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WOMEN ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem předloženou práci vypracovala samostatně, s použitím materiálů uvedených v seznamu literatury.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Frontier existed for several hundred years. Beginning with the arrival of the first explorers at the end of the fifteenth century, pioneering became the trademark of the New World. After the appearance of the first settlers on the eastern seaboard, and during the later exploits into the wilderness that awaited in the interior of the New World, pioneers had to face challenges posed by nature and the unfamiliar environment inhabited by native tribes. In the nineteenth century, the Frontier gained a new significance, as it was pushed ever westward with the incessant march of pioneers over the continent; until in 1890 it was declared by the Bureau of the Census that “at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.”¹ Thus the Frontier was closed. Precisely the time of the nineteenth century when the trickle of westering emigrants changed into a stream of people flooding across the Great Plains into the trans-Mississippi West, roughly from 1840 to 1880, is of interest when discussing the emergence of permanent settlements and communities in the West. This is the time of the mythic West, so central to the formation of the American nation, as discussed by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous essay “Significance of the Frontier in American History”.

The Frontier of Turner’s writings, the West portrayed by popular fiction, western “oater” movies, and deeply seated in most people’s imagination, is a place of adventure, courageous cowboys and treacherous Indians. It is the land of men. Women, if present,

¹ Cited in Jones, Mary Ellen. *Daily Life on the Nineteenth Century American Frontier*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p.5.

form a passive background to the male escapades. Up until the 1950s or 60s, women were largely ignored even in the historical publications about the western Frontier. Only in the last several decades of the twentieth century did pioneer women's lives shift into the center of attention and become the stuff of history.

The West, with its wild nature, omnipresent dangers, rough climate, and "lenient" law enforcement, has traditionally been seen as a male domain, where only the strong survive. This tough country - "hell on women and horses", according to an old saying, was, however, not devoid of members of the "weaker" sex. Though the male to female ratio was in favor of men, women were, in fact, a vital element among the western migrants. Contrary to popular belief; and despite the common nineteenth-century maxim that woman is a passive, domestic creature; women of the Frontier West often took on active roles. Many of them took advantage of the new opportunities found in the West, learned many new skills, and found new identities outside of the usual limited choice of wife and mother. This discussion is concerned with the ways in which women's lives were changed by their move into the West; and consequently, how their own, and society's, perceptions of them changed. I will primarily look at the lives of homesteaders, but also discuss city-dwellers. The area where the characters populating the following pages could be found constitutes the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountain Region, and the Pacific seaboard - chiefly California and Oregon. These regions attracted large numbers of settlers every year due to the riches it promised, be it fertile land, economic vigor, or discoveries of gold.

The nineteenth-century American West was not just a place for white settlers seeking their fortunes. It was a multicultural region with people from a variety of

racial and cultural heritages living side by side. Despite the multicultural and multiracial environment of the Frontier, the main focus of my writing will be the experience of white overland immigrants. These people constituted the majority of population of the nineteenth-century West; and most written records, such as diaries and letters, originated with the white pioneers. The question of racial and cultural relations in this region is a very complicated one, and there is not sufficient space here to do it full justice. However, to complete the picture female pioneers' life, it is useful to give a brief depiction of white – non-white relations and interaction, and the ways in which cultural and racial minorities were perceived by the dominant culture, while maintaining the focus on women.

Minorities represented the racial and cultural “other” to the dominant white culture, and their lifestyles were judged according to the Anglo standards. Generally, they were treated as second class citizens. White Western migrants brought with them a load of cultural baggage from the East, and racist attitudes were not among the things discarded on the way. It is difficult to reconstruct lives and thought of the members of these minorities, as many of them were illiterate and very few kept any kind of records.

For white Americans, westering presented an incredible national expansion and gain of large areas of land; however, this land was not empty. For other peoples – Mexicans, and especially Native Americans – westward expansion meant dispossession and loss of land so essential for the preservation of their life-style and culture. Ignorance of Native American tribes' values led to generalizations based on comparison of Indian women with white women. Since the Victorian standards required every proper woman to remain home, white settlers tended to view Indian women, who generally worked outside, as oppressed drudges and overworked slaves of their husbands, who forced them

into hard labor. The truth, however, was often different, and Indian women enjoyed many rights within their communities that the whites, relying on their own cultural conventions, were unable to see.²

White women's diaries often communicate fear of "savage" Indians that presented a lurking danger to theirs and their families' existence; and were seen as an obstacle to the Anglos' frontiering efforts. However, judging by the evidence of the settlers' diaries and records, peaceful interaction between Natives and whites on the Frontier was common, especially in the early years of the western migration. Many women declared their interest in the Natives and not all their observations and interactions were skewed by cultural stereotypes. In fact, in some cases they yielded enhancement of understanding of the other people and a greater tolerance.

There was a great deal of prejudice against the Hispanic population in the West as well. Mexicans were often thought corrupt, treacherous, superstitious, lazy and lacking in moral standards. These assumptions were largely based on religion and race. According to these deep-seeded prejudices, Mexicans were considered incapable of using the land's resources properly, and thus, like Native Americans, unworthy of the land they occupied. Therefore it was the white man's right to take it over. Although many positive descriptions of Mexicans can be discovered as well. For example, Anglo women in the South-West usually found their Mexican neighbors to be pleasant and often commented on their generosity and hospitality; though it should be noted that only the wealthy classes of Mexicans were respected by the Anglos. It is difficult to reconstruct thoughts

² In some tribes, all the agricultural products planted and reaped by women belonged solely to them; Hopi husbands were not allowed to sell any household goods without their wives' permission; Shawnee and Delaware women, if they decided to leave their husband, could take all the property that belonged to them when they were married, etc...

of Mexican women, because their culture considered it unnecessary for them to learn to read and write, and thus very few records of their lives remain.

Although some Blacks immigrated westward in the post-bellum period, their numbers in the West remained small, and only a miniscule portion of these African Americans were women. The reasons behind the lack of black immigration include lower mobility among the African Americans, and fewer resources for undertaking the journey to the West; but also frequent discrimination of blacks by the immigration companies that led paying customers across the continent. Once in the West, many African Americans found new opportunities, but most could not escape the social, economic and political discrimination, as common on the Frontier as in the rest of the country.³

During the three decades after 1850, when Asian⁴ immigration into the United States was not controlled, large numbers of Chinese men poured into the country and became the source of cheap labor. The ratio of Chinese female and male immigrants was hugely in favor of men. Unfortunately, many of the women were destined to become prostitutes. In the earlier stages of their immigration, the Chinese did not face much discrimination and racial hatred, however, with the influx of cheap Chinese labor, the sentiments swayed towards racial intolerance and ostracism. Chinese-Americans reacted to the white animosity by secluding themselves in separate neighborhoods. In 1882, the efforts to stop Chinese immigration culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended the admission of Chinese into the United States.

³ For research containing interesting findings about the life of black females in the West, see Graaf, Lawrence B. "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920", in Gordon M. Bakken, Brenda Farrington, eds. *The Gendered West*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

⁴ Chinese immigrants were the most numerous. Japanese women did not arrive in significant numbers until early in the twentieth century.

The settlers who are the main focus of this work came from the eastern part of America; and they were the ones mostly prejudiced to the aforementioned groups. Commonly, they traveled the whole width of the continent to seek their western fortunes. It is important to look at how the pioneers were able to overcome these distances and what their daily routines on the Overland Trail were like. How these routines changed once they reached their destinations and the ways of gaining the families' subsistence are the themes that will also be explored. In the attempt to depict the pioneers' daily realities, women and their experience are the focal point, and attention is paid to the division of labor and responsibilities according to the gender roles. The common stereotypes about these women and how their real lives differed from the image of them often found in literature, illustrates the disparity between the public and private picture of a female pioneer's life. The West was a pioneering area also in the field of women's rights. Western states were among the first to grant women's suffrage. Dynamics behind this process show many different reasons and incentives that led to women's political emancipation in the West.

The diversity of the Western landscape could also characterize the variety of experiences of women living there at the time of the greatest American westward expansion. Their letters and diaries give us some insight into the nature of their daily lives. These lives formed the history I am about to recount. There were no heroic deeds performed, no fabulous, memorable feats, but one senses the heroism of small, day-to-day actions of these females, that often ensured the survival and well-being of whole families.

IMAGES AND REALITIES OF WOMEN'S LIVES ON THE

WESTERN FRONTIER

Though historians have long neglected women as a part of the unique experience of settling the wilderness of the American West in the nineteenth century, it would be incorrect to say that there is not a relative abundance of sources that describe women's lives on the Frontier. They have appeared in fiction about the West, as well as in history books. However, numerous depictions of female pioneer are rather remote from reality. Images of these women were frequently molded according to prevalent nineteenth-century ideas of womanhood. The aim of this chapter is to explore where the stereotypes came from, and how they were disseminated; and to assess the extent to which the views about traditional women's roles were challenged by the Frontier experience.

COMMON STEREOTYPES

The western Frontier and its inhabitants are a part of American history that has been very prone to stereotyping. Just as the figure of the rugged, brave, individualistic, larger-than-life male hero commonly associated with the West is to a great extent merely a myth, so the image of a female pioneer we know from many sources – be it fiction, or even history books – is, for the most part, a stereotype as well.

One of the recurrent depictions of the frontier wife is that of a frail, weak woman, transplanted to the rough western country from the East largely against her wishes. She is too gentle to endure the harshness of the pioneer life; and the heavy workload eventually breaks her spirit as well as her body. Lonely, unhappy and overworked, with too many children on her hands, she becomes a tragic figure who no longer can tolerate her dreary destiny and either goes mad or decides to take her own life. Characters of this type can be found, for example, in O. E. Rølvaag's and Dorothy Scarborough's fiction.⁵

Another commonly encountered portrayal of a nineteenth-century western woman is the one of the "gentle tamer". According to the general nineteenth-century views, white women are the ultimate representative of civilization and culture. Her mere presence in the "Wild West", populated mainly by beastly savages and no less boorish white men, has a positive influence on community building. Schools and churches begin to be erected, and the fine web of civilized society is slowly woven. However, the gentle tamer is not credited for the actual deeds and actions; all of which are supposedly done by men, and the refined ladies, though an inspiration for the efforts of community construction, remain utterly passive.

Perhaps the best known stereotype of a pioneer wife and mother is the one of a "sturdy helpmate". Similarly to the images of frontier women mentioned in the previous paragraphs, she too conforms to the traditional notion of womanhood that was widely accepted and expected in the nineteenth century. The "cult of domesticity" will be examined in greater detail later, for now suffice it to say that female pioneer's dedication to civilizing wilderness, and that her moral standard and primary role as her husband's

⁵ Myers, Sandra L. *Westering Women and the Frontier experience 1800-1915*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p.1

aide and the mother of their children sets her firmly within the boundaries of the nineteenth-century woman's role. Though domestic and submissive, this "Madonna of the prairies" bravely bore the trials of the frontier life and fulfilled her duties without complaining. The sunbonneted pioneer wife could work in the fields, wash, cook, fight Indians, and still manage to keep the house neat and clean and the take care of the kids; all for the sake of the family. The household was, for her, of primary importance and seldom did her interests venture beyond its walls.

The three commonly encountered images that I briefly sketched out in the previous paragraphs to some extent resemble and overlap each other. However, each of them stresses slightly different characteristics. In the first one frailty and weakness are emphasized, the second one illustrates the stereotype about the passivity of women, especially when it came to public issues, and the third one depicts the pioneer woman as a strong individual who is able to face the conditions of the frontier life, though still remaining confined to the domestic sphere.

The "mother of the West" image, which most closely resembles the stereotype of the sturdy helpmate, can be found repeatedly in fiction, newspaper accounts of pioneer families⁶, as well as less recent history publications. In Max Binheim's book *Women of the West*, a poem appears that relates a pioneer's account of his life in the wilderness of the Frontier. The last paragraph, dedicated to his wife, is a fine example of the stereotype of the "frontier Madonna" or the "sturdy helpmate." Though acknowledged by the husband as an important part of their Frontier existence, her main accomplishment seemed to be childbearing.

⁶ For examples of "pioneer mother" image in newspapers see Caughield, Adrienne. *True Women and Westward expansion*. (Texas: A&M University Press, 2005), pp 3,4

“A statue should stand, here by my side,
That Pioneer woman brave;
That wife who bore me Children, and died,
And lies in an unmarked grave.”⁷

All of the previously mentioned stereotypical descriptions of Frontier women, however great the differences among them were, fit the Victorian ideal of womanhood. However, not all white women that can be encountered in western writings are quite as respectable. Against the “frontier Madonnas” stood figures such as Calamity Jane or Annie Oakley; sharpshooters and rowdy “ladies”, handy with a deck of cards and a match for any man when it came to drinking. The only culture they were associated with was the saloon culture. These wild women were a very rare occurrence in the everyday reality of the American West; and perhaps because they were so greatly at odds with the norm, they became a well known part of the myth of the West. They formed a symbolic contrast to the ideal of the white frontier mother and wife; a home-loving, wilderness-hating, moral creature. Prostitutes and other “fallen women” sharply contrasted to the Victorian ideal as well, though they were by no means scarce on the Frontier. Prostitutes often became stereotyped, especially in the fiction about life in the West, and the image of a prostitute with a heart of gold is not uncommon. There is not, however, enough space to look into the myths and realities of the Western prostitutes; as my objective is to examine views about women on the Frontier who were devoted to farming or other “respectable” occupations. These women formed the majority of female population in the West. They were the ones who were judged by, and can be compared to, the ideal portrayed by the “Cult of True Womanhood”.

⁷ Binheim, Max, ed. *Women of the West*. (Los Angeles: Publishers Press, 1928), p.114

SOURCES OF STEREOTYPING

Dawn Lander, in her essay *Eve among the Indians*, challenges the common misconceptions about the women of the western Frontier. She draws a distinction between how women of the West viewed themselves and how they were represented by primarily male writers, because these two depictions often differ. According to Lander, the discrepancy can be accounted for by the fact that an imprecise image of Frontier women has been presented to the public mainly by men's writings, to serve a particular purpose. The fallacious representation of the western women as unhappy drudges, opposed to the wilderness and terrified by the Indians, did not remain without consequences, one of which was the spread of the attitudes presented in fiction and presumption that they were the opinions of real life people.

