women's diaries on the western frontier

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For the women who traveled to the western territories in the nineteenth century, the journey brought sharp dislocations. Traditional work patterns were daily overturned with women called upon to do what they had long regarded as "mens' work." The consequence was that gender role, class orientation, even self-evaluation, became troubled areas to many women, but particularly to those women who came to the Overland Trail and the frontier experience in their middle years.

In addition, the great migration disrupted those "long-lived, intimate, loving friendship[s]" which women had formed with other women in the settled communities of the East.[1] The diaries and the journals of women on the frontier reveal that the dissolution of bonds with other women contributed heavily to their sense of dislocation. This dissolution of emotional ties aggravated the merely physical hardships women endured on the journey. When these women wrote longingly of the homes they left behind them, "home" meant their close bonds with mothers, sisters and friends, and they grieved over the loss of those relationships which had provided the structure and the emotional support of their lives. This sundering of their emotional life with women and with the familiar world of womanly affairs, one may surmise, lay at the root of the antagonism to men that marks the pages of so many diaries of the journeying women.

In almost all the early stages of frontier life—the Trail itself and the first settlements—women strove to reestablish the traditional norms of sex roles and work patterns. Thus, there are numerous diary accounts of mothers insisting that their young daughters wear sunbonnets and gloves on the wagon trains.[2] Once the settlements were established, wives and mothers, but particularly young girls, found themselves caught between "old" and "new" life styles. The diaries provide remarkable records of ambivalence, of anxiety and sometimes of exultation as women moved toward new expressions of freedom and self-assertion.

I

In the period immediately preceding the great westward migration a women's world had been ordered by a separation of the sexes. The delineation of "sexual spheres" placed women in life-long contiguities with other women, and allowed them to find high levels of emotional fulfillment within their own group.[3] On the westward journey, women found themselves cast into what was essentially a man's world, the proportion of women to men on the Trail sometimes being no more than one in ten. Once the rigors of the journey were upon them, and the congenial contours of the Great Plains had been passed, women found themselves trudging on foot behind the wagons, in choking clouds of dust, collecting buffalo "chips" for fuel, keeping the cows from wandering off, and the children from accidents. When the men were needed for more pressing chores, the women drove the teams of horses or mules. When the wagons were being inched up the mountain passes of the Rockies, the women worked behind, carrying large rocks to set beneath the wagon wheels to keep them from backsliding. Many diarists fairly exploded with bitterness as the hard journey erased the more graceful tributes by which eastern society had flattered women and hidden the inequalities of their station.[4]

Although the corps of families that emigrated between 1840 and 1860 was a broadly hetergenous cross-section of social, ethnic and economic groups, women within that population had been trained to fairly uniform social roles. Standards of female behavior and female propriety show strong conformity in virtually every literate diary, and those standards were strongly oriented toward middle-class behavior. Thus, the work imposed on women during the six or seven months of travel along the Overland Trail was not merely arduous, but was often felt to be demeaning.

From the first, women understood the westward migration as a masculine enterprise. The decision to make the journey was always a determination made by men. Once it had begun, the two-thousand-mile journey meant that the determination of women's lives,—when to start, when to stop, which trail to follow—was taken from them. One diarist tells how, after months of hard journey, the men went out to survey the area and, still dissatisfied, ordered the march to continue. The women, bone weary, pressed on, waiting for the Pacific Ocean itself to stop the endless travel of the wagon trains.[5]

It became commonplace for women to appraise their condition with anger and despair, and sometimes to feel their very sex had become a burden and a punishment. Abigail Scott Duniway recalls:

> I was born Oct. 22, 1834, just 4 years after my parents wedding day. I being the third in their rapidly increasing family of a dozen. The eldest . . . had died in infancy before the 2nd child . . . was born. . . . I remember when

> my mother informed me . . . her sorrow over my sex was almost too great to be borne.
>
> I remember standing at the bedside when another little sister came to our crowded home. My mother said, through her tears, "Poor baby, she'll be a woman some day, poor baby, a woman's life is so hard."[6]

For Abigail Duniway, the crossing of the plains was a burden history had no business laying at the door of women, and she always considered the frontier directly responsible for her mother's death. "That long and perilous journey across the Great Plains, over the Oregon Trail. . . . Suffice it to say that our gentle mother fell ill of cholera and died."[7]

Of her own lot as a married woman, Duniway records:

> To bear 2 children in 2½ years from my marriage day, to make thousands pounds of butter every year for market, not including what was used in our free hotel at home; to sew and cook and wash and iron; to bake and clean and stew and fry, to be in short a general woman drudge, and never a penny of my own was a hard lot.[8]

Duniway's plaintive self-appraisal, that she saw herself "a general woman drudge, and never a penny of my own," is the silent interface of scores of other lives.

