

## THOUGHTS BY THE WAY

### **THOUGHTS BY THE WAY WOMEN'S WRITTEN PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER LANDSCAPE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Rarely does popular imagery portray the American pioneer woman without her sunbonnet, small child, and fearful disposition. Such depictions, passed through the ages by texts, paintings, film, television, and advertising, are frighteningly misleading. For they suggest that women who traversed the frontier and eventually made a home in the west were merely timid mothers waiting in the wings while their husbands seized land, outdoor appreciation, and all the action.

In order to understand the female experience of the frontier, one must turn to the words and images created by women themselves, through trail diaries written from 1840 into the 20th century. Presenting individual, day-to-day activities, these diaries are a valuable source in accessing the lives of women, otherwise excluded from exploration, politics, and government, as well as historical texts and documents.

In light of modern ecofeminist theory and given the defined roles of 19th century women that often trapped women indoors, this paper focuses on the relationship between pioneer women and the frontier landscape. Did women perceive the place of the frontier differently than their male counterparts? How did women represent these "new" landscapes? What did it mean for a "domestic" women to suddenly make the wilderness her home?

### **BEGINNINGS**

It was 1983: I was a crooked-toothed, skinny sixth grader eager to please my teacher and impress my classmates. The study unit was "Westward Ho!" -- a several month-long history lesson on the American frontier in the form of simulation game, complete with wagon trains, role plays, and daily struggles. My persona was Karen Black, a married mother of six traversing the prairies and mountains of the west to the "Promised Land." I had two tasks: 1) to help the wagon train (the classmates grouped at my table) make decisions based on daily scenarios which were doled out to each team by the teacher, and 2) to keep a running diary of my family's "journey experience."

Seeking authenticity, I carefully covered the plain manilla cardboard cover of a composition book with burlap, then stained with tea and burned the edges of the pages inside. A product of the "Little House on the Prairie" television series, I understood well (or thought I did) the reality of the American pioneer and tried as creatively as I could to express that reality in my own little diary.

Had it not been for my fortunate exposure to diary-writing as a "simulated" history and the nagging question I've been asking most of my life -- "What about the women?" -- my understanding of the American frontier era would be stilted, one-sided, and grossly misrepresented.

Whether one defines it as Frederick Jackson Turner did, as the beginning of what would cultivate the new character of the American people -- as active, aggressive, believers in progress, and

ultimately democratic -- the Euro-American migration to and the settlement of the frontier will always be an important part of American history. Unfortunately, it is a part plagued by myth and stereotype. From high school history texts to 19th century romantic oil paintings to Hollywood's "Westerns" to Marlboro Man advertising, Americans have been presented with a glorified Western frontier space, complete with fringed-legged cowboys, painted Indians, stampeding buffalo, and sunbonnetted women.

Traditionally the frontier has been studied economically, politically, and spiritually -- as a time period in which white men were encouraged to rebel against eastern conservatism and create new policies in new places. While a valid method of study, it is decisively incomplete. The frontier "place" and period had not (until recently) been studied in terms of home, family, culture, and social organization -- spheres frequented, dominated, and defined (whether or not by choice is a different matter) by 19th century Euro-American women.

When and if we find, through medium mentioned above, images of the American pioneer woman, she will likely be portrayed with sunbonnet on her head and a small child on each arm. If we are fortunate enough to read about her, she will be labelled the gentle tamer, the helpmate, the hell-raiser, the mother.<sup>1</sup> Women who did not fit these images, "such as prostitutes, suffrage proponents, and pseudo-men were essentially dismissed by being reduced to outright caricatures."<sup>2</sup>

Such images are "passive," presented to us primarily through the analyses, writings, and art of men. To learn about how women perceived the frontier, we must examine more than what has been presented (by men) as the female role in that space. We must consider the female perception of that space by looking at the "active" portrayals -- done by women themselves -- of western women and the frontier space. This paper examines women's perceptions based on what they recorded in trail diaries from 1840 into the early 20th century.

