

Western Women's History— A Look at Some of the Issues

by Glenda Riley

In 1976 the Western History Association's annual conference included a session devoted to women in the American West. Since then, a burgeoning number of historians have analyzed western women's lives, roles, and contributions. Today, however, the history of western women frequently remains nearly invisible in nationally focused histories of American women. Although some historians of American women have attempted to include western women in their work, others have virtually ignored them.¹

One reason undoubtedly is eastern bias, but another could be the disparateness of approaches and the slipperiness of definitions that characterize the study of western women's history. It therefore seems time for historians of western women to get their own house in order, to clarify approaches and methodological issues.

Five considerations seem essential: accepted definitions for what constitutes continuity and change; integration of the perceptions of women from different cultural backgrounds; greater discussion of the roles of activism and objectivity; resolution of the long-standing confusion regarding "frontier" and "American West"; and greater use of comparative research on women in

different regions of this and other countries.

One obstacle to analysis of western women is the lack of common definitions for continuity and change. Neither term is defined in handbooks or dictionaries of feminist theory.² Without accepted definitions, it is virtually impossible to agree on whether the circumstances of western women's lives changed appreciably or remained much the same. Historians know, for example, that emergence of a market economy altered women's lives, but they interpret the alterations variously.

On the one hand, a historian might interpret modifications wrought by the market economy as slight. Despite increasing numbers of working women, he or she might argue, women's work continued to be viewed as supplemental to the "breadwinner's" income.³ Conceptions of what constituted proper paid jobs for women expanded little, and women still lacked economic resources, political power, military might, and the status that represented the necessary tools of control and dominance in the prevailing social system.⁴ On the other hand, a historian might interpret such alterations in women's lives as distinct change. He or she might conclude that the incomes of married women in market economies brought them

increased power in the family. By seeking employment, women broke through the psychological walls of their homes and began expressing disgruntlement with their domestic workloads and traditional gender expectations.⁵

Perhaps the key lies in how women viewed themselves and their places in society. Women sewing by hand or by machine, whether at home, in a sweatshop, or in a factory, all are performing the same task using different technology in different locales. It seems that if factory women define themselves as wives and mothers performing a female task rather than as wage earners in a labor force, their self-image reflects continuity more than change. But if they refuse to accept low status and poor wages by engaging in protests and strikes, surely they are displaying a different awareness of themselves.⁶

What constitutes continuity and change is further complicated by a second significant point. Western women are not an entity—a category. Rather, they were and are individuals from different educational, racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds who varied in age, marital status, sexual preference, religious affiliation, and geographical locales, whether rural, urban, or suburban. Each woman's circumstances helped shape her perceptions and experiences of the American West.

1. For examples of publications that have attempted to include western women, see the *Journal of Women's History*; Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Power in American History: A Reader* Volume I to 1880 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990); and Nancy Cott, ed., *History of Women in America* (Westport, Conn.: Meckler Corp., forthcoming). For examples of works that overlook western women, see Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989); and Mary Beth Norton, *Major Problems in Women's History* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1989).

2. See Maggie Humm, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990).

3. One woman even masqueraded as a man in order to get a more remunerative job to support her two children. See Kathryn O'Connell, A Lensboro Report of 1864, 1965, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. On gender separation in women's and men's work, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and*

Change (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative Perspective of Women of the Prairie and on the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); and Carolyn Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allenheld, 1983).



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Women at Work

Work was not always pleasure, as indicated by the facial expressions of these women who joined the clientele of a Montana-Idaho bordertown saloon (above) around the turn of the century. For others, work was fun, as indicated by the smile on the face of Katherine Stinson (top right), an aviator who performed at the Montana State Fair at Missoula in 1913. While women like Carrie Dunn (right) of eastern Montana, busied themselves with such domestic work as kitchen cleanup on a ranch, others worked as typesetters on frontier newspapers, as did these two women (bottom right) at the *Kansas Workman* of Quenemo, Kansas, founded in 1883. Still others like Ada Blayne (below), shown sewing in the open air outside her tiny homestead shack near Oelrichs, South Dakota, in 1909, did the conventional in unconventional surroundings.



