

Book Discussion Questions for *Song of Years* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her Grandpa Zimri Streeter and his family were actually early settlers in Black Hawk County. This book, *A Song of Years*, is partially based on the Streeter family experiences. As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her 1901 degree from Iowa State Normal School in Cedar Falls, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess wrote and published many short stories in magazines. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame," so she is now a part of the display of notable people at the Nebraska Capitol.



This is the original dust jacket cover that was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich that is on display at the Aldrich Museum. For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

About *Song of Years*

"During a 1930 visit to Cedar Falls, Aldrich had chatted with seventy-year-old banker Roger Leavitt, whose family, like her own, were early settlers of the region." Soon after, Leavitt wrote her to suggest that "she write a novel based on historically correct accounts of early Iowa history." In 1937, her publisher pushed for another pioneer book. She contacted Leavitt and asked him to share his collected materials. Less than a week later, "two letters and an eighteen-pound box of pages, loose leaves from his seventy scrapbooks arrived."¹ This information, along with personal stories from her family, provided the book's inspiration.

***Song of Years* Basic Plot:** Primarily focusing on Wayne Lockwood & the Martin family, this is the story of the early settlement of Black Hawk County, Iowa starting in 1854 until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

***Song of Years* Primary Characters (see the Facilitator's Guide for additional characters & details)**

The Martins: Jeremiah and Sarah; Sabina; Phoebe Lou; Jeanie; Emily; Melinda; Celia; Suzanne;			
Henry & Phineas (only Martin boys)	Wayne Lockwood	Cady Bedson	Tom Bostwick
Ed Armitage	Ambrose Willshire	Brothers Alf and Rand Banning	Horace Akin

¹ *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen, p. 157 (All quotes from "About Song of Years")

***Song of Years* covers over a decade of time and contains multiple storylines. To discuss the book adequately, several book club sessions are recommended. That might not be possible for every group. Teachers – this book would be a wonderful historical fiction read-aloud since words could be edited.**

If a book club is only meeting once, here are some general questions. Please consider using some of the additional provided supplemental materials to round out your group's discussion.

What do you think are the themes of *Song of Years*?

This book is told from multiple perspectives. Which voice resonated with you the most?

Which one of the Martin family members was your favorite? Why?

Were there any characters that you did not like?

This book covers the middle of the 1800s. What part of the historical section interested you?

A Song of Years contains segments of multiple "love" stories and weddings. Which one could you identify with? Would any of the stories have changed if they happened today?

How did the motto "pull yourselves on through" play out in the lives of the Martins and the settlers?

What was your favorite part of *Song of Years*? Are there any parts of the books you would eliminate?

Introduction and Wayne Lockwood's Arrival to Iowa 1854 (Chapters 1-3)

-Does starting the book at a cemetery draw you into the story?

-Wayne noted that his land must have water and timber. What else would factor into determining where to set up a house on the prairie?

-Wayne's rush for land is based on a true story. Would you been willing to try that hard?

-Cady's first meeting with Wade was noteworthy. Did you anticipate their later interactions?

-Chapter 3 ends with notating "and thus did the curtain go up on the little play which was to contain all the elements of every life's drama: work, play, joy, sorrow, disappointment, achievement, love, hate. Is there anything you would add to this list?"

The Neighbors and Getting Settled 1854 (Chapters 4-10)

-What did Wayne think when he met the Martin family?

-The Martin cabin plays a part in the story. What is notable about the house?

-To avoid a rumored Indian attack, the settlers shelter together. Which reaction can you identify with?

-The arrival of "the box" plays a part in several chapters. Why did it matter so much?

-Why did they all quiet down to hear the first school bell? What did it symbolize?

The Town Seat, Christmas, Weddings and the Representative (Chapters 11-18)

-What happened when Prairie Rapids men tried to take the court records from the town of Sturgis?

-What preparations were done for Sabina's wedding?

-Suzanne is recognized as an idealist. How does this impact her as her family members start leaving?

-How do their Christmas celebrations change through the years?

-How was Henry's wedding different? Do you think he was disappointed with their efforts?

- What struggles did the settlers face in chapter 15? Which one would have impacted you the most?
- Croup is still around today, but how did they treat it during pioneer days? Would this work today?
- In chapter 17, three events happened in 1857 that impacted the Martins. Did any of them surprise you?
- When Jeremiah heads off to Des Moines as a representative, what type of send off does he receive?

The Legislature, Slavery, Abraham Lincoln (Chapters 19-24)

- When Pa returns months later, he is greeted with a party. What did the Legislature accomplish?
- How did death enter the community in chapter 20? What did they do to remember?
- How did the family feel about slavery? What impacted their views?
- When the Scotts moved to the area, this stirred up controversy. Why?
- What did the community think when Abraham Lincoln was nominated to run for President?
- Why was Phoebe Lou's wedding so rushed? How did it impact the family?

Carlie, the Seminary, the President, the War Begins (Chapters 25-33)

- Suzanne dreams of Wayne professing his love to her. What does he do instead? How does she respond?
- Why does Suzanne note that "You can never buy a man's loves, nor even his passing interest."
- How was attending college or the seminary different for students back then?
- “I thought.. you'd like to know your Pa's elected Abraham Lincoln president.” How is this true?
- In 28, the Banningers join the story. What do you think of the brother's rivalry? Do they love the sisters? What imagery strikes you the most when the men leave to fight in the War?
- What happens to the town men with Confederate leanings? Do you think situations like this happened?
- What situation showed that Wayne Lockwood was starting to recognize Suzanne?
- How does the Banninger family competition continue?
- Plot Twist! Did you suspect that Carlie did not really care for Wayne Lockwood like everyone presumed?
- How is the statement proven wrong, "The prairie can't go back on me like this?" Has winter changed?
- Were you surprised by Wayne's thoughts when he helped Suzanne? Would she have been surprised?
- Are Phoebe Lou's sisters sympathetic when she loses her husband? How does Sarah resolve Ed's life?
- Several of the characters interpret the "song of years" differently. Which one do you identify with?

