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Diaries and reminiscences of women on the Oregon Trail: a study in consciousness

Amy Kesselman
*Portland State University*

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Title: Diaries and Reminiscences of Women on the Oregon Trail: A Study in Consciousness.

APPROVED BY MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

Michael M. Passi, Chairman

David A. Horowitz

Gordon B. Dodds

This study is an attempt to discover how women participating in the mid-nineteenth century migration to Oregon viewed the westward journey and themselves in relationship to it. It is not a survey of the responses of all women in the westward movement but, rather, an exploration of the perspective of those women who left a written record of their perceptions or recollections. The thesis focuses on the diaries and reminiscences of women travelling, primarily but not exclusively, in the years 1851-1853.
The introductory material consists of a review of the existing historical literature on women and the West, and a discussion of the methods and assumptions used in the thesis. Following this is a short sketch of the history of the migration to Oregon.

The major part of the thesis is organized around five themes which emerge from women's diaries and reminiscences. The first of the five themes, "Oregon Fever: A Male Disease," deals with the attitude of women towards the undertaking. The second, "The Politics of Everyday Life," discusses women's relationship to decision making and responsibility during the trip. The third thematic chapter, "Values and Sources of Support," explores those things which seemed important to the women who wrote the trail material and discusses the ways in which women's values seemed to conflict with or differ from those of the men on the trip. The chapters "Containment" and "Resistance" deal with the ways in which women expressed their feelings during the journey. The concluding chapter consists of a brief discussion of the effect of the experience of pioneer women on the next female generation.
DIARIES AND REMINISCENCES OF WOMEN ON THE OREGON TRAIL:
A STUDY IN CONSCIOUSNESS

by

AMY KESSELMAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
HISTORY

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1974
TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of


Michael M. Passi, Chairman

David A. Horowitz

Gordon B. Dodds

APPROVED:

Jesse L. Gilmore, Head, Department of History

David T. Clark, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. HISTORICAL WRITING ON WOMEN IN THE WEST

In the story of the settlement of the West, women have traditionally been treated as back drop to an essentially male drama. As in the historical writing about practically all aspects of the past, women are either ignored or viewed through a mist of traditional assumptions about the female character. Women's often recorded reluctance to participate in the westward adventure is presented as yet another obstacle, to be overcome by the men inspired by what Billington calls, "... the pioneer instinct, the strong bent of men's spirits, the desire to blaze trails, to accept a difficult challenge, the thrill of opening a new country, as the long hunters had done in the Kentucky wilderness."\(^1\)

The following excerpt from Verne Bright's article, "The Folklore and History of the 'Oregon Fever'," illustrates the predominant image of the role of white women in the westward movement.

Peter Burnett is talking to his family: "Out in Oregon I can get me a square mile of land," he boasted, "and a quarter section for each of you all. Dad burn me, I am done with this country. Winter it's frost and snow to freeze a body; summers the overflow from the Old Muddy drowns half me acres; taxes take the yield of them that's left. What say
Maw? It's God's country."

The mother was doubtful; "But this is God's country too and it is so far away. And what will we do for schools and churches and towns?"

"There'll soon be schools and churches, stores and towns, everything they have in the old states. You, Jim, go into Independence tomorrow and get the new wagon I bought yesterday. Maw, you make up a list of things we need to take along. Whitman is going back out yan -- he'll lead us. Come on boys, hit the grit."

Red-headed Jim let out a wild yell, "Whooppee! Let's go Maw out yan where the Injuns be."

If our primary interest, in reading dialogues like this is to appreciate how the West was "won," what we see is male adventurousness meeting female timidity and, to the good fortune of the West, male adventurousness conquering. If, however, our interest is in understanding the lives of the people who settled the West, why some of them wanted to come, what their relationships were, what their needs were, what their expectations were, the above dialogue raises a series of questions. Does it present an accurate picture of women's attitudes towards the westward journey and their relationship to decision making? What were the experiences which affected women's attitude towards the trip?