James Harper Tappan, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives



Nebraska Historical Society, Lincoln



Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka



Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

Susan Shelby Magoffin in 1845, the year before she accompanied her husband down the Santa Fe Trail and was scandalized by the behavior of New Mexican Doña Tules

Susan Shelby Magoffin's late 1840s portrayal of Doña Tules, a successful New Mexican saloonkeeper and reputed Monte dealer, in her book, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*, illustrates the complicated frame of reference women of various backgrounds brought to the West. Magoffin, eighteen years old, newly married, impressionable, well-educated, and from a wealthy family, characterized Doña Tules, also known as Gertrudis Barcelo, as "a stately dame of a certain age, the possessor of a portion of that shrewd sense and fascinating manner necessary to allure the wayward, inexperienced youth to the hall of final ruin." Magoffin was further scandalized by Doña

Tules's flirtatious behavior at a ball and by her habit of smoking cigarettes in public.⁷

By contrast, southwestern historian Fray Angélico Chávez viewed Doña Tules in the context of accepted Hispanic rather than upper-class Anglo life. Magoffin, Chávez claimed, was a typical, puritanical American who saw gambling, smoking, and drinking as vices. "To the Latin," he wrote, "there was nothing in the law of nature, or in the Scriptures, that labeled tobacco, liquor, or gambling, as sins in themselves." Chávez noted that, while Latins opposed habitual drunkenness and

gambling, they saw no need to prohibit drinking and gambling entirely. In his view, Doña Tules "made her living by running a house where open gambling, drinking, and smoking were enjoyed by all and sundry with no thought of being socially degraded."⁸

How such behavior should be viewed varies, of course, from individual to individual, but however peculiaristic, such judgments remain valuable to the historian. An Anglo woman's perception of a Hispanic woman—or an African American or an Asian woman—discloses much about cultural values and intergroup relations of the time, just as a Native American or black woman's comments on a white woman's clubs or childraising practices offer distinctive insights into cross-cultural values and misconceptions.

But, such observations demand great care. We need to avoid colonizing types of women—that is, seeing them as consistent, definable groups to whom we apply existing paradigms of Anglo-American, white, middle-class women's history. Rather than restricting women this way, we need to see the diversity within groups of women, as well as the validity of their cultures, rather than simply viewing them as a subgroup in a larger society. The "cult of domesticity," for example, was largely a white, middle-class construct with limited applicability to Native American women.¹⁰

A third issue in the study of western women is its relationship to feminism and current social changes. During the late 1980s, a visitor criticized the Oliver Kelley

4. On modernization, see Esther Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970); Judith van Allen, "Modernization Means More Dependency," *Center Magazine*, (May/June 1974), 60-67; and Helen Safra and June Nash, *Sex and Class in Latin America* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975).

5. On gender roles, see Anne B. Webb, "Forgotten Persephones: Women Farmers on the Frontier," *Minnesota History*, 50 (Winter 1986), 134-48; Nancy Grey Osterud, "She Helped Me Hay It as Good as a Man: Relations among Women and Men in an Agricultural Community," in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

6. See Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978).

7. Stella M. Drumm, ed., *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), 120-21. Magoffin was far from alone in her negative portrayals of Mexicans. See W. W. H. Davis, *El Gringo; or, New Mexico and Her People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857); Lewis H. Garrard, *Wah-To-Yah and the Taos Trail* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1938); and Cecil Robinson, *With the Ears of Strangers: The Mexican in American Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1963).

8. Fray Angélico Chávez, "Doña Tules, Her Fame and Her Funeral," *El Palacio*, 57 (August 1957), 230-32.

Farm in Minnesota because the farm's female interpreters worked in the house and garden rather than in the field. The visitor wanted her daughter and other children to see women doing heavy field work. Staff members responded that Kelley family evidence failed to support this. Yet the visitor was insistent. She appeared to be more worried about what she thought to be a proper role model for contemporary children than she was historical accuracy.¹¹

Unlike this visitor, historians are divided on the proper use of the past. Some insist that researchers accept women's words as truth, or as reasonably accurate representations of how women saw events at the time they occurred, or at least as the way they chose to remember their lives as they aged. Researchers, of course, must interpret all sources as accurately as possible, but they need to recognize their own biases and strive to interpret available source material faithfully. If we don't try to achieve some scholarly rigor, the argument goes, and we let a feminist perspective take control, then women's history becomes a handmaiden to feminism.¹²

The catch in this approach is that historians can never be totally objective. Their eyes and minds cannot be wiped clear of individual perspectives, and biases can blind them to instructive lessons from the past. If we study women's past experiences in terms of exploitation, oppression, liberation, or any other contemporary concept, the past might be more meaningful and helpful to people struggling to survive in the present and plan for the future.

