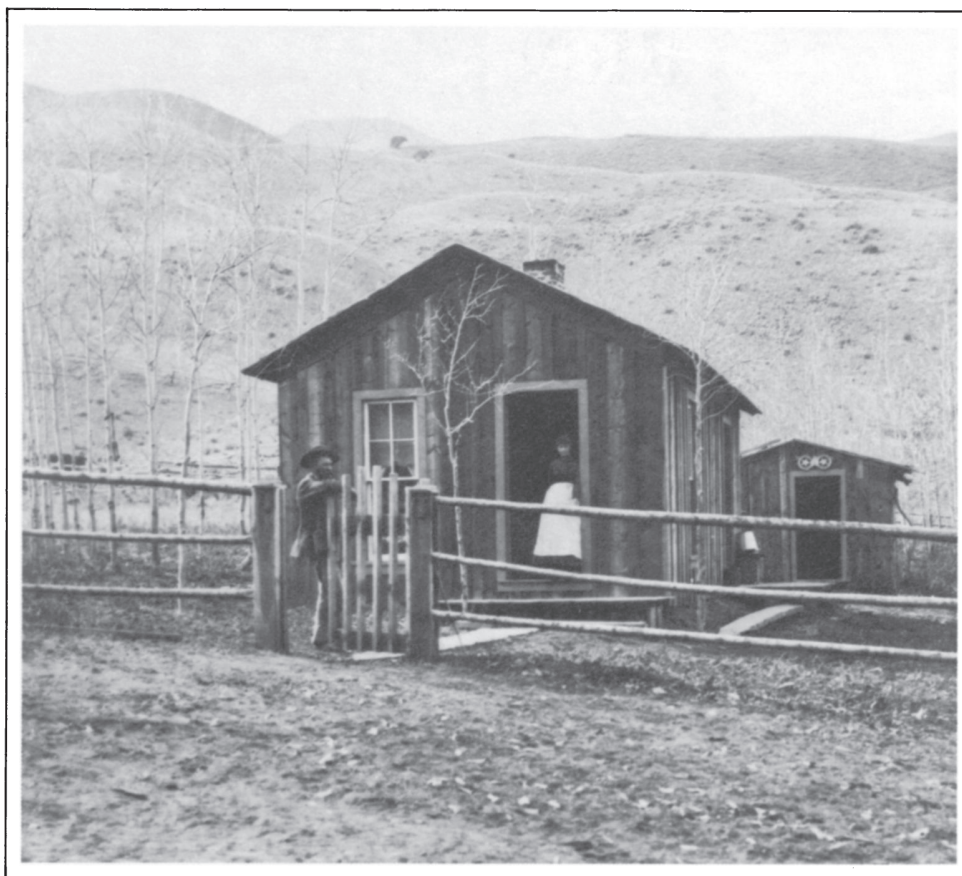


# WESTERN WOMEN

## Beginning to Come into Focus

Recently I went to my university archive, which has an outstanding agricultural collection, to do some research on farm women. I spent quite a bit of time rummaging through boxes of letters and records, scanning photographs, looking at a variety of documents. I found lots of materials on farms, farm machinery, and even on farmers. But I didn't find very much material by farm women or about farm women. I was not especially surprised, because I've had this experience before, so I did what I've learned to do: I scanned the sources for small bits of information devoted to women, intent on building up a picture from the available fragments. As I explained my procedure to the archivist (an expert in old photographs) he said, "Now I understand what women's history is about. Women have been out of focus on the edges of the photograph. You want to bring them into focus." That is precisely what I and other historians who have contributed to this issue want to do. And by doing that, we hope to change the writing of western history.

Most histories of the American West are heroic tales: stories of adventure, exploration and conflict. One well-known Pacific Northwest history is titled *Land of Giants*.<sup>1</sup> With a few famous exceptions (Sacajawea, guide for Lewis and Clark; pioneer missionary Narcissa Whitman; Abigail Scott Duniway, Oregon's one-woman suffrage movement; Jeannette Rankin, Montana's pacifist Representative) women simply aren't mentioned in these grand and sweeping histories. Histories that ignore women so totally are no longer acceptable, because they are incomplete.