In much of the historical scholarship of the westward movement, these kinds of questions have been submerged beneath a pervasive bias which places primary importance on the expansion of the American empire. The pioneers are lionized because they were the vehicle of this expansion, the extermination of the Indians is ignored since Indians presented difficulties for the westward movement, and the
feelings of women about the project they participated in are not explored. Historians generally remain un-self-conscious about their failure to deal with women's lives. Ray Billington, describing the increased interest in the history of the West since 1960, remarked that, "The resulting flood of books, articles and essays has illuminated virtually every phase of the history of the West." This remark was made in the introduction to *Westward Expansion*, which does not include women in its index.

Much of the work which has been done on the history of women pioneers suffers from a tendency current in much literature about the West, its emphasis is on the exceptional. It is often an attempt to place, beside the glorious image of the pioneer man, a glorious image of the pioneer woman. The particular characteristics which historians glorify change as our culture changes, but the essential failures remain; a failure to explore the ways in which the pioneer experience was related to the status of women in the United States as a whole, to analyze the ways in which cultural norms and expectations in mid-nineteenth-century America affected pioneer women and how the pioneer experience interacted with these norms. Instead, what is often presented is a series of stereotypes reflecting more of the cultural experience of the historians than of the people about whom they are writing. Diaries and reminiscences are often used, but they are not treated as sources
for understanding how women felt about themselves and their relationships to the world in which they lived. 7

The first book about pioneer women was Woman on the American Frontier, published in 1877, and written by William W. Fowler. The settling of the frontier, says Fowler,

... is a moral as well as a physical triumph and forms an epoch in the advance of civilization. In this grand achievement, in this triumph of physical and moral endurance women must be allowed her share of the honor. 8

In parcelling out honor, Fowler acclaims woman for her "patience, her courage, her fortitude, her tact, her presence of mind in trying hours...." 9 The image is epitomized by a subtitle to one of Fowler's chapters entitled "female endurance vs. male courage." 10 The anecdotes which comprise the bulk of Fowler's book are extremely interesting, and although there are no footnotes, almost all of them include names of women which could be traced. Since the book was published in 1877, some of these anecdotes may have come from witnesses or fairly recent family memories. For these reasons, Fowler's book is valuable, as it preserves material which has been ignored in later scholarship. The stories Fowler retells, however, are powerfully shaped by his biases. In time honored male tradition he feels no compunction about ascribing motives to the women he discusses and making assumptions about the 'feminine nature' in frequent comments such as the following: "Woman, be it
remembered, is naturally as alien to water as a mountain-fowl, which flies over a stream for fear of wetting its feet.\textsuperscript{11}

Fowler's book covers the exploits of women on the frontier from Colonial times to the post Civil War period. Since Fowler's assumption, explicit throughout the book, is that Woman is Woman no matter where or when she lives, there is little insight afforded in the book about the nature of a particular period and the ways in which the lives of women interacted with specific historical events or trends. It is only with great mental effort that we can pick out the differences between the behavior and experience of women crossing the Rockies and those in the frontier settlements of New England in the seventeenth century, since Fowler's interest in presenting the accounts is in their sameness rather than their difference.

The women in Fowler's book are praised not only for performing in 'their appropriate spheres' but for departing from their traditional roles to display "almost masculine courage and firmness."\textsuperscript{12} He presents numerous accounts of women using guns, dressing as men, fighting in patriotic causes, felling trees and fighting Indians. These role departures are carefully placed in a context consistent with Victorian values. Lest we should assume that women derived gratification from participating in 'masculine activities,' Fowler points out in a section entitled "A hero and still a
woman," that,

... if we were to analyze the motives which prompted her heroic acts, we should find them to spring at last from the source of power whereof we are speaking. It is out of her abounding and forceful emotional nature that she becomes a heroine. It is to relieve, to succor, or to save her dear ones, that she is brave, strong, enduring, patient and devoted. 13