-Wayne's War, Life at Home, The Final Wedding (Chapters 34-47)

- Wayne and the Reserves are leaving for War. When he says good-bye to the Martins, how did they all react? Suzanne wonders the next day "how it would be if Wayne cared for her." How did it change?
- Why is the 1863 4th of July significant? How does it intertwine with Vicksburg?
- Phineas returns home injured. What caused him to break down? How did his life change?
- When the Banninger brothers return from war, why is Suzanne concerned?
- But God was not to be bargained with, not to be cajoled into favoring Suzanne Marin on the river road above other praying women. Lockwood, Wayne, wounded, died." Can we bargain with God?

- When Cady asks Suzanne to marry him, her response is, "I supposed I could if you want me to." Would you have proceeded if you were the recipient of such a response? Why does Cady want to marry her?
- How does Phoebe Lou give Suzanne a bit of hope in her situation?
- What honor was Jeremiah given? Why would a man risk his life to bring back the soldiers' ballots?
- Pa almost misses his "welcome back" party. Did any of his descriptions of the War startle you?
- Did Pa telling Suzanne that Wayne was still alive make her situation harder or easier? Do you think Suzanne's reaction influenced Pa to tell her to stick with her "word of Honor?" Do you agree?
- How did they celebrate the end of the War? What comment had a foreboding tone?
- The family is all affected when Lincoln is shot. Who surprises everyone with a speech?
- Jeanie and Ambrose seem to have a complicated relationship. What are some examples of this?
- Much to Ma's disappointment, Sabina is going to host Suzanne's wedding in her new house. The family arrives. Are they all the same or different? Who notices that Suzanne is sad? Who finally rescues her?
- As Wayne is heading home from War, he reflects on his life. He thinks Suzanne has moved on, but he is sad because "she feels like home to him." How does he find out that the wedding has not happened?
- Was the ending love story satisfying to you, or did you hope for a different outcome?
- The book ends in the same way it began – at the cemetery. Do you appreciate the location more now that you have come to know the characters? Why did the author include descriptions of loved items?

At around four hundred pages, Mrs. Aldrich's book *Song of Years* contains so much about Iowa history, the Union side of the Civil War as well as stories about pioneer living. Readers may still benefit from going through the general question answers even if they are unable to discuss the book with others.

Many of the answers to the overall questions will vary, but here are some potential ones.

Potential Song of Years themes: Fortitude, love, family, perseverance, bravery, selfishness, unselfishness, kindness, patriotism, frugality, ingenuity. The main cast of characters list helps readers remember which voices are the most enjoyable and which characters were admirable.

Were there any unlikeable characters? A few possibilities: Ed Armitage, Ambrose Wilshire, Carlie Scott.

Interesting history: Some may enjoy reading about Iowa statehood. For others, reading actual historical Civil war details is exciting. For the romantic at heart, love stories about throughout the book.

The Song of Years "love" stories might have changed if they happened today. War sped up two of the weddings. That might not have happened today. Married settlers could hang on to the land due to the amount of work that was needed. Widows and widowers often remarried to help families survive.

How did the motto "pull yourselves on through" play out in the lives of the Martins and the settlers? Jeremiah details it out. "No matter what you get stuck in ... mud, swamps, gumbo, snow, jobs, difficulties, disappointments, hurts ... any hard place or thing in life" He encouraged them to "do your own thinkin' ... your own decidin'" then "do your own pullin." The settlers faced numerous difficulties such as drought and storms that they had to push forward through as no one would rescue them. They managed to get by with food and with made-over clothes.

-At the end of Chapter 33, several of the characters interpret the "song of years" differently. Which one do you identify with? See the book guide page containing song lyrics and characters' identifications..

-Any parts of Song of Years that didn't resonate with you? How about a favorite part of the book?

Introduction and Wayne Lockwood's Arrival to Iowa 1854 (Chapters 1-3)

-Does starting the book at a cemetery draw you into the story? Possibly as you would want to know about the lives that are represented in the plots.

-Wayne noted that his land must have water and timber. What else would factor into determining where to set up a house on the prairie? A house would need to be situated away from the wind. Neighbors would have also been important. The top of a hill could help settlers to avoid flooding.

-Wayne's rush for land is based on a true story. Would you been willing to try that hard? Answers will vary. During the early homesteading days, settlers would have had more possibilities.

-Cady's first meeting with Wade was noteworthy. Did you anticipate their later interactions? Maybe.

-Chapter 3 ends with notating "and thus did the curtain go up on the little play which was to contain all the elements of every life's drama: work, play, joy, sorrow, disappointment, achievement, love, hate. Is there anything you would add to this list? Possible answers include friendship, inspiration and faith.

The Neighbors and Getting Settled 1854 (Chapters 4-10)

-What did Wayne think when he met the Martin family? Jeremiah Martin had the look of an old timer with twinkling eyes. Suzanne was 12-16 and matter-of-fact. But when he met all the sisters, "for one fleeting moment he waws under the impression that a couple of dozen girls had descended upon him."

-The Martin cabin plays a part in the story. What is notable about the house and its furnishings? The house is an "architectural triad" with a lean-to and two large rooms. Practical fireplace with iron pot, flour barrel chairs; Seth Thomas clock, President pictures, calico is used liberally; Strong ladders into the loft; bed behind a curtain.

-To avoid a rumored Indian attack, the settlers shelter together. Which reaction can you identify with? "Jeremiah and the others of steady nature belittled the danger." Ed was excitable. Many were tense with fright. Tom decides if the end is near, he is going to be brave (proposal.) One took his family off at a gallop. A woman wandered the woods in her nightgown.

-The arrival of "the box" plays a part in several chapters. Why did it matter so much? Although the Martin family had supplies, they still had given luxuries and modern conveniences to move to Iowa. The box gave them a connection to civilization as well as an opportunity to have more resources.

-Why did they all quiet down to hear the first school bell? What did it symbolize? To quote Jeremiah, "Eddication has come to loway." He stated that it was a symbol of offering free schools for all students across the state. He also noted that "the Iowa school system couldn't ever expect to be what it should be unless every little log school-house did its share." The bell rang all night.

The Town Seat, Christmas, Weddings and the Representative (Chapters 11-18)

-What happened when Prairie Rapids men tried to take the court records from the town of Sturgis? The Prairie Rapids men were trying to sneak into town during the dark of night to take the court records. Men from Sturgis were gathered at the general store. When they noticed the alleged thieves, they took eggs from the store and chased after the men. "There was one grand uncooked omelet between the Prairie Rapids delegation and the court records. The visitors left, oozing wrath and albumen."

