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ABSTRACT

WOMEN AND WESTWARD EXPANSION:
1840-1890

English-speaking, Anglo women in the Trans-Mississippi West from 1840-1890 lived under the expectations of nineteenth-century feminine ideals: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Pioneer women faced the difficulties of the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, the vice-filled mining camps, the privations and loneliness of farms and ranches, and the dangers of the plains and prairies. While enduring hardships in an unsettled land, they brought civilization to the West by building communities and caring for their families. Women in the Trans-Mississippi West faced the hardships of the frontier and built communities while they continued to live within the feminine ideals of the Victorian era.

Rene Lynn Sanchez
May 2000
WOMEN AND WESTWARD EXPANSION:
1840-1890

by
Rene Lynn Sanchez

A thesis
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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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To my mom, Clara Miller, for instilling in me a love of history and for teaching me that an education is the most important gift you can possibly give to yourself.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Few periods in the history of the United States have captured the imagination of Americans as the era of Westward Expansion during the middle to late nineteenth century. Novels, movies, television series, and even children’s toys and games have addressed this unique time period. Cowboys and Indians, gold seekers, wealthy ranchers, and wagon trains are among many subjects glorified, and nearly all of these dramas are played out by brave men, driven by the desire for wealth and independence and to tame a wild land. In these stories, however, women are rarely mentioned, and when they are, they are often grossly misrepresented.

Women in the West during the nineteenth century are usually stereotyped into one of four general groups: “gentle tamer,” “Madonna of the Prairie,” “prostitute with a heart of gold,” and “Calamity Jane.” The most positive and glorified of these groups is the “gentle tamer.” There is a famous statue of one such woman in this category. She is holding a Bible in one hand and faces bravely west with a child clinging to her skirt. She is courageous, heroic, and uncomplaining. The “gentle tamer” bore up under terrible odds and is said to have brought the benefits of civilization to all parts of the American West.
Another type, similar to the "gentle tamer," is the "Madonna of the Prairie." Such a woman is young and beautiful, but too genteel to tame the rough and underdeveloped West. She is portrayed as the victim of her husband's greed, dragged away from a pleasant home and forced to endure great hardships that she is not capable of bearing. The "Madonna of the Prairie" often feels lonely and isolated, deprived of family and worldly possessions.

The third group, written about in the lore of many a mining camp, is the "prostitute with a heart of gold." Those in this category are usually seen as a victim of some man's cruelty or tragedy, such as being cast on her own by the Civil War, and are forced into pursuing her disreputable occupation. However, such women are depicted as kind to others, generously donating money to good causes or personally helping those miners who had become ill or fallen on hard times. Many times she herself meets a tragic end, and the miners mourn her loss as well as remember her frequent acts of benevolence.

The three groups already mentioned have in common the idea of gentleness and kindness that is expected in the character of all nineteenth-century women. The fourth group, "Calamity Jane," is far from conforming to this gentle and kind female stereotype. "Calamity Jane" is a woman who can ride, shoot, drink, play cards, and swear just as well, if not better, than any man. She is an example of the West transforming the woman instead of the other way around. The few

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legendary female outlaws like Belle Starr and similarly infamous figures gave rise to this stereotype.

In reality, women in the West during the nineteenth-century exemplified all of these stereotypes, and none of them. Obviously, there existed some women who fit precisely into these particular groups. Most women, however, did not and these are the individuals—not so simple to categorize—who will be discussed in this study.

While the West included women of various races and ethnicities, the focus of this study shall be on the experiences of white, English-speaking women. This is not meant to slight the recent studies of Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and African-American women, nor is this an attempt to diminish the accomplishments of women of color to the history of the region. The author has simply chosen to explore the experiences of white women in order to narrow the dimensions of this study and refute some of the commonly held misconceptions about white women who played such an important part in the development of the West.

This study examines the lives of women in several different environments—on the overland trail, in the mining camps and ranches of the Far West, and on the prairie and plains. Their experiences will be discussed within the framework of the general social expectations of nineteenth-century American women, with the first chapter devoted to these expectations.
The overall setting of this study is the Trans-Mississippi West, stretching from Kansas to California, covering the years from approximately 1840 to around 1890. In treating the different subdivisions, preference is given to chronology rather than geography. Therefore, women in California will sometimes be discussed before those in Kansas since California was settled first. The main sources used for this study are the reprinted diaries and reminiscences of those individuals who actually lived in the West during that time period, enabling the reader to capture first hand the spirit of these female pioneers. Also included are the ideas and opinions of well-known historians as well as those of the author.
By the middle decades of the nineteenth century American opinion makers had developed new ideas about the nature of men's and women's roles in society. Commonly known today as Victorian, these ideas stressed the differences between men and women, especially women as a weaker, more sensitive creature. There was a strong emphasis on women's place being in the home. It is important to understand the basic concepts of Victorian ideas in order to appreciate that the hardships women faced in the period of westward expansion had to be overcome while trying to live within the narrow perimeters that were set out.

Victorian ideas about women were promoted and encouraged most forcefully in writings that appeared in a variety of ladies magazines that began to circulate widely in the 1830s and thereafter. Most of the articles in these magazines were concerned with traditional women's interests in fashion, recipes, and home furnishings with little or no attention being placed on their intellect. However, one magazine stood out in its originality, focusing more on how women ought to act, and came to be very influential over women's thoughts and behavior. This was Sarah Hale's "Ladies Magazine," which eventually affected the kind of material appearing in other women's publications as well.
More than any of her contemporaries, Sarah Hale defined the parameters of the woman's sphere.¹ She wrote in the various articles of her magazine that women should abide by four fundamental rules of conduct: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These four fundamental rules of female conduct have been dubbed by Barbara Welter and other modern historians as the "cult of true womanhood." A woman in the nineteenth-century was expected to fulfill many functions. A woman's value was judged by how well she exemplified the four fundamental rules. If a woman conducted herself within these guidelines, she would achieve happiness. If she did not, she would have nothing.²

The first of the virtues synonymous with true womanhood is piety, or religious virtue. Men of the nineteenth century were encouraged to marry women who were religious, a state which was believed to come naturally to women while men had to work at it. Women were to serve as examples for men and children, guiding them along a righteous path. Women were believed to be most beautiful when they were religious and repulsive when they were not. The primary way a woman could find peace and happiness was through religion. Nineteenth century women were encouraged to receive an education that would make them more religious, an idea that most contemporaries agreed with. Church work was an

acceptable form of public service because it did not contradict women’s place or role in society.³

Closely related to the idea of piety was purity. Victorian women were encouraged to save themselves for marriage. Although men would constantly try to steal their virtue, women were said to be morally stronger and purer than men and should be vigilant guardians of their virginity. Stories circulated in Sarah Hale’s magazine and elsewhere about women who were not vigilant guardians of their virtue and allowed themselves to be ruined by a slick talking man. Inevitably, these women became deranged and met with untimely, tragic deaths.⁴

While piety and purity were considered important for nineteenth-century women, submissiveness was the most feminine virtue that they were expected to possess. It was believed to be the natural order of things for a wife to submit to the will of her husband. A true woman was believed to be weak, timid, and dependent. She would always need a man to protect her, provide for her, and sometimes even to think for her.⁵

If some historians would argue over whether piety, purity, and submission were really practiced, few nineteenth-century women (or twentieth century women for that matter) would argue that domesticity was not expected and practiced by all women from nearly all classes. It was considered the women’s job to keep the home not only neat and orderly but also happy and cheerful so that the men would

³Ibid., 153-57.
⁴Ibid., 158-60.
not go elsewhere to find happiness. Housework was praised as uplifting and requiring intelligence as well as physical energy. Women would wield a great deal of power within her domestic sphere, having nearly complete control over the vast workings of the household and especially over the children.⁶

No role showed a woman’s power more dominant than in the role of mother. Motherhood was the ultimate example of true womanhood.⁷ Men owed their success to their mothers, and great men’s mothers were praised and admired as much as the men themselves. In a pamphlet written in 1833 to teach women how to be better mothers, John S.C. Abbott praised and exalted Mary Ball Washington, the mother of George Washington. She was the one responsible for creating such a great man, and, the author declared, the entire country should be indebted to her.⁸ Mothers were said to have the most powerful influence in the formation of a man’s character.⁹ Motherhood was the role in which women would be dominant and wield tremendous power without being considered a threat to the masculine sphere.

While Mrs. Hale and many of her contemporaries described the rules of conduct for women, they also encouraged women to exert their influence over

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⁵ Ibid., 160.
⁶ Ibid., 162-66.
⁷ Ibid., 167.
⁹ Ibid., 115.
men in a subtle, unnoticeable manner. If women were able to be subtle, they could possess a great deal of power without seeming to usurp the authority of men.\(^{10}\)

By showing that she was not a threat to men’s authority, Sarah Hale could fulfill the intention of her magazine, which was to improve the position and well-being of women.\(^{11}\) She especially supported the formal education of women. Mrs. Hale often highlighted the achievements of women’s schools all over the eastern seaboard and encouraged women to become educated. However, the purpose of education was not to pose a threat to man’s domain. Rather, it was to help further the upbringing of her children and could be used to help a woman and her family in “emergencies” such as the death of a husband. Mrs. Hale understood this need at a personal level, because she was a widow left to her own skills and talents to support her family. She began her magazine for the purpose of supporting her family, not because she believed women should strike out on their own. On the contrary, she believed women should only work outside the home when it was absolutely necessary.\(^{12}\)

The literature of the nineteenth century encouraged women to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. The virtues were what separated women from men and were believed to place women on a level higher than that of men. Men were seen as base, impure, and consumed with the world of business and politics. The idea that women were to be more virtuous than men segregated men’s and

\(^{10}\) Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 103.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 102.
women's worlds to a considerable degree. Thus it can be observed that in many instances nineteenth-century men and women had little in common, and little to do with one another.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's well-known article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," cites the diaries and letters between women as examples of the intimate relationships nineteenth-century women had with one another. While all children were under their mother's influence, boys older than about age ten spent most of their time with their fathers, learning farming, business, or a trade. Girls, on the other hand, spent all of their childhood with their mothers. During this time they learned the skills of keeping house. They also learned about the women's world of which they were to become a part. Friendships and kinship ties shaped this female world, and women often aided in raising one another's daughters. Many times the daughters of close friends would be encouraged to become close friends as well, thus continuing the mothers' relationship to another generation. Cousins were raised more like sisters, further strengthening female ties.

Women were encouraged to become close with one another because they had much in common with each other, and little in common with men. Because of the separate spheres of men and women, it was believed members of the two sexes simply could not relate well to each other's worlds. Women's lives were all based

\[12\] Ibid., 104.
on the same rules and expectations: marriage, household, and family. Women, it was thought, understood each other’s problems and could help each other.\footnote{Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” \textit{Signs} 1 (1975), 1-29.}

The idea of separate spheres was not limited to Smith-Rosenberg’s ideas of study of mostly East Coast women. Women in the Midwest, those who lived in states such as Illinois and Missouri, for example, were also very close to one another and in many ways rather alienated from men. Women discussed among themselves medical advice, especially potions and superstitions regarding menstruation, birth control, and childbirth.\footnote{John Mack Faragher, \textit{Women and Men on the Overland Trail} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 121.} Women were often trusted more than professional doctors to heal people, especially in small towns where one “granny” might serve as healer for several generations.\footnote{John Mack Faragher, \textit{Women and Men on the Overland Trail} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 121.}

The cause of the growing separation between men and women in the nineteenth-century Midwest lay most likely in the cultural traditions of the times. Women were expected to spend their time raising children and caring for the household, not unlike the ideal virtue of domesticity advocated in the cult of true womanhood. However, in the Midwest, as well as most rural settings, the theoretical concept of true womanhood was all but disregarded because of the reality of women’s lives there.

Women in the Midwest had to work very hard. They provided nearly all the food for the family. They tended the garden and the animals. Bread making,
food preparation, and dairy products were the sole production of women.\textsuperscript{16}

Clothing production was also the responsibility of women, and the cloth had to be spun, sewn, washed and mended often.\textsuperscript{17} In addition to these responsibilities, Midwestern women aided in butchering and field work when needed.\textsuperscript{18} Like all nineteenth-century childbearing women, Midwestern mothers were the primary caregivers for the children. With five or six children to a family on average, such individuals had their hands full, although as the children grew they also had help with the chores.\textsuperscript{19}

As families continued moving west, into the prairies and plains and mining areas beyond the Mississippi River, men’s and women’s spheres often merged and the ideals of true womanhood sometimes had to be adapted to the new situation or abandoned altogether. Women in such circumstances were expected to perform many tasks that did not fall within the domestic sphere, particularly when traveling on the Overland Trail and during times of early settlement in the Trans-Mississippi region.\textsuperscript{20}

In most cases, traditional ideals of true womanhood were still held in high regard and aspired to by the women living in the West. However, some of the roles women were encouraged to pursue seemed radically outside the ideals of the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 125.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 50.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 54.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 52.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 57.  
\end{flushleft}

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The cult of true womanhood and the idea of separate spheres dominated nineteenth century culture and tradition. While many diaries, letters, and other sources have been found to prove that these ideas were not always the reality, historians who say these traditions did not really exist or only existed for upper middle class women are missing a very interesting and important point. Ideals are rarely practiced in full in most societies, but are nearly always aspired to. Given the fact that human nature has changed little over hundreds or even thousands of years, it can be assumed that women were as influenced by the media of the 1830s as women of the 1990s are. While the reality is that a woman in the 1990s cannot

\[^{21}\text{Ibid., 13.}\]
\[^{22}\text{Ibid., 14.}\]
be perfectly thin and beautiful and juggle a family and career without killing herself, most women still aspire to these ideals found in modern media. Likewise, nineteenth-century women were influenced quite powerfully with what they read in ladies magazines and aspired to the ideas of true womanhood. As women went into the West, they still attempted to adhere to these ideals, even though it was almost impossible to do so. Still, the diaries of women in the West lament countless times the loss of femininity and domesticity. Obviously then, the Victorian ideal was an intricate part of women’s upbringing and lifestyle during the nineteenth century, not only in the well-established East but in the newly developed West.
Chapter 3

WOMEN ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

An American woman well born and bred is endowed with the courage of her brave pioneer ancestors, and no matter what the environment she can adapt herself to all situations, even to the perilous trip across the western half of this great continent, ever ready to wander over paths which women reared in other countries would fear to follow.¹

Lavinia Porter

The above quote by an emigrant woman gives tremendous insight into what women crossing the Overland Trail might have thought of themselves. Lavinia Porter indicates that a woman raised well and with courage could withstand the journey across the continent, and could even change her behavior in order to successfully settle in the Far West. Examining the statements of other emigrants in the diaries, letters, and reminiscences of the Overland Trail also indicate that women had to adapt themselves to various new situations and that they did so in order to make the journey a success. The most radical of these adaptations was in having to depart from traditional female behavior. As indicated in the previous chapter, almost all nineteenth-century women attempted to live within the guidelines of true womanhood. However, life on the trail made living up to the ideal nearly impossible. As Lavinia Porter indicates, adaptations in behavior had to be made in order to successfully cross the continent. As we shall see in this

chapter, women who best adapted to life on the trail were those willing to abandon
some traditional Victorian rules but still able to maintain some semblance of
civility and femininity. The balancing of strength and femininity was crucial for
these women to obtain because it defined each off them as individuals and created
the new ideas of womanhood that would come to flourish in the West.

Diaries, letters and reminiscences provide insight into the thoughts and
experiences of these female emigrants, but such materials are scarce. While over
350,000 people emigrated to the Far West between 1841 and 1867, there are
relatively a few who left written sources.\(^2\) The most reliable of these sources are
trail diaries, written by both men and women during the ordeal of migration.
Reminiscences and letters are helpful, but there is a tendency among both male
and female writers in such cases to romanticize and glorify the events they
describe. While diaries are considered more accurate accounts of events,
relatively few emigrants kept them. The reason for this was not that the emigrants
were illiterate. It was for the simple reason that the emigrants were so busy with
the process of moving a household across half a continent that there was little time
or energy left over to keep a diary. Elizabeth Greer supports this when she says:
"I could have written a great deal more if I had had the opportunity. Sometimes I
would not get a chance to write for two or three clays, and then would have to rise
in the night, when my babe and all hands were asleep, light a candle and write."\(^3\)

\(^2\) Ibid., 38.
\(^3\) Ibid., 37.
The diaries that are left were written by a variety of people, reflecting the diversity of backgrounds represented on the trail. Men and women both left diaries, as did some children. There are diaries compiled by older and younger people alike, as well as wealthy and poor, city and country folks, the highly educated and the barely literate.\(^4\) While there is a diversity of people represented in the diaries, some generalizations can be made about the emigrants. Three-fourths of the trail diaries examined by historian John Mack Faragher, for example, were written by people from the Midwest: Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. Nearly all of the emigrants were farmers, worked in farm-related jobs, or came from small, rural towns.\(^5\) While few emigrants were very wealthy, few were very poor. Most stood at the middle income level, since having enough money to purchase the necessary supplies for the trip was important. A basic outfitting for a small family cost about $600, so most emigrants had some financial means.\(^6\)

If an emigrant’s economic status was important in determining the success of the journey west, it was also a major reason for the trip in the first place. A prolonged depression that had begun in 1837 had continued into the 1840s, leaving many farmers, particularly those in the Midwest, in dire financial straits. Banks closed across the country and wages were down 30% to 50% by 1839. The

\(^5\) Ibid., 16.
price of farm commodities plummeted, with wheat being worth just ten cents a bushel and corn often having to be given away.\(^7\) Both men and women saw the advantages of moving west. As an Ohio woman explained, “going to the far west seemed like the entrance to a new world, one of freedom, happiness and prosperity.”\(^8\) Another woman said, “We had nothing to lose, and we might gain a fortune.”\(^9\) Peter Burnett reflected the excitement typically felt by men:

> Out in Oregon I can get me a square mile of land. And a quarter section for each of you all. Dad burn me, I am done with this country, winters its frost and snow to freeze a body; summers the overflow from Old Muddy drowns half my acres; taxes take the yield of them that’s left. What say, Maw, it’s God’s country. Whoo-pee! Let’s go, Maw, out yan where the Injuns be.\(^{10}\)

The numerous books, pamphlets, and personal accounts from friends and relatives already living in the west served to fuel the emigrant’s desire to move. Fanny Kelly wrote: “Those who had gone before sent back to their friends such marvelous accounts. . . . [that] the ‘Western fever’ became almost epidemic. Whole towns in the old, Eastern states were almost depopulated;” even “old substantial farmers. . . . turned their faces toward the setting sun.”\(^{11}\) Men and women alike caught the “fever,” whether it was for gold, land or other forms of wealth by reading the sometimes extraordinarily exaggerated accounts.

\(^9\) Ibid., 43.
In addition to leaving dire financial circumstances and seeking rumored wealth, many emigrants of the early 1860s moved west to avoid the Civil War. Mary Luster wrote that her family went west to escape "the calamity of brother against brother." Adaline Scoville and her husband moved to Utah because he "was not anxious to go to war, and he said he should catch the draft he was sure, and he did not like war, so we sold to good advantage."\textsuperscript{12} Draft dodgers as well as deserters like the notable Mark Twain were fairly common in the West.

For many people health was also an important factor in the move west. As Peter Burnett suggests, weather in the Midwest was trying, particularly the harsh winters. Many emigrants wanted to move to milder climates. "We were bound to search for a healthier and milder clime than Illinois to spend the remainder of our days.... I do not in the least regret leaving the sickness and cold, sand piles and lakes...behind and am looking forward for the time to arrive when we may all get settled safely at the place of our destination."\textsuperscript{13} Catherine Haun's health improved on the trail. "In my case, as in the case of many others, my health was restored long before the end of the journey."\textsuperscript{14} During the years before and during the migration, there had been problems throughout the country with yellow fever and malaria. People in the Midwest were particularly affected by these diseases.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{13} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998), 41.
\textsuperscript{14} Glenda Riley, \textit{The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains} (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 78.
Many emigrants believed their health would be significantly improved once they moved west.

