Reader Guide for Miss Bishop by Bess Streeter Aldrich

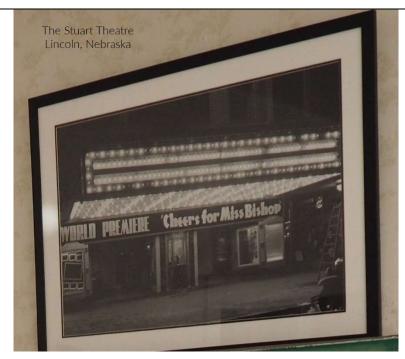
Presented by Gretchen M. Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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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 closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her. "1 As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, 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 would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines and some of her serials became books. 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" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

Miss Bishop was Bess Streeter Aldrich's sixth novel. This title was published in 1933 by Appleton, the same publisher as her previous titles. The reader gets to know Ella Bishop through the years. "She does not marry but remains as a teacher at Midwestern for fifty-one years. During this time, she is close to many students, assisting them, financially or emotionally, as individual needs require; in their youthful ways, they recognize her dedication and warm support." This book was later adapted to become the movie, "Cheers for Miss Bishop."

"The theme for Miss Bishop was originally worked out in Aldrich's story entitled, 'The Woman Who Was Forgotten,' which appeared in the June 1926 American Magazine." "The NEA (National Education Association) bought the story rights and backed production of the Miss Miller story into a movie which was released in 1931 under the same title, The Woman Who Was Forgotten."



Stuart Theater in Lincoln, Nebraska, hosted the 1941 world premiere of the movie, *Cheers for Miss Bishop*. This picture is at the Bess Streeter Aldrich House. Please visit the website to see current tour hours. https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/

Miss Bishop's Family and Close Friends

Ella Bishop	16 at start (born in 1860); A Midwestern grad, she teaches there for 51 years
Mrs. Bishop	Seldom finishes sentences; Widowed in 1875; moved from farm to town

¹ Quoted from the Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 120-121

³ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 121

⁴ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 122

Peters Family	Judge; Meek Mrs.; Sam; Chester; lived by the Bishops; Sam stays steady for Ella		
Delbert Thompson	Formerly Chet's roommate – will partner in law office; plans to marry Ella		
Cousin Amy	After her parents die, she moves in with Bishops; she steals Delbert away		
Hope Thompson	The daughter of Delbert & Amy who lives with Bishops when her parents die		
Stena	Moves into Bishop home temporarily to help with Hope; stays 51 years		
Richard (Dick)Jones	Through a misunderstood connection, he meets & falls in love with Hope		
Gretchen Jones	Dick and Hope's only child; lives with Ella to complete her schooling		
Ronald Smith	Irene's grandson who ends up marrying Gretchen		

Miss Bishop Classmates (information in quotations is from the book unless noted otherwise)

George Schroeder	Big-boned German boy; farmhand; little English; tied to German heritage		
Albert Fonda	"small, weazened-face boy"; sharp at mathematics; astronomy; Bohemian;		
Janet McLaughlin	Scotch; homely; lovable; to be Maynard teacher; later well-groomed, stylish		
Irene Van Ness	Banker's daughter; Halfway engaged to Chester Peters – waits for him; ageless		
	for a time; She marries Robert Hunt – has many children & grandchildren		
Mary Crombie	frank and efficient; to be Maple City teacher – continues that – also wiry		
Mina Gordon	Little, lithe and gypsy-like; to be married; grows - square body; 3 chins; 6 kids		
Emily Teasdale	College beauty; to be married; becomes shadowy and non-descript		
Evelyn Hobbs	Soft-spoken and shyly humorous; to be married; passes away before reunion		

Employees of the School (By Chapter Order)