-What preparations were done for Sabina's wedding? Aunt Harriet sent fabric from the store to Dubuque where Phineas picked it up, then Emily made the dress. Jeremiah took her to Prairie Rapids to buy her wedding bonnet. Jeanie set out candles and dishes and made one cake. Emily made bread, cooked

chickens and the whole pig. Phoebe Lou scrubbed the house, and Melinda washed the pans. Sabine made her brides cake. She took a bath, powdered herself with browned flour and sewed rose petal bags into her dress. A neighbor was given cake dough to bake. All of the girls dressed well.

-Suzanne is recognized as an idealist. How does this impact her as her family members start leaving?

“For how could this prairie child of 1855 know she was an idealist – that always she was to be half afraid to look at beauty for fear it would not measure up to what a lovely thing should be.” Wedding: All at once she thought of Sabina as the favorite sister of them all.” The one leaving becomes the favorite

-How do their Christmas celebrations change through the years? In 1854, they continued their stockings tradition and gave each other gifts. Sarah made maple-sugar hearts, and Emily made dried apple animals. They had a big dinner with fish, prairie-chickens and venison. Wayne and Ambrose joined them as well as Tom. He gave Sabina a shawl and a kiss. In 1855, Tom and Sabina hosted Christmas, so they did not go to the Martin farm for Christmas Eve. Pa reminisced, and the family enjoyed being together. “Even though you grew up and found you could never quite bring back the magic feeling of this night, the melody would stay in your heart always -a song for all the years.”

-How was Henry’s wedding different? He completed his cabin, then he put on his Sunday suit, hitched up his horses to the buckboard and went to town. He didn’t invite anyone. They wondered if he was bringing a wife, but they made a meal just in case as “Sarah said she felt it in her bones.” They invited Wayne Lockwood to dinner to help eat all of the food. He brought back his new wife, Lucy, and they apologized for not doing more. But probably Henry did not care. He seemed glad to be married.

-What struggles did the settlers face in chapter 15? Which one would have impacted you the most?

Answers may vary but could include these thoughts. Tom and Wayne traveled across the state to check out government lands. Not only was the travel part intense, but they also were carrying money and at the risk of robbery. An Indian woman came into Lucy’s cabin and left with a baby blanket, but they all feared she would take the baby too. The nation watched as a new political party was developed – the Republicans. Many people took ill and had to take quinine. Mosquitoes were fought off with smoke. Suzanne and Celia attended some town festivities but then were forced to stay home for the dance.

-Croup is still around today, but how did they treat it during pioneer days? Would this work today?

They put goose-grease on little Nora’s throats. They rubbed her chest and back and they made hot compresses out of onions. These old-fashioned remedies are still used today and can be effective.

-In chapter 17, three events happened in 1857 that impacted the Martins. Did any of them surprise you?

-In March 1857, the Sioux killed men around Lake Okoboji. The Sioux were tired of white encroachment and killed at least 50 people. The Martins had travelers stop by on their way to the Okoboji Lakes, and these three young men were killed in the uprising. Jeanie received three proposals (George Wormsby, Same Phillips and Ambrose Willshire), and Jeanie said “yes” to the last who was a “paragon of virtue.” The drama continued into the next chapter. Jeremiah was nominated to be a state representative.

-When Jeremiah heads off to Des Moines as a representative, what type of sendoff does he receive?

His wife and girls were there along several neighbors. He stopped in town to see Sabina and to thank all who voted for him. Suzanne was the last one who to see him go from home. “Good-bye, Suzy.”

The Legislature, Slavery, Abraham Lincoln (Chapters 19-24)

-When Pa returns months later, he is greeted with a party. What did the Legislature accomplish?

They sanctioned the new Constitution, and they set up county governments. They stopped wildcat money and stated a property tax. Pa himself killed off the bad bills that were encouraging laziness.

How did death enter the community in chapter 20? What did they do to remember? Evangeline Burrell drowned the Red Cedar River. Her mother lost her only child. Melinda had been in the boat too, so she was despondent at the loss. Jeremiah reminded them all to remember, face reality and still keep living.

-How did the family feel about slavery? What impacted their views? John Brown was living in Cedar County and had helped free slaves. They felt that owning black people was wrong. They read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When John Brown was hung, they knew that slavery would split the country.

When the Scotts moved to the area, this stirred up controversy. Why? They brought along a black family, and the community could not decide whether the arrivals were slaves to the Scott family.

-What did the community think when Abraham Lincoln was nominated to run for President? They thought he was unpolished but that he had horse sense, level-headedness, and gumption. Jeremiah felt like that Abe Lincoln was directly representing him and all of his own personal views

-Why was Phoebe Lou's wedding so rushed? How did it impact the family? Ed Armitage wanted to leave the next day to try to find gold in Colorado. Melinda made over a dress, and they all worked frantically on preparations. Having her leave and go so far right away was hard on all of them, especially Jeremiah.

Carlie, the Seminary, the President, the War Begins ((Chapters 25-33)

-Suzanne dreams of Wayne professing his love to her. What does he do instead? How does she respond? He requests that she visit the Scotts to find out more about the daughter. Because he tells her he trusts her, she agrees. But she is so disappointed that she decides to go to the nearby Female Seminary.

-Why does Suzanne note that "You can never buy a man's loves, nor even his passing interest."

Suzanne enters the ladies' horse race and wins, but Wayne is too busy talking to Carlie to notice.

--How was attending college or the seminary different for students back then?

Not only did they have to care for their clothes, but they had to build fires and cook all their meals. To save money, they brought supplies from home and managed to make do.

-"I thought.. you'd like to know your Pa's elected Abraham Lincoln president." How is this true?

Jeremiah spent every "waking moment" organizing a political rally. He organized a parade with three bands, torch lights and campaign songs. A tall settler represented Lincoln." He won over the county.

-In 28, the Bannings join the story. What do you think of the brother's rivalry? Do they love the sisters?

When Alf announces his engagement, Rand states that "no brother of mine can get ahead of me like that." He had asked Suzanne to marry him, and when she declined, he sought out Melinda. Alf might have loved Celia or simply the idea of her. Rand was on a very fast rebound. The brothers competed.

