

1990

Book Review of, *As the Wind Rocks the Wagon*

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guilty to violating an ill-conceived federal migratory bird law. (The law was changed.)

But in the main this book does full justice to its subject, affirming as it goes the great central paradox of ethnology—that the *otherness* of cultures to one another seems to rest on a fundamental *oneness* of human experience. In Ruth Benedict's dictum, "There are many ways of being human"—and to read about Sadie Brower Neakok's noble life is to appreciate the distinctive Inupiaq way, and the devotion and grit with which native individuals like Sadie are trying to accommodate that traditional life to Anglo ways.

Of recent successful whale hunts by Nate and his crews, Sadie says, gleefully, "even our whites have acquired the taste of fresh *maktak* and meat, and they mingle in with our people" (p. 215). Such has been the intercultural spirit of her remarkable career, and Margaret Blackman's book conveys that spirit eloquently.

Jarold Ramsey
University of Rochester

AS THE WIND ROCKS THE WAGON, performed by Amy Warner. APL Educational Video, New York, 1990 (51 W. 81st St., Suite 1B, New York, NY 10024). Teacher's guide. 52 min.

Between 1840 and 1870 one-quarter million pioneers passed over the Oregon Trail to reach the Oregon Territory or the California goldfields. Traditional coverage of this era is dominated by heroic male mythologies constructed around fur traders, mountain men, pioneer patriarchs, and Indian braves. This video seeks to stretch the awareness of the pioneering experience to embrace also the views and vantage points of the thousands of women and children who participated in the overland journey.

The video tackles a worthy objective with generally positive results. In execution, however, the project bumps against and never wholly overcomes modern obstacles in its path toward a more balanced historical awareness. Specifically, its scope touches inadequately the context of interaction between white migrants and native Americans. It omits entirely consideration of black female involvement in the overland experience.

Structurally, the video presents a sequence of dramatizations based on the diaries and recollections of twenty-five female travelers of the trails, plus a single extract from the autobiography of the daughter of a Paiute Indian chief offered as counterpoint. The pioneer-women episodes are distilled into segments featuring four fictional but representative characters discussing aspects of the journey as it progressed from the Midwest to Oregon or California. The characters include a reluctant pregnant

bride, a southern belle, a carefree, young girl, and a cautiously optimistic Iowa farm wife.

This range of feminine types is effective in that it suggests the great diversity of backgrounds and motivations included in the massive migration. The format, however, falters around the decision to have all the characters played by a single actress, relying on her dramatic talents, plus changes in costume and sets, to carry off the production. The production also takes place entirely in a studio, supplemented by visual aids such as trail paintings. The approach is marginally effective but is a poor substitute for the depth and grandeur that a few scenes from the real trail would have added to the final product.

Beyond the technical limitations of the video, serious conceptual shortcomings are also apparent. A story based on the diaries of white pioneer women inherently carries the danger that the messages presented will reflect exclusively the cultural and racial biases then predominant in that segment of American society. To a degree the video recognizes and acknowledges this slant with the inclusion of an episode from the native American perspective. In fact, though, this attempt does not sufficiently balance the many negative and stereotypical expressions offered by the white females on native culture and character.

The dilemma for the video is clear: to alter posthumously the expressions of the pioneer women would be dishonest and inaccurate; to fail to provide enlightenment, context, and supplemental information contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes. The video itself is disturbingly weak in providing such supplemental education for the viewer—a problem all the more serious because the intended viewing audience will be largely young, with few alternative sources of information.

The video, fortunately, is accompanied by a teacher's guide that tackles this problem. The guide includes a glossary and map of the trail, as well as sections on the historical background of the Oregon experience, the political aspects underlying the migrations, and the native American issues involved. There are also suggested ideas and applications for using the video in the disciplines of history, social studies, English, theater studies, and women's studies, in addition to a short but good bibliography of recommended readings.

A final cautionary observation: the teacher's guide offers no section on ethnic or cultural disciplines other than native American and women's studies. Consequently, a significant viewpoint is missing from both the video and the guide: the perspective on westward movement from the experience of blacks in general and black females in particular.

By its nature a work based on diaries, as this production was, will not find enormous resources from this period in the writing of black females.

Migration on the Oregon Trail flourished at a time when the vast majority of blacks were held under a legal system of repressive slavery. A cardinal facet of slavery was the maintenance of illiteracy among the slave population and the discouragement of it among the relatively small free black population. Consequently, the written records of such an era will barely reflect the thoughts and experiences of the blacks involved. This dearth of conventional source materials can lead to incorrect conclusions.

Black males and females did participate in this migration in significant ways and impressive numbers. Black explorers were active in premigration events. Markus Lopius was among the crew of American Captain Robert Gray in 1788; York accompanied Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their journey. Black fur traders and mountain men from many nationalities were active in the premigration West. During the migration many black females and children came west and withstood, in addition to the travails of the trail, the additional burdens that race imposed in pre-Civil War America. Information on this subject is available in the diary records of white females. After all, black females and children, either slave or free, were relied on heavily as labor by the white females of this era. In the Oregon Black Exclusion Law of 1844, for example, black females were allowed to remain in the area a full year longer than their male counterparts. Some attempt to acknowledge and include this ingredient of the wagon-train story would have been praiseworthy and useful in this project.

Despite the reservations as explained, *As the Wind Rocks the Wagon* does contain some strong, redeeming features. Within its limitations the video represents a successful effort to provide a much-needed peek at feminine life on the frontier. It reveals the drama of the dangers and hardships imposed on the pioneer female. It also reflects the lighter moments, the camaraderie, and the sense of accomplishment that were by-products of the migration challenge. Used carefully, this video and teacher's guide can contribute to understanding.

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THE SAGEBRUSH OCEAN: A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT BASIN, text and photos by Stephen Trimble. University of Nevada Press, Reno, 1989 (Reno, NV 89557). Foreword by Barry Lopez. Illustrations by Jennifer Dewey. Maps. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. 248 pp. \$34.95 (hardcover).

To a motorist speeding along U.S. 395 between Riley and Lakeview, blasting through Wagontire at seventy miles an hour, the Great Basin is sagebrush, pure and simple. There are other ways to define this vast