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Chris Jensen	Dane; maintenance man; marries Hannah; stays at school as long as Ella				
Professor Samuel Peters	spelling/Spencerian method of writing; Penmanship (only for short time)				
Professor Loren Wick	Mathematics	Professor Byron Carter	Grammar and literature		
Miss Emmaline Patton	Geography and history	President Corcoran	Mental/Moral Philosophy		
Miss Susie McAlister	Music; "devoted to the goddess Euterpe" – Greek Muse of Music⁵				
Professor Cunningham	Didactics	President Watts	Executive		
Alum Albert Fonda	Astronomy	Alum George Schroeder	German classes		
Radical Professor O'Neil	1 year – history	Dr. Wittingly	Pedagogy		
Professor Crooks	History	Miss Zimmerman	Piano Department		
Professor Stevens	English Literature	Professor James	English		
Only names are given:	Professor Hess, Professor Alderslot;				
President Melvin Bevans Crowder		"Young, efficient; progressive"			

Miss Bishop Questions for the Reader

- 1) This book was written during the Great Depression. Do you think that impacted the storyline?
- 2) Do you think Miss Bishop would have been happier if she would have gotten married?
- 3) Do you think Ella Bishop was self-sacrificing or a martyr?
- 4) Do you think Ella is glad that she kept teaching at Midwestern or do you think she wishes that she would have moved on at some point?
- 5) The movie posters portrayed this book as a love story. Do you agree?

⁵ <u>Euterpe Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster</u>

FACILITATOR GUIDE FOR MISS BISHOP

Insights into the Miss Bishop Questions for the Reader

- 1) The Great Depression definitely impacted the end of the book because Miss Bishop lost her savings due to a bank failure. Money is a part of the storyline as Ella Bishop passes along her savings to Hope and later to Gretchen to help them have more options.
- 2) Miss Bishop seems to have found fulfillment in her life as a teacher.
- 3) While Ella Bishop was definitely self-sacrificing, she did act as a martyr on occasion. Perhaps her family would have been better off if forced to take more personal responsibility.
- 4) Ella seems to be glad that she had such a long history at Midwestern.
- 5) This book is a love story, but more of one of motherly love that Ella Bishop felt toward Hope and Gretchen as well as toward her students. Although Ella had the option the marry Sam, planned to marry Delbert and wished that she could marry John Stevens, they were small parts of the plot.

Additional book group discussion questions for Miss Bishop

Who was the first person mentioned in the book? Who was the last? Is this significant? Chris Jensen is the first and last person mentioned in <u>Miss Bishop</u>. This is significant because he is the steady person in Ella Bishop's life from start to finish.

Why do you think that Ella's mom was so helpless? Does this fact give you a glimpse into Ella's dad? Ella's mom appears to be helpless because little has been expected of her. Perhaps she had a weak constitution, but Ella's dad might have catered to all of her whims and expected little of her.

The male teachers are called "professor," and the female teachers are called "Miss." Why? Perhaps that had to do with males receiving more schooling. But it might have simply been the custom of the day to address males with a more formal title.

Would Ella have been happier had she married Sam Peters?

She makes it clear that she only thought of him as a friend, and she wanted more than that to marry.

Did you enjoy the scene where Ella meets Delbert? Did you predict how their story was going to end? Opinion question, but probably most readers will appreciate Ella's predicament. The title of the book could predict that Ella would stay Miss Bishop. But for a time, it did seem like she would marry Delbert.

Did you predict the choices that Amy was going to make? Was she as childish and guileless as she tried to appear?

The author provides a hint with a biblical reference to mandrakes. (In the book of Genesis, Leah "buys" a night with her husband by giving her sister (his other wife) mandrakes.) This seems to hint that perhaps two women in a household was too many. She wanted to appear innocent, but how she acted would state a different truth since she purposefully sat between them. She also had her head rest on his shoulder while she was sleeping and did hang on to Delbert a bit too long when he helped her down from the carriage. She definitely planned their encounter without Ella.

Did Delbert truly love Ella? Did he ever truly love Amy?