What imagery strikes you the most when the men leave to fight in the War? Answers vary, but here are two. "The train getting up steam like a black monster about to carry the boys into the Unknown." "A few members of the band playing jerkily, tunelessly, as though the instruments too, were sobbing."

-What happens to the town men with Confederate leanings? Do you think situations like this happened?

The town put up ropes as if to hang the town men. They made one of the men give a Union speech and asked if President Lincoln was a fool. They made him acknowledge Lincoln. The other man tried to diffuse the men with cigars and patriotic talk. Emotions were high, so similar situations were likely.

What situation showed that Wayne Lockwood was starting to notice Suzanne? “For downright everyday company he could think of no one he would rather have around than Suzanne, happy and full of fun and intensely interested in everything. But not delicate and dependent.” At this point in the book, Wayne still seems to desire to be with a woman who is fragile and dainty and in need of protecting.

-How does the Banninger family competition continue? Melinda gave birth to a ten-pound boy. When Celia delivered a boy the next day who was a half-pound bigger, she laughed “weakly but triumphantly.”

-Plot Twist! Did you suspect that Carlie did not really care for Wayne Lockwood like everyone presumed?

Suzanne was especially shocked when Carlie asked her to cover for her. “The man I love ... that they didn’t want me to see any more ... that they thought they were separating me from for always. Well, they’ll find they couldn’t do that. He’s coming for me.” “Now you can have your solemn farmer.” Most readers may have thought Wayne would tire of Carlie’s fragility, not that she would leave him behind.

-How is the statement proven wrong, “The prairie can’t go back on me like this?” Has winter changed?

Suzanne gets stuck in a blizzard. She tries to go toward the creek bed and tries to listen for animals. Blizzards are still deadly today. As Suzanne learned, winter snow and wind can blind and confuse one.

-Were you surprised by Wayne’s thoughts when he helped Suzanne? Would she have been surprised? Perhaps the fact that she risked her life to save his sheep again reminded Wayne that Suzanne was “the one real thing.” Evidently he was not as sad about Carlie leaving as Suzanne would have predicted. At this point, Suzanne thought Wayne was mourning Carlie’s loss, not being wistful about her.

-Are Phoebe Lou’s sisters sympathetic when she loses her husband? How does Ma resolve Ed’s life?

Not really. She states “He had his faults but he was full of energy and fun and gay ways and there was never anybody that I liked to be with so well. I guess that’s what a marriage is. And now he’s gone.” Emily and Suzanne both point out that “at least you had someone.” Sabina states “you’ve got a baby” which is something she does not have. Ma did not like Ed because he seemed to be flighty and the fact that he took Phoebe Lou to Colorado. Now she notes “some’s one way, and some’s another.”

-Several of the characters interpret the “song of years” differently. Which one do you identify with?

Note: A book guide page contains the lyrics to this song and character descriptions.

-Wayne’s War, Life at Home, The Final Wedding (Chapters 34-47)

-Wayne and the Reserves are leaving for War. When he says good-bye to the Martins, how did they all react? Suzanne wonders the next day “how it would be if Wayne cared for her.” How did it change?

Jeremiah says Wayne will be home by spring. Emily quickly agrees to care for his horse and is pale. She drops her eyes “so no one can see the hunger in them. Sarah’s mouth twitches. Phoebe Lou cries for him and for Ed. Suzanne promises to be by the lane road and to wave. When the train travels by, Wayne convinces it to stop. He kisses her and simply says “Good-by.” Suzanne knows he is committing to her.

-Why is the 1863 4th of July significant? How does it intertwine with Vicksburg? This was the first 4th that the slaves were freed thanks to the Emancipation Proclamation. In the letters to home, the area men stated that they were going to take Vicksburg by the 4th. That day they received notice of the capture.

-Phineas returns home injured. What caused him to break down? How did his life change? He held it together when his sisters saw his empty sleeve, but when he saw his mother, he put his head in her lap and cried. Jeremiah told them all that “no one must feel sorry for him or help him.”

-When the Banninger brothers return from war, why is Suzanne concerned? Celia and Melinda had only spent one night with their husbands. They had moved back home to have their babies. They had not seen their husbands for three years. Now they had to go try to start a life with them.

-But God was not to be bargained with, not to be cajoled into favoring Suzanne Marin on the river road above other praying women. Lockwood, Wayne, wounded, died." Can we bargain with God? We try. But God's sovereignty reminds us that He is in control. We do not have any clear-cut explanations as to why certain families lost loved ones during war while others do not. This could open up lots of discussion.

-When Cady asks Suzanne to marry him, her response is, "I supposed I could if you want me to." Would you have proceeded if you were the recipient of such a response? Why does Cady want to marry her? He tells her that his admiration has turned to affection. Cady has had an easier life since he was wealthy and since he could pay his way out of the war. Perhaps Suzanne appealed to him because she had been connected to his rival, Wayne. She was not thrilled at his company, so perhaps he liked her on his arm?

-How does Phoebe Lou give Suzanne a bit of hope in her situation? Phoebe Lou agrees to marry older Mr. Atkin after losing her love, Ed. Suzanne notes "It was all very confusing, perhaps even a little comforting that one could learn in time to have some affection."

What honor was Jeremiah given? Why would a man risk his life to bring back the soldiers' ballots? "Jeremiah was ordered by Governor Kirwood" to go to Atlanta and "bring back to Des Moines the ballots of the Iowa contingent of soldiers." Mrs. Aldrich's Grandpa Zimri went to the battlefield to get the votes, so this is based on historical fact. Perhaps without the soldiers' say, a pro-Confederacy man would win.

-Pa almost misses his "welcome back" party. Did any of his descriptions of the War startle you? "The burnin' (of Atlanta) was awful. Explodin' shells and magazines and the flames all night. It was like you imagine hell." They had to feed on the country when they marched out and even took the mules' corn. The Iowa soldiers sent home money in his old carpetbag. Jeremiah loved being the center of the room.

-Did Pa telling Suzanne that Wayne was still alive make her situation harder or easier? Do you think Suzanne's reaction influenced Pa to tell her to stick with her "word of Honor?" Do you agree?

