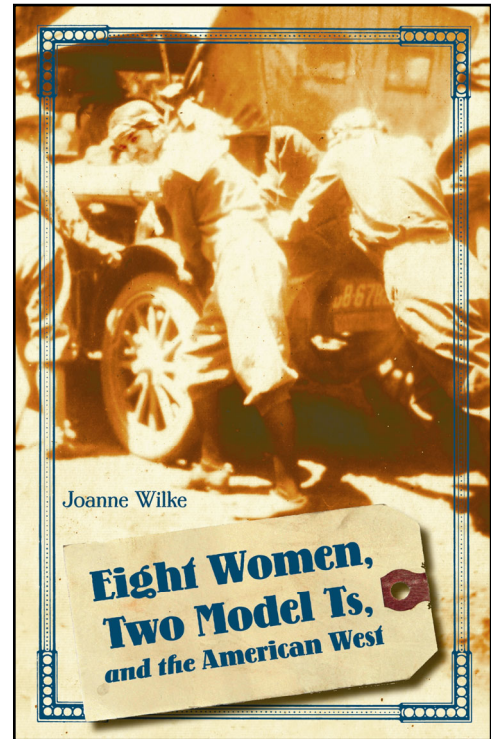




Ancestral Adventures

An Interview with Joanne Wilke
author of
***EIGHT WOMEN, TWO MODEL Ts,
AND THE AMERICAN WEST***

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In 1924 eight young women drove across the American West in two Model T Fords. A group of farm girls who met while attending Iowa's Teacher's College, they shared a sense of adventure and a "yen to see some things." In nine weeks they traveled more than nine thousand unpaved miles on an extended car-camping trip through six national parks, "without a man or a gun along." Joanne Wilke's grandmother and great-aunt were among the fearless females who embarked on this rousing expedition. Now Wilke is the author of a new book detailing their unique journey, *Eight Women, Two Model Ts, and the American West* (University of Nebraska Press). We chatted with her about the book, the challenges she faced in her research, and what she gained from the experience of chronicling a piece of her family's history.

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

JW: I wrote *Eight Women, Two Model Ts, and the American West* because I was intrigued by the trip in 1924 and by the women's stories. I thought it was a unique bit of history that could easily be lost. Additionally, two of the women, Marie and Laura, had a big impact on me personally—not only their strength and intelligence, but their zest and humor. I wanted to do them justice. Although the backbone of the book is the Model T trip, the family stories, essays, and memoirs are the heart.

Q: Do you have any tips or suggestions for writing a book based on a family history? How did you go about doing your research? What were the biggest challenges and how did you tackle them?

JW: My biggest challenge in research was the aging minds of my subjects. I was able to interview four of the women, but they were so old that their memories came in snippets. They couldn't remember what happened where or what route they took, and sometimes they confused this trip with other trips. But as the travelers passed away, their heirs sent me diaries and letters that they found. These were indispensable.

In the future, I would certainly ask interview subjects directly if they had journals, letters, or pictures saved. My main advice in researching family history is to maintain optimistic patience, thoroughness, and good record-keeping, but also to maintain correspondence with other family members. Don't be afraid to contact people, even total strangers, and be willing to let the story take on a life of its own. I would also advise some research into what constitutes nonfiction (as opposed to fiction, or even creative nonfiction), just to be clear in your mind as you work.

Q: In researching and writing *Eight Women, Two Model Ts, and the American West*, what did you learn about your grandmother and great-aunt that you did not know before setting out on this journey?

JW: In the process of writing *Eight Women*, my youthful, somewhat mythic, impressions of Marie and Laura coalesced into a fuller picture of them as human beings. I also found my connection to them was deeper than I realized.

Q: Your grandmother, great-aunt, and their cohorts set out on a long, difficult journey "without a man or a gun along" at a time when this was not at all common. How has their conviction and sense of independence inspired you in your personal and professional life?

JW: When I was a child, I listened as my grandmother's and great-aunt's conversations strayed into various youthful adventures, including this trip. To me it just seemed normal. I thought all grandmothers had such stories. But I was so young and the stories came in such a natural way that it is hard to determine the impact—to separate nature from nurture. I believe that my own curiosity, sense of adventure, ability to think for myself, and a certain willful confidence expanded in their presence. Perhaps that was their true gift to me.

Joanne Wilke's work has appeared in the Crazy Woman Creek: Women Rewrite the American West and Leaning into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West anthologies. She has also written pieces for the Montana Quarterly, the Pacific Review, and the Christian Science Monitor.

To read a recent article on Joanne Wilke and *Eight Women, Two Model Ts, and the American West* in the *Billings Gazette* at <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2007/10/14/features/magazine/18-wilkie.txt>.

For more information on the book, please visit www.midwestbooksellers.org/mwconnections.html and <http://nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Eight-Women-Two-Model-Ts-and-the-American-West,673240.aspx>.