

Diaries of Pioneer Women - Truths Confessed or Society's Expectations Met?

by
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In the years between 1830 and 1890, many women accompanied their immediate families or husbands westward across the wide Missouri, through Kansas and Colorado, and across the Rockies to the West coast. A surprising number of these women kept diaries or journals of their experiences. Some of these were sent back to the families that the women had left behind. Still others were kept in the woman's possession until she died. In their writings, the single women and young brides often openly reveal their enthusiastic attitudes toward the adventure. The major portion of married women's diaries, however, seem to be concerned with rather indifferent accounts of events, the weather, the camp sites, the necessary preparations for meals, and other details. In general, the married women say very little about either their positive or negative feelings concerning the trip West. The few negative comments they make are usually cloaked in terms acceptable to nineteenth century society. In other words, the distinct differences between the comments made by unmarried women and young brides and by married women may suggest the influence of the nineteenth century's code of behavior particularly for married women.

If we look through much popular literature written in nineteenth century America, we will note that between 1820 and 1860, particularly on the Eastern seaboard, a prescriptive literature was presented to women in various women's magazines, in gift annuals, and in various religious publications. The attributes by which a cultured Eastern woman, particularly a married woman, was judged by herself and by society were divided into four basic virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.¹ Such characteristics were said to define the cultured nineteenth century American woman's being. Women were told that religion belonged to them by divine right, as a gift from God and nature. (p. 97) Thus,

they were encouraged to bring religion to the men they knew who either did not have it or had strayed from it. In addition, women were told to bring up their own children with the appropriate religious views. They were told that they must remain virtuous, even though men, because of their more sensual and aggressive natures, would attempt to destroy women's virtue. (p. 91) Purity, then, was a moral necessity. By retaining it, a woman showed her moral superiority to men, a natural expectation in view of her religious superiority.

In addition, women were told that submission was the most laudable feminine virtue, that "men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were the passive submissive responders." (p. 102) The literature which prescribed this virtue as necessary to women based its logic on Biblical text. Man was superior to woman just as God was superior to man. If woman attempted to dominate man, she was tampering with the order of the universe. (p. 102) Consequently, she was urged to be passive and to submit to what her husband ordered. Moreover, she was told to be submissive to her fate as a mother. The *Ladies' Parlor Companion*, in an article entitled "A Submissive Mother," told of an ideal mother who had already buried several children and was nursing a critically ill baby. The mother watched as her other remaining child, a toddler, was nearly scalded to death. "Handing over the infant to die in the arms of a friend, she bowed in sweet submission to the double stroke." (p. 105) However, the toddler survived, as the magazine, applauding the submissiveness of the mother, suggests "through the goodness of God." (p. 105) Thus the mother learned to say "Thy will be done." Perhaps this kind of reaction would be considered by most of us today as atypical and melodramatic, but this behavior was indeed held up to the nineteenth century American woman as the "ideal behavior" of a submissive mother.

Moreover, the woman's prescribed sphere was to be her own fireside--"as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother." (p. 105) Here she was to be comforter, nurse, domestic servant, and moral uplifter. The status of motherhood in middle class nineteenth century America was even considered an elevated plane of being as it was the American mother who was to raise a "whole generation of Christian statesmen." (p. 113) Researchers into women's history have noted that some women seemed completely indoctrinated with the idea that the home was "their appropriate sphere of action; and that whenever they neglected their duties, or went out of this sphere of action to mingle in any of the great public movements of the day,

they were deserting the station which God and nature had assigned them."² Evidently these women internalized society's prescribed views and accepted them as their own. Thus they saw themselves simply as submissive wives and mothers. Further inland than the Eastern seaboard, women who were never exposed directly to this prescriptive literature but who received it by observing the behavior of their Eastern sisters assimilated this behavior into their own lives.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed American women and commented on their status as women and wives. He readily admitted that no community can exist without morals and that "morals were the work of women."³ However, he also noted that young unmarried woman in America was exposed to a much wider range of experiences than she was permitted later in her life. He observed that "the great scene of the world is constantly open to her view," that the "vices and danger of society are early revealed to her," and that she viewed them without illusion and braved them without fear. (p. 118) Yet he also observed that "in America the independence of woman is irrecoverably lost in the bonds of matrimony: if an unmarried woman is less constrained there than elsewhere, a wife is subjected to stricter obligations." (p. 113) After looking at the prescriptive literature aimed primarily at wives and mothers, it is not difficult to see that the nineteenth century made considerably more demands on the attitudes and behavior of married women than on those of the single women or even the young brides.

