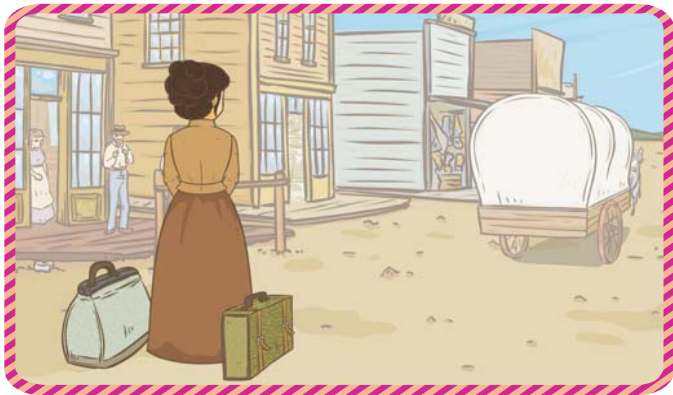


Little Fox Readers

Level 7

## My Life as a Pioneer Woman Teacher



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## My Life as a Pioneer Woman Teacher





My name is Elizabeth Willard, and I am a 22-year-old teacher. I graduated from the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut, one of the first schools in America that trains female teachers. In 1854 I began teaching in the new territory of Kansas, an area located in the middle of the United States. There are many teaching jobs in the West because many whites have been settling here from the East. New frontier towns have popped up everywhere.

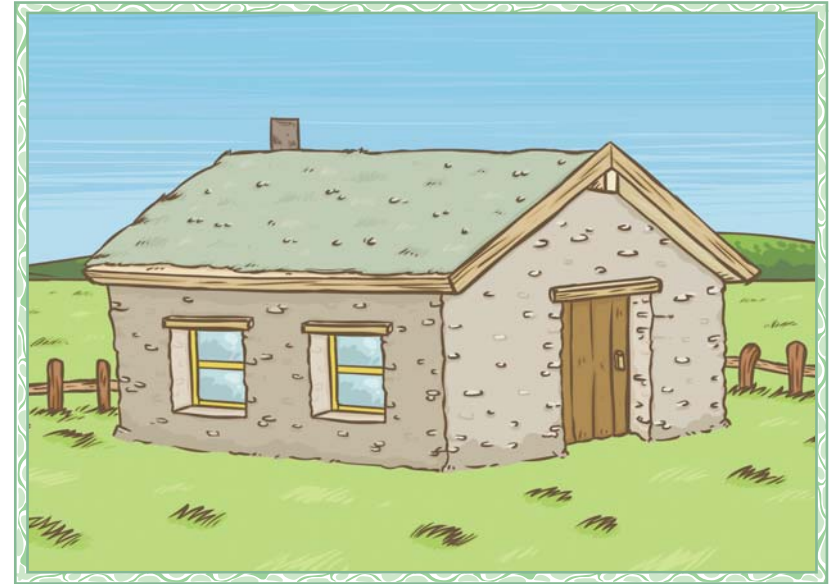
My teacher training started when I was twenty,



and I learned spelling, mathematics, and music. Before graduation my classmates and I were invited to teach out West when we completed our studies. Some teaching students accepted the offer, and I was one of them. We trained for frontier life by carrying pails of water and chopping firewood. We needed to be tough to face the many hardships ahead. When we graduated, a school committee gave us our teaching posts, and I was assigned to a school in Kansas.



All the teachers traveled west in the spring, and since it was unsafe for women to travel alone, my father went with me. First, we rode on horseback for two weeks, about eight hundred kilometers, from Hartford, Connecticut, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Then, we took a steamboat down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh through the states of Ohio and Kentucky. After 12 days we arrived in Old Shawneetown, Illinois, and from there I took a stagecoach on my own. After ten days and another eight



hundred kilometers, I arrived at my final destination—Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Suddenly I was alone in a strange town, and I had nowhere to stay. So I went to the schoolhouse. With so few trees for lumber on the prairie, sod and dirt had been used to build the small school, rather than wood. There was only one room and two windows. The bathroom was outside, and a little fence wrapped around the schoolyard.

Some of the town's children came by to see





me. One little girl named Abby said I would be staying with her family. “Boarding around,” or staying in students’ homes, is common for frontier teachers. I would have to help Abby’s family with the chores, but I was happy to accept their offer. Boarding helps me save money, since I make only one hundred and fifty dollars a year—half the salary of a male teacher.

Most of my students live on farms, so the school year must fit between the fall harvest and the spring planting. During my first year, the



class size varied from 3 to 25 children. Some of the children do farm work and other chores and cannot attend every day. My students’ ages range from four to twenty years old. In my classroom I have a small desk up front, and my students sit on benches in rows. There is one blackboard, and we have no books except for a Bible. Sometimes the children bring in old newspapers or magazines from home. We have no paper supplies, so my students write their lessons on flat rocks called slates. They write with a soft



piece of rock called a slate pen.

Most of my students behave well in class, but sometimes I have to punish them. If a child talks during a lesson, I put a whispering stick in his or her mouth. This is a small wooden stick that is held in place by a piece of cloth that I tie around the student's head. The child is forced to bite on the stick and cannot speak. Sometimes if a student never knows the correct answer to a question, I put a pointy hat on their head with the word "Dunce" written on it. When a student



wears the dunce cap, it means he or she is not very smart.

My first winter was very hard. The temperature sometimes dropped to -23 degrees Celsius. The snow started falling in November and did not stop until April. The only heat we had was a potbellied stove in the classroom, and it was smoky and hard to light. I'd arrive at school early to chop firewood for the whole day. Children close to the stove would get too hot. Others, in the back of the room, almost froze. It



was so cold that my students' lunches of dried fruit and salted meat would sometimes freeze. Some children became sick and died during the year. We all were happy when spring finally arrived.

I am now at the end of my first year, and I am very lonely. When I took this job, I promised not to marry for two years, so I could devote myself to my students. In my free time, I sew quilts and patch my clothes. I go to church and visit the friends I have met there. I have heard that some



teachers have already gone home because the life out here is too difficult. But I would like to stay on for another year. I have grown to love my students and the progress we all have made.