In addition to health and economic reasons, there was a certain restlessness among many emigrants to constantly be in search of a better life. Moving west served as a way to satisfy this restless spirit. Actually, as suggested by Lavinia Porter, westward migration was somewhat of a tradition among Americans dating back to the original colonies. Their “brave pioneer ancestors” had first crossed the dangerous Atlantic Ocean, then, once landed, pushed ever westward into the unknown wilderness just beyond civilization. Each generation had opened a new area of wild country for settlement. Thus, the generation that traveled to Oregon and California were not really embarking on such a strange journey. Rather, they were doing what they, or their fathers and grandfathers, had already done before. In fact, seventy-eight percent of emigrant male heads of household had moved at least once before. Many of the women had also moved before, so the westward journey was not a radical idea. Actually, moving to a new part of the country was seen by some, especially by young women, as a romantic wedding trip or a marvelous, once in a lifetime adventure. Catherine Haun had only been married a short time when she and her husband decided to move west. “Indeed as we had been married but a few months, it appealed to us as a romantic wedding tour.”

Women who were newlywed, traveling without children, and young, single

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15 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 18.
16 Riley, The Female Frontier, 78.
women and girls leave the most buoyant and spirited reflections in their diaries. Miriam A. Thompson Tuller had been married only a short time, and had no children. “I was possessed with a spirit of adventure and a desire to see what was new and strange.” Indeed, an adventurous spirit and a desire to see the world are repeatedly referred to in the trail diaries, particularly by those who are young and single.

Young girls indicate in their diaries and reminiscences that the trail was even fun. E. Allene Dunham was only a child when her family migrated. “We children knew nothing only to enjoy ourselves, and we surely did.” Eliza Ann Egbert’s son recalled his mother’s overland journey as a young girl. “No doubt the young emigrants endured many hardships, but if so, they are not stressed in the diary, nor do I remember that they were ever mentioned by my mother in the many times I have heard her speak of the trip. To them it was the big adventure and the hardships were accepted as part of that adventure.”

With the very young it seems the old adage ‘ignorance is bliss’ may be applied. The very young seemed not to know how perilous the journey really was. Nancy Hembree Snow Bogart reminisced:

I’ve often been asked if we did not suffer with fear in those days but I’ve said no we did not have sense enough to realize our danger we just had the time of our lives but since I’ve grown older and could realize the danger and the feelings of the mothers, I often wonder

17 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 42.
18 Riley, The Female Frontier, 78.
how they really lived through it all and retained their reason.19

Indeed the suffering endured along the trail by emigrant mothers is
observed and lamented in many diaries and reminiscences. Martha Ann Morrison
was thirteen years old when her family migrated, but she remembered the plight of
mothers she observed along the way:

The men had a great deal of anxiety and all the care of their families,
but still the mothers had the families directly in their hands and were
with them all the time, especially during sickness. Some of the women
I saw on the road went through a great deal of suffering and trial. I
remember distinctly one girl in particular about my own age that died
and was buried on the road. Her mother had a great deal of trouble
and suffering. It strikes me as I think of it now that Mothers on the
road had to undergo more trial and suffering than anybody else.20

Where a woman stood in her lifecycle was a large factor in determining
whether or not she would have wanted to move west, and how well she could
tolerate hardships. Women traveling with small children had the most difficult
time migrating. Young, single women not having such burdens usually were
better able to accommodate to the rigors of the journey.

Another factor affecting the attitude of women during the overland
migration was the amount of pioneer experience they had. Women who had
moved before were more likely to meet the challenge of living on the trail and
were more capable of rising to the occasion since they knew what to expect.
Kitturah Belknap had emigrated to Iowa when she was younger, and so was
already aware of conditions on the trail. Her diary is filled with optimistic

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19 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 43.
comments, and even hard work seemed not to have bothered her. "I have washed and ironed and cooked up a lot; finding our appetites improve the longer we are out." Lucy Cooke echoed this sentiment. "So far enjoy ourselves. . . . We live first rate." Ironically, it was Lucy’s husband William who became discouraged and depressed on the long trip. Writing to her mother, Lucy said, "William often wishes we were back, and says so soon as he gets anymore than he started with he’ll be with you. If I were very anxious I think William would send me back to you in the spring; and he go on alone to California; but it looks best we journey together."²¹

However discouraged men might have become on the trail, they certainly were more enthusiastic when the decision was made to go. Most men were like Peter Burnett, excited at the prospect of new land and adventure and it was their job to convince their wives to go. Most of the time women whose husbands decided to go west followed them. However, some women opposed their husbands’ decision and flatly refused to go. "All my father could do was to read every item of California news he could get and talk. . . . for my mother would not be persuaded to undertake such a journey." Although this woman would eventually be persuaded to emigrate, the final destination turned out to be Oregon, not California. Many women undoubtedly wielded influence over when and where the family would travel. However, women rarely brought up the idea to

²⁰ Ibid., 35.
²¹ Riley, The Female Frontier, 77.
emigrate and few really wanted to go. Abbey Fulkerath illustrates the submissive attitude of many women. “Agreeable to the wish of my husband I left all my relatives. . . although it proved a hard task to leave them but still harder to leave my children buried in Milton graveyard but such is our lot on earth we are divided.”22

Abbey’s attitude, as well as that of many other women, indicates how deeply entrenched the idea of submissiveness was in the minds of nineteenth-century women. For the most part, they followed their men without regard for their own feelings.

Many men had originally planned to travel west without their families, but their wives insisted on going in order to keep the marriage and family together. Mary Jane Hayden told her husband she would rather go with him than have their family separated. “We were married to live together. . . and I am willing to go with you…and under these circumstances you have no right to go where I cannot, and if you do you need never return for I shall look upon you as dead.”23 Women like Mary Jane Hayden believed strongly in the binds of marriage and family. “Where he could go I could.” was another woman’s response to her husband’s desire to go west without her. One woman referred to the Victorian domestic ideal that women were necessary for creating a household. “It is the females that can improve your condition and make a home, and them alone.” Some women simply

22 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 42.
23 Ibid., 43.
loved their husbands and did not want to be separated from them. "I was very fond of my husband and was nearly brokenhearted at the thought of the separation."24 For women like Margaret Hereford Wilson, separation was never really thought of, as they believed the only option they had was to accompany their husbands. "Dr. Wilson has determined to go to California. I am going with him, as there is no other alternative."25

For women without husbands or children, the decision to move west was their own. Although there are few written records by single, unattached women traveling the Overland Trail, evidence shows that they were there. Most went west to become teachers, like Rebecca Ketcham. They were influenced by Catherine Beecher’s book *The Duty of American Women to Their Country*, which encouraged women to go out to the Far West to educate both the Native Americans and the newly arrived emigrants from the East. Betsey Brownell wrote to an organization, which helped women become teachers and secure positions in the West. "Being dependent upon my own exertions I feel it necessary also to look at the subject in another light, which I think is not inconsistent with the spirit of doing good."26 The spirit being referred to by Miss Brownell was the desire to see other places and experience new things. Another woman hoping to become a teacher explained her reasons as "...love of adventure and desire to be

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24 Ibid., 44.
acquainted with the manners and customs of the inhabitants of more distant parts.\textsuperscript{27}

Like teachers, missionary women had the desire to help others as well as a spirit of adventure. However, unlike teachers who could travel alone, missionary organizations did not allow women to go west unless they were married. Many missionary women arranged marriages so they would be allowed to go. Although they were married, missionary women, being fairly independent, were active in both the decision to move west and the migration and settlement process.\textsuperscript{28}

While many Anglo-American women had some say in their family's move west, slave women had no choice in the matter. Many slaves were brought west as their owners decided to emigrate to California and Oregon. Although not given a choice in the move, many slave women, once arrived, took advantage of their new home and its laws. In California, for example, slavery was not allowed and many slaves were able to obtain their freedom through the courts. Biddy Mason was one such woman. Brought to Southern California by her owner in the early 1850s, she obtained her freedom by a court order in 1856, when her owner decided to return home. With her newfound freedom Biddy began buying property in the area of present-day Los Angeles and was able to amass a small fortune. She used this wealth to help destitute black families to buy food and other supplies. Clara Brown, another African-American woman, used the money she earned doing

\textsuperscript{27} Schlissel, \textit{Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey}, 47.
\textsuperscript{28} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998), 44-45.
laundry in Colorado to bring thirty-four of her relatives to the West after the Civil War. She would continue to help other former slaves by sponsoring black wagon trains coming west.29

Once the decision to migrate was reached the entire family or group was engaged in preparation. The journey took approximately six months, and there were few places along the way at which to stop for supplies. Therefore, everything needed for the trip had to be taken along. The emigrants typically spent the winter and early spring readying themselves for the departure. They would then go to one of several “jumping off places,” usually Council Bluffs, Iowa or St. Joseph or Independence, Missouri, to wait for the grass on the plains to ripen into forage for the livestock and the swollen rivers to recede. Emigrant wagon trains typically started out in late April or early May.

The months before leaving were spent in a bustle of activity. Property was sold off for cash, and goods were purchased or made for the journey. A strong, sturdy wagon was a necessity to carry all the family’s goods to California or Oregon. Large amounts of food such as flour, bacon, sugar and coffee were needed. Also bedding, blankets, clothing, tents and a wagon cover had to be made and packed. In keeping with their domestic role, the last items were produced exclusively by women. Women had to work long hours making clothes that would be sturdy enough to withstand months of hard use.30 Women also prepared

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many foods besides staples which would provide variety to the meals eaten along the trail. Both at home before leaving and on the trail women prepared bread, cakes, pies, stewed fruit and other treats for the family. Some women even practiced cooking over a fire outside or over a camp stove to become accustomed to the conditions they would face once on the trail. Thus we find an unending list of chores done in preparation for the journey. Mary Ellen Todd remembered the hectic bustle during the months before the family set out:

After we decided to go to Oregon we found there were many things to be thought about and done in order to prepare for such a journey. As time went on I noticed that father was not taking his customary five or ten minutes just before mealtime for reading his favorite books; and I did not get my lessons quite so regularly, nor commit so much of Bobby Burns or other poets….Sometimes father and mother were calling me at the very same time. I heard first, “Mary Ellen, bring me the saw, or the hammer, or take this to mother,” or “Help the baby down, or take this little bucket and get some water,” again from mother, “Mary Ellen, won’t you finish this churning while I get my soap to boiling; we’ll need a lot of soap you know; also I must finish spinning all those rolls that we have been carding, as we just must take with us plenty of yarn.”31

In addition to necessities such as food, clothing and wagon supplies, families took along items of sentimental value as well as personal comfort. Women were especially concerned with keeping a semblance of home and comfort for themselves and their families while on the trail because they believed it was their domestic duty to do so. One woman insisted on taking along her rocking chair, and would sit serenely in the middle of the open plain when camp

31 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 67-68.
was made in the evening. Women took along carpets for the tent floor, lookingglasses, combs and brushes in an attempt to keep a homey atmosphere and clean appearance. Women tried to dress in neat traveling dresses with pressed collars and cuffs and wear starched white aprons. Unfortunately, it was usually women’s home and comfort items that were the first to be discarded when the trail became rough and the load had to be lightened. Lucy Cooke lamented when her husband complained about the large amount of baggage she was bringing: "I had a cry about it...as I seemed to have parted with near everything I valued."32

Physical goods were not the hardest things emigrants had to part with. Most left family members and friends behind and the emotional grief felt by all emigrants must have been great. However, men rarely mentioned the pain of separation in their diaries, or the pain their wives were feeling. Asahel Munger was an exception: "This day has been rather long and lonesome to E. She thought much of home-friends-prospects-and present condition. I tried to have her get above these things."33

Women, on the other hand, almost always made mention of the pain they felt when leaving home:

On the evening before (starting), the whole family, including my mother, were gathered together in the parlor, looking as if we were all going to our graves the next morning. There we sat in such gloom, that I could not endure it any longer, and I arose and announced that we would not start tomorrow morning, not until everybody could

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33 Ibid., 49.
feel more cheerful.34

Lodisa Frizzel compares the feeling of goodbye to the feelings present when a loved one dies:

Who is there that does not recollect their first night when started on a long journey, the well-known voices of our friends still ring in our ears, the parting kiss still feels warm upon our lips, and that last separating word farewell! sinks deeply into the heart. It may be the last we ever hear from some or all of them, and to those who start...there can be no more solemn scene of parting only at death.35

The reason for the differences between men’s and women’s reporting of the departure may be attributed to the idea that it was more acceptable for women to show their emotions than for men to do so. However, another reason may also go back to the domestic role expected of women and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s idea of a female world separate from the male world. Men were ever present on the trail, but the continued presence of other women could not be counted on. Many women lamented the lack of female companionship and support along the trail. Although they may have started out the journey with extended family such as mothers, sisters, cousins, and grown daughters, parties often separated and women found themselves alone in the company of men. Women’s support network was torn apart in the westward migration, and the emotional agony it caused probably accounts for the great attention paid to separation in women’s diaries.

While a common complaint among women was the lack of female companionship, there were many women along the trail. With the exception of the

34 Ibid., 48.
Gold Rush years, 1849-1851, half of westward moving emigrants were women and children.\textsuperscript{36} The problem was that the emigrant parties were isolated by miles of open country, and daily contact with other parties was rare. Therefore, if there were no other women in the party it could be very lonely for the individuals involved.

Most families traveled in groups rather than in solitude. Often extended family from miles away would come together at a jumping off place to make the journey to California or Oregon together. Other times, friends and neighbors from the same rural county would agree to travel together. Women within these parties were able to transport their female support network to the West Coast, and the trail was much easier to bear.\textsuperscript{37}

Emigrant parties were not always made up of collections of people from extended families or friends. Many groups were organized among strangers in the jumping off places. Some parties consisted completely of men, while others included families and single men hired on to help drive livestock in exchange for meals, washing and other services the women of the families could provide.

Within all-male emigrant parties, there was usually a great deal of bickering over the assignment of duties. Noah Brooks traveled in an all-male party:

\begin{quote}
At the onset none knew who should drive the oxen, who should do the cooking, or whose ingenuity would be taxed to mend broken wagons or
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 39.

tattered clothing. Gradually, and not altogether without grumbling and objection each man filled his own proper place. Indeed, the division of labor in a party of emigrants was a prolific cause of quarrel. We saw not a little fighting in the camps of others who sometimes jogged along the trail in our company, and these bloody fisticuffs were invariably the outcome of disputes over the divisions of labor.

Even within parties including women, sometimes there was confusion among the men and women as to who should be performing which job. Rebecca Ketcham commented after two months on the trail: "I believe the day's work is pretty regularly laid out now." Emigrant parties that were organized around families did not have as much confusion or bickering among its members. Men performed traditionally male jobs such as driving wagons and livestock, fixing broken wagons, and guarding the camp at night. Women performed traditionally female jobs such as cooking, sewing, washing and caring for the children.

Men's work was physically taxing and dangerous. Many men drowned at river crossings or were trampled during a stampede. Men were not able to rest during the day, but were constantly walking, driving livestock and wagons, to keep the party moving west. As long as the party was moving, men were on duty. However, once the party stopped men were able to rest and enjoy leisure activities. Randall Hewitt noted that men played cards and went fishing and swimming whenever there was water nearby. The most popular male activity was hunting. Whenever a herd of buffalo was spotted, men would grab their rifles, mount whatever horses were available, and be off. Cecelia Adams noted that as her party
passed through buffalo country, “our boys are on the chase most of the time.”

John Zeiber tells that while the men were hunting, the women were not simply relaxing at camp. “We shall not move today. The women will wash and the men will hunt.” Although much energy was expended during hunts, particularly for buffalo, little food was actually brought back because the large loads could not be carried and the emigrants did not have the necessary tools for butchering. Therefore, with only a few exceptions, men were not hunting for food for the party. Rather, they did so for the leisure and fun it provided for them on the trip.40

As suggested by John Zeiber, women continued to work even when the men were enjoying themselves. The men usually rested when the party stopped, but for women this was the time when their duties really began. Wagons were unpacked to prevent mildew, meals were prepared and utensils cleaned up and put away, never ending washing and mending had to be done and there were always children to look after.

The single most important and taxing duty for women was cooking. Most emigrant women were not used to cooking outdoors, and pots were constantly falling into the fire and food was burned. Within diaries of both men and women, there are stories and complaints about the duty of cooking along the trail. Helen M. Carpenter describes the difficulties of cooking, as well as details of other women’s duties.


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Although there is not much to cook, the difficulty and inconvenience in doing it amounts to a great deal—so by the time one has squatted around the fire and cooked bread and bacon, and made several dozen trips to and from the wagon—washed the dishes. . .and gotten things ready for an early breakfast, some of the others have their nightcaps on—at any rate it is time to go to bed. In respect to women's work, the days are all very much the same—except when we stop. . .then there is washing to be done and light bread to make and all kinds of odd jobs. Some women have very little help about the camp being obliged to get wood and water. . .make camp fires, unpack at night and pack up in the morning—and if they are Missourians they have the milking to do if they are fortunate enough to have cows. I am lucky in having a Yankee for a husband, so am well waited on.  

Whether or not Mrs. Carpenter's husband was unique in the help he gave her is difficult to tell. At any rate, nearly all diaries comment on the difficulties involved with cooking and other work. Lodisa Frizzell complained that the absence of tables made her work even more difficult: “All our work here requires stooping. Not having tables, chairs or anything is very hard on the back.”

Cooking for a large group of people was a never-ending job, and women lost a lot of sleep performing this duty. Helen Stewart and another woman stayed up late to finish their chores: “Everybody is in bed but Agnes and myself I believe and we would be there to but we have to wait til the apples are stewed enough.”

Women also had to wake before everyone else to prepare breakfast. James Clyman woke early one morning to write in his journal that there was no activity.

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40 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 85.
42 Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, 80.
in the camp except the bustle of women preparing breakfast and "...sleeping which is performed by the male part of the camp to the greatest perfection."\(^\text{43}\)

Cooking was complicated still further by it having to be done outside in all kinds of weather. Wind blew smoke and fire on the women, and rain made fuel difficult to find and the fire difficult to maintain. Mary Fisher describes an accident involving another woman in her party: "Her dress caught fire from the stove and before it could be extinguished it was nearly burned off her."\(^\text{44}\) Esther Hanna complained about the wind blowing across the plains: "Had to haul our water and wood for night. ...I have also had to bake tonight. It is very trying on the patience to cook and bake on a little green wood fire with the smoke blowing in your eyes so as to blind you, and shivering with cold so as to make your teeth chatter."\(^\text{45}\) Miriam Davis lamented the toll cooking outdoors took on her physical appearance: "I have cooked so much out in the 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 would pass well for an Osage squaw."\(^\text{46}\) The constant assaults on their feminine appearance were a constant complaint among most women along the trail.

However difficult cooking in the natural elements might have been, many women through ingenuity and not a little courage were able to overcome most of

\(^{43}\) Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 76.


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 83.

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the obstacles. James Clyman describes one wife who “having kneeded her dough she watched and nursed the fire and held an umbrella over the fire and skillet with the greatest composure for near two hours and baked enough bread to give us a very plentiful supper!” Lucy Cooke rolled out her pie dough on the wagon seat beside her as she traveled.47

Women often saw these difficulties as challenges and took pride in their ability to overcome them. Charlotte Stearns Pengra recorded the work she performed at each evening stop with great detail:

April 29, 1853: I hung out what things were wet in the waggon, made griddle cakes, stewed berries and made tea for supper. After that was over made two loaves of bread stewed a pan of apples prepared potatoes and meat for breakfast and mended a pair of pants for Wm. Pretty tired.
May 8, 1853: baked this morning and stewed apples this afternoon commenced washing. . .got my white clothes ready for suds. . .I feel very tired and lonely.
May 14, 1853: gathered up the dishes, and packed them dirty for the first time since I started.
May 18, 1853: washed a very large washing, unpacked dried and packed clothing--made a pair of calico cases for pillows and cooked two meals--done brave, I think.48

Although she comments several times on being tired and chastises herself for packing her dishes while still dirty, Charlotte allows herself a small compliment, showing the pride women felt when they were able to perform their duties well.

In addition to cooking, as Charlotte Stearns Pengra mentions, washing was a large and difficult chore that was performed almost exclusively by women.

47 Ibid., 80-81.
48 Ibid., 81.
Opportunities to wash were few since many night camps were made where there was little water nearby. Therefore, when the party came upon a river or stream, or had time to stop, women made good use of the time. “Came to a creek so high we could not cross, camped, the women to washing and the men to examining their provisions.” “It is agreed to stay in this camp until tomorrow to rest the cattle. Water and grass are both fine. The women are going to wash. It is the best chance we’ve had for a long time, wood and water are plenty and convenient.” Accidents could also cause a party to stop, and women took advantage of the extra time. “One of the camp broke the axle tree of his wagon, then camped, the women washed.” Elizabeth Greer indicates women were pleased to have an opportunity to wash. “Still at Bridger. Here we have a good time for washing, which we women deem a great priviledge.”