In looking at the diaries of young unmarried women, we can see the expected, that Alexis de Tocqueville's thesis is borne out. Yet isn't a difference between the married woman's attitude and the single woman's attitude toward traveling to the frontier to be expected? After all, many times the circumstances for the young girl were totally different from those of married women. For example, in making the trip to the frontier, the young girl's world was not changed radically. She was still expected to help her mother cook, tend the younger children, etc., as she had at home, but she was not deprived of her own place in a social world, her home, her church activities, her club, etc. Sometimes a young girl would even accompany a relative across the prairie just as a change of pace from her life back home. In a diary written in 1862, Rose Bell tells about her trip across Missouri and Kansas on route from Rock Island, Illinois, to Pikes Peak, Colorado. As a young unmarried woman in the nineteenth century, she is expected to exemplify the virtues--piety, purity, and submission to her parents. However, she is not

encumbered by the burden of trying to recreate a home away from home in a covered wagon. Therefore, she can say, "we are enjoying ourselves first-rate."⁴ She can sometimes lie in the wagon, read books she has brought with her, and view the trip as a pleasant change. Another young girl, Harriet Smith, accompanied her uncle to Pikes Peak during the Civil War days. Her diary is filled with enthusiasm for the new experience: "I like this country very well. The atmosphere is very pure and I think this is the place for those that are all the time grunting in the states for it agrees with me very well."⁵

Another young unmarried woman, Sarah Raymond Herndon, crossed the plains in 1865 and relished the new experience. She fancied herself a literary figure and treated many every-day incidents in a flowery style when she wrote about them. She accompanied her family to Virginia City, Montana in 1865 and kept a diary on the trip. However, she did not compile all of her reminiscences until 1902, when she was a wife and mother. In her reminiscences, she philosophizes about the trek westward. In fact, her thoughts seem to stem from a self-conscious desire to fix in the mind of the reader the historical grandeur of the adventure. In one of the first entries, Sarah tells the reader why she is on the journey.

The chief aim in life is the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. Are we not taking risks, in thus venturing into the wilderness? When devoted men and women leave home, friends and the enjoyments of life to go to some missionary movement we think that is a great sacrifice and we wish we had been called too. But when people who are comfortably and pleasantly situated pull up stakes and leave all, or nearly all, that makes life worth the living, start on a long, and perhaps tedious journey, to seek a home in a strange land among strangers, with no other motive than that of bettering their circumstances, by gaining wealth, and heaping together riches, that perish with the using, it seems strange that so many people do it. The motive does not seem to justify the inconvenience, the anxiety, the suspense that must be endured. Yet how would the Great West be peopled were it not so? God knows best. It is without doubt, this spirit of restlessness, and unsatisfied longing, or ambition--if you please--which is implanted in our nature by an all-wise Creator that has peopled the earth.⁶

Many times Miss Herndon laments that she is not an artist, that she is unable to paint the pictures she sees, the storms, the mountains. She climbs to the top of a mountain and says that she realizes why people take hazardous trips just to gain a view. She comments on the people returning from Montana and says that one would be discouraged "if it were not so palpable that they are homesick, and everyone knows that when that disease is fairly developed, everything is colored with a deep dark blue, and even pleasant things seem extremely disagreeable to the afflicted person. The

ladies seem to have the disease in its worst form, and of course they make the gentlemen do as they wish which is to take them home to mother and other dear ones." (p. 172) Yet all of Miss Herndon's reminiscences are based on the diary that she wrote when she was a young girl not yet subjected to the grueling tasks imposed upon the married women; hence she can be critical of the wives and mothers for not continuing the journey.

The young brides, even, start their journeys with more enthusiasm than hesitation. In letters back home to New York, Ellen Gordon Fletcher reveals some of her feelings about her trip to Virginia City, Montana. Previously, she had taught school but retired to marry Mr. Fletcher who had just gotten back from Virginia City. As Mr. Fletcher was already familiar with the trail, Mrs. Fletcher felt entirely secure and regarded the trip as an adventure. This young bride was educated, familiar with romantic nature literature; therefore, she tended to describe the scenery with Wordsworthian enthusiasm, to romanticize her description of campfires, rainbows, and mountains. From Summit City, August 16, she writes home, "I would so like to have you come and see me in my mountain home. You would find it romantic and wild enough for any of you."⁷

In 1904, another woman, Mrs. Margaret Frink, looked back on her experiences as a young bride. She took some of the things she said in a diary made in 1850 and reconstructed the story of her experiences. In her reminiscences she remembers the attention she received as a woman going West. Men would come and peek in the wagon and tell her that she was "certainly a soldier to attempt it."⁸ She remembers being told by a woman she meets that in California, gold awaits every man, and if a woman can cook, sixteen dollars a week for cooking for each man awaits a woman. Margaret becomes so excited about the possibility of finding gold and so worried that all the grass on the prairie will be eaten by the horses and cattle in the wagon trains in front of her own train that, in the absence of the leader of the train, she gives orders for the train to go faster and not allow any wagons to pass them. She expresses excitement when watching a buffalo hunt. She says she can understand why men so enjoy hunting. Margaret also becomes quite excited about crossing the South Platte River.