On his deathbed, Delbert seemed to still love Ella. He was infatuated with Amy and thought protectively of her, but he had to realize quickly that she was immature, especially compared to Ella.

Do you think that Ella still loved Delbert on his deathbed? Do you think Amy ever loved Delbert? Ella loved Delbert enough to come when she was called, but even when they were dating, she seemed hesitant to fully commit to him. Amy might have loved Delbert in her own way, but she clearly wanted to win Delbert away from Ella. At his end, she still cared more about her own comforts.

Should Ella have raised Hope as her daughter or sent her to an orphanage? Even if she did seem to see Delbert's face at times in Hope, she seemed to love mothering Hope.

What did you think of Hope's love story?

Mr. Jones was trying to find his cousin, and Hope thought he was looking for Mis Jones. He lets her wrong idea pass because he wanted to spend time with her. Most readers will like how much effort Richard puts into pursuing Hope, but some might be bothered by his deception.

Do you think John Stevens' wife was still alive when he was driving the automobile back? Opinion.

Should Sam have told his father what really happened to his brother Chet?

Opinion, but Sam seems to understand that it was better for his father to remember Chet as he perceived his son rather than to face the reality of who Chet really had become.

When did old Mrs. Bishop start to decline? Why do you think she held on to life for so long? Soon after Hope's wedding, she "had forgotten how to come back" and lived in the shadows. For "nine years she "rocked in her room, sorted her colored quilt-blocks and sang the cracked and weird little song that held no melody." Perhaps she stayed alive for Ella's sake and because she was cared for so well.

What did you think when Ella gave away her European trip to Gretchen? Opinion.

Should Ella have let Gretchen wear what was supposed to be her wedding dress? *Opinion. Possibly yes because Ella is practical and loves Gretchen. Possibly no since the gesture will not be fully appreciated.*

How does Ella see some redemption in who Gretchen ends up marrying? She is marrying Irene Van Ness' grandson. "when Chester Peters went away because of a mad infatuation for Amy, Irene who loves him, married another — this Ronald Smith was to be born of that line later. Was it possible then that all of the suffering and humiliation of that early day **had** to be, in order that Gretchen and Ronald might have this very beautiful love for each other. Oh, no, that was a foolish thing." (Chapter XXXVII)

Did the celebration at the end take away some of the sting of Ella's forced retirement? Opinion.

Questions on Quotations

"Don't you worry. I won't be an old maid." Suddenly her voice dropped to a husky sweetness. "I have too many dreams for that, Mother. I think sometimes it is as though I am weaving at a loom with a spindle of hopes and dreams. And no matter, Mother, how lovely the pattern – no matter how many gorgeous colors I use, - always the center of it is ... you know, ... just a little house in a garden and red firelight and ... the man I love .. and children ... and happiness. For me, Mother, that's the end of all dreaming." (Chapter III)

Do you think Ella Bishop readjusted her dreams or do you think part of her dreams came true? Part of her dream definitely came true as she did live in a little house with a garden and firelight along with children. She definitely seems to have found happiness even though she never did marry.

(Chapter VII) "Mrs. Bishop was only in her forties, but to have been forty-six in the eighties was to have been an old woman."

Why do you think that women aged more quickly during the late 1800's? Living in the 1800's involved survival. Especially widowed women had to work hard to make it if their husbands passed away early on. Their efforts did age them.

(Chapter VIII) "Mamma – comfort me." It was the cry of a wounded thing. But her mother's heart was pounding so furiously from the shock, and she said her head was splitting terribly, that in a few minutes Ella got up and dressed again and gave her medicine and wrung out cold compresses for her. So after all, it was Ella who did the comforting."

What do you think of Mrs. Bishop's mothering? Do you think that Ella enabled her to be this way? Whether she has always been helpless or was trained to be that way was unclear. She seems to have been indulged often. Possibly Ella could have asked more of her after her father died and trained her to be capable.