The physical demands made upon women were not less than those which men endured. The common conditions of heat, flies, dirt, weariness, lack of water, lost cattle, fear of Indian attack and disease, all these men and women shared. But to the women were reserved the travails of pregnancy and childbirth, the rituals of attending the sick and the dying, the care of the crying infants and the irritable children. America Rollins, in 1852, recorded how the wagon train was "called to a halt quite by accident. Mrs. George's child has fallen out of the wagon and both wheels have passed over his body. Called a physician some hopes are entertained of its recovery."[9]

Women became relentless recorders of the physical and mental anguish of the westward journey. "Mrs. Harriman . . . is suffering severely with rheumatism and she seems to be in perfect anguish and cannot move her hands at all today. Cannot take care of her little one, now nearly two years old. It was presented to her on her journey into the Territory, delaying the company only 2 days. . . . Exposure [has] brought the dreadful disease to her. . . ."[10] The excerpt shows the vicissitudes of the travel, but it also reveals a circle of female solicitude and sisterhood. Driven by the exquisite punishment of the Trail, women helped each other, were responsive to each other's needs, and strove to weave the sort of bonding that helped to preserve the old equilibrium. The diaries show that women fought against the dissolution of their customary roles, fought against the awesome demands of the trail, and sought, sometimes with desperation, "to hold together the few fragments of female subculture

left. . . ."[11] Thus, continued the same diarist, "I picked a lovely bouquet of prairie flowers and carried it to [Mrs. Harriman] but she couldn't take it into her hands."[12]

While not so strenuous as the labors of the men, women's work brought no time for respite. Occasionally, high-strung women were exhausted by the journey. "Mrs. Spalding was so oppressed with labor, that she could not have the society of even her own little daughter. The child was put in a rude kind of wagon in the morning to be drawn about by the Indian children, while the mother was occupied with her domestic chores. . . ."[13] Often a newborn died on the journey. "Mrs. George Belshaw give birth to a daughter 4 o'clock this morning. [Lived] about 2 weeks."[14] Each careful account of another women's misfortune was a muted protest on the part of the diarist against her own fate.

II

The most singular pattern that emerges from the frontier diaries comes from the accounts kept by women of the journey's death toll. Recorded with a bookkeeper's care are the numbers of gravesites passed, the carcasses of the dead animals, and the record of the miles crossed. These peculiar records recur in the diaries of women who were unknown to each other, on different adventures and with different destinations. They provide a startling access into the psychology of women, and suggest how disparate were the emotional worlds of men and women on the westward migration.

Mrs. Cecilia McMillen Adams, who kept the diary of her family's journey from Illinois to Oregon in 1852, traced the wagon train's journey as follows:

> Child's grave . . . smallpox . . . child's grave. . . . [We] passed 7 new-made graves. One had 4 bodies in it . . . cholera. A man died this morning with the cholera in the company ahead of us. . . . Another man died. . . . Passed 6 new graves. . . . We have passed 21 new-made graves . . . made 18 miles. . . . Passed 13 graves today. Passed 10 graves. . . .
>
> June 25: Passed 7 graves . . . made 14 miles;
> June 26: Passed 8 graves;
> June 29: Passed 10 graves;
> June 30: Passed 10 graves . . . made 22 miles;
> July 1: Passed 8 graves . . . made 21 miles;
> July 2: One man of [our] company died. Passed 8 graves made 16 miles;
> July 4: Passed 2 graves . . . made 16 miles;
> July 5: Passed 9 graves . . . made 18 miles;
> July 6: Passed 6 graves . . . made 9 miles;
> July 11: Passed 15 graves . . . made 13 miles;
> July 12: Passed 5 graves . . . made 15 miles;
> July 18: Passed 4 graves . . . made 16 miles;
> July 19: Passed 2 graves . . . made 14 miles;
> July 23: Passed 7 graves . . . made 15 miles;