Susan Magoffin, who as a young bride accompanied her husband on the Sante Fe Trail in 1846-47, was usually enthusiastic about her adventure. Susan traveled with a maid who prepared her food, tarts and wine included, and therefore she was not subjected

to much work on the journey. Early in the trip, she writes, "Tonight is my fifth in el camp. Oh, this is a life I would not exchange for a good deal! There is such independence, so much free uncontaminated air, which impregnates the mind, the feelings, nay every thought, with purity. I breathe free without that oppression and uneasiness felt in the gossiping circles of a settled home."⁸ Susan becomes pregnant on the journey and loses her baby, probably as a result of the horrible travel conditions. (Bernard DeVoto, in his book *The Year of Decision, 1846*, tells about the rigorous hardships of this particular journey.) In general, like most of the young brides, Susan's complaints are few. She does say "I do think a woman embarazada [embarazada-pregnant] has a hard time of it, some sickness all the time, heart-burn, head-ache, cramps etc. after all this thing of marrying is not what it is cracked up to be." (p. 245) This statement, though, only occurs weeks after her pregnancy is over and after the longest section of the journey. This mixture of enthusiasm and restrained complaints about the trip may indicate that my hypothesis about the nineteenth century's influence on married women's behavior and their expression of their feelings is valid. On the other hand, because Susan is freed from work by her maid, she can enjoy the freedom of adventure like other unmarried women. But, perhaps because she has been cautioned by her society to be submissive to her fate as a wife and mother, she may play down her complaints about pregnancy and losing a child. At any rate, to a reader in the 1970's, it seems odd that Susan mentions so little about her pregnancy and the loss of her child when we know that it must have affected her in some way. Also, although Susan may have felt genuinely disturbed by the men's habits, she demonstrates that she adheres to the recommended practice of being the preserver of morals. Thus she expresses her unhappiness with "so much swearing; the animals are unruly tis true and worries the patience of their drivers, but I scarcely think they need be so profane." (p. 3) Moreover, when they reach their destination, Susan comments on her husband's non-observance of the Sabbath. "I wish mi alma would observe the Sabbath more than he does, and though 'tis the custom of the country to do otherwise, shut his store up. It hurts me more than I can tell; that he does not find six days of the week sufficient to gain the good of this world, but is also constrained to devote the day God himself has appointed us to keep holy to the same business." (p.210)

If we read historical analyses of the composition of people who traveled to the frontier, we will note that not only adventurous

single people or young married couples were brave enough to pioneer. In fact, "from 1841 until 1867, the year in which the transcontinental railroad was completed, nearly 350,000 North Americans emigrated to the Pacific coast along the western wagon road known variously as the Oregon, the California, or simply the Overland Trail. This migration was essentially a family phenomenon."¹⁰ Therefore, as we might expect, a number wives and mothers wrote diaries also. These personal accounts, however, differ markedly from the accounts we have just read.

A curious situation existed because when the married woman left her former home, a new experience opened before her. She was leaving the world of prescribed "ideal womanhood" and was going to a land which offered new ways of living and new ways of thinking. Here was her chance to abandon nineteenth century restrictions on the behavior of women. But as Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell suggest, "most women did not view the experience that way. They viewed it as a male enterprise from its very inception." (p. 151) They felt this way because "the supervision of child-rearing, household economy, and the moral and religious life of the family granted women a certain degree of real autonomy and control over their lives as well as those of their husbands and children." (p. 152) Thus to women, leaving a conventional home and all that running it entailed became a threat because it often ruptured the sphere they were allotted. Rather than responding to the new freedom from so many cultural and domestic restrictions, as did young brides like Ellen Fletcher, Mrs. Frink, and Susan Magoffin, most married women viewed their new adventure as estrangement from their usual spheres of activity, morality, religion, family life, and domesticity. The husbands of these women had been encouraged to seek challenges, opportunities, and chances to be individuals. The women had not. Thus, the frontier offered to women not challenge and opportunity - positive values, but isolation and loneliness - negative values.

Knowing that many married women did not choose pioneering, we might expect their diaries to be filled with loud complaints about having to accompany their husbands and families to the frontier. In fact, when I started reading in the diaries, I expected to find confessional comments by the women, comments about how they resented leaving their families, how they hated the hardships of pioneering and how they disliked the loneliness and isolation that it imposed on them. These comments which I expected to find are ones which many women in the 1970's would certainly make if they were

placed in a similar situation. Therefore, I was struck by the lack in these women's diaries of strong statements about their conflicts. I simply could not believe that in one hundred years, the feelings and reactions that a woman would probably experience when placed in a situation which imposed such physical and emotional hardships upon her could change so radically. Consequently, I sifted through hundreds and perhaps even thousands of pages in the diaries, pages relating domestic duties such as baking bread, washing clothes, preparing food for the next day's travel, preserving what little food they found on the trail and nursing the sick. I noted descriptions of camp sites, number of miles covered each day, details about scenery, and details about weather. I found relatively few statements about how the women felt emotionally or psychologically about their imposed loneliness, the physical hardships, and the rigorous demands of the journey.

