PLAINS WOMEN, HISTORY AND LITERATURE:
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
by
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Fiction


Rolvaag, O.E. Giants in the Earth. New York: Harper & Row, 1927. A classic, often misread as the story of the pioneer woman, driven mad by the hardships of pioneering and victimizing others in her madness. Critics caution that culture, personal relationships, etc., play an important role in the trauma this woman faces. HS.

Diaries, Journals, and Memoirs


Ellis, Anne. The Life of an Ordinary Woman. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1929. A forgotten classic of the traveling, enterprising woman who was incidentally also wife and mother. Funny and poignant. HS.

Ise, John. Sod and Stubble. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. A family memoir of the hardships of pioneer days. Bleak but effective. HS.

Linderman, Frank B. Pretty Shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1972. Linderman recreates his conversations with a woman who remembers the days before the Anglos drove the Crows onto reservations. Good for information about Native American women's lives and viewpoints. HS.


Sandoz, Mari. Sandhill Sundays and Other Recollections. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1970. A collection of essays from western Nebraska. Sandoz grew up on a homestead and her stories about her mother are especially rewarding. HS.

Not about women, but contains some of the best materials for
2 guiding ones thinking about Plains experience. His cowboy
story is fiction; the rest is essay and history.

Stewart, Elmera Pruitt. Letters of a Woman Homesteader.
Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1961. A
cheerful recollection from the Wyoming frontier. Perhaps
not on the side of the polyannash, but a good corrective to the
"woman as victim" school of Plains literature. The movie,
Heartland, taken from these letters, does more justice to
reality. HS.

Historical and Literary Studies of
Plains Women

The best recent scholarship of women's lives on the Plains is
based on women's diaries and letters. Those documents show
that women's experiences on the frontier Plains were incredibly
diverse. Some older, standard social histories of the frontier
Plains, such as those by Everett Dick and Richard Bartlett,
are not included in this bibliography because they appear to be
based entirely upon male materials.

DeGraff, Lawrence B. "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in
the American West, 1850-1920," Pacific Historical Review, 49
(May 1980), 285-313. Analyzes the demographic characteristics
of western black women and compares their experiences to those
of white women. Insists on a multi-cultural, historical context.

Faragher, John M. Women and Men on the Overland Trail. New
and memoirs to understand the roles of men and women, as well
as the differences between the early migrations and the later
ones. Claims women did not want to go west and suffered greatly
on the move.

Fischer, Christiane, ed. Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women
in the American West, 1849-1903. Middletown, Connecticut: The
Shoestring Press Inc., 1977. Original documents with a good
introduction. Focuses on California, but rich in other mate­
rials also.

Fuller, Wayne C. "Country Schoolteaching on the sod-House
Frontier," Arizona and the West, 17 (Summer, 1975), 121-40. An
excellent study of the most common professional career of Plains
women.

Kempsten, Elizabeth. Read This Only to Yourself: The Private
Writings of Mid-Western Women, 1880-1910. Bloomington:
Indiana University Press, 1982. A study of letters, journals,
and materials deposited in a single archives. Primarily women,
but supplemented by some men's materials. Eccentric and
stimulating. Punches a number of myths, including the one
that nineteenth century women were afraid of, uninterested in,
and/or uninformed about sex.

Jeffrey, Julie Roy. Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi
most useful and carefully researched study of Plains women.
Chapter on Mormon women as well as the standard studies. Although a bit dense, a good place for advanced high school students to go.


Luchetti, Cathy and Carol Olwell. Women of the West. St. George, Utah: Antelope Press, 1982. Uses diaries or journals for most of its text, but is also notable for its beautiful pictures. Is careful to include as much information as possible on minority women. The kind of book you wish you had edited. HS.

Meldrum, Barbara. "Images of Women in Western American Literature," The Midwest Quarterly, 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1976), 252-267. One of several studies which shows that Western literature stereotypes women into a few categories: the good woman, the bad woman, the resourceful woman.

Myres, Sandra L. Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. A good feminist overview. Although Myres raves against what she perceives as "feminist scholarship," by that she means scholarship which sees women as victimized by the westward movements. Her chapter on women's suffrage in the West is both analytic and complete, the best I've seen. Occasionally Myres lumps all times and places together indiscriminately, but she is careful to differentiate experiences according to class and minority status. Believes women adapted well to the pioneer life.


the standard studies.
for advanced high school

is Gentle Tanners Revisited: Men in the West," Pacific discusses what has not been done and statistical history.

be done.

Rural Women in America, excerpts from popular is for rural women, ideals quality.

ele, Greenhorn. The Upper University of Oklahoma Press, the upper Arkansas River, Especially good for reading posts.

"Prostitution and little Towns of Kansas," 15-53. A study which uses a of the lives of prostit-

women of the West. St. Helps diaries or journals table for its beautiful much information as pos-

book you wish you had

In Western American 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1976), ch shows that Western few categories: the good al woman.

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oted well to the pioneer life.

Iowa Experience. Ames: study of women on the A part east of the Plains, her experiences. Like are victimized by the

of the Western Journey. Most hand accounts of women on the Overland trail. Very useful for their vivid immediacy. Also includes a good introduction. BS.


Stratton, Joanna L. Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981. Very popular, very unanalytic. Makes use of memoirs of pioneer women collected many years after settlement; part of its fascination is the story of the book's origins. BS.


Nineteenth Century American Women's History

Pioneer Plains women existed within the context of nineteenth century America and cannot be fully studied without understanding that context. While most of the historians in this bibliography have included the national context in their work, I have given some of the most important work of American women's history here for those readers who want to explore the larger context.

Bordin, Ruth. Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1930. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978. The best history of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which was the most important single organization for achieving reform and for teaching women how to become public activists. It was ubiquitous, springing immediately into being on every frontier after 1880.

Conway, Jill. "Women Reformers and American Culture 1870-1930." Journal of Social History (Great Britain), 6 (1971-72), 164-182. For those who are curious about the seeming demise of women's activism after they won the vote, Conway provides one provocative answer, an analysis which can easily be transferred to Plains women.

Along with their religious base, nineteenth century women found their greatest power in their organizing. Cott takes them through 1835, just prior to the first great western migrations; the women carried the impulse to band together west with them, and that in part accounts for many of the social and civic reforms coming out of the west after the Civil War.