The problem with Lander's interpretation of the origins of the female pioneer stereotype is the fact that not only male writings perpetuated the stereotyped image of the Western women. Many female writers, such as Laura Ingalls Wilder in her *Little House* series, also portrayed pioneer heroines in accordance with the demands of the Cult of Domesticity. However, it is still useful to look at how Lander views the dynamics behind the typical portrayal of Frontier wives by male writers, as these were undeniably a substantial part of the source for spread of female stereotypes.

When Jonathan Culler mentions Lander's essay, he proposes that "she [Lander] reads the myth of the women's hatred of the frontier as an attempt by men to make the frontier an escape from everything women represent to them, [...] exposing this literary

topos as a self-serving male view of the female view.”⁸ Lander’s essay suggests possible reasons for the construction of the stereotypical image of the pioneer woman.

The Frontier West has traditionally been considered the realm of man; a rugged, individualistic hero of the Davy Crockett type who loves the possibility of independence and adventure that the wilderness of the West offers him. From the time of Turner’s writing, settlement of the West was frequently understood as physical subjugation of wilderness. Women were largely absent from this type of struggle, as they were not properly physically and mentally equipped for the “man’s work” (and man’s play) that went on outside of the household – the woman’s sphere.

The West was the place where the mythic and stereotyped masculine love of freedom could be practiced without repression⁹. In order for the liberation to be complete, the place had to be cleared of the coercive element, i.e. the woman. Consequently, the well known figure of a moral, hard working, home-loving frontierswoman was introduced, who did not interfere with the male desire for the exciting life in wilderness; and although she obediently followed her husband westward, her sphere of influence nevertheless remained safely confined to the household.

Lander ascribes the masculine desire for freedom with sexual undertones, and asserts that the American West was wild not only because of the hunting and fighting adventures, which were typically a part of the masculine domain, but also because of the possibility to engage in sexual experiences with non-white women, traditionally disapproved of by the society. Lander writes that “the assertion that wilderness life is too

⁸ Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), p.45

⁹ Lander criticizes the fact the enjoyment of the freedom that West offered was traditionally ascribed to men. She objects that her own experiences, as well as those of many other women, counter that assumption; which is apparent from personal accounts of western women she knows or from reminiscences of the women pioneers in their letters and diaries.

difficult for women, and the subsequent insistence upon exclusion of white women often assumes, unspoken, the retention of a non-white [i.e. Indian] female sexual object and a sexuality which is without responsibility.”¹⁰ She illustrates her argument with examples from literature, such as Ernest Hemingway’s story *Fathers and Sons* and A. B. Gurthie’s *The Big Sky*. The protagonists of both pieces engage freely in sexual relations with Indian women without the apprehension of breaking the boundaries of morality or propriety.

However, as will be suggested on the following pages, the situation of the pioneers in petticoats is a more complicated one, and goes beyond their images immortalized on book pages. One important question needs to be asked: to what extent did the actual lives of women in the West feed the stereotypes that were presented at the beginning of this chapter? In order to answer this question it is necessary to understand the demands and expectations with which the nineteenth-century society circumscribed “proper” women’s lives. In countless instances there are discrepancies between these expectations and the every-day realities of Frontier women; although that does not imply that women in the West did not strive to conform to the Victorian ideal. Furthermore, the stereotypical images of western women are based directly on the values preached by this Victorian norm.

THE “CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD”

Women in the nineteenth-century America were often instructed about their roles in society based on what Barbara Welter described in her well-known article as “The Cult of True Womanhood”. According to Adrienne Caughfield, “this concept emerged from

¹⁰ Lander, Dawn. “Eve among the Indians”, in A. Diamond, L.R. Edwards, eds. *The Authority of Experience, Essays in Feminist Criticism*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p.201

the United States' rapidly changing social structure in the early nineteenth century."¹¹ She argues that by this period, the pre-industrial, mainly agrarian character of the country's production had changed; and with it gender roles were significantly modified. Women no longer held an important post when it came to a family's economic well-being. Men were the ones who engaged in most wage labor and economic opportunities for women diminished. The middle class gained considerable importance and influence; and became "the chief architect of true womanhood."¹² Its views spread quickly and became the accepted standard, as the middle class became the most important constituent of the American society.

There were four important virtues that every true woman embodied – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. These are also hints that reveal where the true woman's proper place was, both literally and figuratively. Domesticity implies her attachment to home – which was her sphere of influence; but beyond its walls she dared not, and did not need to, venture. She was naturally religious, therefore her "proper sphere" encompassed also church. Submissiveness refers to passivity of Victorian women; because it was the men, who were "the movers, the doers, the actors."¹³ Above all, woman was supposed to be pure as a lily, not even a hint of her sexuality could be visible, in fact, she was actually thought to have none.

Two separate spheres developed, one of them was contained by home, family and church, the so-called private sphere, and was populated by members of the "weaker sex". The other sphere was the one of business, labor, politics and public life, and belonged

¹¹ Caughfield, p.6

¹² Caughfield p.6.

¹³ Welter, Barbara. *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860*. in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1, Summer 1996. p.159

entirely to men. Women's was the realm of affection; men's was the world of action. Woman, though perhaps intellectually inferior to man, was morally superior and therefore the guardian of moral values. Her separate sphere enabled her to be a man's equal, but only as long as she stayed within its boundaries.

The Cult of True womanhood was widely preached by women's magazines, lectures and sermons. Those who did not have access to magazines, which belonged to middle class literature, found its traces in schoolbooks. By the middle of the nineteenth century fifty percent of children between five and nineteen years of age were in school; and their textbooks detailed the desirable behavior of women who were to be "self-sacrificing and domestic."¹⁴

It is no doubt that the rhetoric of the Cult of True Womanhood was widely available to the nineteenth-century American women. However, one must keep in mind, that its full realization was only available to the upper strata of society; and the rising middle class, the ideal of which was for the man to be the sole bread-winner. Their financial situation did not require that women contribute to the family's budget. It was much harder to keep the spheres of men and women from lower classes and rural settlement separate; as in these families all of their members had to make an effort to provide for the family's subsistence. On the other hand, the ideals of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity could be practiced to some extent even under the conditions of not-so-separate spheres.

Welter herself admits in *The Cult of True Womanhood* that

Even while the women's magazines and related literature encouraged this ideal of the perfect woman, forces were at work in the nineteenth

¹⁴ For more detail see Jeffrey, Julie Roy. *Frontier Women, The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880*. (New York: Will and Wang, 1979), p.9

century which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society. The movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, [...] all called forth responses from woman which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature.¹⁵

Frontier living in many respects differed remarkably from the way of life in the established communities where most of the pioneers came from. Even for the many western migrants who came from rural areas, the transition to homesteading entailed substantial changes to their lifestyle. It was more drastic for those who moved to the Frontier from urban communities. In towns and cities, paid labor and exchange of money for goods was the usual means of family's subsistence, whereas for rural people it was common to provide necessities (food, clothing, tools...) by growing them or making them themselves. The urban West also differed significantly from the eastern cities. Infrastructure was less developed than in the East, and the settlements often seemed chaotic, uncultured, and only semi-permanent. Many towns' fortunes rose and fell with the general popularity of the area where they were located, and their life-span was even shorter than that of their inhabitants.

When women crossed the continent, they carried with them certain preconceptions about their gender's role within family and society. It is important to examine the ways in which the life on the Frontier changed how women participated in various areas of private and public life and in what ways, if at all, the Cult of True Womanhood was challenged as a result of the pioneering experience.

¹⁵ Welter, pp 173, 174

WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE WEST: WHAT WAS READ AND WHAT WAS SAID

The sources of information on western women's lives and thoughts are various. Some are distinctly public, such as newspaper articles and women's magazines. Some are private or semi-private and first-hand, such as diaries, letters or reminiscences of pioneer women and their children. All of these convey different types of information. By taking into consideration various sources, one can find a discrepancy between the official, public image of a western female, and a private image, which reflects more accurately the reality of the pioneers' lives.

Women's magazines have already been mentioned as an important disseminator of Victorian values. Publications such as Godey's *Lady's Book* were available and read in the West. When Godey's wrote about Western life, it promoted frontier domesticity, and published stories like "Beauty Out West: or How Three Fashionable Ladies Spent a Year in the Wilderness"; and promoted the thought of "genteel life not only flourishing on the frontier but even improving far from 'the city with its vanities and false glare.'"¹⁶ However, the realities of a pioneer woman's day-to-day life are not to be judged according to the ladies' magazines. Godey's and similar periodicals were a part of prescriptive, as opposed to descriptive, literature. Though it told women how to behave in order to conform to the nineteenth-century ideals, it actually says nothing about whether or not women implemented its advice in their everyday lives.

Newspaper accounts often do not tell the whole story either. Women did a great deal of organizing of social life. They raised funds for, and initiated building of schools and churches. However, they usually did not appear on official boards and in committees that governed these institutions. Men took most of the credit for such achievements, and

¹⁶ Jeffrey, p. 23

that is also what can be found in the newspaper articles, many of which ignore women's participation in the public community events.¹⁷

More informal information about pioneer women's experiences can be found in their letters and diaries. Though letters were written for other people to read, and diaries were also often expected to be read by close friends and family, these documents were meant for a closed circle of people with whom the author had personal relationships; and are therefore likely to reveal more intimate details of women's lives.

Private information is often contradictory to the official image of a Victorian woman. True woman was supposed to be devoid of any trace of sexuality. Matters relating to sexuality or its consequence – pregnancy – were of course not discussed publicly. But under the shell of Victorian purity could be found an entirely private world where sexuality did exist, pregnancy was a consequence of intercourse and when it was unwanted, “contraceptive methods”¹⁸ or abortion were available and widely accepted. Jeffrey relates reminiscences of an Oregon midwife, who comments on abortion: “You see, they didn't do what was right, and had tried, too soon, to have the baby and get rid of it. When it was far along, it was a killing job. Hot salt water was what they used, and it sometimes passed.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Susan Armitage in *The Women's West* classifies newspaper articles as a part of the “official history” conforming to the traditional gender roles, and comments that “historians who have relied solely on newspapers in research perpetuate the invisibility of women.” Armitage, Susan, Elizabeth Jameson, eds. *The Women's West*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p.14

¹⁸ There were no modern, effective contraceptives available to Frontier women in the nineteenth century. Rather, what I mean by contraceptive methods are various ointments or mixtures intended for eating and drinking, or other practices that were recommended to use to avoid pregnancy. Though ineffective, their importance is great, because the fact that they are talked about reflects the desire of women to avoid unwanted pregnancy by means other than sexual abstinence.

¹⁹ Jeffrey, p.58

As has been illustrated, many sources which are easily accessible, because they were meant for public perusal, may contain incomplete or misleading information. One therefore has to examine carefully the “official” story and compare it with the more private accounts, before forming conclusions. This approach can be helpful when trying to determine how much pioneer women’s experiences and their place in the western community differed from those of their eastern sisters.

CULT OF DOMESTICITY AND THE FRONTIER

It has been previously mentioned that the Cult of True Womanhood distinguished between two separate spheres – public and private; male and female. The ideal division of labor in the nineteenth century went strictly along the gender lines. However, the situation of western migrants was notably different. The Frontier presented individuals and families with challenges that often had to be faced in ways that defied the traditional gendered stereotypes.

In order to effectively illustrate the practice of reallocation of responsibilities between men and women, it is useful to concentrate on family units at first. Starting with the experience of the Overland Trail (which is the topic of the following chapter), pioneers found themselves in pre-industrial conditions, where every member of the family had to pitch in so that the unit would survive. Female work was vital in the pioneer household. One female pioneer wrote in her diary: “I am a maid of all trades”,²⁰ and indeed, women’s workloads included an infinite number of chores. Apart from the usual female jobs, such as cleaning, cooking, nursing the sick and childcare, sewing,

²⁰ Jeffrey p.59

gardening and such, women frequently had to assume responsibility for some traditionally “male tasks”. Jeffrey sums up the experience of many women, using a diary entry: “Women did heavy outside [work], helping to dig cellars, to build cabins, [...] helped with the plowing and planting, since ‘there were neither man nor boy that we could hire in the county.’”²¹ There are also accounts of men helping women to do the housework, when there was no female help to be found.

The Western farm women were not the only ones who did “unladylike” labor. Women working on farms all over the country were unlikely to be in complete conformity with the True Womanhood ideal; but due to the initial scarcity of population on the Frontier it was harder to find male help and women were more often forced to carry out traditionally male tasks. Blurring of gender boundaries through redistribution of labor tasks, as well as unique economic opportunities women found on the Frontier will be a topic of one of the later chapters. At this point it is sufficient to say that the traditional nineteenth-century separate spheres of males and females were often transgressed in the West, due to the unique character of life on the Frontier.

In the earlier years of settlement there was no infrastructure, no structured community in the West, and families and individuals had to, so to speak, fend for themselves. At that time it was virtually impossible for pioneer women to conform to the ideals of the Victorian womanhood. That does not mean that Frontier women rejected those ideals, but whether they accepted them or not, the reality of their lives certainly did not permit their realization. Later on, when more settlers came, and a community started to emerge, labor, as well as social life, became more gendered and more traditional views of women’s role were assumed.

²¹ Ibid. p.59

In the later periods of the western settlement, it is possible to distinguish between urban and rural communities. The urban environment was generally more receptive of the Cult of True Womanhood and the values it preached, because more middle- and upper-class people lived in towns and women had more access to middle-class literature, among other reasons. An important institution that appeared in the western cities towards the end of the nineteenth century and contributed to spreading Victorian values was the protestant home mission, to which Peggy Pascoe's book *Relations of Rescue* is dedicated. Home mission activities were fueled by the Victorian middle-class assumption of "female moral authority" and belonged to the realm of benevolent work. Projects of the western missionaries included, for example, building of homes that helped the women who "slipped" from the path of Victorian womanhood reestablish themselves in life and in the community.

The institution of home mission in the West sought, above all, to improve women's situation in the society that was not yet sufficiently permeated by middle class values and not as advanced as in the East. Home mission women endorsed higher education for the female population, and gave support to women professionals. Mission homes provided training, both domestic and vocational, that facilitated their inmates' re-entry to the community and promoted relative independence.