*A mid-1880's homestead couple, from a stereograph by F. Jay Haynes.*

There is another story of the Northwest, the story of new beginnings, of daily life, community-building, the development of local and regional networks and organizations, the growth of the sense of regional identity and distinctiveness. That story—one is tempted to say, the real story—cannot be written without women, for they were full participants in those events.

I thought that I already knew about western women. The western literature I'd read, as well as the folklore and popular culture, abounded with female images: the refined lady, the helpmate, the bad woman. The lady was genteel. She resisted the West, and was either uncomfortable, unhappy or driven literally crazy by the frontier. On the other hand, the helpmate, strong and uncomplaining, adapted to the West, but

*by Sue Armitage*



*A Crow Reservation family photographed by amateur Mary Sawyer Flood.*

became an unreal, selfless superwoman in the process. The bad woman had both glamor and power, but her career was so brief—she always comes rapidly to a bad end—that she had no lasting impact.<sup>2</sup> I realized these were images, stereotypes which didn't tell me what women actually did. I want to know what women have done and how to bring them into focus. And I want to answer a very closely related question: how does the focus on women provide a new perspective on the rest of the picture?

## *Beginnings*

Feel to pity the poor Indian women who are continually travelling... during their lives and know no other comfort. They do all the work, such as getting the wood, preparing the food, pitching their lodges, packing and driving their animals, the complete slaves of their husbands.<sup>3</sup>

Narcissa Whitman, diary  
July 27, 1836

If Narcissa Whitman and I were to meet in some imagined historian's heaven, we would have a lot to talk about. There are many things on which we would

disagree, among them our attitudes toward Native American women. She, like most nineteenth-century women, would stress the differences between herself and Indian women; today, what I and other historians of women see are the similarities in the female experience in both races.

The principle is important: we want to look at the experience of women of all races, not just white women. That has the immediate result of moving the starting point of western history backwards in time. Conventional "firsts" such as "the first white woman over the Rockies" or "the first white child born in Oregon Territory" are replaced by an interest in the effect of culture contact on both Indians and whites.

Anthropological interest in women's activities in the Northwest Indian tribes is as new as the historians' interest in the activities of white women. Early anthropologists studied our regional tribes and tried to describe the pre-contact way of life, but their records clearly show male neglect: women's lives are simply not documented with the same care and attention as those of men. Nevertheless, just as I sifted through agricultural reports for information about farm women, so too can others glean valuable information from the anthropological studies.

When I was growing up, films taught me that the





*Dr. Mary Pillman, center, at her homestead on the Broadview Bench*

West was the place where soldiers and Indians fought—all the time. Today, this military picture of white-Indian conflict is changing, because some new voices are being heard. White women's accounts tell of peaceful contact between whites and Indians, encounters in which the Indians asked for food. Because white women controlled and distributed the family food supply, they, not their husbands, were usually the central actors in these encounters. The female response was anxious, uneasy, but placating.<sup>4</sup> These peaceful everyday encounters provide another viewpoint from that of the military stories. They round out our historical understanding and, at least to some extent, change it.

Of course culture contact is two-sided. The Indian side of the story, and especially the early reservation years, which was for some years too painful to recall, is now being at least partly restored to our historical understanding. One wonders how many Indians were as forgiving as Ironteeth:

I used to cry every time anything reminded me of the killing of my husband and my son. But I now have become old enough to talk quietly of them. I used to hate all white people, especially their soldiers. But my heart has become changed to softer feelings. Some of the white people are good, maybe as good as Indians.<sup>5</sup>

Ironteeth, a Northern  
Cheyenne Woman

Ironteeth's testimonial to the human ability to adapt to change, however painful, is a poignantly moving statement.

## A New Home

From a Colorado diary comes another testimonial of adaptation:

One year this day I entered upon my new duties and when I look back over the past I have no wish to live another such year . . . if I could feel duty called me here I could be reconciled to give up all my former privileges and the society of friends. Now I have settled down with the belief that here I shall end my days and the sooner I make it home the better.<sup>6</sup>

Diary of Amelia Buss  
September 21, 1867

Amelia Buss reluctantly followed her husband from New York to Colorado in 1866. She used her diary as a private repository for the fears and complaints she experienced during her unhappy first year. I first read her diary in a typescript copy, and saw the original on-

1. David Lavender, *Land of Giants* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

2. Beverly Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed" in Claire R. Farrer, ed., *Women and Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).