When the parties stopped for the whole day for resting the cattle or mending a wagon, women began their day early: “The banks of the small rivulet was lined at an early hour after breakfast with fires, kettles, washtubs and piles of unwashed linen showing conclusively that a general lustration was to be performed by the female portion of our party.” Sometimes the party would not be lucky enough to stop near a place with adequate fuel for fires to heat washing water and to cook meals. Women then washed in the rivers, using hard soap and cold water, in wind and sun. Such conditions caused ailments such as burned and

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50 Ibid., 79.
chapped skin. Rebecca Ketcham and her friend had to contend with this problem.

"Camilla and I both burnt our arms very badly while washing. They were red and swollen and painful as though scalded with boiling water. Our hands are blacker than any farmer’s and I do not see that there is any way of preventing it for everything has to be done in the wind and sun.” Under these conditions, it is no wonder why America E. Rollins exclaimed to her diary: “Oh! horrors how shall I express it; it is the dreaded washing day...but washing must be done and procrastination won’t do it for me.”

As mentioned in the introduction, piety was an important part of “true womanhood.” However, as the journey wore on it became increasingly difficult for women to outwardly express piety since the emigrants did not stop for the Sabbath. But in the beginning of the journey, parties tried to stop traveling on the Sabbath, just as they had stopped working on the Sabbath at home. Mary Stuart Bailey’s party stopped the majority of Sundays on the trail, only traveling if they were in need of grass or water, as was often the case. She even had the opportunity to attend services at Salt Lake City, and mentions the sermon by Brigham Young. However, once she and her husband became attached to another party, the Sunday stops became almost nonexistent, and she constantly complains of being tired without the rest. Most other emigrant trains also gave up Sabbath stops as the season grew shorter, or forage and water became scarce. Like

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51 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 83.
52 Meyers, Ho For Californial, 76.
Mrs. Bailey, most women lamented the loss of the Sabbath and commented that traveling "does not seem pleasant" on the Sabbath. One woman commented that the river they had just forded "seemed to reproach us."\textsuperscript{53} The fact that so many women complained about the loss of the Sabbath is an indication that most took their role of being the pious guides for their families very seriously. There was little or no time given to prayer or worship on the Sabbath, although some parties would read scripture during the midday stop. Mostly women, having been raised to set an example of piety, saw the men's disregard for the Sabbath as another assault on their femininity.

Even when the party did halt on the Sabbath, women had little time to rest. Often it was a day to catch up on washing, mending or baking. Esther Hanna suggests that many women were not happy with this situation either. "I was obliged to do many things I was very loth to do on the Sabbath."\textsuperscript{54} Although unhappy, women took advantage of the day and sometimes did as much or more than usual. Cecelia Adams "cooked beans and meat, stewed apples and baked suckeyes. . .besides making patch cheese, and took everything out of the wagon to dry."\textsuperscript{55} This is yet another example of women adjusting their traditional roles of womanhood in order to successfully complete the journey.

\textsuperscript{53} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998), 55.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{55} Schlissel, \textit{Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey}, 81.
While women continued to work even on the Sabbath, men were able to rest, as the work of moving the party was not necessary that day. Phoebe Judson sympathetically wrote:

During the week our men had been very busily employed. . . .Saturday night found them very tired and much in need of physical rest, so they lolled around in the tents and on their blankets spread on the grass, or under the wagons out of the sunshine, seeming to realize that the ‘Sabbath was made for man.’ But the women, who had only been anxious spectators of their arduous work,. . . .not being weary in body, could not fully appreciate physical rest, and were rendered more uneasy by the continued passing of emigrant trains all day long. . . .To me, much of the day was spent in meditating over the past and in forebodings for the future.56

Judging from the descriptions in other diaries about women’s work and their complaints about fatigue, it can only be guessed that Phoebe Judson’s memory was lacking, or perhaps she herself did little work on the trail. The comment she makes about women being anxious spectators during the week is simply inaccurate. Almost all women, as has already been described, were up late and rose early to cook, wash and perform other duties. Even while the party was moving, women did not simply sit in the wagons and rest. Fuel had to be collected, and since trees were few on the trail and adequate fuel could not be counted on at the campsite, women had to collect it along the way.57 Weeds, grass and buffalo chips were gathered into the wagons as the women walked alongside them. Women were particularly disgusted with having to collect buffalo chips, as this was considered the ultimate insult to femininity. “This caused many ladies to

56 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 87.
57 Ibid., 83.
act very cross and many were the rude phrases uttered, far more humiliating to refined ears than any mention of the material used for fuel could have been."

In addition to collecting fuel, women with children had to be constantly on the lookout for dangers, watchful of children who might stray and caring for children who were ill. Fevers, cholera, and diarrhea were very common among emigrant children. Older children engaged in herding cattle often strayed away from the party and were lost. There are many incidences of children falling out of the wagons and being crushed by wagon wheels or trampled by livestock. Lucy Henderson Deady wrote in her diary about her sister, who was poisoned by medicine brought along in the wagon:

Mother had brought some medicine along. She hung the bag containing the medicine from a nail on the side-board of the wagon...My little sister, Salita Jane wanted to tast it, but I told her she couldn't have it. She didn't say anything but as soon as we had gone she got the bottle and drank it all. Presently she came to the campfire where Mother was cooking supper and said she felt awfully sleepy. Mother told her to run away and not bother her, so she went to where the beds were spread and lay down. When Mother called her for supper she didn't come. Mother saw she was asleep, so didn't disturb her. When Mother tried to awake her later she couldn't arouse her. Lettie had drunk the whole bottle of laudanum. It was too late to save her life.

With all the work women had to perform on the trail, children were often left on their own. Accidents such as these occurred often, and added to the psychological stress on women.

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59 Ibid., 52.
60 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 98.
While all women performed traditionally female chores along the way, many also performed the men’s duties as well. Parties often parted, hired hands sometimes abandoned their employers, and husbands and fathers became ill, injured or killed along the way. Women were forced by emergency to take up men’s duties. Charlotte Stearns Pengra was ill with dysentery when her husband and daughter also fell ill with the same ailment. While ill herself, she drove the wagon:

Though Bynon and Sis is very unwell, they are anxious to go on. I drove just before we reached the river I was taken in great pain which resulted in the Dysentery. . .I have suffered much pain and feel a good deal reduced but all are sick and I must keep up to the last. . . .took my turn and drove until I was quite outdone....I am all used up. dark times for we folks. I am somewhat discouraged and shall be glad when this journey is ended.61

Ellen Smith was emigrating to Oregon in 1846 when her husband William died along the trail. She was left with nine children, the youngest of whom was only two years old and the oldest was sixteen and gravely ill. She also had a six-year-old child who was crippled. When their wagon had to be abandoned she packed the family’s provisions onto the oxen and tied the children onto their backs. She pushed on, but her daughter grew weaker and died along the trail. The grieving mother instructed the men of the party to dig a grave six feet deep so the wolves wouldn’t dig up her daughter’s body. When the men stopped digging before they had dug six feet, Mrs. Smith grabbed a shovel and began to dig. The men,

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61 Ibid., 47-48.
ashamed that a woman was digging the grave, continued to dig until the grave was the mother’s specifications and buried the girl. Ellen Smith pushed on with her remaining children and made it to Oregon. She staked a widow’s claim on a piece of land and built a house.62

Women like Ellen Smith and Charlotte Stearns Pengra were admirable and added a new dimension to the suffering endured along the trail. However, women did not just perform men’s work when their husbands were not able to. In fact, many women, particularly the young and single, voluntarily drove wagons and livestock, enjoying their newfound independence and taking pride in their abilities. Mary Ellen Todd commented that she felt “a secret joy in being able to have the power to set things going.” Lydia Milner Waters was a young woman who enjoyed participating in men’s activities.

I learned to drive an ox team on the Platte (River) and my driving was admired by an officer and his wife. . .I heard them laughing at the thought of a woman driving oxen. When climbing hills with boys and young men, 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.

Indeed, many along the trail found the attempts of young women at being more masculine amusing. Molly Dorsey Sanford’s party was trying to walk through thorny brush: “it occurred to me how much easier I could get through if I were a man, and I slipped out into the back shed, and donned an old suit of father’s

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62 Ibid., 84.
clothes. . .it was very funny to all but Mother, who feared I am losing all the dignity I ever possessed.”

Nineteenth-century women tried to instill in their daughters the same traditional values of womanhood that they had been raised with. Older, married women and particularly the young girls’ mothers did not find humor in their daughters’ antics, as Molly noted. Mary Eliza Warner enjoyed sharing her independence with her young aunt, despite the frowns they received from older women. “I drove four horses nearly all day. . .Aunt Cecelia and I played chess, which Mrs. Lord thought was the first step toward gambling.” Some young girls were not as rebellious as Mary Eliza Warner, and obeyed their mothers even though they didn’t really want to. Adrietta Hixon’s mother was typical in her concern for her daughters’ complexions and reputations as ladies.

While traveling, mother was particular about Louvina and me wearing sunbonnets and long mitts in order to protect our complexions, hair and hands. Much of the time I should like to have gone without that long bonnet poking out over my face, but mother pointed out to me some of the girls who did not wear bonnets and as I did not want to look as they did, I stuck to my bonnet finally growing used to it. When riding, I always rode aside with my full skirt pulled well down over my ankles. If we had ridden astride, as they do now, people would have thought we were not lady-like. Mother was always reminding Louvina and me to be ladies.

While young girls enjoyed their newfound freedom, most adult women along the trail wanted to maintain traditional femininity. Clothing style represented a major differentiation between men and women, and women made

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63 Ibid., 84.
every attempt to look feminine. Although some women wore the bloomer
costume, consisting of pantalets and a short skirt, most wore long dresses,
petticoats, ribbons and bows, and starched white aprons.65 As the journey wore
on, women had to abandon many of their pretty clothes and were too tired to be
concerned with their looks. “As the days lengthened into weeks, our self-respect
suffered somewhat in the matter of clothes.” Another woman noted: “We were so
worn out that we were not particular how we were dressed but presented a mixture
of fashions.” Lavinia Porter commented: “I doubt whether any of us could have
been recognized.”66

Women lamented not only their inability to dress properly, but also the loss
of a home. “Oh dear, I do so want to get there it is now almost four months since
we have slept in a house. If I could only be set down at home with all the folks I
think there would be some talking as well as resting.” Another woman
commented, “This gypsy life is anything but agreeable.”67

Although women lost much of their sense of femininity and home, they
were able to keep intact the close relationships they had with one another. All
along the trail, whenever possible, women came together to visit, work and tend
the sick. Catherine Haun noted the interactive behavior of women while the train
was in motion. “During the day we womenfolk visited from wagon to wagon or

64 Ibid., 85.
66 Ibid., 56.
67 Ibid., 58.
congenial friends spent an hour walking ever westward and talking over our home life back in 'the states', telling of the loved ones left behind; voicing our hopes for the future. . .and even whispering a little friendly gossip of emigrant life.”

Cecelia Adams spent almost all of her time with her twin sister Perthenia:

P and I walked on ahead of the rest of the company.
P and I climbed one of the hills.
P done some washing and I baked bread and pumpkin and apple pies.
P and myself...have some jolly times even if we are in a wilderness.

The presence of other women made working easier and more enjoyable. Margaret Haun commented on the continuation of 'feminine occupations' even on the trail. “High teas were not popular but tatting, knitting, crochetting, exchanging recepts for cooking beans or dried apples or swapping food for the sake of variety kept us in practice of feminine occupations and diversions.” As suggested by Margaret Haun, the women did not abandon the popular female sewing circle on the trail. “I visited the tents of our fellow-travelers and found the ladies busily employed as if sitting by the fireside which they had so recently left. . . . Mrs. West, a lady of seventy, and her daughter Mrs. Campbell, were knitting.”

If there were no other of their sex traveling in the party, women often sought out those in different parties at stopping points along the way. Margaret Frink: “I visited a lady today at a train which had halted not far from ours. An unusual incident on this journey.” Mrs. Ferris notes the speed at which women

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68 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 78.
69 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 84.
70 Ibid., 78.
became friends. "We are much acquainted in five minutes as though we had
known each other all our lives. The formalities of the drawing-room are here out
of place--t is "How do you do?" with a hearty shake of the hand, sans
ceremonie."72 Trying to connect with other women was clearly of importance to
those traveling along the trail.

While socializing with members of their sex was of importance to them,
their need for other women in times of illness was crucial. Esther Lyman credits
the care of another woman in saving her life. "I fully expected to die. Joseph was
almost distracted at the thought, and I think my grave would have been on the
plains if I had not had a comfortable place to ride in and one of the best of sisters
to care for me."73 Women actually feared being left alone during an illness. Ellen
Adams was at an army fort nursing a sick woman when her party moved on and
she had to leave. "I felt very badly to come away as there are no women at the
fort."74

Men as well as women along the trail document the fact that women helped
each other in times of illness or childbirth. Merritt Kellogg recalls a night when
his wife rode ten miles to nurse a woman in childbirth, even though his wife was
not well, and the woman was a complete stranger.

71 Ibid., 137.
72 Ibid., 138.
73 Julie Roy Jeffrey, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill
and Wang, 1979), 42.
74 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 140.
He said that his company was ten miles ahead and that with them was a young woman who was about to be confined. He said that she was the only woman in the company. Her husband was a young man and they had not been married quite a year. All of the men, ten in all, in their company, were with one exception single men. The one exception was a rough sort of fellow. He said he had come back in search of a woman to help the young woman in her trouble. (The tale) touched my wife’s heart and she said, “I am lame, and ought not to go, but that woman needs help.” Then she slipped on a pair of my trousers under her dress, then mounted the mule man fashion and galloped away with the man. The baby was born and both mother and child were doing well (when they arrived the next morning) My wife cared for them both through the night and then turned into her bed in our wagon and we hitched up and drove on. All the pay my wife received was the thanks of the couple, who like ourselves were traveling without money. She also had the satisfaction that a person feels in doing for others as they would like others to do for them under similar circumstances. 

In another instance, women not only helped during childbirth but also comforted others when death struck. “Late in the afternoon a group of women stood watching Mrs. Wilson’s little babe as it breathed its last.” The help women gave each other in times of need strengthened the female world of love and ritual and helped women maintain their feminine roles.

It is commonly estimated that as many as one in five women were pregnant and gave birth along the trail. This fact gives new meaning to the term “suffering” on the journey, as some women would have been in the advanced stages of pregnancy. Some trains stopped for a day or two to allow the new mother a chance to recuperate. However, with time always a factor, most emigrant parties stopped only long enough for the woman to give birth. Lucy Henderson Deady

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75 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey, 51.
described what happened when her mother gave birth: “Three days after my little sister Lettie drank the laudanum and died we stopped for a few hours and my sister Olivia was born. We were so late that the men of the party decided we could not tarry a day, so we had to press on.” Imagine the emotional suffering Lucy’s mother must have endured, losing one daughter and giving birth to another in only a few days. Another woman described her sister’s ordeal just following childbirth: “Her sufferings were so great that she does not remember anything for quite a space along there. It all seems like a jumble of jolting wagon, crying baby, dust, sagebrush and the never-ceasing pain.”

For nineteenth-century women death during childbirth, whether their own, the infant’s, or both, was a common risk. But this risk was heightened by the difficulties along the trail. Women’s diaries rarely fail to comment on the death of another woman in childbirth or on the death of a newborn infant. One especially detailed entry by Catherine Haun describes the funeral of Mrs. Lamore and her newborn baby:

We halted a day to bury her and the infant that had lived but an hour, in this weird, lonely spot on God’s footstool away apparently from everywhere and everybody. The bodies were wrapped in a bed comforter and wound, quite mummified with a few yards of string that we made by tying together torn strips of a cotton dress skirt. A passage of the Bible (my own) was read; a prayer was offered and “Nearer, My God to Thee” sung.

...Every heart was touched and eyes full of tears as we lowered the body, coffinless, into the grave. There was not tombstone—why should

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76 Ibid., 59-60.
there be—the poor husband and orphans could never hope to revisit the grave and to the world it was just one of the many hundreds that marked the trail of the argonaut.78

For the women noting these events in their diaries, one wonders if they were not fearful for their own mortality and for the frailty of their own unborn children.

In addition to the difficulties of childbirth, women along the Overland Trail encountered various diseases—either in themselves or their families. Most common was dysentery, which nearly everyone had to suffer with at least once. Especially in the early 1850s, emigrants had to contend with outbreaks of cholera. Few diaries during this time are without at least one or two references to graves passed along the way. One emigrant estimated the number of graves along the trail at between 1500 and 2000. Another emigrant put the estimate at 5000. Cholera was so dangerous because it spread quickly, usually killing its victim within a few hours.79 Even in the diaries of the young and usually spirited emigrants there were observations of graves. Caroline Richardson was a young girl on the trail during the years of the cholera outbreak.

    passed five graves
    saw a new grave covered with prickly pear today—this is the most respect to the dead we have seen on the road and was a lot to the person who had to do it.80

The psychological toll taken on the emigrants in the midst of so much death must have been overwhelming at times. Lodisa Frizzel shared her fears with her

79 Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, p. 71.

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diary: “the heart has a thousand misgivings and the mind is tortured with anxiety and often as I pass the fresh made graves I have glanced at the sideboards of the wagon, not knowing how soon it might serve as a coffin for some one of us.” In a time when death was accepted as a normal part of life, many emigrants seemed to fear not death, but the idea of being left behind, one’s grave never visited, and with the possibility of it being dug up by wolves. Esther Hanna confided her fear in her diary: “O tis a hard thing to die far from friends and home, to be hurried into a hastily dug grave without shroud or coffin, the clods filled in and then deserted, perhaps to be food for wolves.”

Although some diarists did give emotional accounts of the events on the trail, most did not. Even women, among whom it was socially accepted to show emotion, did not often reveal their true feelings in describing what was happening. Esther Hanna, though obviously anxious about the possibility of death on the trail, comments later to her diary, “We must endure (trials) like good soldiers.” Indeed women often hint in their diaries about ‘schooling in’, the practice of hiding one’s feelings from the outside world. Women did complain often to each other and to their journals, but there is little emotion portrayed. “Husband is scolding and hurrying all hands (and the cook), and Almira says she wished she

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80 Ibid., 72.
81 Ibid., 104.
82 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1979), 48.
was at home, and I say ditto.” “The female portion of our little train are almost
discouraged. We sat by moonlight and discussed matters till near 11 o’clock.”

Lavinia Porter shared how she ‘schooled in’ in front of the rest of the party,
but would break down only when she was sure she was alone.

I would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work
was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I
thought I had gone beyond hearing distance I would throw myself down on
the unfriendly desert and give way like a child to sobs and tears, wishing
myself back home with my friends and chiding myself for consenting to
take this wild goose chase.

Interestingly, Lavinia never indicated in her diary that she shared her feelings with
her husband. The practice of “schooling in” was perhaps a way to fulfill the role
of domesticity, keeping the home happy and cheerful for the benefit of husband
and children despite how the women really felt.

Some diaries show that the anger and frustration felt by women on the trail
was directed at the men who had decided on the trip to begin with. Mary Powers’
husband behaved irrationally during most of the trip, causing her to confide to her
diary, “I felt as though myself and my little ones were at the mercy of a madman.”
Margaret Hecox echoed this feeling in her diary: “I wondered what had possessed
my husband, anyway, that he should have thought of bringing us away out
through this God-forsaken country. I feared that we all were to be scalped or
taken prisoners before morning.”

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84 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women* (1979), 47.
85 Ibid., 49.
While many women felt as Mary Powers and Margaret Hecox did, few confronted their husbands outright because they believed they should be submissive. Lavinia Porter was angry with her husband for bringing along a barrel of whiskey. Rather than confront him about it, she handled it in her own subtle way. “I patiently bided my time, and one day when no one was around I quietly loosened. . .the barrel. . .and by nightfall there was nothing left.” A few women did confront their husbands. Some refused to cook or refused to camp at the assigned spot. One woman beat her husband with a horsewhip. Another set fire to the wagon. 86 These examples are extreme, and the reality was that most women probably said little or nothing to their husbands about their feelings.

