

An Improbable Pioneer: the Letters of Edith S. Holden Healy, 1911 – 1950

With commentary by Cathy Healy

Book review by Karling Clymer Abernathy

Hooked *ξ ξ ξ*! Edith Holden Healy's letters about her life in Wyoming from the early twentieth century to 1950 draw one in like a trout tugged to the shore of a crisp Wyoming stream. These engaging, lively, and thoroughly enjoyable letters were written chiefly to Elizabeth Holden (Edith's mother) in the early years of Edith's marriage. She moves on to other correspondents, addressed in fewer letters, as her life changes, illustrating her maturation and self-confidence. Edited and explicated by granddaughter Cathy Healy, they show how a genteel easterner engages and accepts the tough and dusty West.

One could think of Edith as a pampered princess, but she was so game! She rode in wagons that plunged up and down muddy roads near early Buffalo, Wyoming (founded in 1879); slept in sheep wagons; rode out with her husband on many journeys to check on sheep, territory, herders, and neighbors. Her excitement with her surroundings and circumstances comes through in her commentary and sketches; she liked Buffalo and its inhabitants. Life was an adventure for Edith!

Alec Healy, a Utah and Wyoming sheepman with an engineering degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1903, met Edith Holden, a more-than-accomplished violinist, in Boston. They endured a long-distance, eight-year courtship as he established himself in business, and she helped her immediate family cope with several changes, including the deaths of her sister and father.

Raising two boys, Alec, Jr. and Dan, Edith and Alec later moved to Worland, Wyoming, after the dissolution of his ranching partnership with his brother. Alec served as a bank officer, and they eventually purchased the LU Ranch—still operated by family members—based near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Edith was instrumental in nurturing Girl Scouting in the Bighorn Basin, and organized many community institutions. The Healy's adopted two girls, sisters, from the Cathedral Home in Laramie, Wyoming, enlarging their family to six. One remaining daughter, Helen Healy Bonine, now lives in Powell, Wyoming. Edith's life was full of family, community service, music, and travel—and, I would say, happiness.

Woven within the letters are maps by Meagan Healy and numerous family photographs. Embellished with family history and sometimes-poetic illumination by Cathy Healy, *An Improbable Pioneer* speaks of a woman, "the unexpected choice," as her granddaughter puts it, who enriched many lives. Edith's descriptions, wit, observations, and asides will enrich yours. Delightful!

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