July 25: Passed 3 graves . . . made 16 miles;
July 27: Passed 3 graves . . . made 14 miles;
July 29: Passed 8 graves . . . made 16 miles;
July 30: I have kept an account of the dead cattle we passed & the number today is 35;
Aug. 7: We passed 8 graves with a week . . . made 16 miles;
Sept. 7: We passed 14 graves this week . . . made 17 miles;
Sept. 9: We passed 10 graves this week . . . made 16 miles;
Oct. 1: Have seen 35 graves since leaving Fort Boise
Oct. 17: Here are 12 graves all together.[15]

Virtually the same kind of tally appears in the diary of Maria Parsons Belshaw, in 1833, as she and her husband journeyed from Indiana to the Oregon Territory:

Aug. 25: Passed 1 grave . . . we made 12 miles;
Aug. 26: Passed 3 graves . . . 1 dead horse, 18 cattle . . . made 13 miles;
Aug. 27: Passed 5 graves . . . 1 horse, 23 cattle . . . made 15 miles;
Aug. 28: Passed 1 grave . . . 17 cattle . . . made 23 miles;
Aug. 29: Passed 5 dead cattle . . . made 15 miles;
Aug. 30: Passed 3 graves . . . 6 dead cattle . . . made 6 miles;
Aug. 31: Passed 9 dead cattle . . . made 15 miles;
Sept. 1: Passed 1 grave . . . 2 dead horses, 21 cattle, made 10 miles;
Sept. 2: Passed 8 graves . . . 19 cattle . . . made 12 miles;
Sept. 3: Passed 5 graves . . . 8 dead cattle . . . made 20 miles;
Sept. 4: Passed 2 graves . . . 8 dead cattle . . . made 17 miles;
Sept. 5: Passed 3 graves . . . 3 dead cattle . . . made 17 miles;
Sept. 6: Passed 1 grave . . . 3 dead cattle . . . made 17 miles;
Sept. 7: Passed 2 graves . . . 3 dead cattle . . . made 18 miles;
Sept. 8: Passed 1 grave . . . 3 dead cattle . . . made 16 miles;
Sept. 9: Passed 16 graves . . . 1 ox . . . made 16 miles;
Sept. 10: Passed 2 graves . . . 2 horses . . . made 16 miles;
Sept. 11: Passed 1 grave . . . 4 cattle . . . made 15 miles;
Sept. 12-14: Passed 15 dead cattle, 3 dead oxen . . . made 32 miles[16]

In some journals the daily accounts of gravesites are transcribed as weekly aggregates, but they are never ignored. Not even births seem to be recorded with such tenacious attention.

Lodisa Frizzell, telling of her family's travel to California in 1852, wrote: "On the 30th day of the wagon train, we passed several graves. . . . I do not think there would be as much sickness as there usually is for we have passed less than 100 fresh graves . . . hope [wolves] will not disturb the graves."[17] A few pages later in the diary, she wrote:

> Saw . . . one old cow, a paper pinned on her head. It stated that she had been left to die . . . but requested that no one abuse her as she had been one of the best cows. . . . It called up so many associations to mind that it affected me to tears. . . .[18]

The journal continues: "Passed where they were burying a man; scarce a day but some one is left on these plains. . . ."[19] On the 72nd day of the journey, Frizzell wrote:

> we are hardly half way . . . the heart has a thousand misgivings, and the mind is tortured with anxiety, and often as I passed the fresh-made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the wagons, not knowing how soon it would serve as a coffin for some one of us.[20]

The diaries reveal some sense of the extent to which the women felt themselves in antagonistic relation with their men. On occasion, opposition broke into open revolt, as in the account of the desparate woman who set fire to the wagons.[21] But more often, the women maintained their silence. These journals, with their relentless record-keeping of the graves passed, were ultimately indictments of men. As wagon trains penetrated the territories of the West, they drew the backward-bending memories of the women and the leaden inertia of their opposing wills. However bravely they started, however they mustered their strength to meet the demands of each day, however they rallied to appreciate the splendors of the new lands, women—particularly those of mature years—were daily in touch with the journey's terrible toll.[22] In their natural roles as child-bearers, in their familial roles as nurses of the sick, and in their social roles as ritual caretakers and mourners for the dead, the women were in close contact with death on the westward journey.