Women’s anger and frustrations were ‘schooled in’ but men’s anger was often released by swearing and fighting with other men in the party. In some ways, this seems to support the idea that men were morally lacking while women were pious. Indeed, on some occasions women were able to calm angry men and keep the peace, an example of the power a pious woman could yield. More often, however, women stayed out of the fights, maintaining their submissive roles and watching helplessly. Velina Williams notes the relations between men in her company: “Some of the teams started before all were ready, which led to hard feelings and harsh, angry words which made us all very unpleasant. Oh, that the spirit of forbearance and love were more prevalent in our company.” 87 Normally,

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86 Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey. 89.
87 Ibid., 90.
the arguments that arose between men in the party would be peacefully settled, yet
sometimes the company would split up if no agreements could be reached. Rarely
did the arguments escalate into violence. A notable exception is found within the
Donner party. During an argument concerning the order wagons were to be
brought over a hill, James Reed stabbed John Snyder and killed him. Such
events were extremely rare. Companies usually parted before feelings became so
intense.

While many divisive incidents may have occurred, there were also many
times when emigrants banded together to help one another. Henry Allyn observed
in 1853: “The emigrants that are here all join and make a bridge.” Noah Brooks,
also in 1853, noted “the cheerfulness with which these emigrants, total strangers to
one another buckled to work, never leaving it until all were safely over, was
beautiful to behold.” Men as well as women often sought each other out when in
need of assistance on the trail. Obviously then, men were not always base and
lacking in morality.

The joining of large numbers of emigrants into large companies was seen
by many as necessary for protection against Indian attack. In the early years of the
trail, Indians were feared but they were rarely a real threat. However, as the years
went on and more emigrants came into Indian Territory, relations with Indians
became worse. Tribes had been decimated from cholera, smallpox and measles,

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and the buffalo herds began moving away from traditional hunting grounds. Many Indians remained friendly to the emigrants, coming in to camp to trade or exchange gifts. However, the lack of understanding of Indian customs created fear among the emigrants, particularly women. Maggie Hall commented on the fear women felt at the threat of Indian attack:

The boys would go fishing, go hunting. When it was discovered the mothers let up a wail, knew the Indians would kill them, so the pa’s would get out the guns and off they would go to find (the) boys. Tried to kick the boys to camp, first chance, those boys would go off again. But those night alarms, when someone would cry “Indians.” The guard came running in who had seen the Indians hide behind a bush or heard an arrow, etc. Then in a moment men were loading guns, women crying. A call for volunteers would go out and (they) would circle around. . . .But that scare in the night. . . .It made the women nervous and sick.90

Helen H. Clark tells of an incident when the ignorance and arrogance of the emigrants ended in tragedy:

There was a white man who boasted that he would kill the first Indian he saw, he soon had opportunity of fulfilling his boast as they saw a squaw and he shot her as he would a wild animal and the Indians came on and demanded the fellow be given up and they had to do it and the Indians skinned him alive.91

While the emigrants provoked some displays of Indian violence, many attacks were not provoked. Mary Perry Frost wrote of a violent and tragic encounter her party had with some Indians:

We had traveled perhaps an hour. . . .Then Indians. . . .came up squarely in front of our train and stopped the teams, but appeared friendly,

91 Ibid., 118-19.
shaking hands and asking for whiskey; upon being told that we had none they began to talk of trading with the men and while my father was talking of trading a pistol for a pony, they opened fire on us, shooting my father, my uncle, and my father's teamster. . . .Thinking they wanted our horses, they were turned loose and the Indians departed after catching them all. Of those shot, my uncle died outright, my father's teamster was shot through the abdomen and lived until the following morning, and my father was shot through the lungs and lived until the evening of the fourth day. . . .(He) was buried on the morning (of the fifth day). The Indians also killed all the men in the forward party, leaving a boy of fourteen with an arrow in his chest. . . .we stopped long enough to dig trenches and rude graves for the burial. . . .The women and children (in the forward party) presented a sickening spectacle, having been burned by the savages.92

While this attack was not provoked, certainly many Indian tribes felt they were being invaded, and from their point of view they were simply defending their land. Men, women and children all suffered from Indian attacks, but they were rarely as violent as the one presented by Mary Perry Frost. Most simply harassed the emigrants, taking livestock and supplies. Few brought real harm. However, these encounters with Indians created an image of the Indian as a savage being, an idea that stayed with the pioneers, especially women, into the time of settlement, affecting attitudes and relationships between the two groups for years to come.

With the many difficulties encountered by the emigrants on the trail, it is little wonder why one woman commented to her diary, "I am very weary of this journey, weary of myself and all around me. I long for the quiet of home where I can be at peace once more."93 However bad the experiences of the trail were, there were also many good experiences. Many diaries contain stories of amusing

92 Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, 122-23.
93 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1979), 50.
things that happened on the trail. Many, particularly the young, enjoyed friendship, adventure and fun in camp as well as on the trail. "The young ones of our party are all assembled around a blazing fire, from which the sounds of mirth and hilarity come floating on the evening breeze."\(^{94}\) Caroline Richardson wrote that at South Pass members of her party "gather snow for a snowballing." At Salt Lake City her party "pitched a tent in a potato patch. . .found a fiddler. . .and got together enough people for two sets of cotillions. Danced 'til eleven."\(^{95}\) One woman, at the end of the journey, looked back on it and wrote: "I feel the good friends we have made on the journey more than make up for the hardship."\(^{96}\)

In addition to the relationships formed along the trail and the many fun times, emigrants comment both in diaries and reminiscences about the physical features of the landscape. Along the plains, most women wrote less than complimentary comments about the lack of trees and other foliage so common in the east. "We often say that this journey is like going to sea on dry land."\(^{97}\) Laura Johnson commented that "most people scorn it as an empty, useless, monotonous space, barren as the sea."\(^{98}\) A few women, such as Alice Rollins, did make positive remarks about the plains:

> There is something fine in the great breathing space, and it is the only place in the world where your horizon comes absolutely to the ground in every direction; where the dome of heaven fits perfectly the world

\(^{94}\) Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 84.  
\(^{95}\) Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, 71.  
\(^{96}\) Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 64.  
\(^{97}\) Allen, Traveling West, 7.  
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 8.
it was meant to cover, and the sky shuts down over the prairie as the cover of a butter dish fits its plate. 99

For most women however, the plains were a barren wasteland to get through as quickly as possible.

If the plains were a barren wasteland, the mountains were a welcome sight to behold. Although they could be almost indomitable, for they represented a challenging obstacle to hurdle, women still commented about their beauty and grandeur. Sarah Lippencott wrote of the Colorado Rockies: “our . . . drive. . . . over grand heights, through lovely little parks, and wild pine forests, . . . they thrilled me with wonder and delight. . . . [It was] utterly indescribable.” 100 Others gathered inspiration from the mountains, as Sarah Herndon wrote, “there are no places on earth that I have seen which have a tendency to inspire me with such tender feelings, such elevated, purely holy thoughts as mountains.” 101 Comments like these show that emigrants were not completely engrossed with the hard work and tedium of the overland trail. Many took in the sights of their surroundings and appreciated the beauty of the countryside.

At the end of the beautiful but dangerous journey was the promised land, California, Oregon, and other mining and ranching frontiers. Women who completed the overland journey had come thousands of miles but their real work was only beginning. Women would be expected by men and society to bring

99 Ibid., 14.
100 Ibid., 21.
order, culture, and a sense of home to the frontier, and pioneer women fulfilled this expectation. The experiences of the overland trail had made the women who survived it stronger, but not less feminine. Women arriving at the end of their long journey fully expected and desired to return to their traditional and comfortable domestic roles. The reality that they found in their new homes was more like the trail than home; hard work, dangers, and tragedy beset them at every turn. However, pioneer women did not abandon their female roles, rather they adapted them, just as they had on the trail.
Chapter 4

WOMEN ON THE MINING AND RANCHING FRONTIER

My heart arose in gratitude to God that we were spared to reach this land. I can scarcely realize that we are so near our contemplated home.  

Esther Hanna
September, 1852

As pioneers reached the end of the Overland Trail, they all shared Esther Hanna's sentiment. Most rejoiced in arriving safely. For some, the happiness was sobered by the tragic loss of loved ones along the way. For all that arrived in the Far West, there was a sense that the worst part of their journey was over. In fact, the Overland Trail was only the beginning of what the emigrants would have to endure.

Lying at the end of the Overland Trail were the promised lands of Oregon and California. For those arriving in Oregon, establishing a claim and developing a farm were the priorities. For those arriving in California before 1849, the plan was much the same. After 1849, however, most emigrants arriving in California went to the mining towns all over the Sierra Nevada in search of their fortunes. This search for wealth led many miners all over the Trans-Mississippi West as new strikes were made in Canada in 1858, Colorado in 1859, the Pacific

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Northwest, Montana and Idaho in the 1860s and South Dakota in the 1870s. The conditions under which those on the farms and ranches of Oregon and California lived were very different from the living conditions of the mining towns. However, emigrants who arrived early, particularly in the 1840s, shared hardships that by the 1850s were no longer much of a problem.

All emigrants, no matter where they arrived or when, faced an immediate problem of the scarcity of resources. The Overland Trail took a great deal of the emigrants’ supplies, livestock and other valuables that they had hoped would get them through the first winter. Many had hoped to bring livestock across the Trail and sell it in California and Oregon, only to have the animals die along the way or have to be used by the family for food. Some emigrants brought valuables to sell when they arrived, but these too were left on the Trail, or could not be sold upon arrival for lack of demand or money. Money was, in fact, quite scarce in the Far West, as most newly arrived emigrants had little or none. Supplies were expensive, and the emigrants lacked the financial resources to replace what had been left behind.

In addition to lacking resources, many emigrants were surprised and discouraged by the conditions they found when they arrived. Many were not expecting to come out of the wilderness of the Overland Trail, only to find themselves in more wilderness. Early settlers in particular found no towns and

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2 Ibid., 132.
3 Ibid., 67.
few neighbors. These conditions caused one emigrant from Missouri to say, "After the way we had suffered and struggled to get here I had all I could do to keep from asking George to turn around and bring me back home." Returning home was not an option for the emigrants since they had no resources. The only option they really had was to find a good claim and begin the painstaking task of establishing a home.

Finding a good claim was not always easy. Many emigrant families had to move several times before finding the right land or the right job. During this time of transiency, home was usually a tent, a small shack or cabin, a hole, or the family wagon. One pioneer recalled her family's first home in the Far West: "During father's trip he had seen two stumps standing a few feet apart and he laughingly told mother she might live in them...She insisted that father clean them out, put on a roof, and we moved in, a family of eight persons." While homes such as the one just described were supposed to be temporary shelters, many emigrants lived in them for months or even years before a permanent home was built. Most women anxiously awaited a more permanent home, but for others, makeshift shelters suited their sense of adventure. Anne Smith wrote in 1853, "...People all lived in tents...before there were houses. I liked it, especially on

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4 Ibid., 68.
warm nights when I could lie and look at the stars. They seemed just above the
treetops and heaven as near us as at home."⁶

Temporary shelters challenged women’s ideals of domesticity, and many became discouraged. Cooking was difficult, as it usually had to be performed over an open fire over a large kettle just like on the Overland Trail. The lack of supplies made providing meals for the family even more difficult, as Maria Cutting recalled: “I assure you we had many privations and hardships to endure and O such makeouts sometimes having to use shorts instead of flour, sometimes sugar sometimes none.”⁷ Virginia Wilcox Ivins remembered her first home in Petaluma, California:

...the month of February found me just able to begin housekeeping in a small cottage of two rooms which my husband had built, lined with cloth and papered, poor and cheap as it was, it was a veritable palace to me, for was it not my home after six months spent in an ox wagon.⁸

Many other women did as Virginia did, papering the walls with old newspapers, using old dresses and rags for curtains and rugs, and planting trees and flowers outside. Women did whatever they could to make their new homes feel cozy and

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⁷ Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 70.
comfortable. The fact that these women were pleased and proud of what few improvements they made to their crude homes is testified to in many diaries and letters. Virginia was able to appreciate her small home, for it was better than an ox wagon. Rachel Haskell comments to her diary in 1867 about how good her home looks to her:

How comfortable and cozy the sitting room did look this evening by twilight. The shelves laden with books, specimens, minerals, shells. The piano, the sewing machine, comfortable sofa and easy chair, with healthy, happy, prattling, chippy, little children all from Manie to Ella (again).10

Women in the Far West valued any small convenience or gadget. For Mary Murdock Compton, it was a flour bin on wheels. Her Chinese cook once commented on the delight she took in the flour bin, “I think you take that box with you when you die.”11 Women understood the difficulties of settlement, and did what they could to make a house seem like home and to make the family comfortable. As Margaret Wilson wrote to her mother in 1850, “You will wonder how I can bear it, but it is unavoidable, and I have to submit without complaining.”12 Most women believed the privations of early settlement were temporary, and this enabled them to have hope for a better future and thus endure more cheerfully.

9 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1979), 173.
10 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 61.
11 Ibid., 90.
12 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 70.
A more difficult problem for women to overcome in the early years of settlement was loneliness. Homes were isolated from each other and making friends with other women was difficult. In addition to the isolation, men outnumbered women in every area of the Far West for the first ten years or so of settlement. Even in Oregon, where a great many families chose to go, women were outnumbered by men, one hundred thirty-seven to one hundred. Also, many women had come west without extended family and friends, making the isolation seem even worse. It is no wonder Nellie Wetherbee lamented to her diary: “I have been very blue for I cannot make a friend like mother out of Henry...It’s a bore— and Mother is so different and home is so different...Oh dear dear.”\(^1\)

Mollie Dorsey Sanford echoed Nellie’s feelings for home and family, “My sweet sweet home! Why did I ever leave you in the stranger’s land to dwell?” Sarah Hively said simply, “I never was so lonely and homesick in all my life.”\(^2\) Real isolation did not last more than a few years in most parts of the Far West. As more and more emigrants arrived, women were able to find friends with similar interests close by. By 1852, Rebecca Ebey could write about Whidbey Island, off the coast of present-day Washington State, “We have plenty of company four families of us here 12 children.”\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Ibid., 73.
Women in the Far West, particularly during the period of early settlement, often had so much work that they did not have much time to feel lonely. The first priority and primary responsibility for women was the establishment of a home and the care of the family. The ingenuity of women in establishing a home out a crude shelter has already been described. However, women were also the primary care providers for their children. The vast majority of women in the Far West were married and had approximately five children in the household. While this number does not include children who died in infancy or children who were grown and lived away from home, it certainly seems that families in the Far West were not nearly as large as previously believed. In fact, women had access to and practiced many different forms of birth control, from special devices sold through magazines to homemade potions, wives tales, and the most common form, the rhythm method. Evidence that both men and women knew about and practiced birth control is shown in a series of letters between Maggie Brown and her husband Charles. Charles was living in Colorado, and was sending for Maggie and their daughter to join him. The date of Maggie’s arrival, to be during her “safe time” was very important to both of them. First from Maggie to Charles in April of 1881: “Send the money you have & I will come right on. Send it as soon as you get this...I was taken sick (began menstruation) this mor’n’ so see, I must hurry up.” In June of 1881, they are still trying to get the time right, as this letter
from Charles reveals: “...Try and get here by the twentieth of next month and I will be ready for you then, and I think that you will be ready for me by that time.”

Many women realized the advantages of a smaller family. Mollie Dorsey Sanford expressed her opinion, “Will I be a happy beloved wife, with a good husband, happy home, and small family, or an abused, deserted one, with eight or nine small children crying for their daily bread?” While the practice of birth control may seem at first to oppose the domestic ideal, many women believed it helped them to be better mothers. As Mollie implies, a woman would be able to provide a happy home and food for a small family much easier than for a large family.

Women in the Far West, in addition to controlling the number of children they had, also held the upper hand when it came to choosing a husband. Many letters from women in the Far West to female relatives and friends back East attest to the scarcity of women and the attention they received in the West. Women were able to bide their time until the man with the best offer came along. Many women waited until later in life to marry. Other women comment that while there was an abundance of men to choose from many women still married young. Mary E. Ackley observed, “It was customary in the early days for girls to marry at fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years of age.”

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17 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 75.
18 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 232.
when they married, most believed in the domestic ideal of the nineteenth century. Susannah Willeford resolved “to devote my time, life and energies to the welfare and interest of my family.”¹⁹

Susannah’s resolve seemed to be echoed by most women living in the Far West. The family was indeed seen as the center of pioneer life. The family worked together, encouraged each other, and struggled through hard times together. Harriet Francis Behrins, who lived in Quartzburg, California in 1851, comments about being initially discouraged. However, she acknowledges her husband’s effort to cheer her and credits him for making it easier for her to cope. “The enthusiasm and irresistible spontaneity of my partner in life was contagious, and my dear child’s good health and budding fancies whiled away many happy hours.”²⁰ Harriet’s obvious delight in her child is also typical of women in the Far West. Although it has been believed that women in the nineteenth century avoided becoming too close to their children, this simply was not the reality. Numerous diaries and letters to relatives and friends share cute stories of the antics of children, from their first words and sentences to their helpfulness around the house. Carrie Williams shared a story of her son Walla with her journal: “Wallace just now came in to tell me that he was lying on the lounge with Walla playing around when he called him to bring him a drink of water, which the little

²⁰ Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 30.
Women were devoted to their children; worried for them when they were sick, and mourned them when they died. Susanna Townsend wrote home to her sisters the many delights of her first surviving child, including her husband's delight when she smiled at him for the first time: "...Bless her little heart he exclaimed she is smiling at me."

However, in the same letter home Susanna writes about the baby’s death: "At any rate we did feel very happy with her all the time she was with us and it was hard to part with her--" 22

Despite the high rate of infant mortality, women and children both attempted to become close. Sarah Bixby-Smith, who grew up on a sheep ranch in San Juan Bautista, California in the 1870s, comments on how close she and her mother were and the time she enjoyed with her:

Several spring mornings as I grew older, I got up at dawn with Mamma, went to the early empty kitchen for a drink of milk, and then went out with her for a horseback ride, she in her long broadcloth habit and stiff silk hat, and I, a tiny timid girl, perched on a sidesaddle atop a great horse. From the point of view of horsemanship I was not a great success, but the joy of the dawn air, the rising sun, the wildflowers, the companionship of my mother is mine forever. 23

Sarah also remembers the songs her mother would sing to her and the lessons they taught her about death and mythology. "The songs were not gay, but my life was

21 Ruth B. Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp, So Much to be Done (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 70.

22 Levy, They Saw the Elephant, 76.
23 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 249.
not troubled by thoughts of death. Heaven seemed a nice place, somewhere, and angels and fairies were normal parts of my universe."

Mothers took upon themselves the responsibility of educating their children at a time when schools and churches were often out of reach. Rebecca Ebey of Oregon taught her children, "We...spend our time in training the young minds of our children in the principles of Christ and creating within them a thirst for moral knowledge." Rachel Haskell comments almost every day in her diary about some intellectual stimulation and training she gave her children in Aurora, Nevada:

Work thru, gave Ella lessons on news page of Linda March. We have been rather musical today, piano open all the time...heard Dudley and Harry recite the multiplication table and count figures. Ella read Gulliver's Travels aloud to the boys. . . Ella and Harry went to the P. office after dark. Brought Harpers mag. For March and a volume of Hawthorne "Our old home."

Rachel’s family was like many, subscribing to magazines and buying books whenever possible to keep up with outside news as well as to teach their children to read.

In addition to receiving an education from their mothers, children in the Far West were expected to help her around the house. In fact, work was considered a lesson in and of itself. Sarah Bixby-Smith did not spend all her time with her mother riding horseback. "It was deemed wise to keep me occupied, so far as

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24 Ibid., 250.
26 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 58-59, 63.
possible, in order to thwart Satan, ever on the lookout for idle hands. So I was
taught to sew patchwork and to knit, to read and to spell.”

Mary Ann Norman Smallwood commented, “You will gather from what I have related that work and
plenty of it was the lot of pioneer children.”

Children were employed around the house for various tasks, but as they grew older their tasks became increasingly
separated along the lines of sex. As boys grew, their fathers took over training them to take on male responsibilities. As one woman explained, “When little boys become old enough to do some work they need a father to show them and to push them forward to make them industrious.”

Girls, on the other hand, remained with their mothers and learned to keep house. Amanda Gaines understood why she was helping her mother. “I assist Mother in house-hold duties which are various. She is preparing me for a farmer’s wife.” Boys also understood the separation between men and women’s work, sometimes going to extremes not to cross the boundary. “Margaret Isabell’s sons...teenagers...[who] had held their mother up so she could milk the cow. She was still weak from the birth of the baby, but milking a cow was ‘woman’s work’ so they would not do it.”