The news had to have made the situation harder since Suzanne had given her word of honor. She seems to have been shocked numb, but perhaps if she had told Pa how she really felt about Wayne, he would have encouraged her to tell Cady that plans had changed. Her response to his proposal had shown that she was marrying to have a home, not really for love. Telling the truth right away may have saved heartache for later. Of course, the lack of honesty made the eventual ending of the book more dramatic.

-How did they celebrate the end of the War? What comment had a foreboding tone? "Cannon were being fired, flags run up, whistles and bells were blowing and ringing." The rooster even crowed. All gathered at night with the Fire Brigade carrying torches and an "incessant bedlam." All lit their windows. Barney, the Confederate tobacco man "had refused to illuminate, saying he' have lighted up if the d*** president had been shot." Cady notes "Every one has been too busy celebrating to pay any attention."

-The family is all affected when Lincoln is shot. Who surprises everyone with a speech? Henry notes that "somethin' set him apart." He like he was a close friend who understood him. When he wanted to go off to war, it was as if Lincoln told him that his "place lay right here." He notes that Lincoln will live on.

-Jenie and Ambrose seem to have a complicated relationship. What are some examples of this? When she comes back after getting married, she soaks up the laughter as if she had been starved of it. When they had their baby, "the tone of his voice implying that Jenie was the sole parent." He noted "that she had lost control of herself during what was only a natural procedure." He seemed frustrated when a second baby was expected too soon." He went off to war without telling Jenie because he did not want to hear "cowardly pleas for me to stay." Later he was critical with how Jenie handled the farm during

his absence. He said "I wish you'd get things right once in your life." He is unhappy that they have three girls. He continues to criticize her and her time management. Her family does not like Ambrose.

-Much to Ma's disappointment, Sabina is going to host Suzanne's wedding in her new house. The family arrives. Are they all the same or different? Who notices that Suzanne is sad?

Sabina and Tom still have fine things but no offspring. Mr. Akins' boys still wonder if they are welcome as the stepchildren, but they definitely are. Phoebe Lou has Todo. Melinda and Rand (with their two kids) race and between Celia and Alf (with their two kids) to the party. Arriving last, Ambrose excuses their lateness by saying "Jeanie would perhaps some day learn to manager her work right." Emily is the one to ask Suzanne if she really is happy. Suzanne notes that she is the one "who always did so much for everyone." Suzanne is the only one who knows that Emily has feeling for Wayne. If Suzanne married Cade, Emily might have had her chance. Suzanne still plans to "go ahead with what seems our duty."

-As Wayne is heading home from War, he reflects on his life. He thinks Suzanne has moved on, but he is said because "she feels like home to him." How does he find out that the wedding has not happened? A woman talks to him about his service. She mentions that she is nervous because her niece is marrying that night, and she wants to arrive earlier. Wayne admits to knowing her and is surprised by the groom.

-How does Jeremiah finally realize that his daughter is not actually happy? What happens? He offers to go and get Wayne Lockwood for the wedding. She responds "No ... oh, no!" He finally recognized that she has a hurt heart, but this was her hour of honor. Finally Emily is the one to tell her to "go yourself."

-Was the ending love story satisfying to you, or did you hope for a different outcome? Answers will vary. Some may wish that she would have married Cady Bedson like she promised. But because Suzanne has loved Wayne since the beginning of the book, most will like the fact that she gets a happy ending. "It does not take long to cross the floor of a log cabin, sixteen by twenty-four feet, even though in the doing one crosses the width of the whole world of troubled reality into a magic one of peace." Since a widow consoled Cady with herself and four hundred acres, he did get his own type of happy ending.

-The book ends in the same way it began – at the cemetery. Do you appreciate the location more now that you have come to know the characters? Why did the author include descriptions of loved items? "All arguments and bickerings over, all laughter stilled and all tears forgot, the early settlers lie there together in friendly silence on a hillside in the Valley." Besides the tall old tombstones there are a few keepsakes by which to remember them all." The things help to recall various parts of the book.

The title of the book is “from an old patriotic song called “The Song of a Thousand Years,” by Henry Clay Work, who also wrote “Marching Through Georgia.”² This song had become popular during the Civil War. ³ The lyrics from the middle part of this song are quoted in the middle of Chapter 33. Many of the characters apply this song to what is happening to each individual.

For Wayne Lockwood: “Doing one’s duty made one strong. The song of years was a song of strength.

For Sarah, “tying an indescribable way the song of the present with a lost song of the past. There was something so painful about the process of listening to this old song of remembrance, turning her thoughts back to the time when she was young.”

“To old Jeremiah the song of years was a song of faith.”

“To Emily the song of years was a song of desire.”

“To Phoebe Lou the song of years was a song of hope.”

“To Suzanne there was never any doubt but that the song of years was a song of love.”

(All of the above quotations are taken directly from the book, *Song of Years*.)

Questions:

How does the song make you feel?

Which character’s feelings can you identify with the most?

How might this song have been meaningful to those who were personally experiencing the effects of the Civil War? Do you think the anthem was helpful or harmful?

Song of a Thousand Years

**Lift up your eyes desponding freemen!
Fling to the winds your needless fears!
He who unfurl'd your beauteous banner,
Says it shall wave a thousand years!
"A thousand years!" my own Columbia!
'Tis the glad day so long foretold!
'Tis the glad morn whose early twilight
Washington saw in times of old.
What if the clouds, one little moment,
Hide the blue sky where morn appears —
When the bright sun, that tints them crimson,
Rises to shine a thousand years?
Tell the great world those bless-ed tidings!
Yes, and be sure the bondman hears;
Tell the oppress'd of ev'ry nation,
Jubilee lasts a thousand years!
Fearless foes, beyond the ocean!
Little we heed your threat'ning sneers;
Little will they — our children's children —
When you are gone a thousand years.
Rebels at home! go hide your faces —
Weep for your crimes with bitter tears;
You could not bind the blessed daylight,
Though you should strive a thousand years.
Back to your dens, ye secret traitors!
Down to your own degraded spheres!
Ere the first blaze of dazzling sunshine
Shortens your lives a thousand years.
Haste thee along, this glorious Noonday!
Oh, for the eyes of ancient seers!
Oh, for the faith of Him who reckons
Each of his days a thousand years.⁴**