Particularly of interest, and the focus of this paper, is the female perception of the frontier landscape. While women of today seem to be pursuing respect and justice for the environment through the notion of ecofeminism (linking it to the pursuit of equality and justice for women), women of the 19th century were limited by societal expectations that held them within a "cult of domesticity." Discouraged from spending time outdoors, 19th century women were expected to perform certain tasks and had little, if any, relationship with the natural world.

This in mind, how did women who went west perceive (and write about) the frontier landscape they encountered. Were women's unfamiliarities, fears, and struggles manifested in their written descriptions of the terrain over which they and their children crossed? Or did women express a new understanding of the natural world in which they found a sense of freedom not felt before?

### **DIARIES OF THE FRONTIER**

Over eight hundred published and catalogued diaries and journey logs "tell" of the emigration to the American West.<sup>3</sup> Beyond relaying personal accounts of an event, as most diaries do, the journals of the westward journey open up a world essentially invisible during the 19th century -- that of women. Through their diaries we learn what women's primary roles were in the overland journey and how women perceived the people and landscape they encountered. By studying these diaries we also explore time and place in a way that traditional history and geography often ignores -- through the day to day experience of individuals.

While geographers have looked to the non-traditional sources of novel and autobiography to study place, they have rarely examined personal diaries, which reveal subtleties and detail that other sources may not. Frequently viewed as a "problem" when putting together histories, accounts of

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singularities, particular moments, and personal responses are valuable because of their inclusiveness. Claiming that "American pioneers" perceived the land in one way may be misrepresenting the perceptions of certain "outlying" individuals for the sake of a smooth, wholistic-sounding argument.

Women's trail diaries are of interest particularly because in many cases they were meant to be read by friends and family in the east once their writers had reached the "land of milk and honey." As a result, women often recorded the terrain over which they crossed with great detail.

### **WOMEN'S PRECONCEPTIONS OF LANDSCAPE**

Undoubtedly, women who went west took with them a set of preconceptions shaped by the values and mores of the society in which they lived. One thing to recognize when examining women's perception of land is the traditional association between women and nature (read: Mother Earth; "virgin" territories; "fertile" land; "her" waters, mountains, rivers). Such writing and speaking about the land prevailed European discourse long before "Americans" set forth across the "Great American Desert." (Interestingly, Europe and Asia are named after women, though America is not.) Historian Annette Kolodny suggests that such a "gendering of the land as feminine" was a habit that "became the vocabulary of everyday reality with the creation of America, and nowhere more prevalently than with American migration westward."<sup>4</sup>

However, Vera Norwood writes that, "Dominant (male) modes of describing the American environment (which envisioned the land as a woman to be tamed and/or enjoyed) were not viably part of women's vocabulary."<sup>5</sup>

While the western frontier has been presented as a place where one could turn dreams to reality, start anew, and seize economic wealth and spiritual success, it may not have been perceived this way by women pioneers. Undoubtedly, women's perceptions were shaped by spheres and domains to which they belonged. Though women's overland diaries reveal much about trail life and about women's responses to frontier landscape, they must be read with cultural restrictions in mind. In other words, defined by their culture and era, women's writing (even within journals) may not always reveal what women really believed, but instead, what women were permitted to express. Women therefore viewed and wrote about the landscape through a particular "languagescape" which was defined not only by their own fantasies and needs, but by the fantasies and needs of men.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally at play were the societal expectation of women during that era. One expects that the "wildness" of the frontier offered surprises to men and women alike, and often forced a whole new way of life (especially on the overland trail) for both genders. However, of the women that made the trip, the many went against their will, leaving behind the domestic comforts that had been taught to them for centuries. The hardships encountered by pioneering women, unleashed into a domain of difficult manual labor and mental tests, were completely foreign to them.

These preconception, combined with existing associations and dominant written and oral ways of describing nature as woman, certainly left grand implications on westward women who suddenly had to relate to the land in a way they hadn't before.