Women as well as men encouraged their children to remain within the boundaries of their male or female spheres.

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27 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 251.
29 Ibid., 91.
30 Ibid., 90.
Despite the attention children received from their parents, many got very sick or suffered accidents. The mining towns tended to be very difficult and dangerous places to live. Harry Faulkner wrote from Colorado in 1859, “The hardest sight...is to behold four or five women with families of little children washing and cooking in the broiling sun and obliged to cut their own wood.”

Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, otherwise known as Dame Shirley, wrote, “This is an awful place for children, and nervous mothers would ‘die daily.’” Children would accidentally fall into mineshafts or streams, get run over by horses and wagons, or swallow poisons stored around the house. Disease was also rampant, particularly cholera, diphtheria, influenza, measles, scarlet fever and meningitis. Maggie Brown’s only daughter, Mattie, died after a five-day struggle with scarlet fever:

Our darling has taken sick Sunday afternoon. She said “mama my throat is so sore I can hardly swallow,”...Then in a few minutes a high fever came on & an eruption down her back looking something like measles. By nine oclock she complained of pain in her stumac & throwing up everything I gave her to operate on her bowels...Dr. B thinks it scarlet fever & if it is it is in a most malignant form...Pray for me if I should lose her I will need them.

Mattie died the following Thursday evening. John Taylor Waldorf remembered his upbringing near Comstock Lode. “To be raised in a mining camp means an experience as full of thrills and wounds and scars as going to war.” You who have

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31 Armitage and Jameson, The Women’s West, 184-185.
32 Ibid., 186.
33 Schlissel, Gibbens, and Hamsten, Far from Home, 152.
tried it and have survived its perils deserve service medals.” In addition to the physical perils in mining camps, the young were very susceptible to moral perils, as observed by Louisa Walters of Idaho: “This is the hardest place to live upon principle I ever saw, and the young are almost sure to be led away.”

As suggested by Louisa Walters, the Far West often led children away from their families. While many families were able to maintain their ties and remain close, others fell apart under the various stresses of frontier life. An example of such upheaval is the family of George and Abigail Malick. The Malick’s children were older, in their teens or fully grown, which may help to explain the ease of the upheaval. At any rate, one by one, Abigail lost her children and her husband. The first loss came when they went to Oregon in 1848, leaving behind a married daughter. Abigail tells her daughter in several letters how one by one the family separates. The next separation occurred when her son Hiram drowned along the Overland Trail. He was only seventeen.

. . .he swam across the river and the water run very fast and he could reach the shore. . . .the other boys called to him and said Ohiram Oh swim and he said Oh My god I cannot eney More they said he went down in the water seven or eight times before he drowned and then he said Oh My god Oh Lord gesus receive my Soal for I am no More. . . . It has Almost kild Me but I have to bar it And if we are good perhaps then we can meet him in heven.

After the family arrived in Oregon their son Charles went to California to seek his fortune in gold. Abigail’s letter to her daughter tells her “your brother Charles he is Dead too, he Died in California….he was A coming home.” After this incident

34 Armitage and Jameson, The Women’s West, 186.
the Malicks were able to enjoy several years of prosperity. Their daughter Rachel was married in 1852, but in 1854 she died while giving birth to twins. During the same year, George Malick died and Abigail was left with one son and two young daughters.

Abigail Malick's remaining son, Shindel, was led astray by the vices of frontier life. He rarely helped his family, preferring instead to gamble. "After your father died Everything was Left on My Hands and Shin would go off to town and stay away when I would have anything to do....This winter I had to go and chop wood Myself. When the snow was three feat deep for I could not get a man to do it." Her daughter Jane married at fifteen and returned a few months later with a baby and experiencing episodes of insanity. Abigail wrote to her daughter that she had "to tak [Jane's] Babe and Not Let Her See it for two or three Dayes at a time and tie Her Down on the Bed and It took three of us to do it." Susan, her youngest daughter, married at sixteen but later divorced because her husband often threatened her. She later joined a traveling theater troupe. "Susan is an Actress in a Fine Theater Group She will Be gone About three Months...They give Susan Twenty Three dollars a weak clear of all expenses and Take good care of Her...They are All Very Nice."

Despite Abigail's attempts to raise her children well, she failed. She blamed her failure on the frontier life: "I have so Mutch trouble with the children.

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They are not like children raised in the States and They have no Father and they will Not Mind Me."\(^{36}\) The frontier life often destroyed domesticity not just by creating harsh living conditions but by destroying the family. Separation, accidents, and death were common to life on the frontier, and women often suffered a personal and social blow when they were unable to be successful wives and mothers.

Another very serious blow to families and the domestic role of women was domestic violence. While domestic violence was not unique to the Far West, conditions in the West often allowed men more freedom, which meant there was less accountability for their actions. In addition to the frontier lifestyle, nineteenth-century society often ignored the mistreatment of wives by their husbands. Although women were meant to be under the protection of men, for many women this submissive state rendered them defenseless if the men who were supposed to be protecting them turned on them. Women had little social or legal recourse, and often the stigma of abuse kept women from saying anything about it. Since on the frontier women were isolated from neighbors, friends and family, they had no one to turn to for emotional support. Daughters were also abused, at times, creating a pattern of violence throughout the family. This pattern of violence often caused a separation between women within the family rather than a

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bond because daughters learned to resent their mothers and reject their own femininity.

Mari Sandoz, in Old Jules, described her father’s treatment of his four wives. He believed it was his right to discipline his wives if they were disobedient or lazy. When Jules’ first wife disobeyed an order, “Jules closed her mouth with the flat of his long muscular hand.” When his second wife complained about his laziness, “his hand shot out and the woman slumped against the bench.” Mari Sandoz’s own mother asked Jules to help with the farm work, and his response was, “‘You want me, an educated man, to work like a hired tramp,’ he roared, and threw her against the wall.” Jules did not take into account the feelings of his wives. He believed women were to be exploited, used and controlled. Men and society sometimes saw marriage as a purchase of property, the marriage license like a bill of sale. Agnes Smedley’s Daughter of Earth described how this attitude could eventually destroy a woman’s sense of self worth. The character, Ellie Rogers, endured years of abuse at the hand of her husband. She passively responded, “I don’t need nothin’. I don’t go nowhere and I don’t see nobody.” In a sense, she has disappeared. Women like Ellie were tied to their husbands by the need for financial support for themselves and their children. Women who were victims of abuse often ended up begging the perpetrators of the abuse to stay with them. This pattern of abuse and humiliation carried on to the children, with girls either swearing off marriage or marrying an abuser, and boys often becoming
77 perpetrators of abuse themselves. This pattern continued to break down the family over several generations. It is, however, very difficult to know exactly how many families endured domestic violence since there are very few written records on the subject. However, the existence of a few sources testifies to the fact that it did occur, just as there are written sources about men who treated their families well. Thus, family life in the Far West, as elsewhere, had both positive and negative sides.

The family, as already discussed, was the domain of women and under normal nineteenth-century domestic conditions, all of women’s concerns and cares were to revolve around the home, husband and children. The conditions found in the Far West, however, were far from normal and women adjusted their behavior accordingly. Just as they had done on the Overland Trail, women in the Far West took up men’s duties in addition to their own. Usually this was not done by choice, but from necessity because hired help was difficult to find and few newly arrived emigrants could afford to pay help anyway. In the absence of hired men, women helped their husbands dig cellars, build cabins, plant and plow the land. These chores were taken on in addition to domestic chores such as sewing, cleaning, washing, cooking and baking. Chores outside the home were also regularly performed by women, such as keeping the family’s vegetable garden, and caring for the cows and chickens. Sometimes the men would be away from

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37 Armitage and Jameson, The Women’s West, 111-117.
home for months at a time, and women were left with the responsibility of the family and the farm. As one pioneer wrote: “As we live on a farm whatever is done I have got to attend to and so I have a great deal of out doors work.”

Women often became involved with the production of items that could be sold. Virginia Wilcox Ivins made butter and cheese on her and her husband’s dairy ranch in Petaluma, California. “Making butter and cheese is no child’s play, although I had plenty of help and every convenience for making it as easy as possible, and it brought in lots of yellow gold.”

As suggested by Virginia Ivins, women not only worked, but their productivity contributed to the family’s well-being and survival. The money women made from selling eggs, butter, bread, and from sewing often saw the family through hard financial times. While her husband prospected in Colorado, Augusta Pierce Tabor made money for the family in town: “Mr. T. went on to Spanish Bar and went prospecting. I opened an eating house; also made pies & bread to sell, and sold milk from the cows we had driven across the plains. I was very busy every moment from early morn until late at night, finding much more than busy hands could do.”

On the mining frontier, in fact, women could often do much better than men because of the demand for the products of women’s

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38 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 78.
39 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 81.
40 Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp, So Much to be Done, 142.
labors. Luzena Stanley Wilson discovered a miner who was willing to pay ten dollars for a biscuit made by a woman. "In my dreams that night I saw crowds of bearded miners striking gold from the earth with every blow of the pick, each one seeming to leave a share for me."41 Luzena was not the only woman in a mining camp to think of cooking for the miners. Margaret Frink, upon arriving in the mines, wrote, "I began at once to figure up in my mind how many men I could cook for, if there should be no better way of making money."42

Many women in the mining camps turned their dreams into reality and made a great deal of money serving the miners. After discovering the miner who was willing to pay ten dollars for her biscuit, Luzena Stanley Wilson started a hotel the very day she arrived in Nevada City, California:

As always occurs to the mind of a woman, I thought of taking boarders. There was a hotel nearby and the men ate there paid $1 a meal. . . . With my own hands I chopped stakes drove them into the ground, and set up my table. I bought provisions at a neighboring store and when my husband came back at night he found. . .twenty miners eating at my table. Each man as he rose put a dollar in my hand and said I might count on him as a permanent customer. I called my hotel "El Dorado."43

Luzena’s business grew, and she served seventy-five to two hundred boarders at twenty-five dollars a week, and also began handling gold dust for the miners and lending money at high rates of interest. "I became luxurious and hired a cook and

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42 Ibid., 147.
waiters.... Many a night have I shut my oven door on two milk-pans filled high
with bags of gold dust and I have often slept with my mattress lined.... I must
have had more than two hundred thousand dollars lying unprotected in my
bedroom.”

Some women were not fortunate enough to have hired help, and instead
performed all the duties in the house. Mary Jane Megquier ran a hotel in San
Francisco and was quite successful, but she wrote to her daughter back east about
the difficulties of running a busy household:

Some days we have made fifty dollars but I have to work mighty
hard, a family of twelve boarders, two small rooms with very few
conveniences. We came to this house the third of July I have not
been into the street since. . . . I intend to stay only long enough to
make a small pile of the dust which will not overrun two years....
It is the most God forsaken country in the world, not one redeeming
trait excepting gold. . . . I do not sit down until after eight o’clock at
night and three nights out of the week I have to iron. I do not go to
bed until midnight and often until two o’clock. . . . [There are] twenty
in the family.”

Keeping a hotel was only one popular way women made money in the Far
West. Dame Shirley told of Mrs. B., a sixty-eight pound woman who “earnt her
old man (all of 21 years old) nine hundred dollars in nine weeks, clear of all
expenses, by washing! . . . To look at the tiny hands of Mrs. B. you would not
think it possible.” In addition to taking in washing, women sewed, taught
school, tended babies, and worked as cooks and waitresses in hotels and

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44 Ibid., 61.
45 Polly Welts Kaufman, Apron Full of Gold: The Letters of Mary Jane Megquier from San
Mary Matthews arrived in Nevada in 1869, a widow with a young son to support, to take care of some legal problems relating to her deceased brother's property. In the ten years she lived in Nevada, Mary performed nearly every kind of work imaginable for a woman in the Far West, and she was able to support herself, her son, and pay her legal fees.

In all I had twenty to wash for, and it brought me about $8 a week. This, with my sewing, just about supported me, for provisions were very high. In time my school numbered twenty. I now was able to lay up a little every week till I had $35 to fee a lawyer... Another very lucrative source of income was baby-tending, and it was also very pleasant, unless the baby happened to be a cross one-then I earned my money. Here I fitted up two rooms to rent, and asked $12 a piece for them. I paid $12 for the house. The rent of the two rooms, with my sewing allowed me to drop my washing and school... 

Mary Matthews was not unique in being the sole provider for her family. Mrs. J.W. Likins became a saleswoman for Bancroft's Bookstore after a fire destroyed her family's home and her husband and daughter became sick. Mrs. Likins attested in her autobiography that while most people she encountered were kind, and many ordered books and engravings from her, there were others who very bluntly let her know they did not believe a woman should be working outside her home:

Here I met a gentleman from the country, who was trading at one of the wholesale houses; he seemed very angry to think a woman should be selling pictures among so many men. He said I looked old enough to be married and have a family, and ought to be at home taking care of them.

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46 Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, 62.
47 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 179, 182, 185.
I told him I knew I looked old, but he need not remind me of it; that I had a family and was trying to make an honest living for them. Other men she encountered equated her with women’s rights activists and temperance speakers:

“You d—- women think you will rule the country. There is a clique of you who go prowling around having secret meetings, lecturing all over the country on women’s rights; here you are roaming around with that d--- picture of that loafing Grant. There was one of your clique in here the other day, lecturing on temperance. I told her in plain English to leave my shop; I would have no women’s rights around me.”

Mrs. Likins responded in kind: “Thank you for your hint; I am not in your shop, nor do not intend crossing your door-way for fear I might become polluted, for you certainly are the most profane ruffian I ever met.” Her responses to criticism of her occupation as well as her wares were quick but always dignified. Mrs. Likins would later travel into areas surrounding San Francisco such as Santa Clara and San Joaquin counties to sell for Bancroft’s, and was able to support her family for six years.

Both married and single women were able to find work in the Far West, but some chose a less respectable form of employment. Prostitution was an extremely popular vocation for women throughout the West. Some operated out of brothels and appeared educated and high class. Others operated out of their home, called cribs, and were rarely respected even by the miners who paid for their services.

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48 Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp, So Much to Be Done, 49.
49 Ibid., 50.
50 Ibid., 50.
Prostitution was able to remain so popular because women, any and all women, were rare in the Far West and were consequently in high demand. However, prostitutes were not the only women who received attention from men. Even married women occasionally entertained men in their parlors, discussing books, music, home or whatever interested them. Rachel Haskell wrote about one such evening in her diary: “Had a spirited evening. It was exciting to meet two new gentlemen both good looking and interesting. . . . Talked of books.”\textsuperscript{51} Eliza Wilson remembered the attention she received just by her presence: “Even I had men come forty miles over the mountains, just to look at me, and I never was called a handsome woman, in my best days, even by my most ardent admirers.”\textsuperscript{52}

While some of this attention may seem disrespectful, in reality the lonely men of the Far West were desperate for the company of women, particularly families. Joel Brown echoed the sentiment of many miners when he wrote: “I expect that you will think. . .that I am crying to see my wife. Well suppose I am and what then? I am not the only one that is crying to see the wife and baby.”\textsuperscript{53} Men, especially married men with families left back east, were looking for the company of ladies and behaved very respectfully in their presence. Dame Shirley observed that “The most vulgar blackguard will abstain from swearing in the presence of a lady.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998), 160.
\textsuperscript{52} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1979), 126.
\textsuperscript{53} Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998), 146.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 160.
In fact, several women attest to the good behavior of men in their presence. Luzena Stanley Wilson recalled the change in the miners’ behavior whenever she was nearby:

It was a motley crowd that gathered every day at my table but always at my coming the loud voices were hushed, the swearing ceased, the quarrels stopped, and deference and respect were as readily and heartily tendered me as if I had been a queen. I was a queen. Any woman who had a womanly heart, who spoke a kindly, sympathetic word to the lonely, homesick men, was a queen, and lacked no honor which a subject could bestow. Women were scarce in those days.  

Harriet Francis Behrins enjoyed the company and treatment from the miners so well that she did not seem to mind the lack of female companionship. “During the two years that followed...I did not, with one exception, see a white woman. Men on all sides, but none but Indian women.” She did not feel she was suffering, “situated as I was amidst beautiful scenes of nature, recipient of the simple gallantry of the men, who catered to my slightest wish.” At one point, the people at the camp where Harriet lived were short on supplies and a group of men risked their lives to cross a swollen creek to bring back food. Upon their return, one of the men brought Harriet’s husband some bread, butter, and meat, saying “Here is something the little woman can eat.” The consideration so touched Harriet that she “...broke down and cried like a child.”

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55 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 155.
56 Ibid., 30.
57 Ibid., 34.
Luzena Stanley Wilson, who remembered the early miners very fondly and sympathetically, also observed the gallantry with which the men behaved toward women:

Brave, honest, noble men! The world will never see the like again of those “pioneers of 49.” They were, as a rule, upright, energetic, and hardworking, many of them men of education and culture. . . . The rough days which earned California its name for recklessness had not begun. There was no shooting, little gambling, and less theft in those first months.\(^\text{58}\)

That women were highly valued in the Far West is attested to in the writings of both men and women. Women were valued for the services they provided, such as a semblance of home, cooking and cleaning, and also for bringing culture and civilization. Women were also valued merely for their presence, for bringing beauty and respect to the frontier. Women enjoyed the attention and appreciation they received from the miners. For most women, it was probably the first and last time they would ever feel appreciated for their domestic work. At a time when domesticity was the definition of woman, this appreciation not only made women feel good about themselves, it also benefited their place in society as a whole.

Although women were relatively few in number in the Far West, they were able to seek each other out and develop friendships. Just as women on the

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 156.
Overland Trail had easily and quickly become friends with one another, they were quick to welcome a new female settler to the area. Mary E. Ackley recalled meeting one of her best friends when she was only ten years old: “We went immediately to the camp; on a log sat a beautiful black-eyed girl, nine years old. I introduced myself and had a pleasant call. On leaving, I invited her to visit me.” Mary’s friendship with the girl lasted a lifetime: “From the first time I met the little girl until her death recently, a period of a little over seventy years, we were friends.” Western women often ignored traditional social barriers and became friends with many different types of women. Elizabeth Gunn became friends with a New England woman and a Mrs. Yancey from New Orleans, about whom she commented, “seems to have little education...she does not make mistakes in talking, and dresses and acts: as though she had moved in good society.” Elizabeth was also friends with a minister’s wife, and with a Mrs. Lane, whom she described as, “a catholic. I like her as well as anyone I know here.”

In some areas of the West, where Anglo women were far outnumbered, they became friends with women of other races and participated in the social gatherings of their surrounding society. This is particularly true of the desert Southwest. Mary Barnard Aguirre married an aristocratic New Mexican who took her as a young bride to Las Cruces, New Mexico. There, Mary seemed to blend in

59 Ibid., 232.
well with aristocratic New Mexican culture and describes the various celebrations she participated in:

On New Year’s day (1864) my husband & myself were invited to be “padrinos”—(godparents) for the New Years high Mass, which we attended sitting in chairs in front of the altar with highly decorated wax candles in our hands. These were lit & my whole attention was devoted to keeping that candle straight—for I was so interested with the newness of everything that I’d forget the candle for a moment & it would bob over to the imminent danger of my hat.61

Mary also described the traditional Mexican baptism celebration for her first born son, Pedro, and the feasts of each nearby town’s patron saint. She attended mass, dances, and even bull fights.62 Charles and Maggie Brown, also in New Mexico but in the considerably more isolated town of Rincon, bragged about their daughter Mattie’s ability to speak Spanish. Charles wrote “Mattie has a little Mexican boy that she plays with and is learning Spanish very fast.” Maggie wrote “Mattie is learning to talk Spanish real fast. If we don’t know what they say I just call Mattie up and she can nearly always tell me & when she is playing with the little boy she talks it all together.”63 While little Mattie played with the little Mexican boy, Maggie never really became friends with any of her New Mexican neighbors. For some women on the frontier, old beliefs and prejudices died hard. However, in most areas of the frontier it would be only a couple of years before more Anglo women arrived with whom to friendships could be cultivated.

61 Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp, So Much to be Done, 251.
62 Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp, So Much to be Done, 251-252.
63 Schlissel, Gibbens, and Hamsten, Far From Home, 145.
Women came together often to socialize over work such as sewing, quilting, or cooking for special occasions. One young pioneer woman wrote in her diary: “I went to Mrs. Lowe’s quilting There was 15 to quilt had 2 quilts and there was indeed meery faces about them.” Elisabeth Adams suggests women talked while at a quilting: “This afternoon I go to a sewing society at Mrs. Pierces. I suppose the affairs of the town will be discussed over the quilt.” Women not only discussed gossip when they came together, but also talked over problems and comforted one another. Kate Blaine comforted a homesick friend on a visit. The “little frail creature” loved her husband, but “will smother her homesickness and other trials, rather than permit him to know she is not happy. It really seemed a relief to her to be able to tell me how she felt.”