More importantly, Pascoe argues that home mission activities contributed to "the program of using gender difference to strengthen women's voices in society."²² Women leaders of the benevolent societies enjoyed a great deal of respect within their community; they were "praised in terms that echoed those applied to merchants and

²² Pascoe, Peggy. *Relations of Rescue*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.xv

professional men.”²³ It is true that doings of benevolent societies were performed with the intention of advancing Victorian values and stayed safely within the realm of the “woman’s sphere”, i.e. church work, helping other women; and general “civilizing” of the Western society.²⁴ However, through the seemingly “innocent” work within their traditional domain, women in fact gained a great deal of influence in organizing social life and were able to move within the public sphere, traditionally reserved for men.

When analyzing the advancement of women’s position in the Western society, it is necessary to mention women as teachers. Teaching was considered a natural activity for women to engage in, similar to assuming responsibility for bringing up the children. It has not always been that way though. The position of teacher was traditionally occupied by a male. However, as men saw many considerably more lucrative opportunities that the booming West offered, they moved out of the teaching posts. Thus, women could take up the positions; and gradually teaching became a predominantly female affair.

In the rapidly developing western communities many schools were being established and numerous areas faced shortages of qualified teachers. Therefore, the comparatively easy access to higher education for women in the West is also partly a consequence of the need to provide the female teachers with the necessary education. Myers gives an example the University of Iowa which, when it first opened in 1856, admitted a class constituted by eighty-three men and forty-one females. In 1858 a provision was passed which gave basis to admission of both sexes on equal terms. Other

²³ Ibid. p.12

²⁴ Women have traditionally been ascribed the role of “civilizers” of the West, which, without them, would be mainly an uncontrolled assemblage of wilderness, savages and rowdy white men. Men needed them to be reminded that a community needs to be built, and that the church, not the saloon, is the right place to go.

western state universities, such as the ones in Wisconsin, Kansas, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Michigan and California admitted female students by 1870.²⁵

Jeffrey agrees that the West was a territory where women had a much greater opportunity to study at gender-mixed universities. She states that “in 1872 there were ninety-seven major private and public coeducational institutions in the country, and the majority of them, sixty-seven, were located in the West.”²⁶ However, in Jeffrey’s opinion, it is a common fallacy to consider this state of affairs a result of a greater respect of women’s intellectual capacities in the West. She thinks it merely a result of a situation where establishment of separate institutions of higher learning for men and women in the West would have been uneconomical, since numbers of “qualified students of either sex” were too small to support all-male and all-female universities.²⁷

Whatever the reasons behind the popularity of female higher education in the West were, many scholars find it more important to look at its possible consequences. Myers contrasts the West with the nineteenth-century East, rural Midwest and South, where, though perhaps not in all areas, middle-class women were generally restricted in their access to public affairs and confined in “their domestic spaces”. In the West, however, the “tradition of women’s nonparticipation in community affairs was changed and modified. As women began to participate in public affairs as teachers and voters on school issues, Western residents could clearly see for themselves that public life need not cause the defeminization of women”²⁸ (according to the common belief, by entering the

²⁵ Myers, p.185

²⁶ Jeffrey, p.195

²⁷ Jeffrey, p.195

²⁸ Myers, p.185

“male sphere”, women would become less feminine). This situation opened further areas of public life to women.

Though politics was definitely a distinctly male territory even in the West; occasional female involvement in nevertheless indisputable. Jeffrey cites a curious example of Mrs. Staples, a West-Coast pioneer, who “cast as many votes as any man”.²⁹ It was possible because of the fact that illiterate voters who did not know who to vote for would be referred to her and she would literally take the ballot and cross out names she advised the men not to vote for. Thus she undeniably substantially influenced the result of the elections, though she herself was not in official possession of the vote.

Other types of participation of women in the public life were of a more official character. One example of such involvement was the organizing of Women’s Temperance Alliances. These existed all over the United States, but in accordance with the focus of this work, I will concentrate on the ones active in the West. In California, for example, their members held daily meetings and even managed to collect the necessary signatures for petitions to run local elections on the issue of prohibition. Others used more direct action, such as women in Rockwall, Texas, who organized a public protest against the opening of a store that would sell liquor. When that did not meet with success and the store opened, a group of women “raided the store, seized the barrels of alcohol, and poured out their contents in the street.”³⁰ Though the temperance alliance in Hillsboro, Ohio, was more peaceful, these women also made their demands clear. In

²⁹ Jeffrey, p.62

³⁰ Caughfield, p.67

1873, on Christmas Eve, seventy women “placed themselves in front of a local saloon [...] to sing and pray that the saloon stop serving and the drinkers stop drinking.”³¹

Thus it is apparent that a fair number of women were not afraid to voice their opinions about the organization of the community and became increasingly visible in the public sphere. It also must not be forgotten that they usually stood up when issues of great importance to them were at stake, that is, issues bearing connection to their traditional domain, such as protection of family and moral values. Women were expected to conform to conventional gender presuppositions, which in the West classified them as “civilizers” and improvers of the society that was being established. They held the claim to “moral authority”, but in order to exercise it, they had to overstep the boundary of the private sphere and enter the realm of public action. As a consequence, “their initial preoccupations with morality and culture could lead to sharper analyses of social issues, including the restriction of women to the private sphere.”³² Thus private and public spheres cannot be strictly separated; rather, one should look for links between the two that made it possible for women to engage in activity beneficial for the family while at the same time working for the whole community.

This chapter presented some commonly encountered images of western women, and endeavored to expose them as stereotypes. The most important element of the widespread stereotypes is the passivity of women and their confinement within their

³¹ Jeffrey, p.186

³² Jameson, Elizabeth. *Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West*. in Armitage, Susan, Elizabeth Jameson, eds. *The Women's West*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 159

homes. It was shown that the chief source of these assumptions was the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood. Though it sprang up in the urban middle-class East, it made its way westward with the migrating pioneers. However, the unique conditions of Frontier living challenged it in many ways. Women had to become economically active in order to support the family and thus most likely gained a certain degree of power. They also strove to better the society as a whole, through benevolent work and support of Churches and education. By efforts within their traditional sphere of interest women eventually gained influence and partial access to the public domain, previously only reserved for males. Though nineteenth-century American West did not entirely abandon the Victorian values of the Cult of True Womanhood, it can be asserted that True Womanhood was modified and molded to fit the conditions of women's lives in the West.

THE WESTWARD JOURNEY

Families and individuals from the eastern parts of the United States who decided to try their luck in the West, had to overcome the first and usually the greatest obstacle - the distance. For many emigrants the whole width of the American continent lay between them and the western regions. Before traveling by train became an option, the covered wagon was the usual choice of the settlers when it came to modes of travel. The journey took several months and presented the emigrants with a hint of what they could expect their new lives on the Frontier to be like. It also taught them many new routines and ways of dealing with everyday reality. The genders had to find effective methods of division of labor and many men and women took on unfamiliar roles and tasks. Some parties decided that the hardships of the journey were not worth the uncertain rewards at its end and turned back; those who persisted arrived West hoping that the hardest part was behind them, and determined to make best of their new situation.

THE DECISION TO MOVE

The decision-making process involved in such an important matter as moving West was a complicated one, as it was certain to deeply affect lives of all the family members. A majority of western historians believe that the decision to desert the way of life a family had built up and possessions they had accumulated in their old home, for

hope of a better life and more opportunities in the West, rested with the male head of the family. Richard White wrote:

We have remarkably little information about how these decisions were made, but what we have indicates that it was [...] a male decision. Our best information comes from the overland migration to Oregon in the middle of the nineteenth century. This migration was largely a family migration, but within the families husbands almost universally initiated the move. One study of Oregon Trail diaries did not find a single case in which the idea to move had come from a woman. Indeed, three-quarters of women opposed the move.³³

However, restricting the decision-making about the relocation of the family to the males, and deducing that women had no other option but to grudgingly consent, oversimplifies the matter. It is true that nineteenth century gender roles did not leave women much space to control the major fortunes of the family; yet women had several alternatives if they chose not to head West with their husbands.

One of the possibilities was to stay home and wait for letters informing them about the nature of life on the Frontier; and only then deciding whether to follow with the rest of the family. Many of these conclusions were the sole decisions of the women; one of whom was Sadie Martin. Her desire to join her husband in California in the summer of 1888, after five months of separation, was so strong that she made the choice of crossing the continent in spite of her husband's counsel. She wrote, "He had tried to warn me to wait one or two months longer, but I would not listen... I had no one to blame but myself and was not going to complain."³⁴

The alternative of staying behind while the husband left in order to prepare the grounds for an eventual move of the whole family to the Frontier presented several

³³White, Richard. *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own; A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991) p.208.

³⁴ Moynihan Ruth B, et al. eds. *So Much to Be Done, Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p.xviii.

problems. First of all, there was a lack of socially acceptable economic opportunities for women to support themselves in the traditional nineteenth century community. Elizabeth Cress's story is illustrative of this problem. After she had left North Carolina to follow her husband to Illinois, she declined to move further and was consequently deserted by her husband. In this situation, she wrote her parents, asking for help: "My old man has left me & has gon[e] to California and took my wagon and left me and my Children in a bad situation."³⁵

Perhaps the most important reason that led women to join their husbands in the overland adventure was the effort to keep the family together. They preferred the painful parting from their extended family and leaving their old homes behind over breaking up the domesticity represented by the nuclear family. Often large family units consisting of parents with eight or more children, including babies, would tread the trail West. When the decision to emigrate was made, not even pregnancy or sickness could delay the date of departure. In the words Lillian Schlissel, "The society of emigrants yielded little comfort to frailty or timidity – or, for that matter, to motherhood."³⁶ The women heading westward were expected to be strong and able to handle all kinds of common, as well as unexpected complications and deal with great discomfort.

There were instances when a woman's decision not to go determined the plans of the entire family. Such was the case of Mary Jane Hayden, whose husband decided to follow the call of gold in California in 1849. Mary, being "in very feeble health, having an infant six weeks old"³⁷, protested against the move.

³⁵ White, p.208.

³⁶ Schlissel, Lillian. *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p.35.

³⁷ Moynihan, p.5.

I said, 'We were married to live together, and I am willing to go with you to any part of *God's Foot Stool* where you think you can do best, 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.' He answered, 'Well, if that's the way you feel about it I will not go.' [...] And so it was settled that *we* would go the next year to California gold mines.³⁸

A great many factors weighed into the decision to move the entire family West. Although men were responsible for most of the choices, women still retained control of their destinies and had a say in the process.

PREPARATIONS

The resolution having been made, preparations for the journey West commenced. Most people emigrating West around the middle of the nineteenth century were rural people from the Midwestern states, such as Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky or Missouri. Poor families had insufficient recourses for such a step and the rich ones had no incentive to move, so the emigrants usually came from the middle of the social scale. Some of them had already experienced a move West (to the place they currently inhabited) previously in their lives. Although there were emigrants who were relatively experienced in some aspects of a pioneer's life, most were unsure what to expect of the journey across the continent. Many had surprisingly little skill when it came to tasks such as driving cattle, camping or handling firearms. One woman traveler confided to her diary the following ironic remark: "I should say we had some mighty men of valor with us! The Indians would die of fright as soon as they saw them! These mighty men could fire forty shots

³⁸ Moynihan. p.6.

out of their wagons without reloading!”³⁹ Clearly, there were many lessons to be learned and many new skills to be attained on the way.

Many emigrants relied on the guidebooks, which were already being published in the beginnings of the Western migration. Books such as *The Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California*(1845); *Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains*(1846), or *The Emigrant’s Guide to the Gold Mines...Together with...Full Instructions upon the best Method of Getting There, Living, Expenses, etc.* offered advice on how to prepare for the journey; what provisions to take, how to choose stock, and so on. They also included travel tips for Western migrants, like route direction and landscape features.

Women using these and other guidebooks had to face the problem of the lack of relevant information, as all of the earlier guidebooks were written by men and intended for small groups traveling without other family members. Smith and Peavy comment that most of these guidebooks contained at least “a few tips concerning the cooking implements essential to life on the trail, but since these books were [not intended] for women who were feeding entire families, [...] they were not particularly useful for women emigrants.”⁴⁰ Thus, many women had to improvise, and try their best when it came to choosing the right provisions and utensils they would need to perform their duties on the Overland Trail.

Some fortunate women had the help of first hand advice available, from friends or relatives who had traveled West before them. Pamela Fergus from Minnesota had spent four years on her own, with her husband pioneering in the West, before he wrote that the family could join him. In her preparations for the journey, she used a three-page

³⁹ Myers, p.104.

⁴⁰ Smith, Peavy, p.17.

inventory that her husband had sent her of items she would need during the trip and after the arrival to her new Frontier home.⁴¹ When everything was packed and everybody was adequately prepared for the move, the long and often dangerous journey could begin.

MAIN MODES OF TRAVEL AND OVERLAND TRAILS

Families and individuals who decided to relocate westward had several options when it came to modes of travel from the East to the West. There was the possibility of sailing; either all the way around the Horn of South America, or via the Panama Isthmus or Nicaragua. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1876, traveling by train became another alternative. However, the most common image of nineteenth century pioneers bound westward is that of companies moving across America in covered wagons, also called prairie schooners.⁴²

Emigrants could choose between several overland routes leading to the West. One of them was the Santa Fe Trail, which opened up in 1822, forking south from Independence, Missouri. The other two main trails led along the Platte River; the Oregon Trail on the south side, and the Mormon Trail to the north. Both the Oregon and the Mormon Trails were joined at the South Pass in Wyoming. Consequently, the Mormon Trail split southward to Utah. After the series of alternate routes that The Oregon Trail presented, all the cut-offs eventually led the travelers to the Snake River and then carried on west to the Columbia and the coast.⁴³ All trails had many so-called cut-offs, which

⁴¹ Smith, Peavy, p.18.

⁴² Butruille, Susan G. *Women's Voices from the Oregon Trail*, (Boise: Tamarack Books, Inc., 1993), p.54

⁴³ White, Richard. *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own; A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.199.

were various paths branching off the main ones. Numerous travelers took them in hopes of shortening their journey, often only to discover they had been led astray.