But if Woman on the American Frontier is a period piece, replete with untrammeled racism and bristling with the spirit of Manifest Destiny as well as outdated ideas about women, The Gentle Tamers, by Dee Brown, published in 1958, is another, but of a period from which we have not yet emerged. Brown criticizes the older stereotypes of the patient pioneer woman, her appearance molded by the hardships she endured, bereft of finery and fashion. Bemoaning the predominance of this image, he clears the way for his own. "But the western woman," says Brown, "was more by far than a face hidden in a ragged sunbonnet. Often her bonnet was gay with color and ornamented with flowers; sometimes she wore French millinery, the latest styles from Paris, small round hats contrasting with the enormity of her voluminous built-out skirts. Her petticoats were rainbow colored. Her feet might be shod in rough work clogs, but more than likely they were in high boots of finest kid, or high button shoes."14 Instead of being the embodiment of purity and virtue, women, to Brown, are the embodiment of glamour, seductiveness and vanity. The Gentle Tamers
discusses women in the western states in the second half of the nineteenth century. It includes a good deal of material on what Brown calls "Ladies of Easy Virtue,"
15 a subject omitted entirely from Fowler's puritanical panegyric on the pioneer woman. Like Fowler's work, it contains a series of lurid tales about the victimization of white women by American Indians, being much more explicit about the sexual aspects, and a chapter full of anecdotes supporting "the theory that women's vanity can conquer all, any place and any time,"
16 to the delight of the author who rejoices that "using what they had they managed to keep their sex appeal shining under the worst conditions."17

Although Fowler and Brown provide us with some interesting material culled from letters and diaries, their analysis is so stunted by their conception of Woman as an ahistorical category, mysterious and constant, that they provide no serious investigation of women and their roles on the frontier. Extolling the virtues of "maids and matrons"
18 on the one hand, and vices of "pink tights--and red velvet skirts"19 on the other, leaves no room for asking the kinds of questions needed to study history seriously. The work of Fowler and Brown is an excellent illustration of the following observation made in an article entitled "A Review of Sexism in American Historical Writing."

Sexism and good historical writing are incompatible since history deals with change over time while sexist analyses apply immutable and inherent
(as well as unproven) character attributes to women, and then proceed to write history with these attributes in mind. 20

Some progress towards the goal of serious historical writing about women in the west was made by William Sprague in *Women in the West, A Short Social History*, published in 1940. While Sprague does not deal in depth with the experiences of women in the Pacific Northwest, his book asks probing questions about the condition of women in the frontier in general, and establishes a useful framework for developing more specific questions. Writing as he did, at a time when parts of the historical profession were becoming interested in the history of "the common people," Sprague does not get sidetracked into a search for the exceptional and glorious but attempts to describe the conditions of life within which women in the West had to function. In comparing the status of women in various frontier regions, however, Sprague draws conclusions from rather inconclusive evidence. While he quotes a Texas woman as remarking that "... the West is a heaven for men and dogs but a hell for women and oxen, ..."21 he does not apply an analysis of the expressed feelings of women to his conclusion that in the "last West" men treated women better than elsewhere. His supporting evidence is rather incidents of chivalrous treatment of women by men and the expressed need for women in the "last West."
Since feminist ideas first emerged in America in the nineteenth century, women have evidenced interest in the history of women. In the early twentieth century, a spate of biographies, collections and narratives about women living in earlier periods made their appearance and interest has continued in spurts until the present period of feminist activity.

A collection entitled *Souvenir of Western Women*, edited by Mary Douhit, was published in 1905 with the purpose of recording "... women's part in working out the plan of our Western civilization." Although women's diaries and reminiscences have been ignored in favor of biographical sketches, the sketches were written by people only one generation removed from the pioneer experience and the preservation of their recollections is a useful addition to other material.

A later collection, *With Her Own Wings*, edited by Helen Krebs Smith for the Portland Federation of Women's Organizations, in 1948, "... endeavored to present a cross-section of pioneer women's experiences and emotions emphasizing neither the very rugged nor the sentimental." It includes more excerpts from diaries, letters, and reminiscences, and describes the lives of women who have remained unknown as well as those who achieved notoriety. A particularly valuable aspect of the collection is its inclusion of anecdotes and stories handed down through the
generations of Oregon women. Since most of the research that has been done on Western folklore makes little or no attempt to study the folklore traditions of women, these stories are extremely valuable.