The sparse entries about feelings which I did find and which will now be recorded do suggest to me, however, that the married women may have felt strongly about many things but did not feel comfortable stating so directly. The women seem to handle their veiled complaints in rather odd and unexpected ways, ways which may have contributed to our impression of them as simple women with few conflicts about their lives. Some women simply accepted their fate, did what they had to do as pioneers, and wrote as objectively as possible their accounts of their experiences. They wrote in simple language without any overt complaints about their feelings regarding these experiences. For example, Lavinia Porter recalls her experience as she leaves her home and family in Kansas:

I never recall that sad parting from my dear sister on the plains of Kansas without the tears flowing fast and free... We were the eldest of a large family, and the bond of affection and love that existed between us was strong indeed... as she with the other friends turned to leave me for the ferry which was to take them back home and civilization, I stood alone on that wild prairie. Looking westward I saw my husband driving slowly over the plain; turning my face once more to the east, my dear sister's footsteps were fast widening the distance between us. For the time I knew not which way to go, nor whom to follow. But in a few moments I rallied my forces... and soon overtook the slowly moving oxen who were bearing my husband and child over the green prairie... the unbidden tears would flow in spite of my brave resolve to be the courageous and valiant frontierswoman.¹¹

The language is simple and the tone is sad but not impassioned, as we might expect since we suspect that many women were quite opposed to going West. Despite the sadness that Lavinia or any woman starting West may have felt, most women were not willing to turn their backs on their own immediate families because they

loved their husbands and families and wanted to hold their families together. Yet, they were also bound by the expectations of their society to hold the family together regardless of the cost to them personally, a laudable aim, but perhaps very restrictive on the women's personal freedom of choice. She was damned if she stayed home and let her husband go alone not only because she was giving up the man she loved, but also because she was breaking up her immediate family, an action condemned by nineteenth century society. She could not insist that the entire family stay home because then she was imposing her will upon her husband's wishes, and that was tampering with the order of things prescribed by religion and the code. She might also be damned if she pioneered because she left her own home and conventional society, her sphere of domesticity and morality might be hopelessly fractured. Consequently, she had to "rally her forces," to use Mrs. Porter's words, to become the "courageous and valiant frontierswoman" who tried to recreate a home and the conventions of society on the frontier and to complain as little as possible about her fate. Yet beneath the objective statements like the one Mrs. Porter makes, we may surmise that the pioneer woman had strong and conflicting feelings about leaving her home and family.

Mrs. Byron Pengra tells about the endless stream of work that faced her on the journey, both new work not prescribed by the code, such as driving the cattle, gathering buffalo chips, and setting up camp, as well as her usual work load of cooking, washing, nursing sick, and doing other domestic chores. In her diary, she admits that the journey is more difficult than she had thought it would be and that for her there is "no rest in such a journey."¹² She expresses her loneliness but also her awareness that she must submit to her husband's decision to pioneer: "I felt that indeed I had left all my friends save my husband and his brother, to journey over the dreaded Plains, without one female acquaintance even for a companion, of course I wept and grieved about it but to no purpose." (pp. 15-16). She realizes she must accompany her husband; therefore, she tries to make the best of it. When asked if she wishes she had not come, she says, "if I had known the terror and disadvantage of such a storm as we witnessed last night, I should not have started, for I should not have thought I could have lived through it, but I have and feel pretty well." (p. 19) She expresses dismay at the poor way the travelers celebrate the Lord's day; they either travel or they stop, they repair wagons, wash clothing, etc. Near the end of the diary, she expresses only slight discouragement:

"I am somewhat discouraged and shall be glad when the journey is ended." (p. 53) Yet, she does not dwell on her discouragement; she simply says that she is discouraged.

Another anonymous diary written on the Overland Trail speaks briefly about a woman's grief at leaving friends and her awareness of her role as a wife. She says, I "have thought of home and loved ones and of the long time that must intervene before I see them. I know if I put my trust in God and my duty, [as a wife] He will take care of me."¹⁹ She knows her duty lies with her husband and family as well as with her own religious state. Even though she is aware of what is expected of her, the thought, "I wonder how many [days] must pass before I can have the privilege of again seeing the loved ones at home" keeps plaguing her. She records the camp sites, the weather, and the work required of her, as well as the travel conditions. Yet, she doesn't complain loudly. She simply says, "have passed over the most horrible roads ever traveled by man or beast, unfit for a wagon of any kind; but here we are and must brave it through. All I ask is *strength of understanding* to foot it over the worst." Even when the journey overland is completed, her lot doesn't get much better. She arrives in Placerville in 1851 and finds many letters awaiting her. She enjoys reading the letters, but they make her feel acutely aware of the distance between her and her family and friends. Just three weeks after arriving, she writes, "I am *all alone*, George has gone to the express office. He left his jack knife to defend myself." Knowing the fear that she must be living under, we might expect this woman to feel sorry for herself and in a confessional style, to tell us about her complaints. This is not the case, however, as she simply says, in a seemingly indifferent fashion, that this is the way things are.