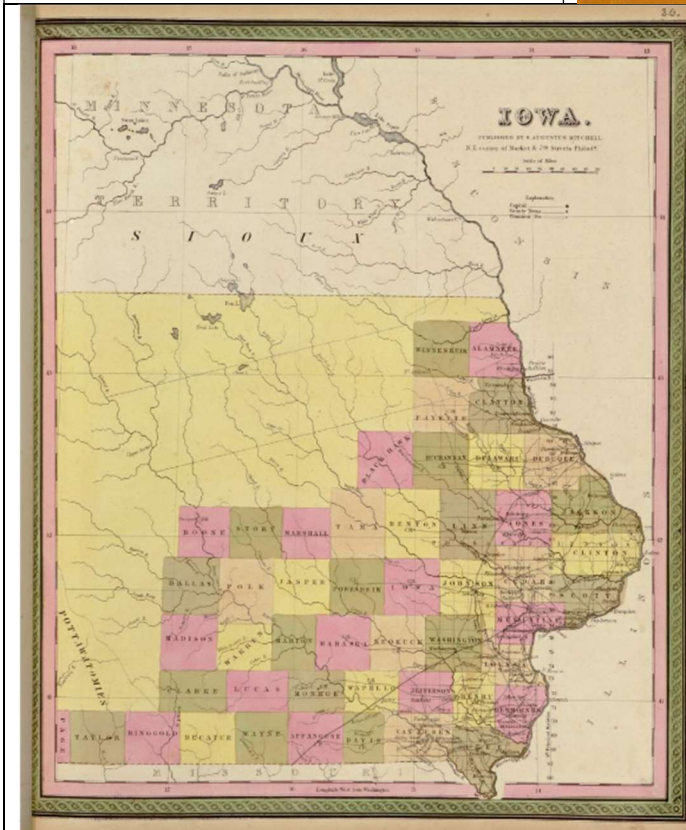
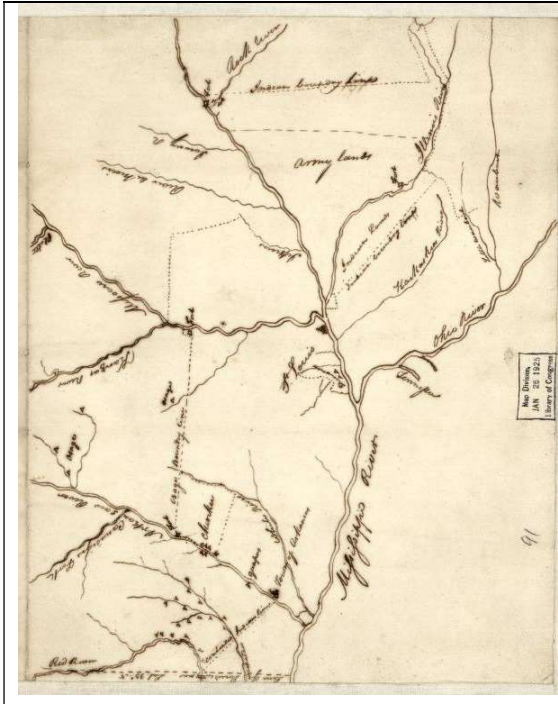
² *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen, p. 160

³ *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg p. 33

⁴ <https://allpoetry.com/Song-of-a-Thousand-Years>

Mapping Early Iowa

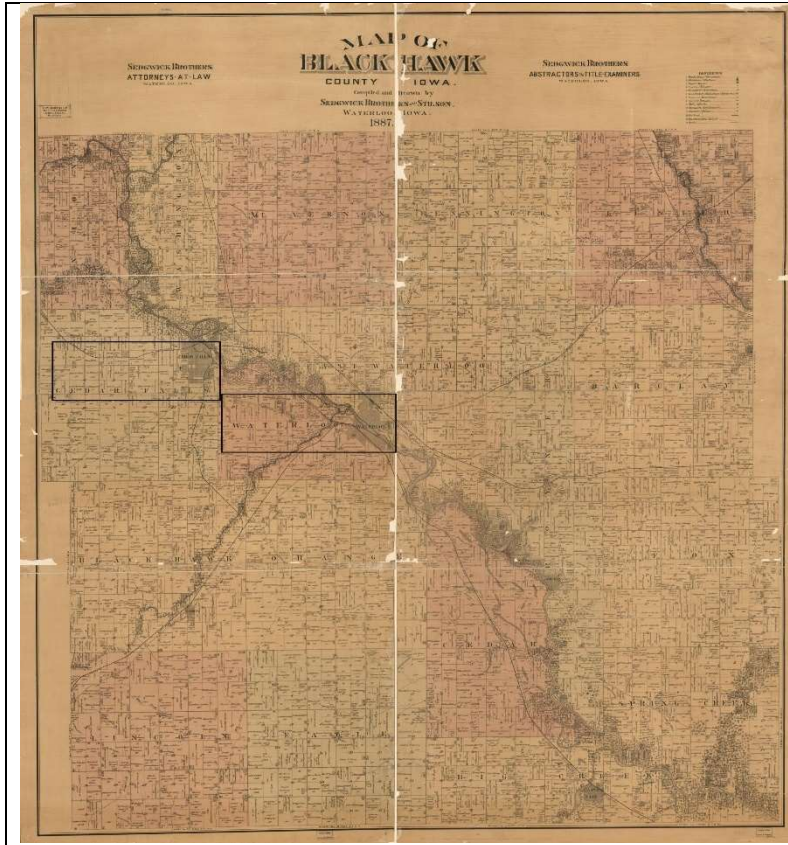
One of the purposes of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804 was to map the newly purchased Louisiana Purchase. The first noted 1804 Iowa map in the Library of Congress collection shows very few identifiable features. By 1845, more of United States geography has been substantiated. But even this updated map shows that the state of Iowa still has some room to grow. Credit: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division



The Iowa map to the left is from an 1849 atlas. Iowa became a state in 1846, but clearly organization of the counties and their town seats were not finalized. This is what Iowa looked like five years before the book, *Song of Years* starts.

Source: Mitchell, S. Augustus. *A new universal atlas containing maps of the various empires, kingdoms, states and republics of the world: with a special map of each of the United States, plans of cities &c., comprehended in seventy sheets and forming a series of one hundred and seventeen maps, plans, and sections.* Philadelphia: Published by S. Augustus Mitchell, 1849. Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/map46000376/>.