Visiting was an important part of women’s lives and a source of joy to them. Rebecca Ebey wrote about the welcome respite that a visit gave her from her work:

I have been busy all day ironing cleaning up and mend the children’s clothes Mrs. Alexander came over this evening to spend the night I was very much pleased to see her and had been look[ing] for her a long time...Mrs. Alexander is very cheerful and makes me feel much better than I have done to be a while in her company.

Visiting often lasted all day, and sometimes several women would drop by a single house by coincidence and a small party might ensue. Rachel Haskell wrote in her

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65 Ibid., 95.
diary about a day when the weather was nice for the first time in many days and many women were out visiting:

. . . the sun was shining clear thought I’d go to town and make some calls. Called on Mrs. Levy. . . . went next to Mrs. Poors met Mrs. C. there. Would have me stay and spend the afternoon. Sent for Mr. H. to eat supper and we had a lively time till dark. Spent the evening at Mrs. Coopers, quite a number of friends there and the jest ran high and the laughter loud. Had some good refreshments and returned home.66

Women’s relationships were strengthened by the need they had for one another. They were always there for one another during times of illness, childbirth, and death. Although no one expected to be paid, one pioneer woman explained that women did what they could to show their appreciation and thanks to one another: “A woman that was expecting had to take good care that she had plenty fixed for her neighbors when they got there. There was not telling how long they were in for. There wasn’t no paying these friends so you had to treat them good.”67 Edith White recalled how her mother was a trusted nurse for the entire community:

Mother often spent night after night nursing the sick...they all had confidence in Mother. . . .
Mother made many a shroud for her neighbors, and sat up all night doing it. She washed and dressed them and helped to put them into the home-made wood coffins covered with black cloth. Those were sad times for the whole town.68

Women did not just attempt to create new friendships; they cared for their old ones as well. Letters were sent home with news of their daily lives and

requests for information about family and friends. Many times these letters painted a rosy picture of frontier life because women were hoping to convince family members to join them. Louise Swift echoed what so many women thought of frontier life: “I want you all here, then I would be perfectly contented.” In the absence of family and friends women often requested memento from those left behind. Most popular were small photos of loved ones which could be packed around easily from place to place and served as a reminder of those left behind. Abby Mansur wrote to her sister in New England requesting pictures:

If I could have your miniature and Eds and mothers and Phebes I should feel a great deal better do make mother have hers taken without fail and Phebe to I trust you will have regard for my feelings to not fail to put them up to it and do not neglect yours and Eds while in health for health is not promised us you can’t think how happy it would make me to receive your miniatures all at once O how happy I should be.

The relationships women developed among themselves eventually became intricate enough for them to play a role in society itself. As communities began to be built in the Far West, women were at the forefront, organizing themselves to help with various causes. Without the early, informal contact women made with one another, they certainly would not have been able to so readily come together and undertake major projects, and the frontier would not have developed as quickly as it did.

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68 Ibid., 276.
70 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 49.
Almost as soon as emigrants arrived in some areas, they began to develop communities. Women were at the forefront to help organize schools, churches, libraries, clubs, charities and other social and cultural institutions. While women primarily were expected to care for the home, establishing social institutions was not seen as an affront on femininity. Instead, building schools, churches and the like were seen as natural extensions of piety, purity and domesticity. As long as women kept to their natural domains and were not in conflict with men, they could maintain male respect despite their active public role. However, community building was met with many challenges on the frontier, and women had to deal with these challenges in subtle but effective ways in order to bring civilization and stability to the Far West.

The first challenge to community building was that the population of the frontier was heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. Living in the same areas were people from many different parts of the United States and, particularly in the mining camps, from many different parts of the world. These people brought with them their own ideas about religion, education, culture and the like. There were also many prejudices between Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites, educated and uneducated, and rich and poor. These cultural differences often caused conflict among the various elements within a community.\footnote{Jeffrey, \textit{Frontier Women} (1998),132.}
Another challenge to community building, particularly during the early period of settlement, was the transiency of the population. Farmers and ranchers often worked the land for a few years, only to pull up stakes and move on when better land was found. Miners were especially transient, following the boom and bust cycle from mining camp to mining camp throughout the Trans-Mississippi West. These transients had little interest in establishing a community because they would only be living in the area a few months or at most a couple of years. Therefore, they gave women little support in their community building efforts.72

Perhaps the greatest difficulty respectable women faced in trying to build communities was the prevalence of immoral behavior and the unwillingness of men to give it up. Men tended to blame such behavior on the absence of women, not realizing that the absence was often due to their refusal to change. Men tended to believe that it was up to women to change men's behavior. Joel Brown wrote: "I attribute so much gambling and drinking to the fact that there is no women in the country." William Perkins also blamed the lack of morality on the lack of women:

The want of respectable female society, rational amusements, and books, has aided greatly to the demoralization of many whose natural character would have kept them aloof from temptation had there been other means but the gambling tables and drinking saloons to have assisted them in whiling away the hours not devoted to labor. Notwithstanding the best efforts of a man it is impossible not to be more or less infected by breathing continually a tainted moral atmosphere.73

72 Ibid., 141-142.
73 Ibid., 141.
In the diaries and letters of women we find shock, horror, disappointment, and dismay at the immoral behavior of the community. The lack of adequate government added to the problem and crime and vigilante justice was common.

Dame Shirley wrote of the violence in the mining camp she lived in: “In the space of twenty-four days we have had murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, a hanging, an attempt at suicide, and a fatal duel.”74 Harriet Francis Behrins was shocked not only by the vice in San Francisco, but by the fact that it occurred on the Sabbath:

...how shocked and grieved I felt the first Sabbath I spent here, when two men were hung from the building occupied by the vigilance committee, and I did not dwell upon the scenes witnessed, as I wended my way to the house of God. Bands of music in full blast, marching through the streets. Bulls decorated with gay ribbons, on their way to the Presidio, to fight to the death; a mob at their heels; not of the open gambling hells, with gold piled conspicuously upon tables in open doorways, to tempt the weak ones, who had earned their money through hard labor...my heart became heavy with the knowledge of so much evil, and a longing for the refined home life which I had left behind me would pull at my heart strings until the Church was reached. ... I realized then, as never before, the value of true religion.75

While saloons and brothels were thought to be the downfall of young, single men, many married men became involved with what went on there—gambling, drinking and even prostitution. Women whose husbands succumbed to these vices felt their personal domestic sphere was slipping away from them.

Rachel Haskell’s husband often stayed out until very late at night, or did not come
home at all. One night, when he came home very drunk, Rachel punished him by
making him sleep alone: "Papa came home very late with a dreadful headache.
He laid on the sofa saying 'He was never so sick in his life.' Threw up. And I
went to sleep with Ella (that's me you know)." Rachel's husband did what he
could to make up with her. Rachel commented that he helped with the housework,
"Washing easy today, Mr. H. cleaned upstairs," 76 and that he "seems much more
affectionate after spending an entire night away from home." 77

Women like Rachel Haskell did not like the behavior of their husbands, and
did what they could both individually and collectively to force morality on the
community. Sarah Royce recalled a church social where a wealthy man brought
"a splendidly dressed woman, well known . . .as the disreputable companion of
her wealthy escort." The ladies were offended, and appealed to a group of men
who asked the man and woman to leave. "The events of the evening proved to
him, as well as to others, that while Christian women would forego ease and
endure much labor, in order to benefit any who suffered, they would not welcome
into friendly association any who trampled upon the institutions which lie at the
foundation of morality and civilization." 78 This type of social exile was a common
tactic for ladies to use to get the point across to men and women alike that
immoral behavior would not be tolerated by respectable people.

74 Ibid., 137.
75 Fischer, Let Them Speak for Themselves, 28.
76 Ibid., 60.
77 Ibid., 64.
Many men did not support ladies’ attempts to get rid of drinking, gambling, and prostitution. For lonely, bored miners, these pastimes were seen as essential for survival. Even prostitutes were seen by most of these men as “ladies.” Some prostitutes were, in fact, educated, socially knowledgeable, and ladylike. Many of them dressed better than respectable women, taking the money they earned to buy dresses of silk and satin, bonnets, jewelry and other finery. Louisa Cook, a teacher, wrote about these women in a letter to her mother and sisters in Ohio:

Ladies are not plenty. There are a great many in all the mining towns who wear the form of woman, but so fallen and vile, a living, burning shame to the sex they have so disgraced. As soon as the miners began to flock to this country these women began to come out of Portland, The Dalles, Walla Walla, and other places, sometimes a dozen in a drove, astride an Indian pony dressed in men’s clothes, rude boisterous and more obscene than the male bipeds who accompany them. Once here they dress very richly and in gay colors and go by the name of fancy women.79

Such prostitutes were pleasant company for the men living alone in the Far West. Edward Ely first viewed prostitution as “demoralizing to the community.” However, he once found himself on a stagecoach with a madam, and he described the woman, “she...a really good looking girl...[but] had I not known her character would have thought her quite respectable. However, we did not stand upon moralities in a California stagecoach and as she was witty and talkative the ride passed away very well.”80

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78 Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1998), 162.
79 Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp, So Much to be Done, 192.
Some men did assist women in ridding their communities from vice, like the men at the church social who were willing to ask the wealthy man and his escort to leave. One individual in every town who willingly helped women do away with gambling, drinking and prostitution was the local minister. However, as Elizabeth Gunn noted, in many places, even the minister had little influence over the community: “The minister is not regarded with the reverence that was given him at home. They respect his learning as they would that of any educated citizen and think he is a good man, and that is all.”\textsuperscript{81} Despite the lack of influence from the clergy, women were occasionally able to persuade other men to support their causes. Reverend Hamilton described how women in Columbia, California were able to successfully campaign for businesses to close on Sundays. According to the reverend, women collected signatures on a petition and called a public meeting where the contents were read aloud. The merchants took “the matter into immediate consideration and after strenuous efforts on the part of those deeply interested in the object, secured concért of action and closed their stores.”\textsuperscript{82}

Women also fought immoral behavior by providing alternative entertainment such as balls, pleasure excursions, theaters, church socials, and picnics. Men knew that if they wanted to attend these social functions they had to dress appropriately and behave in a respectable manner. William Perkins noted

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. p. 170.  
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. p. 167.
how the presence of women and the opportunity for respectable socializing changed the way men behaved: "the epoch of flannel shirts...disappeared for the townsfolk. We now dress like Christians, and I smile to think of the change as I witness myself equipped in a silken lined cloth frock."  

As women fought against immoral behavior, they began to recreate the social institutions they had left behind in the east. When women first arrived, these social institutions were virtually nonexistent. Dame Shirley wrote her sister of the conditions she found in the mining camp:

no newspapers, no churches, lectures, concerts, or theaters; no fresh books, no shopping, calling nor gossiping little tea-drinkings; no parties, no balls, no picnics, no tableaus, no charades, no latest fashion, no daily mail...no promenades, no rides or drives; no vegetables but potatoes and onions, no milk, no eggs, no nothing.  

Women like Dame Shirley lamented not only the lack of basic commodities but also the lack of society. Through their interpersonal relationships, women began to work to re-establish society.

Often the first social institution women created was a school. At first, women educated their children at home or sent them to a neighbor’s house who was willing to take in several children as pupils. However, as more and more settlers arrived, there grew a demand for permanent schools to be built. Women usually provided the monetary assistance to school building projects, and

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83 Ibid., 161.
84 Armitage and Jameson, The Women’s West, 182.
organized fundraisers for the whole community. Tabitha Brown, a woman from Oregon, donated land, a house, a bell, and five hundred fifty dollars to a private school. Women also worked as teachers in the newfound schools. They taught reading and writing, morals and manners, and needle-work, drawing, and painting.\textsuperscript{85}

Many of the early teachers were married women living nearby who volunteered their time or were paid by the student’s parents for their work. As more and more schools were built, professional teachers were hired to teach. These professional teachers were usually single women who went into the profession to support themselves in a respectable vocation. Teachers were paid very little, however, and their working conditions were often trying and difficult. They boarded around with their students, living with different children’s families each week, and were often the subject of public interest and occasional slander. Their classrooms were a mixture of many different ages and abilities, and since there was not set curriculum children brought what books they had at home. Attendance was sporadic, and there were discipline problems with some students. To solve these discipline problems, teachers sometimes had to inflict corporal punishment, and occasionally they were brought up on assault charges.\textsuperscript{86} The difficult conditions of teaching made many women decide to marry at the first opportunity rather than dedicate their lives to being teachers.

\textsuperscript{85} Jeffrey, Frontier Women (1979), 89.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 92.
In addition to school building, women played an integral part in church building. Just as they had done for the schools, women lent their financial support to the church. James Waren, a missionary in Nevada City, noted how helpful women's fund raising efforts were: "We received very timely and efficient aid by a Fair of the ladies of this place." Women also lent their moral support to missionaries and ministers who became discouraged. Reverend Gray wrote that a Mrs. Thornton "assured that the result was greater than I was able to perceive. She said she had observed a marked increase in the piety of some of our church members since I came here- that the young people were more interested-that I was well fitted for this place & c." Women recruited the community not only to donate money but also to attend church services, Sunday school, prayer meetings and other functions. It was especially important for women to bring their husbands and children into the church, since most women saw the guidance of their family into moral behavior part of being a true woman. An Oregon missionary wrote: "Some of the female members have husbands who are not professors-who might give much more than they do-that is allow their wives to. Which they would willingly do-but they feel a restraint in that particular —of course the wife must always exercise prudence in such a case." The difficult position of many women is addressed by the missionary. On the one hand, the

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87 Ibid., 130-131.
88 Ibid., 95-96.
89 Ibid., 96.
ideal woman should be pious and pure, and therefore involvement in and support of the church are acceptable and even expected forms of behavior. However, the ideal woman should also be submissive to her husband’s will. If a woman wanted to be involved with church work, she must have permission from her husband, particularly if she intended to donate any money. From the several records of women’s involvement with the church, many women seemed to have been able to win over their husband’s financial support of the church.

Missionary women were often able to achieve more than their lay sisters in the way of church work because they had more support and respect from both their husbands and the community. Missionary wives were able to put their religious work before their domestic work, and so were not as torn in their priorities as lay women were. Missionary wives had to be extremely social, and always entertained guests. Reverend Atkinson wrote of the importance of being friendly: “In a new country it is difficult to avoid company unless we become boorish and inhospitable and the minister cannot consistently be either. It is very important for me to have visitors.” Because missionaries were paid very little, their wives often had to work to help support the family. Milton Starr, a missionary in Tacoma, wrote about his wife’s efforts to earn money: “Our first effort here was to instruct a few of our neighbors children in our own house. My wife is now teaching. . . about 12 schollars on average. . .this helps a little by way of support.”
Missionary wives also sold butter and took in boarders to support their families so their husbands could continue their field work.  

While schools and churches were important social institutions for women to be involved with, they also organized clubs and charities for other causes. Mary Staples wrote about the women in her area organizing to create a library: “Through the efforts of the ladies in 1860, a purchase of 150 volumes was made as the beginning of a free library.” Women also formed Literary Societies during which they met to discuss literature and other cultural interests.

Charity was one of the most popular areas for women to involve themselves in. There were some protests about women’s involvement in such a public role as charity. Elizabeth Thurston posed such a question: “What can women do? Will she not overstep the bounds of propriety if she ventures into the arena of action.” However, most women and men supported women’s involvement in charity work.

Ladies Aid Societies and Sanitary Aid Societies were first formed during the Civil War to help soldiers and their families. Other local women’s groups were formed even before the Civil War, such as Mrs. A. B. Eaton’s San Francisco Ladies’ Protection and Relief Society. Founded in 1853, Mrs. Eaton’s group was to help “all respectable women in want of protection, employment in families or as

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90 Ibid., 101.
91 Ibid., 85.
92 Ibid., 182-183.
needlewomen.” It was formed as Mrs. Eaton noticed the suffering of women and their children who had been widowed or abandoned. Mrs. Eaton and other women believed it was their responsibility to help other women since men’s organizations were not helpful and often could not be trusted.\(^9\) While this attitude caused some controversy, the community as a whole respected women’s efforts in the area of charity and were often supportive financially.

Other women’s causes such as prohibition were not well supported by the community. Excessive drinking by men became an increasing problem in the West, and women blamed alcohol consumption for other immoral behavior such as gambling and prostitution, as well as the break down of the family and domestic violence. Most nineteenth century temperance groups did not attempt to reform society on a grand scale, however. Instead, they tried to change the behavior of individuals, believing they could better serve the community while remaining in their socially acceptable private role. After the “Maine Law” was passed in 1851 to prohibit the production and distribution of drink, women became increasingly more public in their efforts to ban drinking. Women began to harass saloon customers and owners, and even attempted to change local laws to prohibit alcohol production and sale. However, men became increasingly threatened by the outspoken and aggressive tactics used by such women, so that prohibition failed to take hold in the West before the twentieth century.\(^9\)\(^4\)

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 186.  
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 188.
The fact that women worked to build communities in the Far West shows that most planned to stay and felt they were living rewarding lives. Many women recorded that while the wild behavior of the West was deplorable, there was also an attraction to it. Martha Hitchcock wrote: "I lead a life of great variety—full of agreeable, and stirring incidents. I think I should find any other country very dull after this." Mary Jane Megquier believed she would "never feel perfectly satisfied with...quiet ways again. Here you can step out of your house and see the whole world spread out before you in every shape and form. Your ears are filled with the most delightful music, your eyes are dazzled with everything that is beautiful, the streets are crowded the whole of the city are in the street." 

Women's experiences in the West inevitably changed them individually. Dame Shirley described herself as a "feeble and half-dying invalid" when she first arrived at the mining camp. A year later she wrote to her sister about herself, "And only think of such a shrinking, timid, frail thing as I used to be long time ago’, not only living right in the midst of them, but almost compelled to hear if not see the whole.” By the time she was going to leave Feather River, Dame Shirley was sad and full of regret at having to leave:

My heart is heavy at the thought of departing forever from this place. I like the wild and barbarous life; I leave it with regret...Yes, Molly, smile if you will upon my folly, but I go from the mountains with a deep sorrow. I look kindly to this existence,

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95 Ibid., 142.  
98 Ibid., 53.
which to you seems sordid and mean. Here, at last, I have been contented. The 'thistle-seed,' as you call me, sent abroad, its roots right lovingly into the barren soil and gained an unwonted strength in what seemed to you such unfavorable surroundings.

Dame Shirley’s transformation from frail New England lady to strong pioneer woman occurred in only a few short months, yet it was complete and her experiences stayed with her for the rest of her life.

Agnes Morley was a young girl when her parents bought a cattle ranch in New Mexico in 1886. Because Agnes was not raised in the East, she did not bring with her as many of the ideas of true womanhood as older women did. Also, she grew up in an area of the West that was truly wild, with few settlements or marks of civilization. Agnes had to rely on her own strength to take care of herself. She carried a gun, and once said, “A six-shooter does give one a sense of security. We had a saying, ‘A six-shooter makes all men equal.’ I amended it to ‘A six-shooter makes men and women equal.’” Agnes was extremely independent, and gave up traditional feminine dress and behavior to fit her more physically challenging lifestyle:

First I discarded, or rather refused to adopt, the sunbonnet, conventional headgear of my female neighbors. When I went unashamedly about under a five-gallon (not ten-gallon) Stetson, many an eyebrow was raised; then followed a double-breasted blue flannel shirt, with white pearl buttons, frankly unfeminine. In time came blue denim knickers worn underneath a short blue denim skirt, slow evolution (or was it decadence?) toward a costume suited for immediate needs. Decadence having set in the descent from the existing standards of female modesty to

99 Ibid., 57.
100 Ibid., 112.
purely human comfort was swift. A man’s saddle and divided skirt (awful monstrosity that was) were inevitable. This was in the middle nineties.  

Although she eventually attended Stanford University and settled in California, Agnes missed her life on the New Mexico ranch and visited as often as she could. For women like Agnes Morley, the wildness of the West was a part of them, and it remained so no matter where they were.