III

When a family separated from the wagon trail, there were usually two basic patterns which affected women's lives. If her husband chose to farm a section isolated from other settlements, then in the first season the man was a hunter and his wife a forager. Miriam Davis, who settled with her husband and children in Kansas, in 1855, described tying her small children to the legs of a table when she went to the river to search for roots and plants, for fear the children would be bitten by rattlesnakes if they were free to wander.

Of her kitchen, Miriam Davis writes: "It is roofed by the blue dome of heaven. . . . The oven is so small could bake only one loaf at a time . . . wind has blown so hard that I was obliged to lay stones all around the oven to keep the coals under it. . . . Have already labored hard all day and have baked only 2 small loaves of bread, while in a family of seven like ours one can be dispatched at each meal."[23] Housekeeping on the frontier was something like cleaning the Augean stables.

Beyond the purely physical demands was the sense in which frontier labor was judged to be demeaning. Describing her work during the first year of their settlement, Miriam Davis wrote:

> I have cooked so much out in the hot sun and smoke, that I hardly know who I am, and when I look into the little

> looking glass I ask "Can this be me?" Put a blanket over my head, and I would pass well for an Osage squaw.[24]

Frontier women vigorously disparaged the sloth and the vagrant habits of the Indians, often in proportion as they felt reduced to comparable conditions. The diarist's observations suggests how direct the relation could be between social dislocation and cultural hostility.[25]

In such isolated frontier circumstances, women hauled water and chopped wood, plowed and hoed, drove horses and mules. The routine led a woman to see herself as having become a squaw or a hired hand. Conversely, "while women did men's work, there is little evidence that men reciprocated."[26] It was virtually unthinkable, even in the isolation of unpeopled territory, for women to ask men to cook or to care for small children. The physical withdrawal from the community did not, in itself, set either men or women free of the gender roles established in the eastern settlements. Quite the opposite; the isolated condition of the first frontier sometimes tended to make those roles even more rigid. Many a frontier wife found that her isolated position led her backward to a more subservient dependence upon her husband's will and fortunes than she had known back East.[27]

If the family settled nearer a community, then a very different pattern emerged. In such cases, the house of the married settler often became a hostel for unmarried men in the vicinity, and a woman had to undertake the care and preparation of food for her family and for as many as 18 or 20 single men. From the letters of Mary Jane Megquier, who accompanied her husband to California during the gold rush and prepared all the meals for the men in the mining camp:

> We have a [hotel]. . . . I make the biscuit, then I fry the potatoes, then broil 2 pounds of steak and as much liver. . . . I bake six loaves of bread, then 4 pies, or a pudding, then we have lamb, beef and pork, baked turnips, beets, potatoes, radishes, salad, and that everlasting soup, every day. . . . I have cooked every mouthful that has been eaten. . . . If I had not the constitution of six horses I [should] have been dead long ago. . . . I am sick and tired of work . . . three nights a week I have to iron. I do not go to bed until midnight and often until 2 o'clock.[28]

Similarly, Mollie Dorsey Sanford, who traveled with her husband to the mines of Colorado, described her lot: "My husband is to do the blacksmithing for the company, and as was arranged I am to cook for the men. My heart sinks within me when I see 18 or 20, and no conveniences at all."[29] Much like Miriam Davis' was Mollie's perception of a woman's life in Colorado. "I feel stiff and lame tonight. Have raised my eyes to look into the glass. I see that Mollie Sanford does not look as fair as Mollie Dorsey did one year ago. Mountain air has given her a browner tinge."[30]

Narcissa Whitman, describing how her mother had to cook and keep house for 10 or more "loose" men, writes:

> I often think how disagreeable it used to be to [her] to do her cooking in the presence of men sitting about the room. This I have to bear ever since I have been here . . . at times it seems as though I cannot endure it any longer . . . the cooking and eating room [is] always filed with 5 or more [men]. They are so filthy they require a great deal of cleaning wherever they go, and this wears out a woman very fast. . . . I hardly know how to describe our feelings at the prospect of a clean comfortable house and one large enough so that I can find a closet to pray in [alone].[31]

Whitman was herself a missionary's wife, and the men in her house were often Indians. In her longing for a closet to pray in alone, Whitman was pleading for a refuge from the world of men. Reared in a society which had prescribed separation of the sexes, she sought a situation in which, if she could not be in the company of other women, she could at least be alone.

In letter-writing, as in prayer, women discovered a legitimate provision for privacy. These scattered and dilligent correspondents wove a network by which they strove to maintain their sisterhood. News of parents left at home; news of weddings; news of births and deaths; news of illnesses and prosperities—the network of family and of the community of women was sustained even when the interval between letters was months or years. Virtually every diary I have read in some manner suggests this network of women, with some notation that a sister, a mother, a cousin or a friend has or has not written the news of home and extended family.

Letters were a defence against isolation, a defence against the world of men, and a mode of building a community of sensibility with other women where no real community yet existed. Letter-writing was acceptable behavior which allowed women to absent themselves from the company of men and children, and to secure, however temporarily, "a world of female support, intimacy and ritual," a sense of "continuity in a rapidly changing society."[32]

IV

Once settlements were started, the frontier brought new conditons, and women often found themselves in conflict between their sense of women's proper sphere and the demands of each new day. The diaries indicate that adaptation was anxious and often uneasy. Minor anecdotes, some trivial, some humorous, betray the confusion. Miriam Davis tells that when her husband and children were ill with fever, and the cow had run off, she started on foot to retrieve the animal. A neighbor offered his horse. There, alone on the empty Kansas land, Davis stood wondering whether she dared mount the horse "man fashion!" When at last she

did so and brought home the cow, her husband met her at the door of their home, more struck at seeing his wife riding astride than in seeing her return with the cow.[33]

Mollie Dorsey Sanford recalled a similar adventure when she was a young girl, and told how she also set off to retrieve a runaway cow. "It occurred to me how much easier I could get through the tangled underbrush if I were a man, and without letting anyone know of my project, I slipped out into the back shed, and donned an old suit of Father's clothes. . . ."[34] Coming upon a camp of men, Mollie ran home. "When it was all explained, it was very funny to all but Mother, who feared I am losing all the dignity I ever possessed. I know I am getting demoralized. . . ." The girl's judgment of the impediments of long skirts in a world without paved streets violated her mother's vision of propriety and female rectitude; thus, accommodation to the West for girls and women usually meant deviation from received norms and several diaries suggest that the generation-gap between mothers and daughters may have produced sharp differences. Adrietta Hixon recalls "Mother was always reminding me . . . to be [a] lady, but it seemed to me that the requirements were too rigid, for I always liked to run, jump and climb. . . ."[35] Lydia Waters, who crossed the Overland Trail as a young girl, was least troubled by her mother's strictures. She drove the ox team with prideful excitement and recalled climbing hills on the trail; "sometimes my feet would slip off the [tree] limbs and I would be hanging by my arms. You may be sure my skirts were not where they ought to have been then. . . . There were many things to laugh about."[36]

Some women eagerly accepted the challenges of frontier life, built and ran hotels, established mills and saw-mills, were storekeepers, ranchwomen and business-women.[37] But there remained an uneasy line between respectability and notoriety. Folklore suggests the frontier's ambivalence toward independent women. The fame of Belle Starr, Calamity Jane, Pickhandle Nan, Madame Moustache and Poker Alice indicates the outer range of tolerance. These flambouyant women were indulged by western society like petted tomboys.[38] But there were other women whose efforts at independence were more uncertain. Learning to crack the whip while driving oxen, as she had seen the men do, left Mary Ellen Todd with "a secret joy in being able to have a power that set things going, [but] also a sense of shame. . . ."[39]