Western people's main mode of transportation, the well-known covered wagons, were usually "ten feet long, four feet wide, and two feet deep"; in some cases they had false bottoms that functioned as storage space for various items.⁴⁴ The canvas that covered the top of the wagon was made waterproof with layers of paint or linseed oil. The canvas top held various articles of daily use that were stored in the pockets sewn on the inside of the cover. Goods that the emigrants decided to bring along were stored inside the wagon in a way so as to leave a passage between two rows of packed items. The outside of the wagon was also used as storage space, since numerous objects could be tied to it, such as buckets, farming tools, spare wagon parts, even pieces of furniture.⁴⁵ Later on in the journey, especially in the mountainous regions, many of these articles had to be abandoned by the side of the road, as the draught animals became increasingly more exhausted and unable to haul the heavy loads which amounted to approximately one and a half tons. To pull the wagons, oxen were the usual choice; not only because of their strength and endurance, but also because they did not have special requirements when it came to feed. They could just graze on the grass along the trail. Less frequently mules or horses were used.

Not all emigrants had the means to undertake the journey in wagons. Other modes of travel included packing all necessities on a horse and thus departing on the Overland Trail. Occasionally, individuals ventured to carry their belongings on their own backs and walked across the continent. In the middle of the century, another way of traveling was

⁴⁴ Smith, Peavy, p.20

⁴⁵ Ibid.

invented by the members of the Mormon Church in attempt to reduce the expenses of the long journey. The costs-conscious Mormon Church “ordered converts moving to Utah to pile their belongings onto handcarts and to push them across the plains and over the mountains.”⁴⁶ This method of travel across America was quite tedious and had many drawbacks. A great number of weary Mormon emigrants became more susceptible to harshness of weather and died in weather related tragedies, since they had no wagons to seek shelter in during rain and snowstorms. This mode of travel was eventually abandoned.

THE OVERLAND TRAIL

The division of labor

Most guidebooks did not provide much practical and reliable information about women’s clothing, utensils and methods of cooking and doing other female chores on the Overland Trail. The guidebooks usually recommended, as Roy Jeffrey, author of *Frontier Women* reports, that women emigrants “must develop the male characteristics of strength and resilience, and resourcefulness to survive the trip and also to rely on their female qualities to soothe and socialize men, and to ensure social stability on the way west.”⁴⁷

It is important to point out that most of the division of labor between the genders along the trail, under normal circumstances, went firmly according to the nineteenth century social standards. Thus, women were the protectors of domesticity and were expected to do their best to make the home on wheels resemble the home they had left back East. The nature of their work though, understandably, had to accommodate to new

⁴⁶ White, p.202.

⁴⁷ Butruille, p.54.

circumstances. Some chores, such as cleaning the house, did not have to be performed anymore but women had to take on many new responsibilities and learn many new skills.

According to Richard White, the division of labor depending on the gender “tended to work to the advantage of men. On the trail men could forgo much of their ordinary work, since the daily labor of farm or business was now impossible. Their nearly sole duty was transportation, none of which was light work, however: driving the wagons, caring for stock, selecting the route, and making necessary repairs.”⁴⁸ Their job was made harder by the frequent necessity to walk by the wagons and stay awake long hours for night watch duties. But generally, there were no other tasks for them to perform, and when the wagon train stopped, the day’s labor was over for the male portion of the company, and it was time to relax. Occasionally, the wagons would stop for men to go hunting; however, most of them regarded this activity as a welcome pastime and adventure, rather than work.

A woman’s day on the Overland Trail was in many respects more laborious. After the day’s journey was behind them, and the weary travelers camped for the night, women could not sit down and take a rest, as the core of their duties was still to be carried out. One of the traditional female tasks was cooking for the entire group of migrants. While most men rested, women had to make necessary preparations for the cooking, such as collecting fuel for campfire and hauling water. They served lunch, cooked and served dinner and prepared breakfast and lunch for the next day. When the meal was over, they had to clean up.

Cooking in the harsh conditions of the overland journey was no easy task. Though wealthier families usually hired a cook to perform this duty, most migrants did not have

⁴⁸ White, p.203.

spare resources for this purpose and thus women had to cook for themselves as well as for everybody else in the company. Those who had not been skilled in this respect previously had to learn by trial and error. When the provisions were plentiful, women would cook elaborate dinners; they also made butter and cheese, baked bread and pies and even made preserves. When the party started to run out of supplies, the travelers had to content themselves with significantly plainer food. As Helen Carpenter wrote, “one does like a change and about the only change we have from bread and bacon is to bacon and bread.”⁴⁹

Comments such as the one made by emigrant wife Esther Hana were quite common, “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.”⁵⁰ Moreover, campfire cooking often caused the food to be burned, sudden storms would spoil the whole dinner; and as one woman wrote in her diary, “If mosquitoes are thick, they can get into the dough and turn it black. There is nothing you can do about this.”⁵¹

Apart from the cooking, women had to air out supplies every night to prevent mildew, help unpack and pack wagons, wash clothes, and mend them when necessary, take care of the children and tend to the sick. Chores traditionally considered as female ones rested in most emigrant trains entirely with the women and male help in performing them was rather rare.

Even though the greatest load of female work was carried out in the evenings, it does not mean that during the day women were idle. For a considerable part of the

⁴⁹ Myers, p.123.

⁵⁰ Smith, Peavy, p.28.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.69.

journey they had to walk by the wagons, so as to ease the load for the draught animals. On the way they would collect berries and fuel - which on the plains took the form of buffalo chips. Dried buffalo dung presented an excellent form of fuel; furthermore, a lighted buffalo chip could be used to drive the mosquitoes out of the wagon before retiring for the night.

Additionally, it was quite common for women to take on some of the “male work”, such as help drive the wagons. Peavy and Smith in *Pioneer Women* provide the reader with abundant examples of westering women carrying out traditionally male tasks:

Mary Lyon’s mother drove their wagon for a portion of every day. [...] When the Lyon wagon was mired in deep mud, Mrs. Lyon mounted the family horse and [...] helped guide the oxen out of the mud. [...] Through eighteen miles of a blinding snowstorm, Kitturah Belknap drove the family’s team so that her husband could herd the stock. [...] Cathrine Haun reported that herding the stock, something she’d never done back east, was a ‘service...expected of us all – men and women alike.’⁵²

Elsewhere in her diary, Cathrine Haun wrote:

At other times a chain or rope would be fastened to the front axle and we climbed up impossible bowlders [boulders] and pulled with might and main while men pushed with herculian strength to get the loaded wagons over some barrier. [...] Many times the greater part of the day would be consumed in this strenuous and altogether unladylike labor.⁵³

Perhaps the most exceptional levelers of gender distinctions were the four young southern women who joined the company of Thomas Potter. They were excellent shots and large game hunters; and provided the company with buffalo, elk and antelope meat. Their skills were indispensable, which was soon recognized by all. As a consequence, the party agreed that these women should partake on the “party’s organization and governance” alongside with men.⁵⁴

⁵² Smith, Peavy, p.44.

⁵³ Schlissel, p.179.

⁵⁴ Myers, p.132.

Separation of gender roles was furthermore breached when the need for women to take on men's work became unavoidable; when no men were at hand or when the men in the family became sick or otherwise incapacitated. Martha Morrison's memories of the journey West tell us that "some women did all the yoking; many times the men were off." She writes, "One time my father was away hunting cattle that had been driven off by the Indians, and that left Mother and the children to attend to everything..."⁵⁵

Some women enjoyed the challenge that the Overland Trail presented and were strong enough to face its dangers entirely without the help of the other sex. Mary Wells Yates, known as "Granny" Yates, the mother of thirteen children and a widow, completed her first journey across America in 1864. She would cross the plains twelve more times before she died, guiding and organizing emigrant groups.

Women learned to drive oxen; they cracked whips, climbed mountains and herded cattle; but it was a much rarer occurrence for men to do chores traditionally assigned to women. This would usually happen when there was no woman in the company of male travelers. According to Richard White this kind of "exception to the stability of gender roles on the trail"⁵⁶ was common mainly in groups of Gold Rush migrants. Diaries of the members of all-male parties reveal considerable bitterness of men over having to do "woman's work."

Dress code and gender roles

Mary Ellen Todd, who was nine years old when her family started their westward journey, reports in her diary about her experience of learning how to crack a whip which

⁵⁵ Myers p.35.

⁵⁶ White, p.204.

was something traditionally preformed by men. She obviously enjoyed this activity and felt proud when she heard her father tell her mother, “Do you know that Mary Ellen is beginning to crack the whip?” How great was her disappointment at her mother’s unenthusiastic answer, “I am afraid it isn’t a very ladylike thing for a girl to do.”⁵⁷

Mary Ellen’s mother’s comment suggests that gender differentiation was still quite important for the nineteenth century West-bound women. However, they had to take on roles that were traditionally considered unsuitable for a female to do, and this might have changed their perspective of gender divisions. On the other hand, they were keen on maintaining their status as ladies, and distinguishing themselves from the men.

One way of showing their femininity was by strict adherence to the nineteenth century dress code. The character of daily life was greatly changed for the women on the trail. They had to overcome physical obstacles, wade through creeks, rivers and mud, climb over boulders and fallen trees; all of which was made even more difficult by the long skirts which were an indispensable part of a nineteenth century woman’s apparel. Linda Milner Waters commented on the common accidents that the long skirts were likely to cause, especially when the trail led through a mountainous terrain and it was necessary to climb: “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...”⁵⁸ Although hoops in the skirts were abandoned quickly, long skirts themselves, despite their impracticality, had a curious persistence as women’s dress on the Overland Trail, even though there were indeed other options for women who were willing to shed their skirts. One reads in the diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford that “it had occurred to me

⁵⁷ Smith, Peavy, p.44.

⁵⁸ Schlissel, p.84.

how much easier I could get through the tangled underbrush if I were a man, and I slipped into the back shed, and donned an old suit of Father's clothes...it was very funny to all but Mother, who feared I am losing all the dignity I ever possessed."⁵⁹

In 1851, Amelia Bloomer invented an outfit consisting of long trousers and a short skirt over them, which was named after the inventor herself, bloomers. Amelia, as well as other women, wore bloomers on their way West in the 1850s. However, this trend did not last long, and as many women in bloomers were exposed to public scorn and ridiculed by the majority, who preferred social convention in dress over convenience, women on the trail retreated back to the traditional outfits. Thus, although the long skirts would drag in the mud and dust, could catch fire from the camp fires or be caught under the wagon wheels, women wore them, because, in the words of Susan G. Butruille, "their long skirts were part of who they were. Practicality was quite irrelevant."⁶⁰

Ladies' concerns, joys and fears

One of the responsibilities which rested with the females was childcare. Due to the number of chores women had to perform on the trail, care for young children was often delegated to the older ones. However, there was the constant fear stemming from abundant dangers that threatened the children's lives. Diseases, against which the emigrants had no remedies and no doctors to tend to the sick, spread quickly on the trail; and children were particularly vulnerable to sickness. Moreover, accidents such as falling under the wagon wheels were common. In the haste and chaos of packing up of large wagon trains, leaving the camp and moving on, children were often left behind by

⁵⁹ Schlisell, p.84.

⁶⁰ Butruille, p.78.

accident. There is even a record of a small girl dying after having drunk a whole bottle of laudanum, when her mother was busy carrying out other trail duties and could not watch over her.

In addition to responsibility for the children who were traveling with the families, many women's diaries mention birth on the trail. Pregnancy and birth were tabooed issues at the time of the western expansion; therefore detailed accounts of these matters are not available. Usually women only mention "feeling sick" during the journey, with no particular cause attached to the sickness; and finally in due time write that a new baby was born. We can only imagine the difficulties of the tiresome journey as experienced by a pregnant woman, followed by giving birth generally without the help of a doctor or a midwife. Any complications could prove critical, or even fatal. Moreover, postponing the travel for a single day was often inconvenient, so the mother and her newborn baby had to endure the tedious travel in an uncomfortable wagon without springs right after the birth.

Privacy was highly valued, though more often than not unavailable to the women traveling West. Issues connected with everyday hygiene often became problematic, especially on the prairie where there was no vegetation behind which women could hide to attend to their daily bodily needs. In such cases, the long skirts were in fact very useful. Several women, standing with their skirts fanned out, could provide a sufficient curtain to serve as a retreat for a woman taking care of her bodily functions. With the low level of hygiene on the Overland Trail, the monthly appearance of menstruation must have been extremely unpleasant for women, and the effort to keep it discreet bothersome.

Thus the need of women for the presence of other females is quite understandable. Bonding of women in the company of travelers could help them deal with the everyday issues that were distinctively female. Being the only woman in a wagon train would mean isolation and often humiliation when there were no other females around to help preserve privacy and to give support. It was common for women on the trail to form close friendships with other women. Often they created a circle relatively separated from the male members of the company. Cecilia McMillen Adams emigrated West with her husband and other members of her close, as well as extended family. She spent most of her time with her sister. In her journal she actually only mentioned her husband twice, though descriptions of what she and her sister did together can be found on every page.⁶¹

Women would help each other keep the spirit of domesticity alive. Cathrine Haun's diary imparts information about the common practices of westering women. She tells us that "High teas were not popular but tatting, knitting, crocheting, exchanging recipes [recipes] for cooking beans and dried apples or swapping food for the sake of variety kept us in practice of feminine occupations and diversions."⁶²

The journey West was not all just dreary and tedious travel and work. There were moments when emigrants enjoyed fun in the circle of their co-travelers. Dancing, singing, playing musical instruments and telling stories were favorite pastimes. Though not very often, most groups could afford to postpone the chores and spend the evening in this pleasant way. Sophia Lois Goodridge emigrated West in 1850. A talented singer back home in Massachusetts, she studied music and she brought her melodeon on the journey. Her diary entry from June 8 reads: "We enjoyed ourselves very much at the last two

⁶¹ Schlissel, p.78.