9. On images of Hispanic women, see Antonia I. Castañeda, "Gender, Race, and Culture: Spanish-Mexican Women in the Historiography of Frontier California," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 11 (1990), 8-20; Frances R. Conley, "Martina Didn't Have a Covered Wagon: A Speculative Reconstruction," *The Californians*, 7 (March-August 1989), 48-54; and Beverly Trulio, "Anglo-American Attitudes Toward New Mexican Women," *Journal of the West*, 12 (April 1973), 299-339.

10. Antonia Castañeda, "Decolonization or Recolonization," paper presented October 19, 1990, at the Western History Association annual meeting in Reno, Nevada.

Other scholars take a different tack. Proponents of this view maintain that because we cannot know the literal truth about the past, we can, indeed, we must, interpret the past in light of current issues and understandings. In this view, women's history is a useful and logical handmaiden to feminism. By stressing women who performed heavy farm labor, historians can present far better role models to men and women of the late twentieth century than by emphasizing women's domestic side. Moreover, examining historical gender expectations in this way can provide answers to larger historical questions.¹³

Undoubtedly, it is useful for modern Americans to explore historical roles. When African American re-enactors at Colonial Williamsburg break role to discuss why they would not *really* have been hat-makers or merchants, visitors are forced to think about the historical legacy of contemporary African Americans. Undoubtedly, the Oliver Kelley farm could attempt a similar experiment by placing a German woman in the field to explain why only certain women performed such work.¹⁴

But what of the potential for devaluing women's domestic labor in this approach? If men's work becomes the normative standard against which we judge the worth of women's work, do we not demean domestic labor? To assume that women were only actors when they expanded, or fled from, the domestic realm is to

impute powerlessness to women's world, power to men's. It is important to remember that women were already empowered and esteemable in their own domestic world; women's contributions were worthy and satisfying in their own right.

We must also recognize that the female realm was rarely separated totally from the male. Men's and women's activities often overlapped. A domestically oriented woman also might hold paid employment, hold office as a school superintendent, or work to provide a library, a playground, or medical care for her community. The likelihood of paid employment was especially true for white working-class women, immigrant women, and black women, who performed more men's work at home and participated in the labor force more frequently than white middle- and upper-class women. Such women worked out of necessity rather than to enlarge their realm or to survive rather than to protest. When their numbers are taken into account, the seemingly distinct separation of home and work place, private and public, becomes blurred and recedes in importance.¹⁵

Furthermore, some contemporary feminists do not see women working at "men's" jobs as a manifestation of liberation. Rather, they argue that the male system—patriarchal capitalism—has co-opted women by convincing them to accept male standards of productivity, value, and worthy work. To them, nothing short of a

11. Thomas A. Woods, "Varying Versions of the Real: Toward a Socially Responsible Public History," *Minnesota History*, 51 (Spring 1989), 178-85. See also Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in Susan P. Benson, Stephen Briers, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 137-61, and notes, 378-83.

12. See Donald Ostrowski, "The Historian and the Virtual Past," *The Historian*, 51 (February 1989), 201-20; Jeffrey B. Russell, "History and Truth," *The Historian*, 50 (November 1987), 3-13; Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980, revised edition). See also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap

Press, 1987); and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 573-629.

13. On deconstructionism in women's history, see Louise A. Tilly, "Gender, Women's History, and Social History," Gay L. Gullickson, "comment on Tilly: Women's History, Social History, and Deconstruction," Judith M. Bennett, "Comment on Tilly: Who Asks the Questions for Women's History?" and Louise Tilly, "Response," *Social Science History*, 13 (Winter 1989), 439-80.

14. See Jo Blatti, "Symposium: The Representation of Women's Roles at the Oliver Kelley Farm," *Oral History Review*, 17 (Fall 1989), 91-105.

15. Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History, 1607 to the Present* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1986).

new system of government, cultural ideology, and economy will qualify as liberation.¹⁶ Indeed, some women, and some feminists, support a woman's right to remain within the domestic realm. They argue that a woman's ability to choose the home over the workplace is ultimate feminism.

A fourth stumbling block in interpreting western women's lives derives from one's view of the American West. For generations, historians have seen the West primarily as a land of opportunity, change, and equality. In this Turnerian scenario, women's gains receive emphasis; women's triumphs and breaks with the past are esteemed.

As some historians question this interpretation they see despair and disillusionment, failed farms and unproductive mines, exploitation and destruction of the environment instead of opportunity and change. Rather than equality, they see dominance by the wealthy, decimation of native populations, and prejudice against such groups as African Americans and Asians. Subordination of women is emphasized, while women's triumphs and breaks with the past are minimized.

Disparate interpretations are further compounded by the lack of common definitions for "frontier" and "West." To say that one is studying frontier women or western women conveys little exact information. The topic may be women in colonial New England, late eighteenth-century Ohio, Kansas in the 1850s, Montana at the turn of the century, or women in twentieth-century California. Historians often solve the dilemma by equating West with trans-Mississippi West, but this is still a large geographical area and an elastic time period.

The meaning of the term frontier is not so easily resolved.

16. Humm, *Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, 117-18. See also Ellen Carol DuBois, et al, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 126-53.

17. Lancaster Pollard, "The Pacific Northwest," in Merrill Jensen, ed., *Regionalism in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 187-

Was a frontier a region with less than two people per square mile as the United States Census Bureau defined it? Or was it the phenomenon of settlers pushing in among native populations? Was it, then, a place or a process? Some scholars have argued that it was a historical development, others that it was a political unit, or a cultural unit, or a concept.¹⁷ Not only is frontier an inexact term, it is often a pejorative one as well, evoking an image of Anglo-Americans bringing "civilization" to a western area and its peoples. Neither Native Americans nor Mexicans considered themselves a primitive frontier in need of civilizing.

Frontier may be an idea that has outlived its usefulness. It encourages an adversarial perspective on pioneering, a sense of we-versus-them. Nonetheless, the "American West" is a useful concept. It is a combination of region and mentality, of place and process, a fluid term that spans colonial America and the contemporary West Coast. It allows us to study women—or any other topic—in the framework of migration, cultural interaction, and change and continuity, over time, rather than one of vanquishing others, of triumphing as "bearers of civilization."

A final hurdle is the lack of comparison between women of the American West and other regions—the northeast, the South—as well as women in other countries. Without comparative studies, it is impossible to determine whether western women expanded their realm and rights faster than did women in other places. Certainly, western women received the right to vote before those in the North and South, but this achievement fails to demonstrate *a priori* that western women were more suffrage-minded than their

counterparts in other regions. Numerous western women also became entrepreneurs in businesses, ranging from millinery to prostitution, but this does not prove that western women were more business-minded than their northern and southern sisters. We simply do not know how western, southern, and northeastern women compare.

Political scientist Virginia Sapiro cautions against overemphasizing apparent differences among groups of women. We may, she warns, overlook commonalities: "Although employment rates of women in the United States are among the highest in the industrialized non-Communist world, the degree of occupational segregation is similar, and in some countries—France and Germany, for example—the earning gap between women and men is smaller than in the United States."¹⁸

Only comparative regional and international studies will allow us to understand differences between, and commonalities among, groups of women in different regions and countries. During the past decade, scholars have increasingly studied the effects of race, class, and gender in determining the lives of American women and men. In fact, these three variables are occasionally referred to as the "holy trinity." It is time to add region to the litany.

What seems appropriate and necessary at this point is self-conscious dialogue—conference sessions, roundtables in journals, and articles devoted to these issues. We must take a purposeful step to encourage the ongoing sophistication of western women's history. We can't wait for insight and synthesis to develop; we must work harder to create them.

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206; W. Eugene Hollon, *The Southwest: Old and New* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 3-21.

18. Virginia Sapiro, *Women in American Society* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1986), 434. See also Lynne B. Iglitzin and Ruth Ross, eds., *Women in the World: A Comparative Study* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Clio Books, 1976).