We are all aware that it took courage for the women to pioneer, and in the married women's diaries, the women reveal how much courage it took. For example, Sarah Royce traveled from the East to Iowa and then waited several months before taking the next stage of the journey. The day Mrs. Royce and her family were scheduled to leave on the second half of the trip, the weather was gloomy and rain seemed certain. In her reminiscences, Mrs. Royce says that she knows her duty and that she will not delay their departure for fear of the weather because she has made up her mind to go; therefore, she knows that she will have to meet bravely whatever comes. She knows the journey is going to be difficult, but admits that she is not adequately prepared for camping out at night, with nothing to protect her and her family except the thin piece of canvas that covers

the wagon. Nevertheless, Mrs. Royce ignores the shrinking in her heart at the prospect of such accommodations. She says, "I kept it all to myself and we were soon busy making things as comfortable as we could for the night."¹⁴ Sarah Royce, like other women in the nineteenth century, clings to her religion for strength. When told that she will be left alone with her child in the middle of the desert, she writes, "I made no opposition; I felt no inclination to oppose; though I knew the helplessness and loneliness of the position would be greatly increased. But that calm strength, that certainty of One near and all sufficient hushed and cheered me." (p. 45) Like other good mothers, her only fears are for her child. "What if I should be taken and leave my little Mary motherless? Or, still more distracting thought--what if we [her husband and herself] both should be laid low and she be left a destitute orphan, among strangers." (p. 17) But when these worries plague her, she says that she prays to God and commits both herself and her child into his hands. After she has done this, she can say from her heart, "Thy will be done," and feel "strong for duty and endurance," (p.17) those cherished virtues of the nineteenth century.

Despite the courage which Sarah Royce's words reveal, other comments suggest that she continues to long for the home she had before she came West. Only after she reaches her destination, California, does she admit how much she misses her home: "However brave a face I might have put on most of the time, I knew my coward heart was yearning all the while for a home-nest and a welcome into it." (p. 72) Sarah doesn't complain about the poorly constructed shack, the lack of privacy, and the poor equipment she has to set up housekeeping. She merely says that she "had never before realized the worth of quiet domestic life." (p.103) Because these women seem to be so objective about and accepting of the hardships they encounter, it is easy to see why we perceive them as simple women without conflicts. Yet perhaps the fact that they understate their negative reactions by writing so sparsely and objectively about them should suggest something to us about the pressure that they may have felt to behave in a manner acceptable to their society.

All of the diaries thus far have contained relatively objective comments about these women's responses to the hardships on the frontier. Still other women handled their complaints differently. For example, Mollie Sanford writes:

My heart has been like a turbulent stream, whose waters rush on in querulous motion. My little bark dashes out on the turbulent waves today. It

should have been moored in a quiet harbor. I sit listlessly with dripping oars, and heed not its wayward direction. Over the dark river I see the green shores and bright sunshine I can behold but not reach! Must I thus recklessly dash along without one effort to make the brighter side? Must I remain in the shadow when I might reach the sunshine? Rouse faint heart. Does not everything of beauty beckon me ashore?

There! My effort has saved me. I leave the troubled waters behind.¹²

To some, the language in this entry may seem trite and sentimental. Yet knowing the hardships and deprivations that these women so obviously endured, we must be aware of the emotions behind Mollie's words. Perhaps the explanation for Mollie's use of trite and sentimental words to express deep and strong emotion is not so complicated as it may seem. Because of the way nineteenth century society expected women to behave - to be submissive to husbands as well as obedient and devoted as wives and mothers, the women who went West were not encouraged to express directly any anger, resentment, and frustration which they might have had. As contemporary readers, we might question how these women did express themselves. Some women evidently said nothing; they didn't write diaries and suffered none the worse for it. Other women remained silent and went insane. Perhaps still others found a way to express themselves without being thought rebellious. Because women were supposed to have an abundance of emotions, they were not chastized by their society if they became emotional and sometimes even maudlin in expressing how they felt. Consequently, the anger, resentment, and frustration which these pioneer women may have felt were sometimes redirected into composing sentimental entries like the one just quoted. Also, knowing how anguished most women are when they lose a child, we may suspect that Mollie Sanford, in the following entry, may be channeling her anger and resentment into an acceptable mode:

After many weeks I again seek my Journal. On the 28th of August my little babe was born, a beautiful boy, but he did not stay with us. God took him to his fold, this one pet lamb. When I first looked on his face, he was in his little enfim, dressed in one of the sweetest of the robes I had made, into whose stitches I had woven dreams of my angel baby. (p. 157)

Once again, the euphemistic statements like "God took him to his fold, this one pet lamb" may be Mollie's way of redirecting her agony at losing a baby, partially as the result of the poor conditions she is living under. Like the mother in the *Ladies Parlor Companion* who bows her head in submission when her baby and her toddler near death, Mollie realizes she must not lash out at her fate. Instead she couches her thoughts in words which are very sentimental, but which are entirely acceptable to her society as words women use to

express their feelings.