While few emigrants, male or female, could be completely prepared for the hardships and privations of pioneer life, most did understand that at least the first few years would be difficult. Yet most did not regret coming west, despite the difficulties they encountered. Anne Booth’s comments to her diary reflect the general feeling most pioneers had:

I have not for a single moment. . .felt the slightest wavering in my resolution to remain here a few years; and by active exertion, try what kind Fortune may do for us. . .it is true, there are many disadvantages and privations attending life in California; but these I came prepared to encounter, and by no means expected to find the comforts and refinements of home. . .”

Women were used to hard work and challenges, according to Anne: “I know of no single circumstance calculated to annoy or trouble us with which we were not already acquainted; while on the other hand, there are many causes to encourage and induce us still to persevere in this undertaking. . .” The lure of success and perhaps the sting of past failures kept pioneers on the mining and ranching frontier hopeful that the next season would bring success, the next camp would
bring untold wealth. Success did come to some of the pioneers on the mining and ranching frontiers, but not the kind of success they were expecting. Instead, cities were built, American society and culture were established, and settlement completed. Women were active in all aspects of this activity and their efforts changed forever the landscape of the West.

The West, however, did not dramatically change the women who settled there. They remained in the same roles they had held in the East: wives, mothers, teachers, and missionaries. Women had been the traditional builders and maintainers of the home and the local community, and they continued to be. The ways in which they fulfilled their roles had changed, for they were rebuilding their institutions from scratch and therefore had to adjust their traditional values to a new way of life. But the key word here is “adjust.” Western women did not abandon the traditions of Victorian womanhood altogether, they simply modified them to fit into their new surroundings.

\[101\] Ibid., 113-114.

\[102\] Levy, They Saw the Elephant, 59.
Chapter 5

WOMEN ON THE PLAINS AND PRAIRIE

How grateful we are to God, who guided our steps to this wonderful country of the brave and the free, and who has helped and guided us through the struggles and vicissitudes of the pioneer days. May his rich blessings rest on the coming generations as it was rested on the pioneers.¹

Christine Hokanson

Many pioneers on the prairie and plains probably believed, as Christine Hokanson did, that the hand of God was somehow working in their lives, enabling them to survive. Certainly conditions of this region were incredibly difficult, and one wonders if it was not by some supernatural grace that the early pioneers were able to settle Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana. These areas were by far the most challenging frontiers yet to be met by American pioneers. While California and Oregon held gold, fertile soil, and a mild climate, the prairie and plains region was known as the Great American Desert. The land was only good for growing certain crops, and the weather was unpredictable and often violent. It is no wonder so many pioneers went home or moved further west after only a few years, but it is equally a wonder why so many stayed despite loneliness, blizzards, storms, grasshoppers, and other physical and emotional challenges. It is even more incredible that most men who came to the prairie and plains brought their


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families with them, women and children who seemed unsuited to the harsh and inhospitable environment. However, these women eventually overcame the obstacles and created farms, communities, and cities on the prairie and plains, which prospered and are still prospering today.

When the early pioneers arrived in places like Western Kansas, they found wide-open land as far as the eye could see with hardly a tree or hill in sight. Many women were discouraged at the sight of such a barren landscape. However, many diaries and reminiscences also tell that women marveled at the beauty surrounding them. Lillie Marcks, a little girl of seven, remembered her and her mother’s reactions to the prairie when they first arrived: “As we drove on the prairie, Mother and I could hardly stay in the wagon. The wild flowers covered the prairies in a riot of colours like a beautiful rug. How we longed to gather some....” Lillie Marcks also remembered the hospitality her family received from a family already living near them. “We found waiting for us kind neighbors; long tables of boards set up out-doors and were soon loaded with food.”\(^2\) Lillie was not the only pioneer to note the willingness with which already established families helped new arrivals. Emma Hill remembered her family finally finding a suitable home, and a neighbor close by to help her: “There was a family living near our camp in a one-room log cabin with a dirt floor and they kindly let me come in and make biscuits and bake them in her oven.”\(^3\)

\(^2\) Ibid., 43.
\(^3\) Ibid., 47.
Neighbors helped each other often on the prairie and plains. Hattie Wilson recalled how neighbors from the surrounding area came by to help her father and brother build their house:

My father’s and brother’s first work was to build a log house and when they had gotten the logs all out for the walls and ‘shakes’ (long shingles) split from the logs of oak wood and ‘puncheon’ (long thin boards hewed out with an adz from logs) for the floor, they had a ‘house raising’ and all the men in the country, for they had gathered in quickly, were invited to help raise it.4

The tradition of house and barn raising began with the earliest pioneers. However, neighbors continually helped each other build or expand their houses and outbuildings through the twentieth century. On a drive along dirt roads in Neosho County, Kansas, Regina Bradshaw recalled how her husband had taken part in building many of the houses and outbuildings that were passed. When the time came to build his own house, neighbors were quick to return the favor.5 Early pioneers and even later ones understood the importance of working together to overcome the harsh conditions they faced.

In Western Kansas, lumber was scarce and new materials for building had to be imagined. The most available material was dirt, and most early settlers made their first homes from the earth. Some of the homes were really holes dug into a small hill. Others were built using sod bricks fitted together and packed with more soil. While sod houses were practical, cheap, cool in the summer and warm in the

4 Ibid., 51.
5 Regina Bradshaw, Interview by author, August 8, 1993.
winter, they were not very easy to keep clean. One Kansas settler remembered the horrors of her family’s dugout:

Father made a dugout and covered it with willows and grass, and when it rained, the water came through the roof and ran in the door. After the storms, we carried the water out with buckets then waded around in the mud until it dried up. Then to keep us nerved up, sometimes the bull snakes would get in the roof and now and then one would lose his hold and fall down on the bed, then off on the floor. Mother would grab the hoe and there was something doing and after the fight was over Mr. Bull Snake was dragged outside. Of course, there had to be something to keep us from getting discouraged.⁶

As horrible as sod houses could be, women still did what they could to make them homey. Emma Hill was proud of the improvements she was able to make in her new home:

In about a week we had a cabin ready to move into. It had a dirt floor and dirt roof, but I tacked muslin overhead and put down lots of hay and spread rag carpet on the floor. I put the tool chest, the trunks, the goods box made into a cupboard and the beds all around the wall to hold down the carpet, as there was nothing to tack it to. The beds had curtains and there was a curtained alcove between the beds that made a good dressing room, so we were real cozy and comfortable.⁷

Lydia Lyons recalled the improvements she made to her cabin: “The wind whistled through the walls in winter and the dust blew in summer, but we papered the walls with newspapers and made rag carpets for the floor, and thought we were living well, very enthusiastic over the new country we intended to conquer.”⁸ The

⁶ Stratton, Pioneer Women, 53.
⁷ Ibid., 56.
⁸ Ibid., 52.
small improvements women were able to make and the few knick knacks they were able to display helped women feel more at home and gave them confidence in their domestic abilities. Women did not seem to care what kind of house they lived in, just so long as they were able to beautify the inside. Nannie Alderson, a Montana pioneer from a wealthy family in West Virginia, started her married life with her husband Walter and four single cowboys in a one-room lean-to cabin. However, upon her arrival she laid out white oil cloth and bright red doilies on her table, and added her grandmother’s silver and china cups and saucers. Women’s determination to create a comfortable home, no matter what the circumstances, shows how deeply engrained the domestic ideal was in the minds and hearts of nineteenth-century women.

In addition to the everyday difficulties of maintaining a dirt home, women on the prairie and plains had to deal with extreme weather conditions and natural disasters. Prairie fires, violent storms, blizzards, scorching sun, and problems with insects and animals tested the endurance of men and women alike. The fact that women were able to rise to the occasion and act quickly in an emergency shows that they could go beyond a limited domestic role if necessary.

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Prairie fires were extremely dangerous and feared by the pioneers. The fires could ignite and spread very quickly, and pioneers had to move fast to save their homes, livestock, and crops. Every pioneer understood the danger a prairie fire could pose. Harriet Walter was just a young girl when she had to fight a prairie fire:

One day in May I was gathering wild flowers on a hill opposite our house when I discovered fire creeping along the roadside and almost to a meadow which was in front of our house. The grass there was very tall and rank, and I knew, child that I was, that if the fire ever got in there our home was doomed. What would you have done? Well, I took off my petticoat and beat till I was exhausted but every spark was out.1

Women did not allow personal fear or social traditions to keep them from protecting their homes from fire. J.C. Ruppenthal described how his mother fought a fire near their home with as much courage as many of the men gathered around:

A number of neighbors came too and perhaps a dozen or so in all fought the flames for hours and finally subdued them, though considerable good timber was burned over and fine young trees killed. In this fight with fire, fear lent power to mother and she fought without stopping, heeding nothing of the admonitions of the men fighters who assured her she need not work so hard. She wet sacks and carried sacks and smote the flames of burning grass even as any of the men, and ventured into the thickest and hottest of the line where the fire ate steadily into the dry grass.11

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10 Stratton, Pioneer Women, 83.
11 Ibid., 85.
As fearful as fires were in summer, the winter held its own threat of blizzards. Blizzards sometimes hit with no warning, even forming in two or three hours from clear blue sky. They trapped and killed people and livestock alike, burying them inside drifts of snow eight to ten feet deep. Snow blew wildly in all directions, blinding travelers. A farmer could even get lost between his house and his barn if he did not string a rope between the buildings as a guide. Children occasionally were lost and died when blizzards sprang up while they were walking home from school. In addition to the dangers from the blizzard itself, homesteads were cut off from supplies for days for even weeks by a blizzard, and if not properly provisioned, a family could freeze or starve to death. Having plenty of supplies, especially during the winter, was very important.\textsuperscript{12}

One of the strangest natural disasters pioneers had to contend with was the plague of grasshoppers that arrived every few years in the late summer. Many pioneers remember the sun being covered by the silvery insects. Once they alighted, the grasshoppers consumed everything in their path and there was nothing that could be done about them. Crops and vegetable gardens were destroyed, sometimes sending a family into extreme privation. The grasshoppers even ate the wood and cloth in and around people’s homes. Often, the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 92.
grasshoppers laid their eggs and the following year another plague ensued. This was most discouraging, as the grasshoppers frequently came back when the farmers were expecting to recover. However, most stayed and managed to replant new crops the following year.¹³

Grasshoppers were not the only wildlife the pioneers had to contend with. Wolves and coyotes roamed the prairie and plains region, searching for food and sometimes scavenging through the pioneers' stores of supplies. S. N. Hoisington recalled an incident at his neighbor's house where the wolves were much more than just a nuisance:

Mother tried to cheer her up, but she continued to worry until she got bed fast with the fever. At night she was frightened because the wolves would scratch on the door, on the sod and on the windows, so my mother and I started to sit up nights with her. I would bring my revolver and ammunition and axe, and some good-sized clubs.

While the woman was sick the wolves continued to harass them. But once the woman died, they became utterly relentless in their attempts to get inside the house.

After that the wolves were more determined than ever to get in. One got his head in between the door casing and he was trying to wriggle through, mother struck him in the head with an axe and killed him. I shot one coming through the window. After that they quieted down for about a half an hour, when they came back again. I stepped out and fired at two of them but I only wounded one. Their howling was awful. We fought these wolves five nights in succession, during which time we killed and wounded four gray wolves and two coyotes.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 103.
¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

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The courage of the woman in this story to keep the body of a neighbor from being devoured by wolves is an example of the extremes women were willing to go through for other women.

The physical hardships faced by women on the prairie and plains only served to make their already difficult lives more stressful. Women performed a great deal of work, much of which was outside the domestic sphere. Clara Hildebrand recalled the work of pioneer women with the idealism so typical of reminiscences: "What was the work of a farm woman in those early days?... Hers was the work of the Wife and Mother, the Helpmate of her Husband, the Home-maker and the Home-keeper." The reality of women's work was far less idyllic than Clara remembered. Mrs. J.H. O'Loughlin recalled working in the fields: "We prepared the soil for planting with a breaking plow and then used an ax or hatchet to make a hole in the sod, then dropped the seed and closed the hole with our heels." Because women helped on the farm, they became increasingly involved in the details of crops and other farm workings. Clara Hildebrand described how women were very much a part of running the homestead:

The pioneer Kansas woman shared her husband's work and interest in the garden, the orchard, the crops, and animals of the farm; she worked in the garden and gathered its products. She knew just how each vineyard or tree in the young orchard was coming in. She shared in the hopes for a bountiful crop as the field things sprouted and grew green and tall. Did a horse, dog or other farm animal get badly gored, cut or

15 Ibid., 57.
16 Ibid., 59.
wounded, hers was the task to cleanse the wound and take
the stitches that the drew the torn edges together.17

The contributions women made to the homestead were numerous. Millie
M. Shepard often helped the family through years of crop failure with the products
of her work, as her daughter recalled: "Such years as that it was that dairying and
poultry saved the day. Butter and eggs, what would people have done without
them?"18 When crops failed, women sold butter and eggs, sewed and performed
other tasks to earn extra money to see the family through until the next season
when they could try growing crops again.

In addition to the farm work that women took on, they had to perform their
domestic duties as well. Gathering water and fuel were often physically taxing
jobs that had to be performed daily. If the family was not lucky enough to have a
water source nearby, women had to walk to a stream or a pond, sometimes a mile
away, and carry the water back to the house. Even if the family had a well, often
several trips had to be made from the well to the house. For fuel, women and
children gathered buffalo and cow chips in gunnysacks to store and use throughout
the winter. Particularly during the warm months, fuel was collected very often to
ensure the family would have enough for that day as well as a store for the cold
months.19

17 Ibid., 61.
18 Ibid., 60.
19 Ibid., 61-62.
Providing meals for the family was another major challenge for women because of the scarcity of provisions. Women had to have foresight and imagination when it came to planning meals. Harriet Adams recalled the work that went into her family's food preparation:

The provisioning of a large household required constant attention and foresight. Fruit, when it could be obtained, was preserved, dried and canned. Vegetables were stored and meat preserved and smoked, and all the bread and pastries were made in the kitchen, the aroma of mother's favorite blend of coffee, Mocha and Java, as it roasted in the oven on Saturday mornings still lingers delightfully in my memory of spicy odors.\(^{20}\)

Alice Conitz would try to get ahead of her work so it would not be as difficult: "I would start to bake two days ahead; bread, cake, doughnuts, cookies and some pies, so when they came I had just the meats, vegetables, and pies to bake. We would always have a fat hog to kill and that would all be used up in three days. . . and we would have beef from town every day."\(^{21}\) Women also went to considerable trouble to find treats that would add variety to their family's diet. Mrs. F. M. Pearl remembered going across the prairie in search of berries and fruit: "There were also wild gooseberries, wild grapes, chokeberries, pawpaws, wild crab apples, hazel nuts, and hickory nuts if you went far enough to get them, but the one lone fruit on the prairie was the globe apple, which was made into preserves and was very much appreciated on account of the scarcity of fruit."

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 63.

Women also raised animals such as chickens, pigs, sheep and cattle that were regularly slaughtered and prepared for the family’s consumption. Wild game provided a welcome change in the family diet. While the men performed the hunting, the preparation of the meat was left to the women.22

Another important task for women to perform was keeping the family properly clothed. This task involved many steps, including spinning and dying cloth, sewing, mending, washing, ironing, and soap making. With stores far away and ready made clothing expensive, women were relied on to make and maintain the clothing for the family. As previously noted, some women had to sew or take in washing to provide extra income for the family as well.23

While women worked very hard, they did have help from their children. Pioneer children were expected to work hard, often performing tasks as physically strenuous as those performed by adults. While girls traditionally helped their mothers, and boys traditionally helped their fathers, necessity often dictated that these lines be obscured or completely done away with. Margaret Mitchell Womer remembered performing much more than women’s work on her family’s homestead: "There were nine children in our family, six girls and three boys, and as the girls were older and my father not strong, the hard toil of pioneer life fell to the lot of the girls. . . ."24 Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote many times in her "Little

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22 Stratton, Pioneer Women, 64.
23 Ibid., 65-70.
24 Ibid., 146.
House" books that she often performed outdoor work with her father since the family had no boys. The ability to perform men's work well gave women a sense of pride, as Laura described when she helped her father with haying: "Laura felt proud. Her arms ached and her back ached and her legs ached, and that night in bed she ached all over so badly that tears welled out of her eyes, but she did not tell anyone."25

Other young girls were lucky enough not to have to perform men's work. Della Todd wrote in her diary the work that she did around the house for her mother: "This has seemed like a long day. I went to the garden and picked peas for dinner, made a pie, cleaned the milk-room. After dinner I swept the house, done some mending, made cookies. I have begun to believe in the old saying: "Experience is the key that unlocketh many a door."26 Della's last sentence shows that she understood the purpose of her work, to give her experience in home-making that she would take with her when she married.

The heavy workload required of women, coupled by the far flung homesteads and settlements, caused many women to feel lonely and isolated. This feeling was compounded when their husbands went away, even for just a short

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26 Riley, The Female Frontier, 84.
time. Julia Gage Carpenter was extremely lonely on her homestead in the Dakotas. She commented in almost every diary entry about the loneliness she felt:

Frank did not come. I stayed in the house all alone over night. . . .
Frank went to Fargo to see about his ‘Sue claim.’ I stayed alone all day and over night. . . . Alone all day and night again.
Dreadfully, dreadfully forlorn. Can’t stand being alone so much. . . .
Frank gone to gardner, 25 miles, expected to be home tomorrow but it has rained all day and I fear the roads are impassable I have been alone all day and must be here alone all night. (I am frantically lonely. Can hardly endure it.)

With other homesteads far away, or out of sight because they were dug underground, women felt isolated and sometimes even fearful. Anne Bingham recalled how empty the prairie surrounding her home looked at night:

There was just a cotton-wood cabin on the farm with one room and a loft reached by a ladder. There was not a tree, nearer than the little creek, and our nearest neighbor lived in a ‘ravine’ out of sight about a half a mile away. We were as much isolated as if we were miles from a neighbor and not a dwelling in sight. I never saw a light from a home at night all the time we lived on the farm.

The scarcity of neighbors caused some women to become friends with people they would not normally be friendly to, such as Indians. Many white women viewed Indians with distrust and fear, although their fears were often unfounded. Leola Lehman recounted the day she was startled by the visit of a local Indian woman who told her: “I came to see you. I thought you might be

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27 Elizabeth Hamsten, Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 18.
28 Stratton, Pioneer Women, 85-86.
lonesome." Over time, Leola and the Indian woman became good friends, and Leola once remarked that she was "one of the best women" she had ever known.29

Similarly, Delia E. Brown told of a Mrs. Campbell who dealt fairly with the Indians and was greatly respected by them. She was friends with many of the local Indian women, who helped her settle in her new home: "Mrs. Campbell has said, if it had not been for the friendship of the squaws she does not know how she would have survived those first years of loneliness in the little new town on the Smoky." She was so friendly with the Indians, and they so respected her, that one day three Indian women came to her and gave her a little gold ring. "No words can express what that little gold ring meant to me, the love and kindly feeling that was in the hearts of those three Indian women has been a very precious memory to me."30

Even women who had been hurt by Indians in the past often learned to differentiate between the behavior of individual Indians and judge each one on his own merits. One such woman was Nannie Alderson. Nannie's first home in Montana had been burned by Indians because one of the Alderson's hired hands had insulted them. This did not stop Nannie from becoming friends with other Indians. One Indian Nannie and her husband trusted and were friends with was a deposed chief named Little Wolf. Little Wolf took Nannie's children for walks and played with them. He became so close to the Aldersons that when they

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29 Riley, The Female Frontier, 99.
30 Stratton, Pioneer Women, 116-17.
decided to move to nearby Miles City in 1893, the old chief cried. “Your papooses will get sick, maybe die, and I will not see you anymore.” Nannie’s relationship with Little Wolf and other Indians helped to be more sympathetic and open-minded toward them, and it also gave her companionship on the wide and open prairie.

The emptiness of the prairie was frightening to women who were ill or nearing childbirth. While women were usually attended by other women or midwives, their husbands or older children, occasionally expectant mothers were totally alone and had to care for themselves. Childbirth during the nineteenth century could be dangerous even with a doctor in attendance, and women were terrified at the prospect of being alone. However, Annette Lecleve Botkin related one such story, when her own mother was left alone for the day while her father went to town for supplies. Soon after he left, Annette’s mother went into labor, and she had two small children, aged four and eighteen months, home with her:

So my brave mother got the baby clothes together on a chair by the bed, water and scissors and what else was needed to take care of the baby-drew a bucket of fresh water from a sixty-foot well; made some bread-and-butter sandwiches; set out some milk for the babies. And when Rover had orders to take care of the babies he never let them out of his sight, for at that time any bunch of weeds might harbor a rattlesnake. So, at about noon the stork left a fine baby boy.... My mother, having fainted a number of times in her attempt to dress the baby, had succeeded at last; and when my father came in he found a very uncomfortable but brave and thankful mother....