Fiction Based on Fact: The Early History of Black Hawk County in Iowa



“Map of Black Hawk County, Iowa in 1887 from Sedwick Brothers and Stilson, Source: Library of Congress

<https://lccn.loc.gov/2012587553>

Boxes added to show Cedar Falls (left) and Waterloo (lower right.)

Setting for the *Song of Years*

“The state is the locale, but the emphasis is centered on Red Cedar Valley on Sturgis Falls and Prairie Rapids, Cedar Falls and Waterloo respectively, on today’s map. The fruitful land between the two rivers had been a member of the union of state less than eight years when young Wayne Lockwood, out of New England with its narrow, rocky, scrimped farms, came into an Iowa June, to feel the love of the land and a great greediness for ownership snatch at him, as he looked at the prairie stretching to what distance far men knew.”⁵

“Many of the familiar names of Cedar Falls history appear in their actual roles: the Overmans, Peter Melendy, Andrew Mullarky, Joseph Bancroft and the early families settling Prairie Rapids (now Waterloo.) The character Wayne Lockwood was patterned after Jacob Hoffman. Some of Jacob Hoffman’s family live on big Rock Road in Black Hawk County, Iowa, right where Jacob Hoffman “planted” his stake more than 130 years ago.”⁶

Chapter one reflects Jacob Hoffman’s June 1885 true story. During his land staking process, men came riding up to him and asked him to move on. Jacob “suspected that the men in the buggy were landboomers – men who cared nothing for the land except to get it pre-empted and then make the coming settlers pay their price.” After putting his stakes in the ground, Jacob sprinted across the miles and “reached the land office about sunrise and waited on the steps for the office to open. He entered his claim. He had won his race against the land boomers.”⁷

The Chapter 11 egg incident is also based on historical fact. Here is the 1875 recount printed in the newspaper.

“An attempt of some kind was made in 1854 to change the location of the county seat, but the exact nature of which we have been unable to ascertain, even from those who resided here at the time. It is said certain citizens of Waterloo went up to Cedar Falls for that purpose, and a general row was the result. Something stronger than Cedar River water was used, and after the steam was up, the citizens of that town procured some eggs and opened fire on the invaders. O. E. Hardy sported a plug hat, and that afforded a prominent mark for the egg men, and the result was the hat was badly damaged, and the Waterloo force was driven from the field.”⁸

⁵ “Song of Years.” *Nebraska State Journal* 1-22-1939, page 29.

⁶ Recounts of Jacob’s land claim story are found in *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg p. 34 & 36

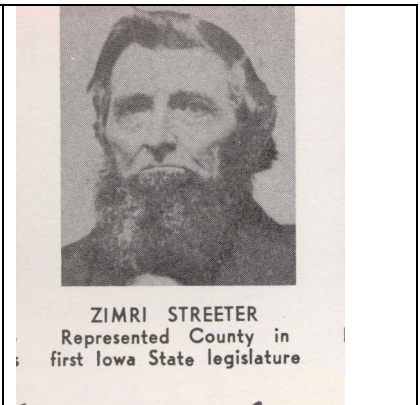
⁷ *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg p. 36

⁸ “County Seat Locations: History of the Several Contests.” *Iowa State Reporter* (Waterloo, IA) May 26, 1875, p. 6

"One of the unique characters among the pioneer lawmakers of Iowa, thirty years ago, was Zimri Streeter, " Old Black Hawk," as he was familiarly called by his colleagues in the General Assemblies of 1858—60."⁹

So begins the section in the *Annals of Iowa*. This 1897 book featured several editors, including Mrs. Aldrich's father, Charles. Peter Melendy wrote the section on his friend, Streeter. As was already mentioned, Melendy is one of the settlers that inspired characters in *Song of Years*. A person can read the entire article about "Old Black Hawk" for free on the "Annals of Iowa" website. This book is now a part of the public domain.

Note: Permission was granted to the Bess Streeter Aldrich Foundation to use this picture of Zimri Streeter for educational purposes.



"I wish you could have known Grandpa Statler. A tall gaunt man he was – as big and massive as the native timber in whose clearing stood his weather beaten house. And he was the wittiest man I ever knew. The Hon. Ezekial Statler I ought to call him for he was the first representative to the state legislature from Nemaha County – but the whole country side and half the young raw state knew him as Grandpa Statler."¹⁰

Bess Streeter Aldrich actually never met her Grandpa Zimri Streeter. He died in 1880, a year before she was born. While his presence was no longer a part of the family, his legend lived on. As an early Iowa pioneer, he made a lasting impact on the state and on the Streeter family. Mrs. Aldrich added facts about his life into several of her fictional stories. "He becomes, for her, the archetypal older pioneer hero – massive and gnarled, wise and witty and devoted to land and country. He would reappear in *The Rim of the Prairie*, *Song of Years*, "The Soldier Vote in '64" and in the "I Remember" chapter in *Journey into Christmas*.¹¹

In *Song of Years*, Zimri is the fictionalized Jeremiah Martin. Bess noted that "I followed as best I could the characteristics of my grandfather, Zimri Streeter." Incidentally the family could also see the family resemblance between Mr. and Mrs. Martin and their grandparents. "Bess' cousins also recognized their Grandmother Streeter as Sarah Martin but felt that Ma's tongue was a tad too sharp."¹²

One of the most notable contributions Zimri made was to serve as an early Iowa Legislature representative. This detail becomes a part of *Song of Years*. Mr. Streeter's common sense was appreciated.

"In 1857 he was nominated by the Republicans of Black Hawk County for Representative in the Legislature, and elected by a large majority. He went to Des Moines without any " axes to grind," and had no special measures to urge upon the Legislature. He was always in his seat, attentive to business, and invariably acted upon his own judgment. He had no vain ambition to see his name in print as the author of bills presented, but he took especial delight in showing up and defeating extravagant and selfish schemes. He held it to be the highest duty of a member, to closely examine every proposition presented to the Legislature, and unless it was clearly right and necessary, it had better be defeated. It is probable that no member of the House of 1858 and 1860 defeated so many visionary, vicious or useless bills as " Old Black Hawk." ¹³

Mr. Streeter also did help with the vote. "In 1864 Mr. Streeter was appointed by the Governor as one of the Commissioners to take the vote of Iowa soldiers in the field." ¹⁴ This part in *Song of Years* was true to life.