Ella Bailey, another married woman who settles in Weld County, Colorado, evidently shares some of Mollie's feelings about living on the frontier. Ella cooks for the men on her farm and, in her diary, records the huge amounts of food needed, fifty-one pies one day and twenty-three the next, as well as three thousand cookies and fifteen loaves of bread. Her response to the work she has to do is to say "home is where the heart is. Love will make enduring a thing which else would overset the brain or break the heart."¹⁰ In another place, Ella writes of her loneliness. "Looking for Mr. Bailey home. Seems like he has been gone a month though the days are forty-eight hours long in Colorado and the Sundays seventy-two hours long." Later she says, "by myself today. Everything [is] as still and lonely looking as a grave yard." I have "been thinking of home. I can't help but wish I had never seen Colorado. It is lonesome and desolate. If being here didn't make one think of home, I don't know what would." In these passages, unlike the more objective entries, we note Ella's forty-eight hour days and her seventy-two hour Sundays. Also some of her expressions seem cliched, "home is where the heart is," and "lonely looking as a grave yard." Certainly Ella, like many other lonely women stranded on isolated homesteads all over the frontier, must have felt that the days really were that long and Sundays even longer. Obviously Ella is not a literary artist; therefore, it is natural for her to use cliches to express herself. Yet it also seems possible that Ella Bailey may have chosen these trite cliches rather than more plain and graphic words of her own because these cliches do not threaten the values of her society. In using them, she is not actively expressing a complaint about her fate as a lonely woman on a homestead. Thus the cliché-ridden, sentimentalized language which characterizes certain entries made by pioneer women may not only be the naive language of simple, uneducated women, but also an acceptable way for them to express their negative feelings about pioneering in a nineteenth century society which prescribed their behavior and attitudes for them.

Some women, despite the unpleasantness of the conditions of pioneering, tended to deal with their reactions to their experiences by euphemizing them in their diaries, journals or reminiscences. We cannot know that they didn't feel about the experiences as they say they did, but we can gain some sense of the validity of their responses by determining to whom they wrote. For example, Harriet Sherrill Ward writes her journal specifically to send to the folks back home. She is so conscious of her nineteenth century audience that

she addresses it saying that they would laugh if they could peek at the camp at that moment:

It is just four months today since we left our dear home and friends, perhaps forever, and have since been leading this wild wandering, gypsy life. Oh when will the day arrive when we can say this journey is over? You may possibly infer from this remark that I am becoming weary of this mode of life but indeed, my dear children, were you all with us and our horses fresh it would notwithstanding all its hardships be to me a perfect pleasure trip. There is so much variety and excitement about it, and the scenery through which we are constantly passing is so wild and magnificently grand that it elevates the soul from earth to heaven and causes such an elasticity of mind that I forget I am old. Indeed I sometimes feel as if I should take the wings of morning and fly away.¹⁷

and later:

We have passed the entire summer in this wild, wandering way, toiled onward day after day, week after week and month after month toward that far off land where thousands have gone before us to die of disappointment, and perhaps no better fate awaits many of us. I often look about me and wonder who of all the numerous throng by which we are surrounded are to be favorites of Dame Fortune; but the anxiety of all seems to be to reach our anticipated goal, and when reached I presume our anxieties will only take a new form. It will no longer be, 'How soon shall we get there?' but 'What shall we do, now we are here?' (p. 152)

and finally, when they reach California, when they are isolated and completely hemmed in by the snow-elad mountains:

But so it is. Here we are like Rasselas of old, shut up in the happy valley and like him, wishing to be liberated and trembling to mingle with the world again. But my motto has been 'Hope on, hope ever;' and now my dear friends, on this bright and beautiful morn of the 10th of April I will bid you all Goodbye and pray that our Heavenly Father will bless and protect you all. (p. 171)

Obviously Mrs. Ward is a well-read woman. Her reference in the first entry to the "elasticity of mind" that she feels as a result of the beautiful scenery reminds us of Wordsworth and his transportation of mind. In the second passage, her reference to the favorites of "Dame Fortune" recalls Chaucer and the medieval wheel of fortune. The last entry even mentions Rasselas, the main character in Samuel Johnson's book of the same name, and equates her own entrapment in the valley of California to Rasselas' confinement in his valley. Thus her experiences as a pioneer are related in a fairly formal and self-consciously literary fashion which plays down the hardships and realities of the journey and emphasizes the felicities of it.