One historical novel, *Reluctant Pioneer*, by Beatrice Bliss, deserves mention in a review of literature about women in the West. The popular image of the pioneer experience has been largely derived from historical novels which tell the story from a male point of view. In *Reluctant Pioneer*, a novel based on the life of the author's great grandmother, Mary Vowell Adams, Beatrice Bliss attempts to get inside the mind of a woman pioneer. With appreciative sensitivity to the details of female existence, her tragic portrait of Mary Adams focuses some of the questions which need to be explored about women in the westward migration. To a considerable extent, this paper was stimulated by questions raised in *Reluctant Pioneer*.

The one narrative history of women in the West written by a woman is *Westward the Women* by Nancy Ross, published in 1944. Ross is explicit about her commitment to counter the traditional male approach to the history of women. "It is men who have written the world's histories," she says in her introduction, " . . . and in writing them they have almost without exception, ignored women. Another cast of male mind, that of the philosopher, has seen fit to treat women as special human creatures, the possessors of traits so
peculiar as to make them objects worthy of separate classification under Man." With this commitment, Ross searches among both the well known and the anonymous for models of women acting creatively and independently. She draws heavily on diaries and letters, which she sees as valuable source material for exploring "... the hidden drives of the American woman." Her eminently readable narrative presents a wide variety of data about women in the West from 1830 to 1900. The difficult task of making sense of this data, however, of asking questions of it, developing new questions and searching for the answers to them, remains to be done. Ross leaves us guessing. She presents material indicating immense frustration and despair on the part of women but states at the end of her book, "What happened among the best of pioneers was true democracy with men and women sharing equally...," leaving us to assume either that the frustration and despair was not among the 'best of pioneers' or that it is somehow not relevant to the question of sexual equality. Women on the frontier did more varied work than women in later more urban environments. In addition to caring for the home and children, they milked cows, cultivated gardens, and produced the main necessities of life. Did that mean that women felt themselves to be equal participants in life on the frontier? Did it mean that they felt themselves to be less dependent on men than women who bought ready-made clothing, soap, candles, and
cheese? These are the kinds of questions which I am attempting to answer by studying the thoughts of women as expressed in the diaries and reminiscences of the journey to Oregon.

II. THEORY AND METHOD

The overland journey represented only five to seven months in the lives of its participants. However, for a number of reasons, trail material is a rich source of insights about the lives of pioneer women in general. Because of the tremendous amount of publicity which the migration to the Far West enjoyed both at the time of its occurrence and long afterwards, a fair number of women wrote diaries and, unlike many valuable source materials about women's lives, many of them have been preserved and made available. We are therefore able to study a collection of primary source material all written about one particular experience which occurred within a fairly short time period.

Certain aspects of female experience stand out in relief because of the particular character of the overland journeys. As I shall demonstrate in this paper, the westward movement appealed primarily to men. Most of the women who came to Oregon in the late 1840's and early 1850's came only because their fathers or husbands wanted to go. So few women came to the Oregon country during the first three decades of the European invasion that the "shortage of
females" became a prime preoccupation of Pacific Northwest life. Participants in a male-defined venture, separated from the spheres of activity in which they exerted some influence, surrounded by uncertainties and dangers, women were in an acutely powerless position. The overland journeys provide us with an opportunity to explore women's responses to powerlessness.

It does not require much perspicacity to understand that women in the nineteenth century were involved in a different set of activities from those which involved men. As David Potter pointed out, the differences between the work of men and women has significant implications in terms of the consciousness of each group. This paper will explore some of those differences.

But differences in work patterns are not the only roots of the differences between the consciousness of men and women. To use an analogy: A white plantation owner may have seen himself and the world somewhat differently from a white businessman, but the consciousness of black slaves were strikingly distinct from both of them, whether they were slaves in a warehouse or on a plantation. The key difference here is not activity so much as power. The slaves had no control over their lives, while the slave owners had control over both their lives and the lives of their slaves.

Most white women were not bought and sold in nineteenth
century America. However, they had no political power; their choices of activity were severely narrowed by law, convention, and unequal opportunity. Married women were at the mercy of their husband's will. In 1848, while thousands of immigrants were wending their way westward, a group of women meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, to inaugurate the Women's Rights Movement, declared: "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."31

Out of female experience, the matrix of powerlessness, and a specific range of activities and responsibilities, female consciousness developed. This is not to say that all women thought alike. Individual, class, ethnic, and regional influences all contributed to the way different women perceived themselves and their world. Female experience was, however, a crucial component. When we examine the consciousness of men and women who shared similar regional, cultural and class experience, we can perceive distinct differences.