⁹ Melendy, P., (1894) "Zimri Streeter — "Old Black Hawk. """, *The Annals of Iowa* 1(5), 412-415.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.2439>

¹⁰ "Grandpa Statler" *Harper's Weekly* (26 June 1915) by Margaret Dean Stevens, Bess' pen name

¹¹ *The Collected Short Works 1907-1919* by Bess Streeter Aldrich; "Grandpa Statler" preface, p. 44

¹² *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg p. 36

¹³ Melendy, P., (1894) "Zimri Streeter — "Old Black Hawk. """, *The Annals of Iowa* 1(5), 413.

¹⁴ Melendy, P., (1894) "Zimri Streeter — "Old Black Hawk. """, *The Annals of Iowa* 1(5), 415.

Song of Years Cover



“The jacket design, reproduced above, was painted by Mrs. Aldrich’s son, James Aldrich; it shows the seven sisters and the young man who played ‘so important part’ in the life of one of them.”¹⁵ The painting was done using oils. In a September 27, 1942, *Omaha World-Herald* article featuring Mrs. Aldrich, this artwork or another piece about this book appears to be hanging on the wall. The painting appears to have remained in the family.

Mrs. Aldrich wrote about seven single sisters in *Song of Years*, and these women were inspired by her own aunts. “Old Zimri was full of his jokes, and those seven daughters were as lively as jumping beans. I knew them only as middle-aged or old ladies, but because of their sprightliness then, can well believe how they overflowed the cabin with their merriment. They made their own clothes and their own fun, laughing their heads off at every things, with special hilarity for the tricks perpetrated on the young men courageous enough to come courting.”

In the novel, one of the sisters remains single. This was not true for the Streeter sisters. “Soon they began marrying the more hardy of the candidates who had borne up under the teasing. Mary took “the Justice;” Cornelia, the new doctor; Lavina, Lucinda and Julia, promising farmers, Lucy and Sarah married brothers. If you married one of the seven Streeter girls, you acquired a combustible sort of creature and an excellent cook. It would be noise and argumentative in your home, but never monotonous.” As for her father? Mrs. Aldrich notes this. “My father was their quiet brother. He had a mild drollery about him but was not very talkative. Those garrulous girls must have taken it out of him.”¹⁶ In the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopan Gowman Youngberg, confirmation is given that Henry Martin is modeled after Mrs. Aldrich’s father, James Streeter.

¹⁵ *The Birmingham News* “Scanning the Bookshelf.” 2-12-1939, p. 75 (Birmingham, AL)

¹⁶ All three quoted excerpts in the text portion are from *Journey into Christmas*, Chapter 12, “I Remember”

While *Song of Years* contains fictionalized characters, Mrs. Aldrich was meticulous when presenting details about the time period. “It is as nearly correct in its history as I could know, and because I was very careful in the writing, I believe it to be authentic in every way from the historical standpoint. It has been my purpose in all stories of the pioneers to prepare carefully so that young people may rely on them for accuracy of readers.”¹⁷ Because the book took place from 1854 through 1868, history is presented around the time of the Civil War.

A portion of Abraham Lincoln’s acceptance of the Republican nomination for President is found in Chapter 23.

<p>Springfield, Ill., May 23, 1860 Hon. George Ashmun, President of the Republican National Convention Sir: I accept the nomination tendered me by the Convention over which you presided, and which I have formally approved, and the letter of yourself and others, as a committee appointed by the convention, for that purpose. The declaration of principles and sentiments which accompany your letter, meets my approval; and it shall be my care to not violate, or disregard it, in any part. Implored the assistance of Divine Providence, and with due regard to the views and feelings of all who were represented in the Convention; to the rights of all the states and territories and peoples of the nations; to the rights of all the states, and territories, and peoples of the nation; to the inviolability of the constitution, and the perpetual union, harmony and prosperity of all, I am most happy to cooperate for the practical success of the principles, declared by the Convention— Your obliged friend, and fellow citizen. A. Lincoln</p>	<p>“I accept the nomination tendered me ... Implored the assistance of Divine Providence and with due regard to the views and feelings of all who were represented in the Convention; to the rights of all the states and territories and peoples of the nations; perpetual union, harmony, and prosperity of all ... am most happy to cooperate for the practical success of the principles declared by the Convention.” Your obliging friend and fellow citizen Abraham Lincoln, May 23, 1860</p> <p>This complete, handwritten acceptance is part of the Library of Congress collection. While his intentions must have spread, Abraham Lincoln’s words were not printed until June 1860.¹⁸</p>
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In the book, the Martin family are portrayed as strong supporters of President Lincoln. At the end of Chapter 43, Henry, who was normally quiet, gave a stirring speech about Lincoln. Did his thoughts move you?

While most of the book portrays an anti-slavery mindset, at times strong language is used that seems to promote mistreatment. At one point, Suzanne even states in Chapter 27, “Why should we fight for a lot of n*****s?” Because this book is based on historic letters and documents, some of these opinions can seem troubling.

- 1) How would you feel if one of your family members was called to fight on behalf of another group of people? What if this enlistment was required?
- 2) Would you have been willing to help slaves escape at your own potential peril?
- 3) Chapter 31 notes that “The Scotts’ Negro man” brought his two children to school every day. Do you think this happened in other parts of the country during this time? Was the community progressive?
- 4) How might the perspectives found in this book have changed if it would have been written by a Kansas family that was more than likely pro-slavery?

Fort Sumter	Shiloh	Fort Donelson	Metamora
Corinth	Chicksaw Bayou	Lookout Mountain	Missionary Ridge

The above Civil War battles are also mentioned. To learn more, visit www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles.

¹⁷ “Bess Streeeter Aldrich Writes of Cedar Valley” *The Gazette* (Cedars Rapids, Iowa) 1-22-1939, p. 25

¹⁸ [Image 1 of Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833-1916: Abraham Lincoln to George Ashmun, Wednesday, May 23, 1860 \(Letter of acceptance\) | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](https://www.loc.gov/abraham-lincoln/papers/series-1-general-correspondence/1833-1916/abraham-lincoln-to-george-ashmun-wednesday-may-23-1860-letter-of-acceptance/)