



NEWS RELEASE

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Colby's Female Settlers: Groundbreaking Pioneers

Colby, KS – The promise of land attracted many adventurous spirits to Kansas in the 1800s. Melissa Alger was one of them. Alger, a single schoolteacher, journeyed to Thomas County to claim a homestead and to build a future. Alger's adventure west represents the American pioneer stories featured in the Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition *Journey Stories* on display January 8 – February 21, 2010 at the Prairie Museum of Art and History, 1905 S. Franklin in Colby.

Twenty-five year-old Melissa Alger arrived in Thomas County in May 1885. She traveled west from Kirksville, Missouri with the Williams family, whose members included her close friend Alice Williams. Alice Williams, like Alger, sought a homestead in Thomas County.

Homesteading land required a large commitment on the part of the homesteader. In order to prove up on the land, the homesteader had to build a permanent dwelling, break five acres of ground the first year and more the following years, and live on the land at least half the time.

Alger and Williams took out homestead papers on adjoining land and built dugouts close to one another. They took turns staying in each other's dugouts to combat loneliness and to fulfill their requirement of living on their land half of the time.

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Plowing was backbreaking work, done by hand. Plowing the first five acres proved to be a challenge for Alger. Eager to break ground, she hired a man to plow the land for her while she stayed in town and waited for her dugout to be completed. When she visited the homestead to check on the progress, she found that the work had not been completed. The following spring, Alger left nothing to chance. She followed the hired man as he plowed the ground. After the third time working the ground, Alger planted corn.

Neither Alger nor Williams remained alone on their homesteads for long. Williams sold a relinquishment to her property in 1886 and later married John Bean. On October 20, 1886 Alger married James Wallace. Alger and Wallace were the nineteenth couple to be married in Thomas County. After marriage, Melissa Alger Wallace stayed on her homestead with her husband, who made daily walks into Colby for his job at the Feehan Meat Market. Melissa Alger Wallace's story represents the pioneer spirit of Thomas County's early settlers. Her headstone at Beulah Cemetery bears the image of her sod house and the inscription "The soddy will always be a symbol of the western Kansas pioneer spirit."

According to Sue Taylor, director of the Prairie Museum of Art and History, "Melissa Alger and Alice Williams were two of the thousands that came to Thomas County in the 1880s. Their story is just one of the many journey stories that will be highlighted in *High Plains Journeys*, our companion exhibit to *Journey Stories*."

To learn similar stories of pioneer settlement, make the trip to Colby to the Prairie Museum of Art and History for the *Journey Stories* exhibition. Journey stories – tales of how we got here – are as American as apple pie. Why did our families come to America? Why did our ancestors choose Kansas as home? The exhibition explores four centuries of American history through images, audio clips, music, maps, and artifacts. Visitors will listen to stories of travelers and trace their route on an interactive map; read harrowing accounts of escaped slaves on the road to freedom; and use an 1859 guidebook to prepare for a westward trip on an overland trail.

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The Prairie Museum of Art and History will showcase local journey stories, including those of Alger and Williams, in the *High Plains Journeys* exhibit. “There are many wonderful stories of people on the high plains that we will be sharing in the *High Plains Journeys* exhibit, but we also hope to inspire people to discover their own story or the story of a community or family member,” said Taylor. “We are honored and thrilled to be a host community for *Journey Stories*.”

Special *Journey Stories* programs offered at the Prairie Museum of Art and History include *People in Motion: Migration and Transportation in Kansas* by Isaias McCaffery on Thursday, January 21 and *Famous Visitors to Western Kansas* by Evelyn Hoyt Ward on Thursday, February 18. Both programs take place at noon.

The Prairie Museum of Art and History is one of six Kansas community cultural organizations to host *Journey Stories*. Other Kansas hosts include the McPherson County Old Mill Museum in Lindsborg, the Glasco Community Foundation, the Geary County Historical Society and Museums in Junction City, the Parsons Public Library, and the Atchison County Historical Society.

The *Journey Stories* exhibition is part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution, the Kansas Humanities Council, and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. Support for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the United States Congress.

The Kansas Humanities Council sponsors the Kansas tour of *Journey Stories*. A non-profit cultural institution, the Kansas Humanities Council conducts and supports community-based programs, serves as a financial resource through an active grant-making program, and encourages Kansans to participate in their communities.

For more information about *Journey Stories* and related exhibits and events in Colby, contact the Prairie Museum of Art and History at 785/460-4590 or www.prairiemuseum.org or the Kansas Humanities Council at 785/357-0359 or www.kansashumanities.org.

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