3. Clifford Drury, *First White Women Over the Rockies* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark, 1963-66), Vol. 1, p. 75.

4. Susan Armitage, "Women's Literature and the American Frontier" in Lawrence L. Lee and Merrill E. Lewis, Eds., *Women, Women Writers and the West* (New York: Whitson Publishing, 1979) and forthcoming work by Glenda Riley.

5. "Ironteeth, a Northern Cheyenne Woman" in Thomas B. Marquis, *The Cheyennes of Montana* (Algonac, Michigan: Reference Publication, 1978), p. 81.

6. Diary of Amelia Buss, Fort Collins, Colorado, 1866-67, Colorado State University Archives, Fort Collins, Colorado.



ly several years afterward. The opportunity to actually hold her diary in my own hands was the most thrilling experience I've had as an historian. My sympathy for her and my critical understanding were encompassed in the physical act of holding her 120-year-old diary, the story of a reluctant pioneer.

Many women, although certainly not all, were indeed reluctant pioneers. They have been memorialized in the stereotype of the frail, frightened, homesick woman, forever out of place on the frontier. But that is not Amelia Buss's story. Her regrets for physical comforts and a network of friends are certainly not unreasonable or particularly pitiful: they are honest statements of loss. Just as reasonable is her statement of reconciliation and purpose: "the sooner I make it home the better." This cycle of events and psychological adjustments—leaving home, settlement, adaptation, and the eventual development of a new sense of belonging, which at last partially incorporates new values, needs careful study. Diaries and letters, such as those of Amelia Buss, documenting the early years of settlement are essential historical sources.

The settlement period often seems unconnected to subsequent western history. A history of waves of settlement, tied together by a focus on the family experience of adaptation, might provide a new, unifying principle in regional history.

## ***"Westward I Go Free" Says He, But Not She***

No historian of western women can get very far without encountering the ghost of Frederick Jackson Turner. In his famous historical theory Turner insisted that pioneering, for all its hardships, was fundamentally liberating. The individual who moved west, Turner argued, was freed from the economic and psychological constraints of the civilization that was left behind. But consider this reminiscence:

Occasionally all along our journey, I had tried to crack that big whip. Now while out of the wagon, we kept trying until I was fairly successful. How my heart bounded a few days later, when I chanced to hear father say to mother, "Do you know that Mary Ellen is beginning to crack the whip?" Then how it fell again, when mother replied, "I am afraid it isn't a very ladylike thing for a girl to do."<sup>7</sup>

Mary Ellen Todd, age 9

The fact is that sex—gender roles, as we historians politely put it—makes a difference. There are always famous exceptions, like Calamity Jane, but the accumulating evidence points strongly to the conclusion that most pioneer women did not view the frontier as a way to free themselves from constricting sexual stereotypes. However, as Mary Todd's words indicate, some of their daughters did. This is an interesting topic that needs to be explored more fully.

At another level, the realization of the importance of

7. Adrietta Hixon, *On to Oregon* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1977) pp. 45-46.

8. David Potter said all this in his prescient article, "American Women and the American Character" in John Hague, ed., *American Character and Cultures* (Deland, Florida: Edwards Everett, 1964).





*Barnyard chores on Ray Wolverton's diversified farm at the Valier Irrigation Project, ca. 1910.*

gender roles leads to the disconcerting realization that Frederick Jackson Turner was, at best, half right.<sup>8</sup> The frontier thesis does not explain women's experience. We must recognize that there were two Wests: a female, and a male one. We know about the male version; now we need to describe women's western sphere.

## *Women's Work Is Never Done*

As we look at what women actually did, the first thing that strikes us is the extent and importance of household work. We think of men as the providers, but in the West many male jobs such as hunting, fishing, farming and mining paid either poorly or irregularly. It is not too much to say that *women* were the household providers. For example:

My husband earned \$150 which was used to build that cabin for us to live on until the next season with the exception of the amount we got out of a can of cream (\$1.50) about once a week. I had chickens and sold eggs at 6¢ a dozen. And of course, later I was boarding men at 25¢ a meal, part of the time at 50¢ a meal. But actually all that really did was feed our family.<sup>9</sup>

Colfax, Washington farmwoman, 1929  
Housework was more than a "labor of love":

it was an essential economic contribution to the family. Men could not have afforded to farm, ranch or mine without the work of women in their lives. A Colorado rancher testified:

My mother was a hard-working person, good gardener, she really raised everything in the garden—she kept us all eating out of that garden, all the vegetables we needed and canned a lot of stuff. She was satisfied with that kind of life. My wife was just like that. The woman helped the man to make things go. If it weren't for the woman, we couldn't survive on one of these mountain ranches.<sup>10</sup>

An important and little-explored theme in women's history is how this domestic role changed over time. When did women stop providing most of the household food, and why? We know that the farm woman changed her activities as technological changes in agricultural machinery caused a shift from labor-intensive to capital-intensive farming practice.<sup>11</sup> But we know very little about when and why the wives of miners, ranchers or local businessmen changed. Some of the factors leading to change were increased family income, electrification, and the powerful effect of a national food distribution system.<sup>12</sup> This is a fruitful area for research.

10. Interview from Sugarloaf Oral History Project, Boulder, Colorado.

11. Corky Bush, "The Barn Is His, The House Is Mine," *Technology and Culture*, Fall 1982.

12. Susan Armitage, "Household Work and Childrearing on the Frontier: The Oral History Record," *Sociology and Social Research* 63 (April 1979), pp. 467-474.

9. Interview from Whitman County Historical Society Oral History Collection, Colfax, Washington.

## Women's Groups

A persistent western stereotype shows a lonely woman longing for the companionship of other women. This image, usually a pitiful one, actually contains a strong and important truth. To a much greater extent than today, nineteenth-century women relied on other women for emotional support. Women's groups were an important part of their lives. In western towns and even on the isolated frontier, women reached out to other women and formed clubs and associations of many kinds. This communal aspect of women's lives formed a bond that extended into politics. Often, women who met together in religious, charitable and cultural groups found that they shared strong views on the social questions of the time. The range of their activity is quite amazing. Let me take just one example, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which had chapters all over the West. In Kansas the WCTU organized state-wide in 1879, and in addition to prohibition, was active in charity, public education, relief for prostitutes, and

municipal sanitation.<sup>13</sup>

The Boulder, Colorado, chapter of the WCTU, organized in 1881, did "preventive work" with children, established a local reading room as an alternative to the saloon, and lobbied constantly for local prohibition and moral reform.<sup>14</sup>

In Washington, the WCTU moved directly into politics, playing a major role in creating the pro-suffrage vote of the territorial legislature in 1883, and subsequently voting in strength for local prohibition. Unfortunately, their activism provoked a backlash, and drinking men voted overwhelmingly against woman suffrage when Washington became a state in 1889. Washington women had to work until 1910 to regain the vote.<sup>15</sup> In spite of this setback, western women were more successful than their supposedly more sophisticated eastern sisters in obtaining suffrage. In ten of the eleven western states, women had the vote by 1914. Arizona was the lone exception.

13. June Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas: Women's Organizations, 1880-1921," unpublished paper, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas.

### Let Them Speak for Themselves

One of the best ways to bring Western women into focus is to read what they say about their own lives. This listing of books is not exhaustive, but indicates some of the most accessible readings:

*Prettyshield, Medicine Woman of the Crows* (University of Nebraska Press, 1974) an oral history with a Crow Indian woman, was conducted by Frank Linderman in the 1930s. A more recent, and more directly personal account, is that of Beverly Hungry Wolf, a Blackfoot woman, *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (William Morrow, 1980).

The diaries of Narcissa Whitman, Mary Walker and other missionary women were reprinted by Clifford Drury, *First White Women Over the Rockies* (three volumes, Arthur H. Clark, 1963-1966). Other interesting accounts are *Mollie: The Diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford* (University of Nebraska Press, 1976), an account of the Colorado Gold Rush; Phoebe Judson's *A Pioneer's Search for an Ideal Home, Or Life at Puget Sound* (Washington State Historical Society, 1966); and Nannie Alderson's appealing reminiscence of early cattle ranching in Montana, *A Bride Goes West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1969). One interesting aspect of these books is the wary, but friendly relationships between white and Native American women.

Women's diaries on the Overland Trail are quoted extensively by Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (Schocken Books, 1982). Another recent book, Joanna Stratton's *Pioneer Women* (Simon and Schuster, 1981) reprints reminiscences from Kansas.