Women who were widowed or single, women whose husbands were given to alcoholism, women whose husbands had abandoned them and their children found independence hard to maintain. Their property rights were ambiguous and poorly protected. Writing of her own life in its legal implications, Abigail Duniway describes being a frontier widow:

> [If] my husband had lived and I had died, he could have spent everything we had earned in twenty years of married life and nobody could have cared what became of my chil-

> dren. . . . My girls and I have sold butter, eggs, poultry, cord wood, vegetables, grains and hay . . . but after I've earned [the money] I can't even buy a pair of shoes without being lectured by the court for my extravagance.[40]

Another woman, whose husband had signed a note for a friend who defaulted, found that both she and her husband were being sued: "I was . . . a legal nonentity, with no voice for self-protection . . . but, when penalty occurred, I was [my husband's] legal representative."[41] A similar story is that of a woman whose husband sold all the household furniture and left her and five children destitute. Prevailing on a townsman to take a mortgage on her house, the woman managed to take in boarders and to support her family. But on the husband's return, he repudiated the mortgage, divorced the wife, and sent the children away. Thus, the rights of women in the territories were a matter of uncertain dimension.[42]

Under the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act of 1850, for example, a woman might claim 320 acres of land, or half a married couple's allotment of 640 acres, but when the Act expired in 1855, it was not re-enacted. The state-by-state legislation by which women could or could not buy and sell in their own names is an area of much-needed research. The legal rights of married or widowed women were far from clear, and one suspects that as historians we know more accurately the rights of slaves under the slave codes of the Old South than we do of the rights of women in the western territories.

During the later stages of the frontier women succeeded in wringing a measure of personal independence from their situation. Women's suffrage made strong headway in the West, with the territorial legislatures of Wyoming and Utah giving women the franchise in 1869 and 1870 and Washington soon following.[43] In addition, western women availed themselves of the right to divorce in higher proportion than did their eastern sisters. The *United States Census Report of 1887-1906* indicates that while the highest marriage rate outside the South prevailed in the Mid-West, so did the highest rate of divorce.[44] The ten states with the greatest number of divorces in relation to population were Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arkansas, Texas, Oregon, Wyoming, Indiana, Idaho and Oklahoma. The ten states showing the lowest rate of divorce were Delaware, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts and Louisiana.[45] Although demographic evidence and statistical data are incomplete, the indications are that divorce and suffrage formed strong lines of self-determination for western women. With all its special hardships, the frontier in its later developments set women free of many eastern conventions. The western experience, which in its initial stages exacerbated the traditional inequalities imposed upon women by custom and by law, seems in later stages to have yielded to newer social and legal forms for women.

V

The last question to be posed is what happened to those women who were not strong enough to meet the frontier's extravagant demands, to those women who could not sustain the work or the loneliness, the loss of children or the weariness of spirit. The rate of insanity and emotional breakdown on the frontier remains, like other questions, in need of study. Whether the ratio of insanity was greater for women or for men, whether the frontier experience in itself generated pathology, are questions still to be answered.

A director of the Oregon Insane Asylum in 1878 attempted to convince legislators of that state that insanity was more prevalent in the East because foreign immigrants were more susceptible to mental illness and to criminality than were the "native-born" madmen of his own state.[46] While the record is far from clear, interesting issues are raised. The *Reports* of the Insane Asylum of Portland, Oregon, between 1870 and 1890, show that the total number of patients treated in the hospital increased from 260 between 1870-72, to 411 between 1876-78, and that it swelled to 734 between 1884-86. Of this number, the ratio of female to male patients begins at approximately one third and increases within one decade to one half.[47] Regarding the commitment of women to asylums, one suspects that only the most violent acts of madness and the most rigid types of withdrawl prompted their removal from the families and from society.