(Chapter XIII) (President Corcoran) "The only way I know to hold on to those fleeting years is to bind myself to youth. If in these swiftly moving years I can pass on a little of the living flame from the torch I carry ... I can help light the long steep paths for young people ... the service I have rendered will be its own reward."

- 1) Can teachers have a family and still be successful? 2) Do you agree with President Corcoran that binding oneself to youth is worthwhile? 3) How did his quote inspire Ella in the future?
- 1) At the time, women were not allowed to marry and continue teaching. Teaching can demand a lot of your time. The answer depends on your definition of success. 2) Making an impact on the next generation does matter. Working with kids can age a person but also make life meaningful. 3) Being a torch to the next generation becomes her mission. Although she falters a bit, she comes to realize that "by doing her simple duty from day to day ... she must have given some of the living flame that glows more brightly as the ages pass." (Chapter XLI)

(Chapter XVII) For the first time her suffering was for all three, - for Amy crying out her spinless, superficial sorrow – for Delbert going down alone into the strange darkness – for herself, the scorned one, who agony had been greatest of all. "Promise, Ella." "Oh, why is life such a drear stark thing, Delbert? Life was meant to joyous and lovely." "You will always have joy and loveliness in you, Ella," "It should have something besides loneliness and despair." "You will have neither one, Ella." "I've suffered so ..." "So have I ... God, how I've suffered." "How can I go on?" "Promise you'll look after her ... through it." "But what about me? Is my life to be nothing but duty and obligations and service to others?" "You are so strong ... and clean. Hold my hand ... things are ... are slipping ... quick, - promise, Ella." "I promise."

- 1) Did Delbert ask too much of Ella? 2) Is life more than duty, obligations and service?
- 1) Possibly. But he knew her character. 2) Sometimes. But part of life is fulfilling commitments.

(Chapter XXII) "I want this man for my own. I'd rather be near him than any other human I've ever known. I think he feels the same way about me. I *know* it. I can *feel his* feelings. I'm entitled to happiness. A girl took my lover away once. Why can't I do the same thing? He has no real wife. He's misunderstood, his life half ruined. I could give him everything, - love, companionship, happiness. I've only *one* life to live, - why can't it be completely happy?"

"Now, you!" She was as impartial as a judge. "What can you say to that?"

"I can say enough." Her clean honest mind took the chair. "In the first place, every one *isn't* entitled to happiness, not at the expense of some one else. Happiness gained that way ceases to *be* happiness. Have you ever heard that two wrongs don't make a right? And just why do you drag into this that weak young Amy? You with your years and your education and your so-called poise and judgment! 'Misunderstood!' Where have you heard that feeble excuse before?"

Does happiness matter above else? Do you consider Ella to be noble for her decision to not pursue John Stevens? Did she always act with integrity in her relationship with him?

- 1) The world does seem to emphasize happiness. In fact, Ella's ideas of not wanting her own happiness at the expense of someone else's happiness may be considered old-fashioned today.
- 2) Whether or not, Ella is noble is a bit of an opinion. Choosing to not wreck someone else's happiness for your own happiness is considerate. But perhaps Mrs. Stevens in not happy. Maybe she would be happier without her marriage. John Stevens might be happier with Ella. Once upon a time, the commitment part of marriage mattered to people. Some truly have a reason to get out of marriage some might say that Mrs. Stevens kleptomaniac tendencies might be reason enough to dissolve a marriage. For traditionalists, happiness is not the only goal for marriage. 3) One could definitely argue that while Ella's speech to herself was full of integrity, her actions did not always follow. While she did not purposefully travel to the teacher meeting with Mr. Stevens, she did spend alone time with him after the sessions. She ultimately chose to walk away, but she was tempted to stay.

(Conversation between Hope and Ella, Chapter XXVI) "But Aunt Ella, I can step right into any school now and just *reproduce* Miss Jones's model classwork."