### **WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF LANDSCAPE**

Though female pioneers undoubtedly shared some common experiences, there was no typical overland journey. Women faced different daily challenges, coped in different ways, and expressed

different perceptions of the frontier landscape. In analyzing such responses, one ultimately might question whether or not there exists an inherent difference in the way men and women view the natural landscape: Currently, this is a popular topic among modern theorists, writers, artists, and photographers. While this paper doesn't draw a distinct line between the environmental sensibilities of men and women, it does propose that on the frontier, based on their different societal roles and duties, women and men perceived the frontier wilderness differently.

In considering the woman's view of the frontier, we must recognize that the place of the frontier was an unusual one. It was ever-changing, shrinking, and moving, as were women's perceptions of it. Historian Ray Billington defines the frontier as a place and a process, "where a low man-land ratio and unusually abundant, unexploited, natural resources provided an unusual opportunity for self-advancement."<sup>7</sup>

This explanation is of interest because it assumes that travelers and settlers of the frontier "place" were interested in exploiting the abundant, untapped natural resources. But Kolodny writes, "Massive exploitation and alteration of the continent do not seem to have been part of women's fantasies. They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden."<sup>8</sup>

If this was indeed the case, and women dreamed only of a "cultivated garden," might the landscape of much of America be different today had women been in control?

Because many women, prior to departing, read the propaganda and guidebooks describing the west as beautiful, sublime and majestic, it is not surprising that women expressed awe and admiration for the natural landscape. For one thing, most of them had never witnessed scenery like that of the west before. Moreover, while such guidebooks revealed a great deal about navigation, travel routes, hunting options, Indian encounters, they told little about how to build fires from buffalo chips, wash, sew, or keep track of children -- duties expected of most pioneer women. Therefore, women were forced to adapt, remaining in their existing roles, to a completely foreign, "wild" environment. Since most women were expected to cook and wash, as they had at home, they had to learn to gather buffalo chips for fuel and use stones to pound dirt out of clothing. Hardly easy tasks.

Though categorizing runs the risk of overgeneralizing, women's perceptions can be analyzed in several ways. Certainly one must consider the many factors which influenced how a woman viewed the experience as a whole. How old a woman was, her purpose in making the trip, and the particular trail conditions on the day the entry was made certainly influenced the way women wrote about the frontier.

Though likely assigned special duties and chores, girls traveling with their families probably had fewer responsibilities than their fathers, mothers, and older siblings. Thus, they could meander off the trail more often and spend more time writing in their journals. Thus, while the diary of a mother of six might seem a dry, emotionless record of the elements, the number of graves passed, and miles traveled, the diary of a 13-year-old girl might contain lengthy descriptions and personal feelings about the day's events and scenery.

Fourteen-year-old Sallie Hester, who traveled to California in 1849 with her parents, two brothers, and a sister, writes,

Several of us climbed this mountain -- somewhat perilous for youngsters not over fourteen. We made our way to the very edge of the cliff and looked down. We could hear the water dashing, splashing and roaring as if angry at the small space through which it was forced to pass. We were gone so long that the train was stopped and men sent out in search of us.<sup>9</sup>

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Though exceptions exist, this type of adventurousness was typical within the 20 or more diaries of this study written by young girls.

While the majority of women pioneers went west with their husbands in search of fertile land, others were missionaries who went to convert Native Americans, military wives who traveled with their husbands to various forts, or single schoolteachers who went to make a new life for themselves. A woman's purpose in traveling west also colored her perception. Twenty-three-year-old Maria Holst Pottsmilk traveled west in 1905 with a 16-coach train of "Happy Methodists and schoolteachers." She writes about the Rockies in her reminiscence,

A prairie girl who had never seen even such rocky formations as the Black Hills, I was now among the loftiest and most dominating mountains in the United States. I stood in awe of those rugged rocks up in the sky. In the presence of the mighty pinnacles and cavernous depths I became aware of my inability to comprehend the meaning of all the wonders about me -- the cause of this wild grandeur.<sup>10</sup>

Likely excited about her future and traveling relatively comfortably, Pottsmilk is able to express such a positive reaction to her environment.