⁶² Ibid. p.180.

places we camped. Had two violins in our tent; had some music and dancing.” On June 14 she wrote again: “Had a pleasant time – some music and dancing.”⁶³

The everyday reality, however, was more often hard and trying than entertaining. Every day on the Overland Trail was another test. Surviving was often not easy for the Western emigrants; their lives were threatened many times before they reached their destination. It is hard to imagine how the nineteenth century travelers faced the sickness on the trail when there was no doctor available, nor medicine, and often even fresh water was lacking. Thus illnesses, though a part of their everyday experience, became one of the great fears for the migrants, and especially the women, whose responsibility it was to take care of the sick. Richard White informs the reader that “the death rate on the trail was about 3 percent, or about 10 000 people in all, compared to a death rate of 2.5 percent in American society as a whole. [...] Accidents accounted for more deaths than Indian attacks, but most deaths – 90 percent – were caused by disease.”⁶⁴ Sanitary conditions on the trail were unsatisfactory. Cooking utensils could not be washed properly, and “water supplies and cooking mixed with milling animals and their waste.”⁶⁵ Water became polluted and turned into a breeding ground for bacteria and viruses, especially during the years when the Overland Trails grew more crowded. Common dangerous illnesses included typhoid, malaria, dysentery, diarrhea, measles, smallpox, tuberculosis, yellow fever, and the most dreaded of all – cholera.

⁶³ Holmes, Kenneth L., ed. *Covered Wagon Women. Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails 185.* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln: 1983), p.213.

⁶⁴ White, p.199.

⁶⁵ Butruille, p.100.

According to sources, “the cholera epidemic of 1850-52 killed half of all the people who would die on the trails between 1840 and 1860.”⁶⁶ Cholera was carried into the United States from Europe and Asia on ships and it quickly began spreading from the coast to the interior. Though many western migrants believed they were escaping it, cholera followed them across the plains. Women’s diaries record the horror of the disease. Many of them counted the graves they saw daily along the way, or described the terrible experiences of losing loved ones to the disease. Jane D. Kellog wrote in her journal: “There was an epidemic of cholera all along the Platte River. [...] All along the road up the Platte River was a grave yard; most any time of day you could see people burying their dead; some places five or six graves in a row. [...] It was a sad sight.”⁶⁷

Disease was the most common cause of death on the trail, but it seems that most westering women were even more terrified of Indians. A mention of the Natives can be found in every journal. According to traditional belief, Indians were dangerous savages lurking in the wild and attacking groups of travelers when least expected. In reality, however, Indian attacks on the trail were relatively rare, especially in the first years of migration. Moreover, whites represented a far greater danger for the Natives. According to the records, “between 1840 and 1860 Indians killed 362 whites on the trail, whereas whites killed 426 Indians.”⁶⁸

In the earlier years Natives did not have many reasons to interfere with white travelers. It was actually quite common that they helped them, either by showing them the way or assisting them with crossing rivers. The migrants frequently traded with the Indians, which benefited both parties. There are plentiful examples that suggest friendly

⁶⁶ White, p.199.

⁶⁷ Schlissel, p.59.

⁶⁸ White, p.199.

affiliation between the white travelers and the Natives. Margaret A. Frink wrote in her diary that “there was an Indian village of considerable size. The Indians seemed to be well-disposed. Our boy, Robert Parker, made a trade with them, exchanging his worn shoes for a pair of new moccasins.”⁶⁹ Celinda Hines in 1853 commented: “Most of the males have no clothing but a sort of apron. They are the most pleasant agreeable looking Indians I have ever seen.”⁷⁰

There are also many accounts of the atrocities committed by the Indians. In the later years, when the migration peaked and more and more whites were crossing the Indian lands, killing buffalo – so essential for the survival of the Natives - and spreading diseases against which Indians had developed no immunity, Natives began to understand whites as a threat. At that time Indian attacks became more frequent.

However, the fear of Indians is ever-present in all stages of Westward migration. Maggie Hall’s diary offers the following description of what many a traveler felt about the Natives: “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.”⁷¹

There was a clear cultural misunderstanding of the Natives on the part of whites. Over and over, diaries mention Indians standing by the side of the trail, “begging.” Most whites considered this practice demeaning and “disgusting.” Such diary entries reflect the ignorance of the Indian traditions, according to which those passing through the lands of

⁶⁹ Holmes, p.115.

⁷⁰ Butruille, p.93.

⁷¹ Schlissel, p.119.

a different tribe were expected to offer presents. Thus the encounter of cultures very different from each other, each believing they had a right to the land which they occupied or were planning to settle, or even passed through, led to many clashes and conflicts.

JOURNEY COMPLETED

Those who made it across the continent, whichever route they chose, started a new life on the Western Frontier, far from the home they had known, facing conditions unlike those they had been used to. However, by the time the overland journey was over, westering women had learned a great number of skills they would need in their new Frontier home. They had realized they could face many challenges and become stronger by confronting their fears. The family had recognized that the woman was an essential part of it and contributed to its well-being – physical, psychological, as well as economic. The Overland Trail had given most women the necessary experience, strength and self-confidence to ensure their survival in the new environment.

WOMEN'S LIVES ON THE FRONTIER

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis is an essential document of Western scholarship and much Western historical writing has been in response to it. Much of the criticism has centered on Turner's having completely left out women from the vast space of the American West, as if their participation in the Frontier experience was nonexistent. Many twentieth-century publications corrected this error by introducing the female figure into the masculine Western landscape and showing how essential her contribution to the life in the West was. Frontiering did not leave the female experience in the nineteenth century unchanged. It modified women's position in society and their economic and political importance. To illustrate this, one needs to examine the every-day experience of women in the nineteenth-century West, their routines, struggles, and endeavors to make their new Western lives better. West presented many opportunities for women to take on active roles in the economic sphere and in managing their own lives.

NEW HOME IN THE WEST

After the long trip across the plains, most immigrants were relieved to reach the end of their journey. However, the life that awaited them would not be significantly easier or less challenging than what they experienced on the Overland Trail. Erecting their new home was the first task of the rural settlers, after having arrived on the piece of land they would occupy. It was not uncommon for the newly arrived settlers to continue living in their wagons during the first weeks, until a better habitation was constructed. In

the more settled urban areas, it was possible to rent rooms until the family could build or buy their own house.

The first dwellings were generally not very impressive and far from comfortable. Many pioneers started out by living in a dugout, “a windowless space scooped from the side of the hill, with some boards, brush, and sod for a roof”.⁷² Other housing options included not very attractive possibilities of living in a tar-paper shack, canvas-wall house, primitive log cabin or sod house. A “soddie”, typical of Nebraska and the Western prairies, was built of large blocks of sod, mud and grass; the interior was often dark and dirt floor would change into a big pool of mud when there were rainstorms. Moreover, roofs often leaked; and insects, snakes and other kinds or vermin were frequent unwelcome visitors in these dwellings.

Women’s reactions to this sort of living were varied. Anna Shaw described her mother’s arrival into the log house in Michigan; when she saw her new home, she fainted and then she quietly despaired for several hours before she reconciled herself to the sight.⁷³ Mary Ballou, a California pioneer in the 1850s, mentions her “kitchen” in one of her letters home, “All the kitchen that I have is four posts stuck down into the ground and covered over the top with factory cloth.”⁷⁴ Though erecting a house was a task assigned to men; many pioneer women were actively involved in the construction. Eliza Farnham did all the carpenter work on the two-story house because she thought it a waste of money to pay a man “for doing what I found my own hands so dexterous in.”⁷⁵

⁷² Butler, Anne M., Ona Siporin. *Uncommon Common Women*. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996),

⁷³ Myers, p.141

⁷⁴ Fischer, Christiane, ed. *Let Them Speak for Themselves. Women in the American West 1849-1900*. (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977) p.103

⁷⁵ Myers, p.161

One of the best descriptions of life in the California mining camps is offered in the “Shirley letters” written by Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe under the pseudonym “Dame Shirley”. Shirley wrote them in 1851 and 1852 from Rich Bar and Indian Bar on California’s Feather River. In one of her letters, she gives an account of the crude log cabin which she was to inhabit. She writes, “My toilet table is formed of a trunk elevated upon two claret cases and by draping it with some more of the blue linen neatly fringed, it really will look quite handsome.”⁷⁶ Women’s inventiveness in efforts to make their new homes more tolerable and “homely” was never lacking. One pioneer, for example, used her husband’s colorful geological survey maps to decorate the walls of their cabin. Others made curtains for the windows, braided rag carpets to cover their floors, and decorated walls with muslin or newspaper. In the end, many of them felt proud of their accomplishments in creating an inhabitable home in the challenging Frontier conditions.

THE WORK OF THEIR HANDS

The tasks traditionally assigned to the female members of the pioneer family were numerous and mostly in accordance with what was generally considered a woman’s realm. Women on the Frontier were expected to clean the house, cook, sew, wash clothes, plant and tend to gardens, and take care of the children and the sick. In addition, they often kept chickens, milked cows and made butter and other dairy products. Most of these tasks were made harder by the Frontier conditions and many women complained particularly about cooking and washing. Before they could get a hold of a stove, pioneers had to cook in an open fireplace or outdoors over a campfire, which made preparation of

⁷⁶ Clappe, L. A. Knapp Smith. *Shirley Letters from the California Mines*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949) p.59

meals very demanding. Moreover, there was the danger of their long skirts catching fire. Some, such as Miriam Colt, solved this problem by putting on bloomers, though most women in an effort to keep their “womanly” appearance were reluctant to give up the traditional long skirts. Very frequently, having to perform a number of “unladylike” tasks, clothes were one of the few things that distinguished them from men.

The first years on the Frontier usually continued the Trail experience in that everybody had to share the labor required for the family’s subsistence. Thus the gender boundaries in the division of labor were easily and frequently breached.⁷⁷ Women would perform heavy outside tasks such as plowing, herding of livestock and other field work. One woman pioneer confided in her diary that she had begun to herd cattle when she was just 10; another one commented on her ability to use firearms, saying “I could take the head off of a gray squirrel in the tallest pine.”⁷⁸ Occasionally, women had no choice and had to assume responsibility over the whole operation of their households and farms. This was the case when their male relatives were sick or died, or when they were absent, which was not a rare occurrence on the Frontier. Whereas single women and widows in the East generally sought the support of their male family members, Western women had fewer relatives close by who they could turn to, as they usually had left their extended families in the East behind. Consequently, they usually had to rely on themselves.

Though it was less frequent for men to do women’s work, at times they did share some traditionally female tasks. Many female accounts of Frontier life refer to men cooking. Mary E. Ackley’s diary mentions that her father temporarily took in six men

⁷⁷ This kind of blurring of gender roles was more common in the rural areas than in towns. It was not unique to the Frontier, because farming families elsewhere in America faced similar conditions, however, it was much harder to find hired help on the Frontier, due to the sparse population. Therefore women had to “pitch in” with their work much more often.

⁷⁸ Moynihan, p.34

who lost their houses in floods while pioneering in California. She wrote that “no board was charged, but each man contributed to providing the provisions, and men did the cooking.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, men helped with chores such as washing (hauling water), childcare, and other housework. Since women’s work did not carry as much prestige as men’s, males performing these tasks rarely mentioned them in their diaries. For example the diary of Clark Woodis never mentions his washing the dishes and cleaning the house, though his wife’s journal states clearly that he did perform these jobs.⁸⁰

It is difficult to generalize about the effect that the relaxing of the strict gender role boundaries had on women. Some felt empowered by the discovery of their skills and strength in performing unfamiliar tasks. They felt proud of their accomplishments and perhaps thought, like Elinore Stewart, “I just love to experiment, to work, to prove out things, so ranch life and ‘roughing it’ just suit me.”⁸¹ On the other hand, many female pioneers felt overburdened with work, and the occasional absence of men, which meant additional responsibility, seemed too much for them to bear. Western historians draw various conclusions from facts of Frontier women’s lives. Though many (Myers, Harris, Peavy...) stress the importance of the increased women’s autonomy and self-reliance; others (Jeffrey) assert that, despite the blurred gender roles, there was no significant relocation of power in favor of women in the Frontier family and community.

⁷⁹ Fischer, p.230

⁸⁰ Harris, Katherine. “Homesteading in Northern Colorado, 1873-1920: Sex Roles and Women’s Experience”. in Armitage, Susan, Elizabeth Jameson, eds. *The Women’s West*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987)

⁸¹ Myers, p.163

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

The nineteenth-century Western migrants undertook their long journey in hope of the better life that this move would eventually secure them. This essentially meant expectations of improvement of their financial situation. The existence of countless opportunities for male immigrants is a well-known and often asserted fact. However, Frontier offered many possibilities of women gaining wealth as well.

Most women on the rural Frontier worked in their homes, producing goods for their families. Exchanging the fruits of their labor for cash was not uncommon. In fact, it was quite an important source of extra income that helped many families survive. They sold eggs, milk and butter, took in sewing or made gloves, hats and candles; they baked and sold pies and bread. Mary Caples wrote in her diary that she sometimes sold a hundred pies a day. These activities were not considered a “gainful employment”, however, and thus women earning cash in this way do not appear in censuses as “working women”.

Using the “traditional female skills” to gain substantial income was not difficult on the Frontier. Since, in many areas, there was a great disproportion in numbers between the male and the female inhabitants, the male majority was badly in need of somebody to wash their clothes and cook their meals; and they were willing to pay high prices for a bit of “homely” care. Men were often aware of the benefits that a woman’s work could bring, as is apparent from one of the Shirley letters which reports a comment that a man made about a woman in the mining camp: “a wife of the right sort, she is. She earnt [sic] her old man nine hundred dollars in nine weeks, clear of all expenses, by washing!”⁸²

⁸² Clappe, p.45

Some wives' activities brought more money into the family's budget than their husbands' labor.

Keeping boarders proved to be an even more profitable undertaking. Boarders were either provided with meals, accommodation, or both. Those who had boarders living in their own house were limited by the available space and their business remained on the smaller scale. However, there were women who ran quite large boarding houses, such as one Colorado pioneer, who reported having seventy-seven boarders. Others cooked in bulk for large numbers of men. Luzena Stanley Wilson, after having arrived in Nevada City, decided to "assist in the recuperation of the family finances" and opened a boarding house. She made her own table, set it up, bought necessary provisions in the local store and started cooking. When her husband returned home in the evening, there were "twenty miners eating at my table. Each man as he rose put a dollar in my hand and said I might count him as a permanent customer."⁸³ As her establishment prospered, Wilson took her husband into partnership.

Many hotels and boarding houses were operated by the whole family, with the husband usually keeping the books and taking care of the building, and the wife cooking, serving and cleaning. In this way, though economically active, women did not overstep the boundaries of the traditionally female domestic sphere. The scope of their activities remained essentially within the household tasks. However, there were others, whose ambitions led them outside of what was generally considered "female domain."