"I'm glad you think so and it will help you immensely to have a high standard before you. But don't forget that you may teach where you will not have model training-school equipment."

"But Miss Jones says we should demand the best of materials."

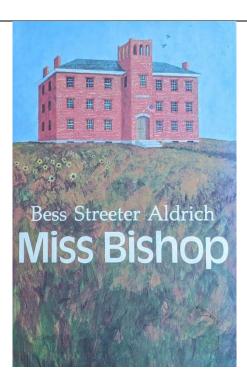
Ella smiled: "You could demand it in some schools until the cows come home and not get it, - and anyway there is much more to teaching than the material aids that surround you."

"Just the same I do think it's beneath a graduate of Miss Jones' course even to accept a position in a place where the aids are not up to date."

To which Ella said crisply: "Two of the greatest teachers in the world, Hope, were not equipped with upto-date materials aids – Socrates 'who brought down philosophy from the heavens to earth' – and a Man who wrote with his finger in the sand."

Whose teaching philosophy do you agree with more? Should teachers demand proper materials? Those who appreciate ingenuity and traditional methods will appreciate Ella's methods. Those who push for progress will gravitate toward having newer materials like Hope. Wanting what is best for students is a part of being a teacher. Yet pushing for more when there are financial limitations does not seem to be wise or helpful.

Saying good-bye to Old Central and to Miss Bishop.



Andy Wither designed the cover for the Thorndike Large print edition of the book. His painting seems to feature the Old Central building. This edition of the book is owned by the book guide author.

(Chapter XXXIX) "It was from President Crowder – brief, gracious, explanatory. There were to be several changes in the faculty and he thought it much better that she know about the change in her own department before the board met. Delicately veiled, with the kindest of motives, it suggested that she might prefer to get in her resignation prior to the board's action."

How would you have handled this forced resignation? Do you think it was necessary? Was this action really kind?

Being asked to resign when you have spent so much time selflessly teaching would have been frustrating. Many would want to have a discussion with the administration or board first. If a teacher is no longer able to complete his/her job, a forced resignation might be necessary. Sometimes being pushed forward can help us move into a positive direction. Asking a long-time employee to step down may not be kind especially if that person was not involved in the discussion.

The Inspiration behind Central Hall in Miss Bishop

A Bess Streeter Aldrich Treasury contains her two most popular novels along with five of her short stories. Her son, Robert Streeter Aldrich wrote the introduction, and this is what he had to say specifically about Miss Bishop.

"A Lantern in Her Hand was first published in 1928. Not long after came Miss Bishop, Mother's tribute to the schoolteacher, which had its origin in a news item sent by a friend informing her that the first old building at Iowa State Teacher's College was being torn down. However, that was but the germ of the story. Always with Mother, a great deal of thought and planning went into each novel, although always she drew upon actual historical backgrounds."6 Bess Streeter Aldrich grew up in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She "attended Iowa State Normal School (now University of Northern Iowa) and received her degree in 1901, then taught for one year in Boone, Iowa."7 Because Central Hall, the original building, had been a part of her own schooling, the fact that it was going to potentially be torn down would have impacted her personally.



Although the former Iowa State Normal College (as it was also known) provided the initial inspiration, Mrs. Aldrich did not use that location as her only source. "Aldrich carefully avoided naming an actual place or school, and because she wanted the book to honor all teachers, she told her publisher she did not want any specific reference concerning the locale of the story." Her inspiration was four different Midwest schools in particular: Iowa State Teachers College, Ames (Iowa State University), the University of Iowa, and Nebraska University. She noted that "what school in the Midwest did not begin with a few acres of prairie grass, four or five teachers, one building and a handful of students? The history of one in its essence is the history of them all." 10

Note: Photo is cropped from *The Atlas of Black Hawk County, Iowa, 1910: Photographs of Citizens, Views, Residences, and Institutions.* Courtesy use of the image was granted from the Iowa Digital Library.

