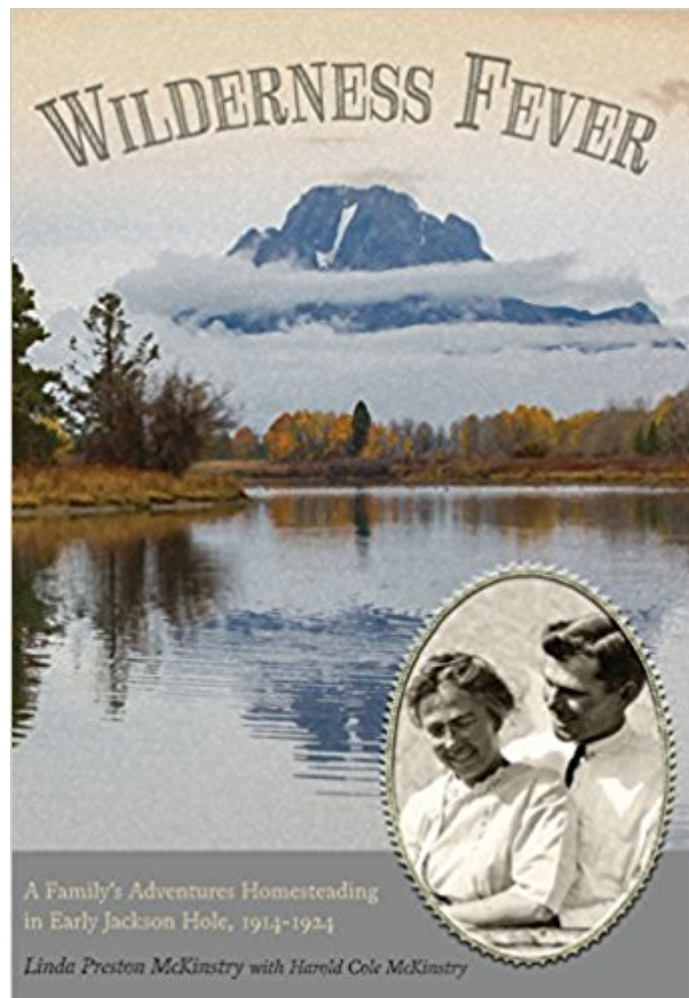




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Wilderness Fever: A Family S Adventures Homesteading In Early Jackson Hole, 1914-1924



Synopsis

WOMEN WRITING THE WEST 2017 CREATIVE NONFICTION WILLA FINALIST In 1914, Linda and Mac McKinstry left their secure jobs in Washington, D.C., married, and moved west to establish a homestead in country both untouched and beautiful, but also inhospitable, dangerous, and forty miles from anywhere. Their hair-raising, yet charming, account of their struggles to build a homestead and raise a family at the foot of the Tetons provides a glimpse into life in an region so wild and scenic that powerful outside interests covet its cascading water for irrigation and its land for preservation as a national park.

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Customer Reviews

The stories of homesteaders are endlessly fascinating to me. They are always stories of hope, adventure, and courage. While each story is a variation on those themes, each one is unique in its setting and the details of the homesteader's challenges. *Wilderness Fever's* unique setting is the picturesque and rugged country around Jackson Hole, Wyoming, long before tourists tamed it. Linda, raised in Massachusetts, was teaching home economics in Washington D.C. where she met Harold, from North Dakota, who worked for The U.S. Department of Agriculture there. Tired of urban life, and fueled by Harold's desire to have his own ranch, they quit their jobs, married and headed West to find the perfect place to homestead. Linda's training in home economics and Harold's experience with North Dakota farming were valuable skills, but nothing could totally prepare them for the challenges of homesteading life in early Jackson Hole country. From 1914 to 1924, Linda and Harold (Mac) lived on the land, raised three children, and did their best to master

the blizzards, sub-zero cold, flooding, fire, isolation, short growing season and hard physical labor in order to fulfill their homesteading dream. Based on journals and letters both Linda and Mac wrote during those years, this book shows what homesteading was like for them day to day. Although neither Linda nor Mac had ever experienced such hardships, they embraced the hardships as an adventure. Only reading between the lines can one sense their feelings of isolation and loneliness. One chapter titled, "A Winter with No Women" describes the winter of 1917 when snow averaged 5 feet in depth and Linda did not see another woman from November 16th until April 14th. She wrote: "With the cooking, the baby to care for, and the general housework, there was always much to be done." The closest thing to a complaint was Linda's comment that, "The most unpleasant part of winter living was the outside plumbing...with below freezing temperatures, outside trips were far from pleasant. But some way we took it all in stride and did not think too much about it since everyone in the community had the same problems." In addition to the difficulties of pioneer life, the McKinstrys lived with rumors of possible expansion of Yellowstone Park which might encompass their land. Would they be allowed to keep it? Rather than supporting his family by ranching as he'd envisioned, Harold's income came primarily from his surveying work and teaching school. Linda opened and ran a tearoom for tourists for a couple of summers to bring in additional income. She enjoyed the contact with "people from the 'outside' world" and it provided an outlet for their excess cream and butter. In the final chapter of the book, "Reality Sets In," the lure of the frontier that brought the McKinstrys West succumbs to the unending difficulties of life in Jackson Hole Valley. Although they decide they must move on, this book is a testimony to the love the McKinstrys had for their homesteading years and a tribute to all they accomplished. I'm grateful that they recorded and shared their vivid and honest story. It allowed me to vicariously share the experience of homesteading in Jackson Hole country in the early days of the 20th century. I appreciate the book's well-written foreword by historian Sherry Smith. It provides helpful information about homesteading in general, and the history of Jackson Hole settlement in particular. The book's pleasing design, including numerous photographs of the McKinstrys' homesteading life, add to the appeal of this book. Anyone who loves homesteading stories, likes reading western history, or has ever visited Jackson Hole and the Tetons (or has wanted to) will enjoy this book.