The statistics for those committed to the Asylum in the 1870's show that all women were either married or widowed, whereas similar tables for the 1880's show that women were both single and divorced, indicating the admission of women who were living widely different life styles. The causes of insanity, as they are offered in the Reports of the Portland Asylum, range from disappointment in love to masturbation.[48]

That pathology on the frontier was commonplace one may gather from an assortment of sources. Sandoz' biography of her father, for example, records that:

> Two men and a woman were sent to the insane asylum on the first passenger train East. Down at the edge of the hills a mother of three hung herself. North of Hay Springs a man killed his brother with an ax. . . .[49]
>
> A neighbor on the south table hanged himself in his well curbing and dangled unnoticed for two days in plain sight of the road, so nearly did his head resemble a windlass swinging.[50]

And of course Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* provides the classic portrait of the frontier woman for whom loneliness and isolation led from depression to insanity. The frontier diaries contain an occasionally searing notation of loneliness, as in the account of two women who trudged down to the railroad depot to gaze at the faces of people as the moving cars passed through the desolate lands.[51]

Samuel Eliot Morison, writing of America's colonial frontier, tells that:

> Anne Hutchinson, a stouter-hearted woman than Anne Bradstreet, "when she came within sight of Boston and looking on the meanness of the place . . . uttered these words, if she had not a sure word that England would be destroyed, her heart would shake." [Governor Bradford] who reported those words said it was very strange that she should say so'—of course a man would! Hawthorne inferred that the horror of wilderness life brought the Lady Arabella Johnson to an early grave; and I suspect some such thing behind the silence of Governor Bradford on the death of his young wife Dorothy, drowned from the Mayflower in Provincetown Harbor, after gazing for weeks on the desolate sand dunes of Cape Cod.[52]

The common disposition of Americans has been to view the western experience as the process of taming and civilizing the continent. In this familiar saga, women have figured as the civilizing agents. We have not yet asked whether the wilderness exerted an opposing, a countervailing impulse, one which resisted the incursion of the settlers. We have not asked how the wilderness condition worked *against* the pioneer, or how women, often drawn unwillingly into that wilderness, worked *against* the men. New studies of women on the frontier, by opening inquiry to those ways in which women were vulnerable to the pressures of the frontier, must provide new avenues by which we will begin to see, too, the vulnerability of men.[53] New studies of women, conflicted by new social and sex roles, must also throw light on role conflict in men.

Once we have begun to gather adequate demographic data on marriage and divorce, on insanity and suicide, on illigitimacy and property rights, on gender roles and the subtle attitudes of class identification, only then can we begin to assess the frontier heritage we have assumed all along to have known. The diaries of women on the Overland Trail and on the frontier are a rich source we have just begun to explore.

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footnotes

1. The description of the "sororial" relations of women in the first half of the nineteenth century appears in the work of William R. Taylor and Christopher Lasch, "Two 'Kindred Spirits': Sorority and Family in New England 1839-1846," *New England Quarterly*, 36 (1863), 25-41. Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class, and Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly*, 25 (May 1973), 131-53, and the recent published essay by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs*, I (1975), 1-28, are more rich in conceptual framework and have been valuable in the preparation of this paper.

2. See Adrietta Applegate Hixon, *On To Oregon! A True Story of a Young Girl's Journey into the West* (Wesler, Idaho, 1947), p. 12.

3. See, for example, the works of Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer, 1966), 151-74; Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady; From Pedestal to Politics*, 1830-1930 (1970), chs. 1, 2.; Aileen Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal* (1968), ch. I; Nancy Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness* (1972), ch. 3.

4. Selections of this paper were read at the meeting of the Midcontinent American Studies Association, May, 1975, and it was prepared before the publication of "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-67," by Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2/3 (1975), 150-66. Their research, like my own, is based upon diaries and journals of women and many conclusions of the present paper are corroborative of their work. I am indebted to the unpublished dissertation of Dawn Lander Gherman, "From Parlor to Tepee: The White Squaw on the American Frontier," University of Massachusetts, 1975, for its rich bibliography.

5. "Diary of Maria Parsons Belshaw, 1853," ed. Joseph W. Ellison, in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 33 (1932), 332.

6. Abigail Scott Duniway, *Pathbreaking: An Autobiographical History of the Equal Suffrage Movement in Pacific Coast States* (Portland, Oregon, 1914), 3, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

8. *Ibid.*, 9-10.

9. Mrs. Ashmun Butler (America E. Rollins), "Diary of the Rogue River Valley, 1852-1854," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 41 (December 1940), 340, *cf.* also Mrs. Velina Williams, "Diary of a Trip Across the Plains in 1853," *Oregon Pioneer Association Transactions*, 47th Annual Reunion (1919), 220-226.