⁶ Aldrich, Bess Streeter. A Bess Streeter Aldrich Treasury. Matticuk, NY: Aeonian Press, 1978 (republished by special arrangement.)

⁷ Quoted from the Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 16)

⁸ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 123

⁹ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 123

¹⁰ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 123

Who was Miss Bishop?



Miss Bishop, the actress, starring in *Cheers for Miss Bishop*

This original 1940 still photo from the movie, *Cheers for Miss Bishop*, is a part of the Bess Streeter Aldrich Foundation collection. In the movie, Miss Bishop was played by actress, Martha Scott. As sometimes happens in Hollywood, Scott was actually the third choice for the film. Barbara Stanwyck and Margaret Sullavan were the first two picks, but both ended up having other acting commitments that they could not be released from in order to play Miss Bishop.¹¹

According to the late Roger Leavitt, former Cedar Falls historian, the character may have been based on former Iowa State Teachers' College faculty. "Leavitt found a distinct similarity between Miss Ella Bishop and Sara Findlay Rice, member of the Terpsichorean History Department. Others could see shades of Miss Riggs of the English Department." Biographies of both of these women can be found on the University of Northern Iowa website. 13

In a letter discussing the *Cheers for Miss* Bishop movie, Mrs. Aldrich alluded to two other inspirational teachers: University of Nebraska English professors Louise Pound and Marguerite McPhee. ¹⁴ Mrs. Aldrich described high school Shakespeare teacher Grace Norton as a "favorite of everyone." ¹⁵

The most likely candidate was Bess' first cousin who was an educator for fifty-two years, just like Miss Bishop. Louise Barrett was working on her master's degree at the college when Bess was a student there. "She would have been able to provide insight into the lives and problems of teachers who had survived for many years on their small salaries and who faced retirement with little income." But perhaps, just as she used a composite of experiences for the book, Miss Bishop represents many.

Honoring educators continued during the *Cheers for Miss Bishop* movie premiere festivities. These local teachers were a part of the festivities: Fremont's Mary Alice Caywood; Fairbury's Helen Belle Powell; Nebraska City's Billie Klein; Elmwood's Shirley Green; Beatrice's Katherine Henderson; Lincoln's Jane Pettit and Omaha's Doris Payne. ¹⁷

¹¹ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 177

¹² Quoted from the Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 25)

¹³ https://scua.library.uni.edu/university-archives/biographies

¹⁴ Quoted from the Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 26)

¹⁵ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 123

¹⁶ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 123

¹⁷ "Hollywood Takes Lincoln by Storm for "Bishop" Premiere." Lincoln Evening State Journal, 14 January 1941, p. 1

Cheers for Miss Bishop



Pictured from left to right: Ella Bishop (Martha Scott), Sam Peters (William Gargan) and Mrs. Bishop (Dorothy Peterson). Photo is from the Aldrich Foundation Collection.

The 1941 movie "Cheers for Miss Bishop" is based on Mrs. Aldrich's book. "Richard Rowland purchased 'motion picture, radio, and television rights' to *Miss Bishop*. 18 Originally the movie was to be called, "Three Cheers for Miss Bishop." Rowland decided to work directly with the publisher instead of with her agent, John McCormick. Because of all of his work on her behalf, "Aldrich insisted that he must receive half of the agent's fees. Williams agreed, and Appleton split the commission with McCormick." 19

"Rowland wanted Aldrich in Hollywood as a consultant, and she wanted to see her work recreated from print into film." She stayed in California for several months. Besides utilizing a set, several scenes were filmed at an actual university. "Scenes were shot at the University of Nebraska campus in Lincoln because the film company's publicity department wanted to have a specific school and place. It was a big event for the author and the entire area." ²¹

¹⁸ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 172

¹⁹ Petersen, Carol Miles. *Bess Streeter Aldrich*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 172

²⁰ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 177

²¹ Petersen, Carol Miles. Bess Streeter Aldrich. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 179-180