

Book Discussion Questions for *The Lieutenant's Lady* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

For additional questions and concepts found in *The Lieutenant's Lady*, please see the facilitator's guide which includes more about the background research, area forts, Native American references and 1940's perceptions.

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.



The original jacket cover was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich. This painting is on display at the Aldrich Museum.

About *The Lieutenant's Lady*

This novel by Aldrich was based on a primary source. "Miss Lillian Houghton of Marshalltown gave Bess diaries her aunt had written in 1866 and 1867 while travelling by riverboat up the Missouri from St. Louis into the Dakota and Montana territories to meet her Lieutenant husband at Camp Berthold in Dakota territory – a long, tiresome and dangerous voyage. Bess spent almost a year researching to make each detail as authentic as possible."² For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

***The Lieutenant's Lady* Basic Plot:** Linnie Colsworth is visiting Omaha relatives. Lieutenant Norman Stafford fights for the Army during the Indian Wars and proposes to Cousin Cynthia. On her way back East, she travels to Norman's current fort to tell him that her cousin has jilted him. To save face, she marries Norman temporarily, but then she decides to stay with him out of love, despite the hardships and difficulties that took place for those serving in the Army during the 1860's out in Western territories.

***The Lieutenant's Lady* Secondary Characters (see the Facilitator's Guide for additional details)**

Omaha	River Rose	Fort Berthold	Native Chiefs	Camp Cooke	Travel
Uncle Harry	Mrs. Duncliff	Major Halligan	White Shield	Lanes	Lt. Walbourn
Aunt Louise	Elderly captain	Sargent Smith	Crow Belly	Talcotts	Mrs. Duncliff
Cousin Cynthia	Pilot & his wife	doctor	Red Cow	Norrisis	Uncle Henry
George Hemming	St. Louis merchant	Father DeSmet	Fool Dog	Houghtalings	Cynthia
Magnus & Olga	(no Norman)				Aunt Louise

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

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 40)

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Overall questions:

What do you think are the themes of *The Lieutenant's Lady*?

This book is told from the perspective of a white adult woman. How might it change if it was told from the lieutenant's perspective? What if one of the Native American chiefs told this story?

Would you consider this book to be a romance? What about a love story?

Omaha: Chapters I-V (1-5)

How did Linnie end up traveling to Omaha? Do you think she wanted to come?

What did Linnie notice about Cynthia when it came to how she felt about men?

"Here she was thinking about Norman Stafford, who was over at the Hernden House thinking about Cynthia, who had been chattering away about George Hemming." Did you predict what might happen?

When Lieutenant Spafford had to say his good-byes to Linnie instead of Cynthia was any part surprising?

How did Cynthia and Linnie's versions of love differ?

On p. 58 it says "But, surprisingly, it seemed in that brief second that Uncle Henry and George knew something which no other human being knew." What do you think Linnie was referencing?

River Rose: Chapters VI-VIII (6-8)

Do you think that Linnie was brave or foolhardy to venture West to find Lieutenant Stafford?

What was truly motivating Linnie in her trek west? Her cousin's wishes or something more?

How were the women different that she met on the riverboat?

What do you think was the toughest part of the journey for Linnie?

Would you have been willing to travel the route that Linnie did by yourself?

Fort Berthold: Chapters VIII-X (8-10)

Lieutenant Spafford did not think it was appropriate for Linnie to stay in his quarters unless she was his wife.

Do you think that sense of propriety would be true today?

"She knew now that Cynthia would have never come at all." Do you agree with Linnie?

For the first time, Linnie was around Native Americans. What experiences did she have with them?

Camp Cooke: Chapters XI-IXX (11-19)

What new places did Linnie see on their way to Camp Cooke?

What does Mrs. Talcott need to be content? Do you feel the same way?

Even after her relationship with the Lieutenant changed, Linnie kept up Cynthia's picture. Why?

What are some ways that the soldiers and families passed the time at Camp Cooke?

"Rachel in a frontier fort was crying for her children and would not be comforted." How was Linnie affected by the loss of the Houghtaling baby and by the loss of the soldier?

Did Linnie's schooling efforts really make a difference for the children? Why or why not?

Travel/ Omaha: Chapters XX-XXIII (20-23)

How would Linnie's life had changed if she would have remained at Camp Cooke with the others?

"I can stand it" becomes a theme in the book. How did Linnie manage through the tough times?

Has Cousin Cynthia changed since becoming a widow? Why or why not?

According to p. 168, Linnie felt that "Norman did not love her as he had loved Cynthia." Did that change by the end of the book?

Norman's thoughts near the end of Chapter XXIII seem to summarize the tone of the book. What might the reader conclude?

What did old Mrs. Stafford (Linnie) think that she heard right before she died?