Another woman, Arvazine Angeline Cooper, expresses her feelings about pioneering in a similar, if less literary, fashion. We recognize her reluctance to express her negative feelings about her

experience because of what she says about telling her kinfolk and neighbors good-bye: "In brooding over all this, I let a kind of wordless grief take possession of me, I kept it all to myself, and shed my tears when others were asleep and kept up appearances so well that no one suspected I was not reasonably happy."¹⁶ In similar fashion, she plays down her condition when she goes into labor and stops the progress of the wagon train. She describes herself as being "in a poor fix to travel." (p. 148) After having the baby, instead of dwelling on all of the gruesome details of giving birth inside a covered wagon surrounded by restless cattle, Mrs. Cooper says in one sentence, "At two o'clock a little blue-eyed brother came to our wagon to share the honors and favors with the black-eyed belle." (p. 148) Certainly Mrs. Cooper must have had great self-discipline to write about such a momentous event so succinctly and in such terms. After the birth of her baby, she says that the narrative will now become so personal that she must write about herself in the third person. Therefore, instead of writing directly about her fears of the wagon turning over when the team runs off with it, she says: "The mother had long since resigned herself to the inevitable, and made no outcry, thinking if she only knew which way the wagon would turn when it went over, as surely it must, she might somehow be able to keep her baby more safe, till she became sensible that the movement was decidedly slower." (p. 150) Later, instead of complaining about the strains of nursing a new baby while traveling in a wagon train, she writes about herself as though she were another person or a person in a novel. "The poor mother was not able to sleep a wink while the wagon was in motion, she was in exceedingly sore straits, for there was nothing in the limited variety of food available that the baby would eat. However, she was saved from utter despair by another mother whose sick baby would eat very little, and so the good woman conceived the idea of feeding her baby for her." (p. 152) Again, like Mrs. Ward, Mrs. Cooper does not write directly about her negative feelings but tries to soften them by putting her remarks in the third person, in perspective as literature rather than a confession of her own feelings.

After looking at these entries from various diaries and journals written by married women, we may realize that the simple physical pictures that they present of themselves are very similar to the one historians have drawn of them. For example, if we look at Dee Brown's book, *The Gentle Tamers*, written in 1958, we note that he entitles his first chapter, "The Sunbonnet Myth." In it, he poses the questions, "Who was the Western woman?" "What was she like, this

gentle, yet persistent tamer of the wild land that was the American West?"¹⁹ His initial, but forceful, answer is a quote from Emerson Hough who saw the pioneer woman as a patient and submissive figure in a sunbonnet:

The chief figure of the American West, the figure of the ages, is not the long-haired, fringed-legging man riding a raw-boned pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before. (p. 2)

Nancy Wilson Ross, in her book *Westward the Women*, written in 1944, describes the women who came West as women who came, "in tight-lipped protest, simply because their man had caught the virulent Oregon Fever and there was nothing to do but follow."²⁰ Yet, she too praises these women for their lack of self-pity and for their fortitude and gallantry:

Life demanded of them a standard of conduct that fell little short of heroism. Yet though it was difficult in the far West to avoid acting the part of a heroine, women did not think of themselves in such a role. They quietly accepted as a part of the pioneer experience the necessity for courage and endurance in the face of any emergency. (p. 182)

Even Walter Prescott in *The Great Plains* speaks of the courage and endurance which the plains demanded from women who tried to settle there: "The loneliness which women endured on the Great Plains must have been such as to crush the soul, provided one did not meet the isolation with an adventurous spirit."²¹

These historical portraits, then, are synonymous with the physical portraits that the women reveal of themselves in their diaries and journals. Occasionally the entries reveal the pioneer women's concern with the lack of religious opportunity, with the upset in their domestic lives, and with the loneliness that they had to face, but only briefly and in relatively objective, sentimentalized, or euphemistic words that were acceptable to their society, not in any overtly critical remarks about their lot as women. As contemporary readers, we might expect that these women would have said more about their negative reactions to going West. Yet, we must also realize that these women, particularly the wives and mothers, had internalized the values of their own society so completely that they rarely revealed any direct opposition to or conflict about them. They presented portraits of themselves which we readily accepted, portraits like the following written by Catherine Amanda Scott Coburn:

Having been asked to define or describe woman's station in pioneer life, I, intuitively, after the manner of woman respond: Woman's station in pioneer days was that of the true woman in all time and conditions, faithful to duty,

unselfish devotion to the interests of the family; loyal support of patriotic and religious interests and primitive church institutions; prompt to answer the call of neighborhood needs; ready, in brief, for the duty that lay nearest. Woman filled her station in the pioneer era as she has filled it in all eras of the world's progress--helpfully, cheerfully, and with daily widening purposes.²²