10. Miriam Colt Davis, *Went to Kansas* (Watertown, N.Y., 1862), 56-57.

11. Faragher and Stansell, 151.

12. Davis, 57.

13. Clifford M. Drury, *First White Women Over the Rockies: Diaries, Letters and Biographical Sketches of the Six Women of the Oregon Mission Who Made the Overland Journey in 1836 and 1838*, Vol. I (1963), 211.

14. Maria Parsons Belshaw, 328.

15. Mrs. Cecilia McMillen Adams, "Crossing the Plains in 1852," *Oregon Pioneer Association Transactions, 32nd Annual Reunion* (1904), 290-325.

16. Maria Parsons Belshaw, 321-330.

17. Lodisa Frizzell, *Across the Plains to California in 1852* (New York Public Library Pamphlet, 1915), pp. 14-16.

18. *Ibid.*, 2-21.

19. *Ibid.*, 22.

20. *Ibid.*, 29.

21. Faragher and Stansell, 160.

22. "Men viewed drudgery, calamity, and privation as trials along the road to prosperity. . . . But to . . . women . . . hardship and loss only testified to the inherent folly of the emigration to 'this wild goose chase.'" *Ibid.*, 153.

23. Miriam Davis, 53.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Cf.* Mary E. Ackley, *Crossing the Plains and Early Days in California* (San Francisco, 1925), 66; "When my washerwoman was ill I would hire an Indian Man to do the rubbing, never a squaw. The squaws were hideous. . . ."

26. Faragher and Stansell, 155.

27. "Women's status will be lowest . . . where women are isolated from one another and placed under a single man's authority, in the home." Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, 1974), 36.

28. Mary Jane Megquier, *Apron Full of Gold: Letters from San Francisco, 1849-1856* (Huntington Library, 1949), 33, 46-47.

29. Mollie Dorsey Sanford, *Journal in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1958), 137.

30. *Ibid.*, 143.

31. Drury, 137-138.

32. Smith-Rosenberg, 28, 11.

33. Miriam Davis, 110.

34. Mollie Dorsey Sanford, 53.

35. Adreitta Hixon, 21.

36. Lydia Milner Waters, "A Trip Across the Plains in 1855," *Quarterly of the Society of California Pioneers*, 6 (June, 1929), 78.

37. See *The Saga of "Auntie" Stone and Her Cabin, 1801-95*, "A Pioneer Woman Who Built and owned the first dwelling operated the first Hotel, Built the first dwelling, Erected the first Brick Kiln in the City of Fort Collins," ed., Nolie Mumey (Boulder, 1964).

38. See *Poker Alice, History of a Woman Gambler in the West*, Nolie Mumey, ed. (Denver, 1951).

39. Faragher and Stansell, 157.

40. Abigail Duniway, 14-15.

41. *Ibid.*, 23.

42. *Ibid.*, 37-38.

43. T. A. Larson, "Dolls, Vassals, and Drudges—Pioneer Women in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly*, III (January, 1972), 5.

44. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Bulletin No. 96, *Marriage and Divorce 1887-1906,* 15-18.

45. *Ibid.,* 19.

46. Oregon Insane Asylum, Portland, Oregon, *Joint Committee Report,* 1878, 16.

47. Oregon Insane Asylum, Portland, Oregon, *Reports of the Physicians, 1870-72; 1876-78; 1884-86.*

48. Joint Committee Report, 1878, 18. Norman Dain's book, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States 1789-1865* and Gerald N. Grob's *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* indicate how comparatively scarce are the necessary materials for the western territories.

49. Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln, 1962), 110, and throughout.

50. *Ibid.,* 166.

51. See Jane Lippincott, *New Life in New Lands* (1871), 27, also Jane Cazneau (Cora Montgomery), *Eagle Pass* (N.Y., 1852).

52. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston, 1962), 321.

53. Richard Slotkin's book, *Regeneration Through Violence, The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (1973), provides an excellent treatment of the captivity narratives (ch. 4), but the full subject of womens' experience on the frontier and in the wilderness has not yet been assayed.