Literary accounts, based on reminiscence, include the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, which are full of daily detail; the novels of Mari Sandoz, especially *Old Jules* (University of Nebraska Press, 1962), her painfully honest account of the pioneer experience of her own family; and the lyrical celebration of pioneer women in Willa Cather's novels, *O Pioneers* (Houghton Mifflin, 1913), and *My Antonia* (Houghton Mifflin, 1918).

Historians have only recently begun to compile and organize this rich record of individual accounts. Two valuable books are Christine Fischer, *Let Them Speak for Themselves* (Dutton, 1978), which includes materials from California and the Southwest, and *A Harvest Yet to Reap* (Toronto Womens Press, distributed by the University of Nebraska Press, 1976), a collection, with many wonderful photographs, of the lives of women in the Canadian prairie provinces. Julie Roy Jeffrey's study *Frontier Women* (Hill and Wang, 1979) is a comprehensive secondary source. Dee Brown's well-known *The Gentle Tamers* (University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Originally published by Putnam, 1958) has much primary material, but is marred by the author's persistent sexism. Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller have criticized his work and have provided a full and fascinating bibliography of sources, in their review essay "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West" *Pacific Historical Review* (May 1980), pp. 173-214.

Much valuable material remains in private hands or uncatalogued in archives. Public programs, like the touring photographic exhibits, "Hidden Faces: Women in Colorado" (created by Sarah Jacobus and stored at the Boulder Public Library), Washington Women's Heritage (an NEH-funded project coordinated by the Women Studies Program at Western Washington University) and other media presentations (like "Good Work Sister" a 20-minute slide-tape show on women shipyard workers in Portland in World War II by the Northwest Women's History Project, and "On Stage With Washington Women" a readers theater presentation about the lives of women in Eastern Washington produced by the Women Studies Program at Washington State University) are designed to increase public awareness of women's history with the hope of encouraging further research. Specialists in women's history and women's studies at regional universities and colleges are generally eager to work with local groups who want to undertake research of this kind.



## Community Building

In western stereotype, women were "gentle tamers." Their very presence on the frontier was enough to make rough and rowdy men think about polite behavior and the establishment of civilized institutions like schools, churches, libraries and the rest. What's striking about this stereotype is the unbelievable passivity of the women. Women didn't have to *do* anything; they simply had to be there and men would build communities around them.<sup>16</sup> The women I've described in other parts of this article weren't that passive. They played an active role in building their communities. Women selected community projects, lobbied for them, and raised money for them. But when the moment of formal organization came, the women stepped back. Men were elected as officials, and were often given credit for the entire enterprise. Oral histories are beginning to document many informal women's activities such as these, and women's club records are a major source for the history of more organized efforts like those of the WCTU and countless other groups.<sup>17</sup> Our historical archives already contain much information about the active role of women in the West. But to see it and to appreciate its value, we need to look beyond the stereotypes and bring women into focus.

14. Katherine Harris, "Feminism and Temperance Reform in the Boulder WCTU," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, (1979), pp. 19-24.

## Re-vision

Any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end.<sup>18</sup>

Elinor Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*

As I have been suggesting, when we focus on women, the rest of the picture will change, sometimes dramatically, sometimes only slightly. As historians work with women's materials and incorporate them into regional writings, our sense of the West will inevitably be different from what it is today. Some old verities will have to be modified or discarded, but at the same time, our vision will expand. Someday soon, the adventurers, the explorers and fighters will be joined by Elinor Stewart's homesteading woman, and her unstereotyped, real sisters throughout the West.

15. T.A. Larson, "The Women Suffrage Movement in Washington," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 67 (April 1976), pp. 53-54.

16. Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 85.

17. For example, the Wyoming Women's Oral History Project, "The Lives of Wyoming Women, Past and Present," University of Wyoming, Laramie, has a special focus on the relationship between women's private concerns and public activities.

18. Elinor Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 215.

SUE ARMITAGE is Director of the Women Studies Program and Associate Professor of History at Washington State University, Pullman, Washington. Prof. Armitage holds an MA from San Jose State College and a Ph.D. from University of London and has published widely on the history of women, including articles on household work and women's literature.



Montana Women's Christian Temperance Union Officers, 1900. From left: Mrs. I.N. Smith, Mrs. Matt. W. Alderson, Mrs. W.E. Currah, Mrs. Anna A. Walker, Mrs. Rose Ingersoll, Rev. Alice Barnes.