Such was the case of Nellie Cashman; though called "Frontier angel" by many, she was not very angel-like with her knack for danger and adventure. Nellie entered the traditionally male field of gold mining. She led a very transient life, migrating through

⁸³ Fischer, p.158

various areas of the West, according to where the newest gold discoveries were made. By opening numerous hotels and boarding houses, she made sufficient resources to live on and sponsor her prospecting endeavors. Most of her establishments brought considerable profits; however, her mining claims usually yielded just mediocre returns. On her many prospecting trips, she was often the only woman in the party of male miners, yet she was respected and able to “[carve out] the place she sought in the masculine world of gold rushers”.⁸⁴ Her prospecting eventually led her as far as Klondike, and even Africa.

Nellie Cashman was certainly not the only female prospector in the American West; gold panning was a listed female occupation in the nineteenth-century Mexican censuses. Though nineteenth-century woman’s interests definitely were not expected to include mining, there were women who achieved important posts in this industry. Delia McCarthy was president and general manager of the Cooperative Mining and Milling Company in Cripple Creek. Women ran the Silver Mountain and Clear Creek Mining Companies; and the owner of seventeen mines in Colorado was a woman.⁸⁵

A great number of women owned businesses operating in various fields; and many were owners of ranches and farms. According to the Homestead Act of 1862, single and widowed women or women who were heads of households could apply for the government-issued claims; and many did so. One survey estimated that in Colorado and Wyoming, around the turn of the century, an average of 11.9% of homestead entrants were women.⁸⁶ Some women applied for homesteads merely to increase the amount of land that their families owned; others with plans to sell the land eventually on profit.

⁸⁴ Zanjani, Sally. *A Mine of Her Own, Women Prospectors in the American West, 1850-1950*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) p.212

⁸⁵ Smith, Peavy, p.105

⁸⁶ Schlissel, p.154

However, there were a number of single women who actually worked their land themselves, while often supplementing their income with other occupations such as teaching or working as domestics. Some of these women eventually developed into large agri-business owners, such as Harriet Strong, who owned “extensive orange and walnut groves and very profitable pampas grass business”. Her skills and achievements enabled her to become the first woman on the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the first woman Trustee of the University of Southern California Law School.⁸⁷

Those who did not earn their living by operating their own businesses had the opportunity to seek paid employment. Perhaps the most common female job in the West was teaching school. As men had numerous opportunities to enter more profitable employment, teaching became an overwhelmingly female occupation. Salary varied according to the school district and the number of students, but, according to Katherine Harris, “there is no evidence that the sex of the teacher affected the pay”.⁸⁸ Teaching offered young, single women the possibility to earn their own living and relative independence; and thus often presented an alternative to early marriage. Teachers in the West were in great demand and many institutions (such as the Board of National Education, formed in 1847) tried to recruit young women in the East to fill these posts; though it usually proved more feasible and practical to find acceptable candidates among the local women.

Less often mentioned, but also an important promoter of learning in the West, was the female librarian. The trained librarian emerged as a professional occupation in the late nineteenth century. Western communities, keen on bringing in more culture, were eager

⁸⁷ Myers, p.262

⁸⁸ Harris, p.172

to gather funds to open libraries that would be staffed by educated librarians. Other professional occupations open to women included writing and art. There were a number of Western women authors, writing books and newspaper articles; some even published their own newspapers.

Important distinction should be made between the social classes. The affluent urban dwellers experienced a different kind of life. Women of the upper classes, and increasingly the urban middle class, did not have to work; in fact, some of their diaries express how appalled they were by the mere idea of work. Men were the sole breadwinners in these families. Women of the upper class enjoyed a life of leisure. In the families whose financial situation did not permit hiring domestic servants, women were responsible for housework and childcare.

The unbalanced ratio of men and women on the Frontier was one of the reasons why prostitution flourished in the West. The figure of the Western prostitute has been much mythologized in literature and almost every fictional Western town had its own “prostitute with the heart of gold”. However, the reality of prostitution was considerably drearier than the myth. Prostitutes lived a “difficult life with many forms of social, economic, and political constraint.”⁸⁹ Many of them, being poor and illiterate, found themselves lacking other options of employment and thus they were unable to escape the life in brothels or on the streets. Most of their clients were not affluent and therefore unwilling to pay generously for the women’s services. Conflicts with clients were not uncommon and often led to violence. Prostitution frequently became a path to alcoholism, drug addiction and premature death. Yet some madams managed profitable businesses. For example, 1880s Helena’s madam Josephine Hensley, alias “Chicago Jo”,

⁸⁹ Butler, p.93

owned a large portion of property in the city's tenderloin district – the area famous for its saloons and brothels. Several Denver madams (Mattie Silks, Laura Evans, Jennie Rogers) were also quite famous and prominent in their times. Prostitutes and brothel operators, if they wanted their establishment to remain open, had to pay large sums in taxes and “gifts” to the local governments which sought to decrease the tax burden of the “respectable citizens” by collecting exorbitant figures from the demimonde. Thus the profits in this line of business were greatly decreased.

Life on the Frontier presented women with many obstacles and challenges. Those who despite many challenges preserved in new and unfamiliar tasks that the Frontier living required; usually discovered new sources of strength of body, as well as mind. By assuming new roles, women often transgressed the traditional gender boundaries. Though these boundaries were never fully discarded, under the pressures of Frontier life they became more flexible.

Although historians do not agree on the question whether the Frontier was an empowering and liberating environment for women; it remains true that women could find more paths to independence in the West than elsewhere in the country. From the possibilities of higher education, to paid employment, to property and business ownership, all of this was somewhat more common for Western women. In 1890, the West was home to 4 percent of American females; but it claimed “15 percent each of the female literary writers and of the female scientists, 14 percent of the female lawyers, [...] 10 percent each of the female doctors and of the female journalists.”⁹⁰ Apart from these official numbers, there were many more women whose activities, whether transformed

⁹⁰ Smith, Peavy, p.119

into financial profit or carried out just for the immediate benefit of their families, were of enormous importance in building the Western society and economy.

SUFFRAGE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Women's suffrage became a widely debated issue in the American states and territories in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, women's suffrage advocates joined forces with those fighting for African American voting rights in order to battle for general equal suffrage. However, it gradually became clear, especially after the fifteenth amendment was passed, which made political discrimination on basis of race unconstitutional, that women would have to bring their struggle for suffrage to the successful end alone.

Though organized women's suffrage movement started in the East, it was in the West that women first reaped the benefits of being granted the vote. The country as a whole did not make women's suffrage the law of the land until 1920, when the nineteenth amendment was passed. Out of the seventeen referenda on women's suffrage that were held in eleven states in the four decades after 1870, but before 1920, all of them took place west of the Mississippi but three.⁹¹ Numerous states and territories granted women the right to vote before it was done on the national level. Starting with Wyoming in 1869, the quest was followed by Utah (1870)⁹², Colorado (1893), Idaho (1896), Washington (1910), California (1911), Arizona, Kansas and Oregon in 1912, Montana and Nevada in 1914, New York (1917) and Michigan, South Dakota and Oklahoma in 1918. It is impossible not to notice that the overwhelming majority of the states where women were first allowed the access to the polls were in the West. The states with full-suffrage for

⁹¹ Myers, p.219

⁹² Wyoming enfranchised its women still as a territory, it joined the Union as a suffrage state in 1890. Utah also definitively granted women the vote after it had become a state, in 1896.

women were also the newest ones; for example, by 1914 women's suffrage was approved in eleven out of the eighteen states last admitted to the Union.⁹³

The question then arises, what caused this geographically disproportionate political empowerment of women? Why was the right to vote first won by women in the West rather than East which originally gave birth to the women's movement? It is very important to always remember that it was in the hands of men to give women the vote, as only they were allowed to take active part in the forming of legislature. There have been many speculations on the western success of women's suffrage, ranging from assertions of greater respect for women on the Frontier, earned by their hard work and participation in the western society, to explanations based on the political expediency of granting women the vote. The reasons for success in the struggle for female access to the polls in the West are varied. Some of them only apply to selected states and territories; and some conclusions can be drawn about the character of women's suffrage campaign in the West in general. Combination of numerous factors, many of them independent of the actual efforts of women to gain the vote, contributed to the female access to the polls in the West, before the rest of the country gained this right.

IMPORTANT LEGAL ISSUES

The law in the English colonies was based on English legislature. According to English common law, married women had very few rights. Through marriage they became one legal unit with their husbands and their rights to property, to sign contracts, to retain their own earnings and to guardianship of children were all transferred to the husband. Though in America it was more common for women to help their husbands

⁹³ Myers, p.234

with the family business, many women were in fact landowners and heads of families, and “the colonial laws were less restrictive than in England, women had no political rights and far fewer legal rights than men.”⁹⁴

Abigail Scott Duniway described in her book *Path Breaking*, a case which illustrates married women’s legal powerlessness. She relates a story of a woman whose husband “sold their household furniture and disappeared” leaving her “destitute, with five little children.”⁹⁵ Duniway helped her obtain mortgage on a furnished home, in which she established a fairly successful boarding house. Duniway reported on the woman that “things were going well with her when her husband returned and took legal possession of everything. He repudiated the mortgage, which the wife had no legal right to contract, and there was nothing left for her but the divorce courts.”⁹⁶

Though stories such as this one eventually inspired Abigail Scott Duniway to fight fiercely for women’s suffrage, they also draw attention to issues apart from gaining the vote that had to be solved and measures to be passed that would directly influence women’s lives. Women quite often believed local suffrage in municipal, school and tax elections to be more important than being able to vote on national issues.⁹⁷ Married women’s rights were also crucial. In 1839, Mississippi wives were allowed to own property separate from their husbands. In 1846, Wisconsin’s constitutional convention adopted a married women’s property law, which was later dropped and reinstated soon after the state joined the Union. New York’s reform bill of 1848, giving married women the right to own property separate from their husbands’, was a great success and married

⁹⁴ Myers, p.214

⁹⁵ Duniway, Abigail Scott. *Path Breaking, an Autobiographical History of the Equal Suffrage Movement in Pacific Coast States*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 24

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p.24

⁹⁷ Myers, p.237

women's property legislation was passed in Massachusetts too, in 1854. At the end of the 1850s, married women could own property in Kansas (they were also granted guardianship of children) and Iowa, where divorce laws were also improved. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 upheld the New Mexico's women's property rights, previously existent under the Mexican land-grant system. In 1851, women in Oregon became eligible land recipients under the Oregon's Land Donation Act. Despite some eastern examples, most of the legal improvements in the status of women's rights were first introduced in the Western parts of the United States, a pattern which is similar to the later spread of the women's suffrage.⁹⁸

There would have not been any change if there had not been for the individuals working for the cause of women's rights. Some of them dedicated astonishing amounts of energy and financial support to the fight for equal suffrage. Though eastern leaders played a big role in organizing campaigns in the earlier stages of the struggle for suffrage in the West, many distinguished suffrage leaders sprung up in the West. One of the most exceptional Western suffragists was Abigail Scott Duniway. She described the everyday hardships of the Frontier living and her role in the western suffrage movement in the book *Path Breaking*. Duniway founded a magazine called the *New Northwest* which promoted women's rights. She also traveled extensively, lecturing and helping with campaigns for women's suffrage. Though not always entirely in accord with the national suffrage leaders on all issues, her cooperation with the Easterners was quite fruitful.

Caroline N. Churchill, another important women's rights advocate active in the West, was born in Canada, and moved to Denver in 1879. She founded the *Colorado*

⁹⁸ Information was drawn from *Westering Women and the Frontier experience* and from *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, Compton's NewMedia, Inc., 1994 (<http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm>)

Antelope, a women's rights newspaper, in the same year. She criticized the way society was managed by men; and condemned women who did nothing to change the status quo. In 1882 the *Antelope* became *The Queen Bee* and continued to be published until Churchill's death. In addition to the two who were just mentioned, there were many other women in the West, working for the cause of female suffrage, whose endeavors helped it become reality in many states and territories well before it became the national law.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE WESTERN SUFFRAGE

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact reasons why suffragists celebrated victories in the West earlier than in the rest of the country. Some circumstances were specific to individual states and some can be generalized and applied to the whole region. It is possible to point out some general facts about the West and Western politics that helped these women gain the vote before their Eastern sisters by examining the process of struggle for suffrage in the selected Western states.

The nineteenth-century American West was a region consisting of territories rather than states; and this fact might have had an influence on suffrage legislation. The process of approval of women's suffrage was considerably less complicated in a territory than in a state. It was sufficient to have the measure passed by the territorial legislature and signed by the governor. No referendum or constitutional amendment was needed, as was the case in the states. Thus, for example in Wyoming "a total of fourteen people acting in their official capacities brought the law into existence"⁹⁹; since the members of

⁹⁹ Beeton, Beverly. *Women Vote in the West: the Woman Suffrage Movement 1869-1896*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), p.7

the territorial government and the governor where the only people necessary to express themselves favorably on a debated law for it to come into effect.

Moreover, national government considered the Western territories a suitable and convenient ground for testing the women's suffrage. In fact, in 1868 an Indiana congressman George W. Julian suggested that all of the Western territories grant women the right to participate in elections. Though the bill did not pass, it stirred the interest of a number of congressmen, because "experimenting with woman suffrage in the territories [...] appeared to be safe. Neither the political stability of the established states nor the national political scene would be seriously altered because territorial voters could not vote for their own governors or for the President."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the structure of the electorate would have to be reconsidered when the territory would draft its constitution in order to achieve statehood.

Use of the women's vote as an advertising tool to increase female and family immigration into the West was an important pro-suffrage arguments in many Western regions. Racial arguments were used as well, which will be discussed later. Another important fact, unique to the West, was the lack of organized and effective opposition to female suffrage. It was one of the reasons for the earlier suffrage victories, such as the one in Wyoming. On the other hand, in the Eastern states anti-suffrage movements had quite a tradition; for example Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women was founded in 1895 and was the largest and most active in the US.