Wilderness Fever: A Family's Adventures Homesteading in Early Jackson Hole, 1914-1924. Linda Preston McKinstry with Harold Cole McKinstry, with a foreword by Sherry L. Smith, Ph.D. (Glendo, WY: High Plains Press, 2016) Most Americans think of homesteading as having occurred in the 1800s. We can all picture the wholesome farm families sitting on the seats of

wagons pulled by oxen, the billowing white canvas covering all their possessions. Possibly a milk cow is tied to the back of the load beside a crate full of chickens. On the horizon— is that cowboys, or possibly Indians? Some parts of the West, especially including western Wyoming, stayed wild longer than, for example, the Dakotas. And for Linda Preston McKinstry and her husband Harold Cole McKinstry, homesteading began in 1915 when they left bureaucratic jobs in Washington, D.C. and took advantage of the government's offer of "free" land. McKinstry, called "Mac" of course, grew up in North Dakota and had studied agriculture and Linda was a home economics teacher when they settled in Jackson Hole. In several ways, they were not typical homesteaders. For one thing, they were thirty years late for the peak of homesteading. Both were well-educated, and most importantly, they had money. If homesteading hadn't worked out, they could have gone elsewhere and done something else. Having a ready supply of cash also allowed them to have luxuries such as Valentine's Day cards and gifts for each other on special occasions. Still, their lives were hard and demanding. This book is composed of letters they wrote to Linda's mother, which retain the freshness of experiences just lived, and from memoirs they wrote years later. Besides the dangers of their chosen lifestyle, with no doctor, no telephone, and only rare mail service, they had to become adept at planning ahead. Once winter dumped several feet of snow on their remote home, they knew they wouldn't be able to leave for months. They ordered groceries to be shipped to the nearest settlement, Victor, Idaho. Think about this list: 500 pounds of white flour, 100 pounds of cornmeal, 75 pounds of whole wheat flour, and 100 pounds of cornmeal. There's your bread and pancakes for the season. Several hundred pounds of potatoes. 25 pounds of navy beans, 10 pounds of macaroni, and 25 pounds each of prunes, dried pears, figs, and dried apples. 1 24-can case of tomatoes. 12 cans each of corn, string beans and salmon. 10 pounds each of lima, red kidney and chili beans. 14 pounds of noodles. Add in 50 pounds of brown sugar, 300 pounds of white sugar, 10 pounds of coffee and a little coffee and tea, and you've got your menu for the winter. On this diet, the McKinstrys cut ice, skied and snowshoed and drove starving horses through drifts twice as high as the horses. In November one year, they ordered 500 pounds of potatoes. Two ranchers drove to Victor to collect a supply of potatoes for themselves and neighbors. Because of the extreme cold, the potatoes had to be unloaded and kept close to a fire each night to keep them from freezing. They supplemented their diet with elk shot near their home. In order to eat meat in the summer, Susan had to can it, which required packing it into quart jars that had to be kept covered with boiling water on the wood-fueled stove for several hours. Because few fences existed in the country where they lived, Mac was constantly searching for their strayed

horses and cattle, sometimes in extremely cold weather conditions. Travel required hardships and risks most of us can't even imagine today. This meant that when anyone was traveling through the neighborhood, they'd stop for a visit and every visitor had to be fed, and sometimes bedded down in the tiny, poorly-insulated log cabins that served as their homes. Linda writes often of expecting only Mac for lunch only to have as many as 10 people show up expecting to be fed. Yet their youngest daughter reported that the couple loved the lifestyle, and only left it when they had three children who needed schooling. In addition, they believed it was likely that Yellowstone National Park would absorb their ranch, making it impractical to continue improving it. One of the fascinating aspects of the book is the comparison and contrast between Linda's and Mac's accounts of the same events, allowing us to see how the life affected both of them. The book designer helped the readability immensely by reserving the outer third of each page for the notes that might have been turned into annoying footnotes, providing additional information on the text, as well as information describing the photographs in the book. For me, the hardest part of the reading was that the authors wrote often in passive voice but that was the style of the times, and probably also because they were writing about their past, looking back at their adventures. "Thanksgiving Day was spent at the ranch," they write, rather than "We spent Thanksgiving Day at the ranch." But these are small matters. Read this book for a clearer understanding of homesteading, and to enjoy the astonishing steadfastness and adaptability of these two heroic explorers. Their adventure was reality for most of our pioneering western ancestors.

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