Finally, trail conditions and the time and place of a woman's entry affected how she reacted to her surroundings.

Certainly diary entries made at the trip's beginning differed from those made after four months of travel when a wagon train would likely be crossing the Continental Divide.

Eighteen-year-old Esther Belle Hanna, a missionary who traveled west in 1852 with her husband, wrote this early on in the journey, "Got along comfortably last night -- heard wolves howling very near us, the first I ever heard, they make a singular, mournful noise." From this, one can infer that Hanna was comfortable with traveling and, expressing no apparent fears, impressed with the "call of the wild." Later in her diary, however, the toil of travel begins to take its toll. She writes,

Travelled 15 miles today over the most torturous road I ever could have imagined, nothing but rock after rock. The country all along presents the most barren appearance nothing but sage ... The sun has been oppressively hot all day and I am wearied and suffering from jolting over rocks which has given me a severe headache.<sup>11</sup>

Other women also expressed boredom with the frontier landscape at times and certainly after many long months of travel a tired women tending sick family members and wearied oxen might not be overjoyed at the sight of towering mountains.

Noteworthy, in addition, is the extent to which women focused on the "wildness" of the frontier in their diaries. Some women were frequently bothered by the absence of civilization and entered any and all sightings of recognizable domestic features -- homes, army forts, even rock formations that looked like homes or churches. Others made sure to remark on the quality of land beneath them, keeping in mind the life they would soon make and the development that would take place once they arrived.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, are the women who were impressed by the untouched landscape and found beauty in all its wildness. These women, in most cases young girls, who were rejuvenated and excited by their new "uncivilized" surroundings reveal an unexpected side of women pioneers not presented by traditional sources.

## CONCLUSION

Such is the variety illustrated by women's diaries and reminiscences of the frontier era. Expected to uphold their 19th century homemaking duties in a completely foreign, outdoor environment, pioneer women learned how to be resourceful with what the natural world offered them. The land was their resource, and could not always be something at which to marvel and appreciate. For some, however, it offered strength, rejuvenation, and a new perspective.

Accounts of individuals, diaries remind us that just as no two pioneer women were alike, neither were any two overland journeys. Women came from different backgrounds, crossed the land for different reasons, and ultimately perceived and expressed their experiences in different ways. Studying the female experience through female writing however might be as close to the truth one may come, remembering that even women's private writings were shaped by societal constructs and what was "expected." Perhaps, as Kolodny purports, women's ideas about settlement were less grandiose, limited to the small private spaces of personal gardens. Perhaps, instead, women were just as eager as their male counterparts to transform the natural western landscape into a civilized scene, complete with fluffy curtains and picket fences. Likely, there were women from both spectrums and many in between. In any case, modern historians and geographers must celebrate women's personal stories as sources which collectively present a thorough, more inclusive picture of the American frontier period and place.

### Notes

1. See Dee Brown's The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West, University of Nebraska Press, 1958. Though Brown's study offered the first overview and analysis of women in the west, it "essentially provided an elaboration of an older male image of western women, one which still dominates literature and the classroom." (For an extensive discussion, see Joan Jensen's and Darlis Miller's essay: "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," Pacific Historical Review, 49 (May 1980), pp.173-213.
2. Riley, Glenda. The Female Frontier. University Press of Kansas. 1988. p.5.
3. Schlissel, Lillian. Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey. p.10.
4. Kolodny, Annette. The Lay of the Land. p.9.
5. Norwood, Vera. "Women's Place: Continuity and Change in Response to Western Landscapes." Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives. p.162.
6. Norwood and Monk. Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives. p.162.
7. Billington, Ray A. America's Frontier Heritage. New York, 1966. p.25.
8. Kolodny, p.xiii.
9. Hester, Sallie. "The Diary of a Pioneer Girl." Covered Wagon Women, Vol. 1.
10. Pottsmilk, Maria M. Holst. "Life Story of an Oregon Immigrant-1905." p.42.
11. Hanna, Esther Belle. "Journal of Esther Belle Hanna." p.4,22.

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