However, there were also significant hindrances to the efforts of Western suffragists. One of them was the frequent link of female vote with the demand for

¹⁰⁰ Beeton, p.xi

prohibition. This particular connection was criticized by Abigail Scott Duniway; who, though in favor of temperance, did not approve of banning liquor sales entirely. The story of suffrage in Washington is illustrative of how anti-liquor attitudes could heat up the anti-suffrage sentiment. After the Civil War a new election code was passed, according to which all white US citizens had a right to cast their ballots. Mary Olney Brown tried to persuade the legislature that since women were citizens, they had the right to vote. She succeeded in two precincts where the election judges let women vote, an action which drew much attention. In 1871 the vague wording of the original election code was cleared up and a bill was passed which denied suffrage to all females. In the same year, Duniway and Susan B. Anthony organized a huge suffrage campaign in Washington and Oregon and, in 1877, women were granted the right to vote in school elections.

The big victory came in 1883 when Washington women were fully enfranchised. Duniway warned the newly enfranchised women not to take action on the question of prohibition immediately. However, soon after granting women the ballot, there were a number of successful campaigns to outlaw liquor in numerous parts of the territory. Women were held responsible for this; and the coalition of anti-prohibitionists and anti-suffragists were able to exert enough influence to deprive women of the right to vote.

Washington women had to wait until 1910 to gain the access to the ballot box again. By then the link between women's suffrage and prohibition was not a hindrance anymore, due to the general spread of anti-liquor mood. Some also link the 1910 Washington suffrage success, as well as California and Oregon vote with the rise of the Progressive politics.¹⁰¹ The decades labeled as The Progressive Era (roughly the 1890s through 1920s) are characterized by politics sympathetic to restructuring of the society by

¹⁰¹ Myers, p.233

way of reforms. The progressives favored issues such as “social justice, general equality and public safety.”¹⁰² Among the measures resulting from these tendencies on the American political scene are, among others, direct elections of Senators, Prohibition, Income Tax, and broadening of the women’s suffrage, including the eventual passing of the nineteenth Amendment granting the nationwide female access to polls.

SUFFRAGE ON THE STATE LEVEL

Though most of the suffrage victories were achieved towards the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, it does not mean that suffrage was not debated much earlier than that. In 1865 Amelia Bloomer gave a very eloquent 1.5 hour plea for women’s rights in front of the legislators of the Nebraska territory. As a response, the *Council Bluff Chronotype* wrote, “As far as property rights are concerned, all seemed to agree with the lady that the laws of our country are wrong... We may doubt it is [good] policy for women to vote, but who can draw the line and say that naturally she had not a right to do so?”¹⁰³ Soon after, a bill to grant suffrage to women was introduced. Though the responsible committee of the upper House recommended passage; legislators became distracted by other disputes and the discussion of the suffrage bill was not taken up again. This unfortunate circumstance lost Nebraska women the chance to be the first ones in America to cast their ballots. Perhaps the idea of women voting was still a thought too radical for the 1850s; when other, “less radical” women’s

¹⁰² “Progressive Era”, from *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, 2 August 2006. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Era)

¹⁰³ Weatherford, Doris, et al, eds. *A History of Women in the United States: State-by-State Reference*. Vols. 1-4. (Danbury: Grolier Academic Reference, An Imprint of Scholastic Library Publishing, Inc., 2004) p. 367, vol.1.

rights (such as property rights, children custody, divorce laws...) had not yet completed the process of becoming the law.

The following decade witnessed a vigorous campaign for equal suffrage in Kansas. There were two amendments to the state constitution submitted by the legislature; one giving the right to vote to the freedmen, the other to women. The 1867 Kansas campaign was important for several reasons. Above all, it was the first popular vote on the issue of woman suffrage in the United States, and there was a strong sentiment that its outcome might serve as a sort of a precedent for the rest of the country. Henry Blackwell, an important member of the American Equal Rights Association, thought that "success in Kansas means success everywhere".¹⁰⁴

At the time of the Kansas campaign, women's and freedmen's suffrage were still closely linked in the struggle for equal suffrage. However, 1867 would mark the end of the cooperation of women's rights activists and the supporters of freedmen's political rights. Due to the abolitionists' affiliation with the Republican Party, which launched a stark anti-women's-suffrage campaign, abolitionists and feminists became increasingly estranged. This development went as far as woman suffragists' cooperation with democrats, who were often openly racist (such as George Francis Train, with whom Susan B. Anthony canvassed Kansas); despite the fact that great majority of feminists had always been supporters of abolition. Though neither women's nor black suffrage was approved in Kansas, the 1867 campaign has several important consequences. It resulted in increased partisanship in the politics of the national women's suffrage leaders; in split in the leadership of the American Equal Suffrage Association (between Blackwell and

¹⁰⁴ Du Bois, Ellen Carol. *Feminism and Suffrage*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) p.167

Lucy Stone who disapproved of the affiliation with democrats, and Stanton and Anthony) and, most importantly, in the emergence of the independent women's rights movement.

Wyoming

1869 was the year when the suffragists' dream became reality in Wyoming. The territorial legislature granted women the vote, which made Wyoming the first state or territory to enfranchise its women. The curious fact about this pioneering move is that it was all done with very little female participation. Apart from some previous discussion of the issue, there had been hardly any effort on the part of suffragists; there had been no campaign and no suffrage organization lobbying the legislature. One is left to wonder how come that a measure that had been unsuccessfully fought for elsewhere passed in Wyoming seemingly effortlessly?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that there were relatively few women in the territory. According to the 1870 census the ratio of white women over 10 years of age to men was about 1 to 5.8. Therefore men did not have to fear that the newly enfranchised female population could significantly change the outcome of elections. In fact, *Harper's Weekly* commented on this issue, "Wyoming gave Women the right to vote in much the same spirit that New York or Pennsylvania might vote to enfranchise angels or Martians."¹⁰⁵

The small number of women living in Wyoming allowed for another argument in favor of their enfranchisement. Many believed that giving women the vote would function as an advertisement for the territory and would help attract more female and family immigration. Even Susan B. Anthony believed this to be true and after the bill on

¹⁰⁵ White, p.356

women's suffrage in Wyoming was passed, she advised women to move there. These expectations proved to be in vain, as the female immigration into the Wyoming territory did not increase. However, this fact did not stop other territories from using similar arguments when defending the female vote.

Yet another reason that might have helped the passage of the bill is suggested by Beverly Beeton. According to her, the territorial legislators endeavored "to put Governor John A. Campbell on the spot", as either his signing or vetoing was "sure to produce protest"¹⁰⁶ and force him to make enemies. Campbell was not much favored, because to the Wyoming legislators he seemed to be too much of an Eastern puritan; and he was appointed by the President, rather than chosen by the representatives of the territory. However, Campbell surprised everybody when he signed the suffrage bill without delay or doubts. Moreover, when the legislature later attempted to repeal the law in 1871, he refused to sign the repeal act and disfranchise the women.

Thus women in Wyoming continued to be able to vote, hold office and serve on juries. The legislation also demanded equal pay for woman teachers and enabled married women to own property and run their own businesses. One more challenge was presented in 1890 when drafting the state constitution in order to join the Union. The women's suffrage clause was considered controversial enough to possibly keep the territory from being accepted and it seemed it might have to be dropped. However, the legislators defended the female vote by telegraphing the congress "that they would remain out of the union a hundred years rather than join without woman suffrage."¹⁰⁷ The constitution was approved and Wyoming became the "Equality State." As the first state whose women

¹⁰⁶ Beeton, p.4

¹⁰⁷ Beeton, p.17

were allowed to vote, it served as a testing ground and the impact of women's suffrage on society as well as women themselves would be closely watched. The evaluation of the women's voting was generally positive. It proved that women were capable of political action and would not be "defeminized" by it; and this allowed Wyoming to be used as an encouraging example in suffrage campaigns elsewhere.

Utah

The enfranchisement of women in Utah territory followed shortly after that of Wyoming. This action included a great controversy because a majority of these seventeen-thousand women were members of the Mormon Church which was known for the practice of polygamy. Plural marriage was widely disapproved of by the Gentile public¹⁰⁸, and together with slavery, it was considered a "twin relic of barbarism".¹⁰⁹ The stereotypical image of a Mormon woman that non-Mormons in America were familiar with was the one of a downtrodden drudge, a slave of her tyrannical husband.

The seeming paradox of a territory which supposedly disrespected women but gave them the vote can be explained. Many Easterners believed that the politically empowered Mormon women would vote the practice of plural marriage unlawful. The Reconstruction reformers believed that polygamy "existed only where women were degraded; therefore, it would disappear if the women were elevated" through the political power the vote would grant them.¹¹⁰

The Mormon Church approved of women's suffrage for the opposite reason. The Church believed that the Mormon women would not repudiate the plural marriage as that

¹⁰⁸ Gentile was the name for anyone who did not practice the faith of the Mormon Church.

¹⁰⁹ Beeton, p.23

¹¹⁰ Beeton, p.23

would mean denouncing their faith. At the same time, such a liberal and progressive measure as female franchise would raise the image of Mormons in the eyes of the Easterners, gain the support of suffrage groups and in fact help Mormons fight the endeavor of Congress to abolish polygamy. As it turned out, these speculations were only partly correct; as the battle against plural marriage did not cease until its practice was eradicated by law. On the other hand, the Mormon Church was right in its anticipation that Mormon women would not attempt to do away with polygamy.

The argument that women's suffrage would promote female immigration was not used in Utah, because there was no shortage of women in this territory; and because of the fear of the Easterners that female immigrants into Utah would become plural wives. Some authors¹¹¹ favor the view that Brigham Young was concerned about the arrival of large numbers of Gentiles (mainly miners) into Utah; and granting women the vote would secure the Mormon majority in elections. The reasoning behind this was that the Gentile immigrants were largely single males, and a great majority of women in Utah were Mormon. However, the proportion of Gentile inhabitants of the territory in 1870 was so small that it is very unlikely this argument could have had any real relevance.

Though it seems that in the case of Utah the decision-making process about the female vote for the most part excluded women, it should be mentioned that there was active support for the measure on the part of Mormon women. Perhaps the best known suffrage advocates are the three plural wives of William S. Godbe, the leader of the Church of Zion; as well as Emmeline B Wells, who published the newspaper called *The Woman's Exponent*, which defended women's suffrage together with polygamy. The Utah Woman Suffrage Association was active since 1889.

¹¹¹ White, p.356, Myers, p.223

The question of franchise in Utah was closely linked with that of plural marriage; as can be seen from the actions of the US government in attempt to abolish this institution. In 1882 the US Congress passed the Edmunds Act, which sanctioned those practicing polygamy and included their disfranchisement. In 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act was passed, which effectively disfranchised all Mormons, of both sexes; and women lost their right to vote. The Mormon Church officially discarded the practice of plural marriage in 1890, which enabled refranchisement of the Utah men three years later; however, the women would have to wait for this privilege until 1896, when Utah became a state.¹¹²

Colorado

Colorado's struggle for suffrage was considerably more complex and demanding for women's rights advocates than ones in Wyoming and Utah. The issue was discussed by the territorial legislature as early as 1868 but the suffrage measure did not pass in the House. The question of the female vote again cropped up during the 1876 constitutional convention. As the delegates were eager to have the constitution ratified and approved by the US Congress in that same year, in order to join the Union as the Centennial State, they avoided all controversial issues that could heat up the debate and cause delays. Women's suffrage was one of them. However, women were allowed to vote in school elections and a provision was passed that made subsequent referenda on this question mandatory. The first state legislature called one in 1877, the result of which was an overwhelming defeat for the women's suffrage which was a great disappointment for

¹¹² Information about anti-polygamy legislation was found in: Mead, Rebecca J. *How the Vote Was Won, Woman Suffrage in the Western United States, 1868-1914.* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

Colorado suffragists. Many of them blamed Mexicans, miners¹¹³, blacks and the “saloon element.” Bishop Machebluf, who was an extreme opponent of female suffrage, might have influenced many Roman Catholics to vote against it. Other suffragists considered the unsuccessful outcome of the referendum a consequence of the lack of supports from the political parties, or of not enough pro-suffrage activity on the part of women themselves.

The struggles for suffrage subsided in the aftermath of the 1877 referendum and the suffragists would have to wait sixteen years before they could again work to persuade voters in another one. Richard White ascribes the eventual success of women’s suffrage in Colorado to “the effective organization of women in the interval between the [1877 and 1893] elections. [...] Colorado women mobilized existing organizations. Middle class women’s clubs, women members of labor unions, and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union all joined for the suffrage battle.”¹¹⁴ There was a state-wide effort to convert male voters to favor the female vote, in which newspapers articles, speeches and demonstrations played a great role. In contrast to 1877, fewer Eastern suffragists were invited to help with the 1893 campaign.

There were other important issues that contributed to the favorable outcome of the suffrage referendum. Mainly it was the overall dissatisfaction with the unfavorable economic situation and the old political parties in Colorado at the time. Many believed that things could hardly get worse; and that if women voted it was improbable they would do any poorer than men. Moreover, Colorado in the 1890s became influenced by the Populist politics and Populist Party, which dominated the government after 1892,

¹¹³ Suffragists got most support in Denver and very little in small towns, mining communities and Latino counties.

¹¹⁴ White, Richard. p.357

defended women's suffrage. Thus the Centennial State became in 1893 the second one to officially endorse women's suffrage.

After numerous victories in the West, western suffragists were prepared to help their Eastern colleagues. But the national leaders felt that efforts to enfranchise women on the state level were not effective enough, and decided to concentrate on nation-wide enfranchisement. They also believed that the Western suffrage success gave enough warning to suffrage opponents elsewhere to mobilize powerful opposition.

Apart from various political reasons¹¹⁵ and use of female suffrage as an advertising tool, all of which has already been mentioned; there are other reasons for defense of the women's vote in the West. The arguments for and against the issue were frequently sprinkled with racist rhetoric. In the West, there were not only black and Indian men, but (especially in California) a large number of Asians and many of these had the right to vote. Therefore a complaint was often voiced that white American women should not be politically inferior to the previously mentioned groups. However, enfranchisement of women posed a problem, since it would also grant access to the polls for black, Native and Oriental women; a thought wholly unacceptable to the large majority of white men. Negative attitudes towards these female minorities were so strong that they often served as a more powerful argument than the white women's right to political power.