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32 Ibid., 87.
The courage of this woman is astounding, as is the intelligence of the family dog who watched out for the two older children. The fact that everyone involved with this incident survived and suffered no ill effects is a credit to the bravery and quick thinking of the young mother.

Most women did not have to endure such dangers as Annette Lecleve Botkin’s mother did. Women were able to tend one another and sometimes the whole community when illness or childbirth struck. Illness was especially common due to unclean living conditions and poor nutrition. Many pioneers died of diseases such as cholera, malaria, smallpox, typhoid, pleurisy, and pneumonia.

Minnie Michel remembered being sick often, as were many of her neighbors:

As is usual in new countries where much land is newly broken, there was a great deal of sickness of a malarial nature. Few families escaped the ague and fever. We had our full share of ‘the shakes’ and were all taught to take our quinine before the days of capsules. Many were the plans to try and disguise the awful bitter, but with indifferent success. Sometimes the whole family would resemble a temporary hospital with all the nurses sick.33

Because doctors were scarce, women usually cared for the sick. May Crane remembered her mother caring for her own family as well as neighbors, sometimes even acting as a sounding board to people to tell their problems to:

Mother’s nursing ability was not confined alone to the home. She would ride on horseback to the home of a sick neighbor, often taking with her the baby, if her services were required for a length of time. She assisted at births and deaths in many homes and in her calm way was a tower of strength to many

33 Ibid., 72.
in trouble. It was always so easy to tell mother one’s troubles and even to confess one’s sins. She always saw all sides and nothing seemed to horrify her, for she always made allowances for human frailty.\textsuperscript{34}

Women often wanted another woman with them when they were sick instead of a doctor. Nannie Alderson expressed the importance of a woman’s nursing when she was ill and her husband wanted to fetch a doctor: “I don’t want a doctor. I want a woman!” After a neighbor woman arrived, “I simply kept quiet and let her wait on me, and I recovered without any complications whatever.”\textsuperscript{35}

When someone was about to give birth, often a whole community of women would help out with chores as well as the birth itself, as a Jewish woman in North Dakota described:

> When a baby was born, the children in the family were sent to the neighbors to stay for the time, so that the mother could have rest and quiet for the first few days, the only rest many of these women ever knew. The rest of us would take home the washing, bake the bread, make the butter, etc.\textsuperscript{36}

Women needed each other not only in times of illness or childbirth, but also as friends and neighbors. Women were usually very friendly to newly arrived pioneers and helped them settle into their new life. Lois Holman recalled that as soon as she arrived in Sergeant Bluff, Iowa, “the ladies have all called on me that live here in the City which consists the whole of six.”\textsuperscript{37} While there obviously

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{35} Riley, \textit{The Female Frontier}, 101.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 100.


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were not many women in the area, they were extremely friendly to one another. Another pioneer woman described her welcome by the small number of ladies in town: “In all there were just fourteen women in the town in 1869, but they all vied with each other to help us and make us welcome.”

Women’s interpersonal relationships and the tradition of neighbors helping neighbors allowed the far flung homesteads of the plains and prairie to organize into communities with schools, churches, and other social organizations. Just as in the Far West, women were at the forefront of community building, raising money for schools and churches, volunteering or working full time as teachers and organizing social groups and activities.

Although vice did not exist as rampantly as it did in the Far West, partly because it was mostly families that settled the plains and prairies, women still faced some challenges in their attempts to establish orderly communities. While most of the plains and prairie region was made up of farms, ranches, and small towns, there were small pockets where large groups of single men gathered. The reason for this gathering was the existence of cowboys who came regularly from Texas to stations in Kansas to ship their cattle to markets in the east between 1866-1886. These railroad stations soon sported saloons, brothels and casinos where the cowboys could let off steam at the end of the long drive from Texas.

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38 Riley, The Female Frontier, 100.
Women with families in these cowtowns looked upon the vices of the cowboys in much the same disdainful manner as those in the mining camps looked upon the vices of the miners. Frances Poor recalled the violence that accompanied the cowboys when they arrived:

In the latter part of November, 1870, we were sent to Abilene to be night operators during the Texas Cattle Drive to the place. It was then a very small, rough, pioneer town; quite often a person would be shot down in the night, carried away and no one could learn anything about it. I suffered more real terror in the few weeks we lived there than in all the rest of my western life.39

While many women noted the violent behavior and existence of vice among the cowboys, others noticed another side to their behavior. Minnie Lawless remembered the cowboys attending religious services:

There was a school house built in Wano that spring and a Sunday School organized. Services were held occasionally as itinerant preachers passed through. Many times I have seen the little school house entirely surrounded by cowboys mounted their horses, heads close up to the open windows. They listened respectfully and were liberal when the 'Hat was passed.'40

Pauline Floeder Wickham, living near Wichita in the 1870s, recalled the cowboys she occasionally encountered to be courteous and well mannered:

Some of the early settlers had trouble with the cowboys. We found them to be very kind and courteous in their primitive way. Some of them were creatures of feeling and quite a large degree of refinement, for many of them had come from homes in the east and later married [and] settled down.41

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40 Ibid., 219.
41 Ibid., 213.
Farmers just outside the cowtowns saw the arrival of the cowboys as a mixed blessing. The arrival of huge numbers of cattle literally dropped fuel enough for an entire year. Farmers were also able to sell their supplies and stock to outfits who were running low after coming north from Texas. However, the cattle also trampled the crops, ate the forage needed for their own cattle, and sometimes infected their own cattle with disease. However, the cattle drives only lasted a couple of decades, when the railroad was extended into Texas and farmland was enclosed to form ranches. Even when they existed, the cattle drives and the cowtowns did not significantly hinder women's attempts to re-create society on the prairie and plains.

Just as in the Far West, one of the first priorities of prairie and plains women was the creation of schools for their children. During the early period of settlement, schools did not exist and children were educated at home or by a willing neighbor. Emily Briggs was one such neighbor who voluntarily started a school of her own, as her daughter, Anna Briggs Heaney, recalled:

Many of the neighbor children got their first and almost their only schooling from Mrs. Briggs. She taught the simple rudiments of the three R's to a man who has since represented his county in the state legislature. A sheriff of Lincoln county learned to read beside her old cook stove by her buffalo tallow candles' light. One of the foremost district judges of the state is proud to count himself one of Mrs. Briggs' boys.42

42 Ibid., 158.
Often along with schools went the organization of churches. Although full time ministers were hard to find, pioneers met regularly to discuss the Bible, pray, and sing songs. A strong faith in God is a trait many pioneer children recall about their parents. Lilia Day Monroe credits the strength of the pioneers to a strong religious spirit:

How [is it] the pioneers preserved their cheerfulness? You cannot say that they imbided it from each other, they were too far apart. You cannot lay it to the simple fact that they were acquiring homes because, as compared to what they had left when they came to Kansas the huts and dugouts had to be glorified by idealism if they were to be called real houses. No, there seems to be only one source of their cheerfulness, of the sublime courage, of their indomitable determination to conquer and to surmount all difficulties—and that was their simple faith in God. They were not bothered by creeds and dogmas. They took solace of religion as they breathed the pure air of the prairies. They bothered not about the chemical properties of the air that invigorated them. They were not superstitious, not fanatical, but held fast to the promises of the father, and their efforts after getting located were to establish places of worship and schools for their children. 43

Lydia Murphy remembered that even on her family’s first night in Shawnee, Kansas they held their nightly worship service:

That night the family Bible rested in the center of the room. We gathered around the table, seated on boxes and improvised chairs while the usual evening family prayers were held after the reading of a chapter of scriptures. During the fifty years of his Kansas citizenship, this morning and evening scripture reading and prayer was not once omitted in my father’s house. 44

43 Ibid., 171-172.
44 Ibid., 172.
In the early days of settlement, pioneers observed their faith in their own homes as Lydia's family did, or in small groups of neighbors gathered at each other's homes or under a shade tree. Effie Thompson remembered how important these Sunday gatherings were to the pioneers experiencing difficult times:

There was no church, but the scattered families would gather at one of the homes to have Sunday School and to hear an occasional circuit rider. They knew the hardships of frontier life. They felt the pangs of loneliness; but bravery, sacrifice, courage, and true companionship with Jesus Christ made them rich in experiences of neighborly helpfulness.45

Religious services provided not only spiritual renewal but also a chance for neighbors to gather to socialize. Harriet Woodin Comstock recalled the gatherings that occurred often at her house: "There were no school houses nor churches, so religious services were held around at the homes, mostly at our house, as it was larger than common. It had been the custom to stay for dinner, many coming from several miles."46 Lydia Murphy also commented on the socializing that went on at religious gatherings: "...these meetings were social as well as religious and were the only break from the hard toil of empire-building, homemaking pioneers, except an occasional quilting, sheep-shearing or sorghum-making gathering."47

Organized churches meeting in their own buildings and having a full time minister took time, energy and money to create, and these were very lacking in the early years. Itinerant preachers commonly filled the role of full time ministers,

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46 Ibid., 173.
47 Ibid., 175.
traveling from place to place attending neighborhood Sunday gatherings in settlers' homes. Itinerant preachers, or circuit riders, rode horseback from circuit to circuit, boarding with families and relying on their generosity to support themselves and their families. They rarely made a good living, and were often paid in kind; crops, livestock, or anything else people could spare. 48

When churches were built, women were at the forefront of raising money for the building and maintenance of the church. Minnie Campbell recalled the role her mother played in providing money for the church's needs:

We had no organ at our church and no money to get one. My mother agreed to see there was an organ there, and she started a subscription paper. In a few days there was a good organ in the church and it was paid for. Also another time after our church had been newly papered, no one liked the altar, and the man said he would put something there that would be much nicer if they could raise the money. My mother said, 'You fix the altar, and we'll see you get the money.' And today when I see this beautiful altar, I always think of the Mother who wanted her church to be as beautiful as her home. 49

Women were always willing to organize themselves for causes they deemed worthy. Bringing culture to the plains and prairie region was important, and women organized literary societies to discuss literature and to form libraries. A Shakespeare Club in Cheyenne, Wyoming was formed with the following statement of intent: "We, the members of this club realizing that our highest advancement comes through study and that association is an incentive to our own

48 Ibid., 180.
49 Ibid., 178.
best effort to establish this Club for that purpose." Mrs. Ed W. Sayre recalled how her ladies group formed a library:

> Since we had no money to buy books, we asked people to contribute anything they thought was suitable.... In no time at all we had our shelves filled. Books were used more and more.... We organized a Club and rented the front of a store building next door to my home. Members took turns at keeping the library open and soon started money-making projects with a library building of our own as our aim.... How brave and ambitious our little Club was.  

Charity was one of the most common reasons women organized themselves. Although charity was seen as an acceptable way for nineteenth century women to serve the community, they occasionally met with opposition to their plans because their causes sometimes crossed political boundaries. Such a situation arose when the Wichita Ladies Aid Society decided to help their neighbors who were in need during a winter following a drought and locust plague. The men of Wichita refused to allow the women to ask for help from other parts of the country because they were afraid it would discourage emigration. The ladies wrote this letter to the newspaper and were able to persuade the men of the town to change their minds:

> It is absolutely true that there are families in the country whose only safety from starvation lies in the charity of the people... that women and children have no shoes and stockings...that many cabins have no floors, and their inmates at this inclement season place their beds upon the ground. To those who, like doubting Thomas will not believe, we propose to furnish transportation into the country and let them see for themselves....

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50 Ibid., 176.
As far as the injury to the country is concerned by the circulating of the truth, will it hurt the country as much to help these people in their need as to let one man or woman die of cold or starvation?  

Food, clothing, and cash were soon pouring into the area to help the needy families.

Women’s efforts to organize social gatherings were met with warm approval by the communities of the prairie and plains. Women were often at the center of their family’s social and relaxation times, as Katherine Elspeth Oliver remembered: “Our Sunday nights were best of all. Mother used to play as we sat in the twilight and far into the dark, the lamps unlighted. Musingly, her fingers drifted over the keys, weaving from memory a rich medley. Then when the lights were brought someone found the ‘gospel hymns,’ and crowding around the piano we sang.” Special occasions such as weddings were celebrated by the family and also neighbors who gathered from miles around. During these gatherings there was always plenty of food, music, and dancing. Weddings were not elaborate, but they were happy times in the community.

Music and dancing was so popular on the frontier that communities held dances from time to time. Annie Gilkeson remembered the fun she had at the dances she attended: “...I...remember the dances that were frequently given and

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54 Ibid., 135.
to which I was sometimes allowed to go. There I learned to ‘swing around the circle, Balance all’ and dance the Virginia Reel, which I thought the most fun of all.”55 Sometimes the dances were not organized by the community but were thought up by young people. Catherine Cavender recalled the ‘surprise parties’ she and other young people were involved in:

We went ‘Bob’ sleighing and sometimes ice skating but the popular society fad was ‘surprise parties.’ The modus operandi was the young men met and planned the ‘surprise.’ The girls filled big baskets with good things to eat and the crowd descended unannounced on the poor unfortunate victim—sometimes getting them out of bed—and taking possession of the house, danced until morning. Uncle Jack Downing was a favorite victim for he wielded a mighty sassy fiddle bow in those days.56

Catherine also recalled the times friends gathered to go horseback riding:

Our joy rides were horseback rides. Wild dashes across the prairie, the wind painting our cheeks with nature’s red! Western women and girls were expert riders, and one of the best and most graceful riders of the day was Mrs. A. D. Gilkeson. I do not dare tell how the Grandma’s of today used to ‘cut up’ on horseback—you might suspect that Grandma was not exactly shy and backnumberish as she would have you believe.57

55 Ibid., 137.
56 Ibid., 141.
57 Ibid., 142.
As Catherine Cavender suggests in her last joking lines, women on the prairie and plains were often independent and fun loving, particularly those who grew up in the area. Women gathered strength and pride in themselves at the challenges they overcame. As many reminiscences suggest, early pioneers believed they had a special gift of a strong spirit, and this strong spirit survives today in the attitudes of their descendents. Nannie Alderson embodied the pioneer spirit even in old age. Author Emmie Mygatt recounted a story about the last time she saw Nannie. She was so sick, she could not get out of bed, and apologized for not being able to do so. The following day, Emmie returned and found Nannie standing just outside her cabin. “I always want you to remember me standing up.” Not long after she said these words to Emmie, she died at the age of eighty-seven. Her final wish to her family: “I do not want any of you to feel badly; I’ve lived along and full life.” Women on the plains and prairie did lead full and often difficult lives, but they faced these challenges standing up and were able to summon the strength to settle the land for future generations while maintaining their homes and families.

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58 The Western Writers of America, The Women Who Made the West, 26-27.
Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Women were an ever present and active force in the settlement of the Trans-Mississippi West. Until a couple of decades ago, their contributions were little known or appreciated. With the opening of new fields of study such as women’s studies, and the expansion of established fields such as history, women’s contributions to pioneer life have been increasingly examined. Now, most historians would agree that women’s contributions were equally as important as those of men, perhaps even more important. But until very recently, this is where the studies have ended. Stereotypes and glorified legends still obscure our view of pioneer women. The images of the “gentle tamer,” “Madonna of the Prairie,” “prostitute with a heart of gold,” and “Calamity Jane” are still what come to the minds of most people when they think of pioneer women. While certainly a few examples of these images can be found, even in the women studied in this paper, the vast majority of pioneer women cannot be fitted into any of these stereotypes.

The real lives of pioneer women actually speak for themselves, from the pages of letters, diaries, and reminiscences reproduced here in this paper. What these pages reveal is not the stories of helpless women wretched from genteel surroundings and forced to endure an overland journey, privations, and tragedy. These pages do not show the lives of extraordinarily brave women who summoned
courage from their innermost souls to tame the savage west. Equally absent are 
stories of rootin’, tootin’ gunslingers and kindhearted soiled doves who sold 
themselves in the mining camps. What the pages of women’s writings do show is 
everyday women doing what had to be done, and hoping that one day their lives 
would return to “normal” in the definition of nineteenth century femininity.

Women living in the nineteenth century were expected to be pious, pure, 
domestic, and submissive, and the vast majority of the women examined in this 
study lived up to, or attempted to live up to, these standards. Pioneer women did 
not throw off the shackles of womanhood when they entered the West, as has been 
previously believed by many historians and lay people alike. Instead, they tried to 
make the West into a reflection of their more familiar homes in the east. Pioneer 
women created communities, all the while keeping within the sphere assigned to 
them by Victorian society.

These pioneer women attempted to be pious and pure; the many 
condemnations of the loose morals of the people living around them attests to this 
fact. Women traveling along the Overland Trail write in their diaries about the 
horrible behavior of some of the men on the trail, the bad language and the 
fighting being particularly distasteful. Once arrived in the mining camps, few 
diaries fail to mention the saloons, dance halls, prostitutes, gambling, drinking, 
and crime. Women were quick to criticize the immorality that ran rampant in the 
mining camps, and both men and women blamed the immorality on the absence of
"ladies.” On the farming or ranching frontier, women were not inundated with immorality, but they still criticized the improper acts of those who were living around them. Women were quick to organize themselves and fight the presence of bad behavior. For some, the fact that women organized against immorality seems to show that they were becoming politically active or venturing outside their domestic sphere. This is a misinterpretation of these women’s intentions. Women who organized and attempted to bring higher morality to the frontier were protecting their husbands and children from bad influences, and trying to make the community as a whole a moral and safe place to live. Building schools, churches, and community organizations was women’s way of extending morality to the general community, a community that would otherwise be filled with vice and would eventually pollute their families and even themselves. Therefore, women who took such actions felt they were protecting their families’ morality, and fulfilling society’s expectation of pious and pure women.

Pioneer women were also expected by society during the nineteenth century to be domestic and nearly every woman in this study fulfilled this role as well. They were wives and mothers for at least a time in their lives, and they took this responsibility extremely seriously. Women cared for their homes physically, by cleaning, decorating, and even fighting fires. Women cared for their husbands and children by looking after them when they were ill, educating them, and supporting them physically as well as emotionally and spiritually. The pioneer women who
worked outside their homes typically did so only out of necessity, if their husbands were not able providers. More often, women’s work was connected with the family business, ranch, or farm and therefore fell under the heading of “domestic,” even if it was planting crops or milking cows. Women did not abandon the idea of marriage and family, as some historians have argued. Rather, they took on more physical labor on the frontier, but never abandoned their responsibilities to their husbands and children.

Finally, pioneer women were submissive to their husbands. Many who have studied pioneer women have attempted to prove otherwise, but the women’s writings again speak for themselves. Victorian society instructed a wife to submit to her husband’s will, and most of the women in this study did so. However, perhaps a new definition of submissive is necessary to explain the behavior of pioneer women. In the twentieth century, there is a tendency to think of the word ‘submit’ in a very negative light, as if being submissive meant giving up all control of one’s life and placing it in the hands of another, probably selfish and cruel, person. Nineteenth-century women and men did not necessarily define submission in this way. Both men’s and women’s diaries reveal that most men thought a great deal about their wives’ feelings and ideas, and attempted to accommodate them if they could. Some men, to be sure, cared nothing for their wives or children, and were very abusive. But most men involved their wives in the decision making process, and respected their wives’ views. They saw them as
important helpmates. Looking over the writings left by pioneer women, there are examples of women who did not necessarily want to move west, but they did so because they trusted their husbands and soon came to support the idea themselves. There are even women who wanted to move, or who were able to change the family's ultimate destination. Pioneer women assisted their husbands in business as well as farming and ranching, sometimes having to take over for months at a time as their husbands searched for other work or conducted business. This assistance, however, should not be viewed as "taking over." Rather, these women were simply doing what was necessary to maintain the family. Nineteenth century marriages were probably not the power plays that many in the twentieth century believe they were. Marriage was believed to be a partnership, with the wife being perhaps a junior partner, but nonetheless an indispensable part of the family.

Pioneer women, then, did not transform themselves in the Trans-Mississippi West, as many experts have believed. They clung to the ideals society had taught them: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Western women adjusted these ideals to fit the reality they found in the Far West, but they never abandoned them. This study has shown this to be true by using the very words these women wrote down to describe their experiences on the frontier.
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