Living by Faith Alone

She and her husband went to the revival because the church was their church too, sort of. They hadn’t been shy about telling their neighbors they liked the United Brethren fellowship but weren’t that hot on all that stuff about hell.

Maybe the revival’s title should have kept them away: "Hell, What it is. Where it is. Who Goes There." They went anyway.

Even if I could write every word, I could scarcely suggest the unloving tone and manner of presentation, the vulgarity and crude materialism of the whole thing. The geological location, the names of people now there, the vile denunciation of others, the stickiness of melted brimstone, the red flames of burning sulphur--it was all but intolerable.

Then, the test. In "a large, challenging voice," the preacher asked "whether there was anyone before them who did not believe in hell."

Caroline Boa Henderson, who with her husband, Will, worked a plot of grassland were not particularly shaken by a preacher flinging burning brimstone.

“Is there anyone here who does not believe in hell?” he said again.

Caroline Henderson raised her hand.

The preacher marched up the aisle, told Caroline to hold out her hand, lit a match, and held it beneath her skin. "You don't think your body can burn?" he said.

It wasn't fire she doubted; it was the place he delighted to call Hell.

Her hand blistered, or so she told her readers; but what really burned her was how the fire-breather told her neighbors it was unbelievers such as this woman who were going to burn in hell.
The Hendersons never darkened the church door again, the only church within miles on the windswept grassland, the land so many abandoned when it dried into powder that swept into the lungs of man and beast alike. The Hendersons grew more and more alone.

People in town thought of prickly Caroline Henderson as hard to get along with. True believers sometimes are, and Caroline Henderson was. She didn’t believe in some nether world of hellfire, but she was a champion of faith in this world, even in the Dust Bowl.

Caroline Henderson believed a man or woman who loved the land he or she worked would reap a harvest of virtue and grace.

The faith sounds cockamamie today, even here in Siouxland, where the abundance of our good land keeps us here. But Caroline Henderson truly believed, like Thomas Jefferson, that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God."

The Hendersons lived in No Man's Land on the Oklahoma Panhandle, where between 1933 and 1938 she and Will suffered 301 dust storms, some as long as four days. They would not leave, even when blinding dust drifted endlessly into the house Will had built with his own hands. For several years, her essays from the heart of the Depression appeared in the *Atlantic* magazine. Single-handedly, in thoughtful, lyrical prose, she taught the American public what it was like to eat dust of No Man’s Land.

Get this: Catherine Boa Henderson grew up here, in Plymouth County, on a Union township farm between Remsen and Kingsley, a farm her father managed and ran, the kind of land Thomas Jefferson believed made promises.

She left Siouxland for Mt. Holyoke in 1897, at a time when very few farm girls even went to high school, much less a college. She must not have been shy about her faith because the Mt. Holyoke class prophecy boldly declares that Carrie Boa, class of 1901, will soon be living "somewhere on a western ranch."
In her commencement gown and mortarboard, her soft cheeks make her look girlish. There's innocence in her endearing eyes, but no fear; it’s a face that will win by grace you might expect of an Iowa farm girl in 1901.

Her life was no bowl of cherries. The Hendersons lived hand-to-mouth through years when there were no cattle in the gates, no fruit on the vine, nothing.

She may well have given up on hell because she'd seen enough on earth. But she never stopped believing in the land, even though it neither promised nor delivered a rose garden. Unlike Steinbeck’s Okies, Caroline Boa Henderson, who grew up just outside of Kingsley, never stopped believing in the land she so greatly loved.

Read her for yourself—she’s still here in *Letters from the Dust Bowl.*