It is tempting to assert that since women in the West did such a great amount of work in building up of society; and proved their strength, endurance and character as mothers, wives, but also as farmers, teachers, business owners and heads of families; it

¹¹⁵ Political reasons include recruitment of women's support for a particular political party, hopes to use of women's votes to back a certain policy (Utah), desire to embarrass political opponents (Wyoming), desire to gain Eastern support in campaign for statehood, safeness of political experiments in territories...etc.

was easier to give in to the pressure for their enfranchisement in this area of the US. The West perhaps was to some extent an empowering and liberating environment for women and gave them greater responsibility within the community, but it is not certain how much this fact influenced the struggle for suffrage. It should be remembered that the first suffrage victories had little to do with efforts of women to gain the vote. The speculations about Western women's earlier political privileges being the consequence of the greater degree of democracy on the Frontier or of the "Western chivalry" are more than questionable. Rather, it can be said that the greater ease with which the Western women were enfranchised was the result of interplay of a number of reasons and circumstances, some general, some specific to the individual states and territories. However, it remains a fact that for whatever reasons, the pioneers' West was also a pioneering area in the field of women's rights.

CONCLUSION

Through stereotyping, the American West of the nineteenth century is a place that has been turned into a symbol. Traditionally, it stands for freedom, individualism, and strength stemming from the victorious fight against the wilderness. All the aforementioned attributes are overwhelmingly male. Thus the Frontier created the myth of the rugged, self-reliant American pioneer. As his counterpart; a woman sprang up in the national imagination who was timid, passive, and domestic. She was the source of a gentle, "civilizing" influence on the Frontier backwoods.

The traditional image of the sun-bonneted pioneer is molded according to the requirements of the nineteenth-century society. The Victorian ideal of the "True Womanhood" called for piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity to be the central attributes of every proper woman. A woman's place was her home and her role was to care for her family; do housework and tend to the children. But this was very often not the case with Frontier households. Many western women's personal records bear evidence of their hard labor in the house and out, in the fields. They tell us of women's economic activities, and involvement in public affairs, well outside the traditional nineteenth-century woman's realm.

Starting with the overland journey, women had to learn a multitude of new skills and patterns of behavior. Despite the efforts to keep the division of labor on the Trail in accordance with gender lines, these gender-based boundaries were often trespassed. Women had to help men drive the wagons and haul heavy loads when necessary. Men

sometimes pitched-in with female tasks, such as cooking and carrying water for washing. In all-male parties, they had to take over the “women’s work” completely. Even without the occasional assuming of the male responsibilities, women’s labor on the Trail was not easy. Washing clothes, cooking meals and childcare were made significantly harder by the primitive living conditions. Moreover, new tasks appeared such as collecting fuel and airing out supplies.

By the time the pioneers arrived to their destination, the image of woman as a passive, frail, domestic creature had been shattered. She had to learn how to best survive in the rough conditions on the Trail; and her work-load would not likely become much easier in the years to come. Pioneers often had to build up their dwellings from scratch. For those who settled in the country, as opposed to town, the primitive Trail conditions continued. Women living on the farms were not confined to the inside of their houses, as the Victorian ideal would have it, but often helped with outside, traditionally male duties; such as tending to animals, plowing, and other field work. This occurrence was more common in the West than in other rural settlements throughout the country due to the scarcity of hired help on the sparsely populated Frontier. Although most pioneer women did value the traditional “Cult of True Womanhood” ideal, it was simply not possible to adhere to it under the circumstances of Frontier living. Some of these women even found pleasure in learning new skills and proving the strength of their bodies and minds.

Many western women found opportunities outside of the realm of house and fieldwork. Through various endeavors they became significant contributors to family budgets, and in some cases the main breadwinners. Using feminine skills to become entrepreneurs in the West proved to be very profitable. Women opened boardinghouses,

cooked meals, baked breads and pies and sold them. In this way made considerable profit. The Western family was well aware of the woman's importance in ensuring its means of living.

As more and more settlers came, the West became a place of great demand for education. As men pursued more profitable occupations, teaching jobs were filled by women. Another mainly female professional occupation was that of a trained librarian. The West was pressed for availability of education for women. Numerous Western colleges sprang up, many of them were coeducational, and produced a number of female graduates.

Women were traditionally seen as the civilizers of the West. Their task was the betterment and refinement of the newly emerging community. In compliance with this expectation, they were involved in issues connected with organizing church congregations and ensuring educational opportunities. They were often made decisions on school issues, performed a variety of benevolent work, and organized Temperance alliances. In this way they were able to enter the customarily male public domain; and, through the work that was expected of them, transgress the boundaries of the "female sphere."

From there, only one more step remained to the women's full entry into the public life – the access to the ballot box. In this area the West managed to precede the East, and women in a number of Western states and territories enjoyed the right to vote long before it became the law of the land. This development had many causes, some of them characteristic only to the individual states, such as the case of Utah, some generally applicable.

The West was perceived as a “testing ground” where the consequences of women’s voting could be observed. Unlike the East, which consisted of states, much of West was still territories, and it was considerably easier to pass legislation in a territory than a state. Thus, it was a less complicated process to give women the vote; or, to take it away, if deemed necessary. In cooperation with the Eastern suffrage leaders, Western women’s rights defenders, such as Abigail Scott Duniway or Caroline N. Churchill, fought hard for the female ballot, and celebrated multiple victories. However, it should be kept in mind that the decision on the woman suffrage always remained with the male voters and legislators, and women’s enfranchisement was the result of the interplay of many circumstances; and only partly a consequence of women’s efforts.

Life of a Frontier woman was complicated and challenging. It brought as many disasters as it offered opportunities. For those willing to learn, it could mean a change for the better, but it had to be worked hard for. Pioneer women’s heroism was in their every-day actions and their willingness to persevere in the face of many obstacles. Whether this process proved empowering or not, it certainly created a new creature, capable of transforming her environment and willing to let it shape her. Though typically underestimated and often overlooked, the women of the American Frontier were vital to the future of the expanding country.

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ZHRNUTIE

Kolonizácia amerického západu je relatívny pojem. Od doby, kedy sa objavili prví bieli obyvatelia, všetko smerom do vnútra kontinentu bol západ, takzvaný „Frontier“. Hranica osídlenia sa stala hranicou medzi civilizáciou a divočinou. Táto práca sa sústreďuje na obdobie devätnásteho storočia, kedy sa kolonizácia na západe amerického kontinentu stala masovou záležitosťou. Vtedy vznikol známy image amerického muža, bojujúceho s divočinou, a tým utvrdzujúceho svoju silu a dominantné postavenie v prírode. Krajina amerického západu sa tak stala domovom klanu silných horalov, lovcov a neskôr farmárov a cowboyov, teda mužov. V skutočnosti však ženy, na ktoré sa často v týchto súvislostiach zabúda, zohrali veľmi dôležitú úlohu pri expanzii Ameriky na západ. Neboli zďaleka iba pasívnym doplnkom mužov, sediacim doma a starajúcim sa o domácnosť a o rodinu. Ženy našli na západe mnoho príležitostí, ekonomických a iných, vďaka ktorým rozvinuli svoje schopnosti a našli nové úlohy v spoločnosti, okrem tradičných úloh manželky a matky.

Ženy amerického západu devätnásteho storočia sa objavovali v literatúre ako manželky – pomocníčky svojich mužov, ktoré málokedy prekročili prah svojho domu. Tento obraz amerických žien je sčasti dôsledkom požiadavkov vtedajšej spoločnosti. V devätnástom storočí sa od ženy očakávali hlavne vlastnosti ako pobožnosť, submisívnosť, morálna čistota. Miesto každej správnej ženy bol jej domov, a jej hlavnou starosťou pohodlie jej rodiny. Akékoľvek činnosti mimo sféry domova boli vyhradené pre mužov, a to platilo aj o práci vonku v poli. Avšak ženy na farmách sa nemohli tomuto druhu práce vyhnúť. Na západe bolo osídlenie pomerne riedke, o to ťažšie bolo nájsť

akýchkoľvek pomocníkov. Z tohoto dôvodu sa ženy museli aktívne zapájať do rôznych druhov činností, ktoré boli za normálnych okolností mužskou záležitosťou, ako napríklad práca na poli, či chov zvierat. Mnohokrát ženy prispeli podstatným dielom k stavbe domu, či úprave domu a jeho okolia. Napriek súdobým štandardom, hlásaným obľúbenými časopismi ako Godey's, zo záznamov samotných žien, ktorými sú denníky a listy, vyplýva, že skutočnosť bola vzdialená ideálu.

Už počas cesty na západ boli rodiny nútené občas porušiť zásady tradičnej deľby práce podľa pohlavia. V skupinách migrantov zložených z mužov aj žien, muži mali zväčša na starosti ťažné zvieratá, denné presuny vagónov a nočné hliadky. Hoci to nebol ľahký údel, práca, ktorá pripadala na ženy bola často omnoho únavnejšia. Od žien sa očakávalo, že väčšinu cesty zvládnu pešky, aby zbytočne nezaťažovali zvieratá. Popri chôdzi zbierali palivo na večerný oheň. Na každej zastávke ženy varili, vetrali zásoby a znova ich nakladali do vagónov. Popritom sa museli starať o deti a o chorých či zranených, prať a častokrát pomáhali mužom s presunom vagónov. V prípade, že ich muži neboli schopní vykonávať svoje úlohy, ženy boli nútené ich prebrať.

Je zrejmé, že už počas samotnej cesty migranti okúsili život, ktorý ich očakával na konci cesty. V záujme optimálneho rozloženia činností potrebných pre prežitie sa ženy i muži museli naučiť mnoho nového, opustiť niektoré staré návyky a naučiť sa novým. Avšak tieto zmeny neboli zbytočné. Všetci účastníci cesty na západ, do svojich budúcich bydlísk, si už počas tohoto presunu privykli na nové podmienky, vďaka čomu bol ich život v cieľi cesty aspoň o niečo jednoduchší.

Po príchode na západ bolo potrebné sa usadiť v novom domove. Mnohí osadníci si museli najprv vybudovať obydlie, čo nebola jednoduchá práca. Niektoré ženy

spomenuli v denníkoch svoju aktívnu pomoc pri budovaní domov. Život v týchto primitívnych podmienkach nebol ľahký. V dôsledku riedkeho osídlenia týchto teritórií nedochádzalo k tradičnej del'be práce a špecializácii, preto mnohé rodiny museli byť sebestačné pri sebazásobovaní potravinami, oblečením a mnohými nástrojmi a pomôckami. V takýchto podmienkach ženy nemohli nečinne prizerať, ale zapájali sa aj do fyzicky náročných činností, tradične určených mužom.

Tradičnou úlohou žien bola všetka práca v domácnosti. Patrí sem varenie, pranie, udržiavanie čistoty obydlia, či šitie oblečenia. Mnohé z týchto činností bolo neporovnateľne ťažšie vykonávať na čerstvo osídlenom západe. Pranie, napríklad, bola najobávanejšia domáca práca, ktorá zaberala celý deň. Vodu na pranie museli ženy nosiť z vodného zdroja, keďže neexistovala kanalizácia. Najbližší potok mohol byť vzdialený aj niekoľko kilometrov. Mydlo na pranie tiež nebolo možné vždy kúpiť a ženy si ho museli variť samy. Okrem týchto činností mali ženy na starosti deti, chorých, a v prípade absencie alebo choroby mužov museli prebrať aj ostatné aktivity.

Ženy taktiež významne prispievali do rodinného rozpočtu. Tradičné činnosti ako varenie a údržba domácnosti boli v oblastiach osídlených prevažne mužmi veľmi žiadané. A tak pečenie a varenie jedál a ich distribúcia prinášali slušné zisky. Ďalším možným spôsobom zárobku bolo poskytovanie ubytovania, a to buď vo vlastnom dome alebo v oddelenom obydlí, z ktorého sa stal hotel.

Mnohé ženy na západe pôsobili ako učiteľky alebo knihovníčky. Rola učiteľky bola v súlade s tradičnou úlohou žien pri výchove detí, ale na druhej strane vyžadovala určité vzdelanie. Americký západ sa spolu s rozšírením univerzít stal miestom s väčším počtom univerzít dostupných pre študentov oboch pohlaví, než iné oblasti Spojených

Štátov. Okrem tradičných povolání môžeme nájsť aj iné, za normálnych okolností čisto mužské, ktorým sa však napriek tomu venovali aj niektoré ženy. Patrí sem napríklad baníctvo alebo podnikanie s poľnohospodárskymi plodinami vo veľkom.

Za tradičnú úlohu ženy, predovšetkým na „divokom“ západe, považovali američania devätnásteho storočia zlepšovanie stavu spoločnosti, z hľadiska morálneho a z hľadiska „civilizovanosti“. A tak sa ženy venovali podpore budovania kostolov a škôl, charite a podobným činnostiam. Týmto spôsobom sa vydali smerom do verejnej sféry, ktorá patrila mužom. Podarilo sa im zbližiť sféry domáce, rodinné a verejné.

Napriek svojim činnostiam a zásluhám, ženy dlhú dobu nemali oficiálne slovo v politike. To sa v devätnástom storočí začalo meniť. Západ bol regiónom, ktorý jednoznačne viedol v úspechoch pri uzákoňovaní volebného práva žien a hoci celonárodne sufražetky neuspeli až do roku 1920, už dávno pred tým dostali túto možnosť mnohé ženy amerického západu. K tomuto prispeli mnohé okolnosti, od politickej výhodnosti tohoto kroku, pretože na západe bolo jednoduchšie otestovať jeho dôsledky, cez aktivitu zastáncov volebného práva pre ženy a neaktivitu jeho odporcov, až po špecifické dôvody, platné v jednotlivých štátoch.

Ženy amerického západu devätnásteho storočia v žiadnom prípade neboli opomenuteľné. Tvorili dôležitú časť spoločnosti, na ktorú by sa pri výklade histórie amerického národa nemalo zabúdať. V mnohých ohľadoch boli ich životy rozdielne od životov žien na rozvinutom a vyspelom východe. Museli bojovať s novým prostredím, snažiť sa ho prispôbiť svojim požiadavkám, ale boli nútené sa aj samy adaptovať. A tak mali možnosť využiť mnohé príležitosti na zlepšenie života svojho, svojich rodín a spoločnosti, v ktorej žili.