Certainly, as Nancy Ross Wilson suggests, it might be interesting "to speculate what the effect would have been on the woman marching westward into the unknown America of the forties, the fifties, and the sixties had there been photographers, gossip columnists, and staff members of women's magazines to observe them at given points along the route: at Independence, Missouri, for instance, where they began the journey toward the limitless horizon; on the other side of the Platt, where many a new widow would have turned back had there been anyone to accompany her; or finally on the crest of the Continental Divide with the fabled hardships supposed now behind them."²³ However, we have no such record. The only records which we have lead us to see the pioneer women as simple, courageous, submissive, and patient women. Consequently, we can only guess at the intensity of emotion, and perhaps conflict, that may lie behind these tenuous entries and recognize that perhaps these objectivized, sentimentalized, and euphemistic entries are written evidence of how nineteenth century pioneer women could deal with their feelings and reactions. Thus the diaries become documents of society's expectations met rather than the graphic truths of pioneer women confessed.

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NOTES

¹Barbara Walber, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," originally published in *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer, 1966), 151-174, reprinted in *Our American Sisters*, eds., Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade (Boston: Allyn and Bacon Inc., 1973), p. 96.

²Mrs. A. J. Graves, from *Woman in America: Being an Examination into the Moral and Intellectual Conditions of American Female Society* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1841) reprinted in *Root of Bitterness*, ed., Nancy F. Cott (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1972), p. 44.

³Alexis de Tocqueville, "On American Women and American Wives," from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, rev. ed. (New York: Colonial Press, 1889), Vol. II, pp. 208-213-221-224, reprinted in *Root of Bitterness*, p. 117.

⁴Rose Bell, "Diary of Rose Bell" (unpublished manuscript in Colorado State Historical Society Museum Library, Denver Colorado).

⁵"To Pike's Peak by Ox-Wagon - The Harriet Smit Day Book," ed., Fleming Frazer Jr., *Annals of Iowa*, Iowa State Department of History and Archives, Third Series, Vol. XXXV, 2 (Fall, 1959).

⁶Sarah Raymond Herndon, *Days on the Road - Crossing the Plains in 1865* (New York: Bun Printing House, 1902), p. 44.

⁷*A Bride on the Bozeman Trail--The Letters and Diary of Ellen Fletcher - 1886*, ed., Frances D. Haines Jr (Medford, Oregon: Candee Printing Center, Inc., 1970).

⁸"Journal of the Adventure of a Party of California Cold-Seekers under Mr. Leonard Frink - Diary of Journal Across the Plains from Martinsville, Indiana to Sacramento, California, March 30, 1850 - Sept. 7, 1851" (from the original Diary of the trip kept by Mrs. Margret A. Frink, Oakland, California, 1897)

⁹*Down the Santa Fe Trail - Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin 1846-1847*, ed., Stella M. Drumm (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), p. 10

¹⁰Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, "Women and their Families on The Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867," *Feminist Studies*, Volume 2, Number 213 (1975), p. 150.

¹¹Lavinia Honeyman Porter, *By Ox Team to California: A Narrative of Crossing the Plains in 1860* (Oakland, California: author, 1910), p. 7 reprinted in Faragher and Stansell, "Women and their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867," *Feminist Studies*, p. 151.

¹²Charlotte Emily Pengra, "Diary of Mrs. Byron L. Pengra" (unpublished typescript in Western History Division of Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado), p. 5.

¹³"Diary Overland - Michigan - California, 1851" (Western History Division, Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado).

¹⁴Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady*, ed., Ralph Henry Gabriel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 64.

¹⁵*Mollie - The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866*, ed., Donald T. Oanker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. 143.

¹⁶Ella Bailey, "Diary of Ella Bailey - 1869" (unpublished diary from the Colorado State Historical Society Museum and Library, Denver, Colorado).

¹⁷Harriet Sherrill Ward, *Prairie Schooner Lady - The Journal of Harriet Sherrill Ward, 1853*, as preserved by Ward De Witt and Florence Stark De Witt (Los Angeles: Western Lore Press, 1959), p. 142.

¹⁸Arvazine Angeline Cooper, "Journey Across the Plains" unpublished manuscript reprinted in *Growing up Female in America: Ten Lives*, ed., Eve Merriam (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 139.

¹⁹Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers* (Bantem Books, 1956), p. 1

²⁰Nancy Wilson Ross, *Westward the Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), p. 4.

²¹Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), p. 506.

²²Catharine Amanda Scott Coburn, "Women's Station in Pioneer Days," printed in *History of the Oregon Country* by Harry W. Scott, compiled by Leslie M. Scott, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1924), p. 315

²³Ross, pp. 88-90.