Victorian ideology and tradition reinforced these differences. Integral to the mystique of 'true womanhood' was the belief that women's extreme purity made them unfit to participate in the male world. The society of men was portrayed as sinful and interaction between men and women often became limited to that necessary to maintain the
nuclear family. The social segregation of the sexes which resulted reinforced the divergent directions in which male and female consciousness developed. It fostered the development of a distinct set of female values, attitudes, priorities, traditions, sources of support and forms of creativity. In this paper I am calling this complex set of phenomena female culture. Rediscovering the meaning of this culture is a difficult task. It involves excavating and analyzing the art women produced, the songs women sang, the medical wisdom they passed on to each other, and the forms of social interaction they developed. Our ignorance in this area is mammoth.

This paper will deal primarily with consciousness; women's perceptions of themselves and the world around them, their values and feelings as expressed in their diaries and reminiscences. Because so little is known about the various facets of women's culture, my study of consciousness is primitive. By studying the diaries in terms of what they can tell us about the minds of women in the westward movement, I hope to suggest areas which need to be explored in order to unearth the culture of women in nineteenth century America.

In discussing the reasons that the history of women has been ignored by the historical profession, Linda Gordon made the following observation.
... the things that have usually been considered to constitute femininity, and which women are pressed so hard to conform to, are precisely those things that remove women from the political arena. Although the image of femininity has changed significantly in some ways, in one dimension it has remained the same: what is feminine is almost antithetical to what is powerful. Since women have had neither political nor economic nor military power, obviously they did not make history and obviously they are not in the history books. 36

To study the history of women, then, we must shift arenas. The politics of women's lives is often contained in areas considered trivial by traditional historical writing. Subjects such as the preparation of food, washing, caring for the children and the sick, have been separated from the main body of historical investigation and discussed only as "manners and customs." But often these issues contain important insights about the lives of women. My paper will deal with a number of these 'trivial' issues.

I have not attempted to secure a representative sample of women in the westward migration. I have worked with the available sources, those diaries and reminiscences which have either been published or cited in published works, and those unpublished manuscripts which are located in the Oregon Historical Society. Women who wrote diaries had a certain amount of confidence in their ability to express themselves in writing. A number of the women whose diaries I read also wrote poetry, and many clearly enjoyed using words. In these ways, they are a particular group of women. It must also be noted that not all diaries
end up in historical societies.

I do not mean this study to be conclusive or comprehensive. It is meant to be suggestive. I have examined the available material in relationship to the conditions of female existence and the cultural milieu of the period of the westward migration in an attempt to find clues which can be explored further with an eye to differences within the female community. Given that we have so little understanding of female consciousness and culture, we need these clues before more sophisticated studies can be undertaken.

The material available written by women on the overland journeys includes, in addition to diaries, a large number of reminiscences. While concentrating on the diaries, I have not ignored retrospective perceptions of the trip. Reminiscences often include a broader area of information, such as descriptions of what happened before and after the trip, not included in diaries. Since I am interested in women's responses to the journey, retrospective responses are also relevant. Because reminiscences of pioneer experience often have a tendency to conform to ritualized patterns which became popular in the three or four decades following the overland journeys, and in order to take into account the distortion which occurs over time, I have used reminiscences carefully and have clearly identified the material which came from them.

Although I have used some other material, I have
concentrated on diaries from the years 1851-1853. The decision to thus narrow the focus of the essay, rather than covering a longer time period or a broader group of women, was based on my desire to explore the responses of women to similar experiences. This approach facilitates what Gene Wize, in American Historical Explanations, defines as the task of historical scholarship: "... to search out what is connected with what and when and how and through what forms." Several factors contributed to my choice of the years 1851-1853. The migrations from 1843-1849 were smaller, and those of 1849 and 1850 were shaped by the Gold Rush: most people were headed for California and, as Merrill Matte pointed out, "The Gold Rush in its early stages was largely a male affair and this is reflected in the journals." In 1851, although the size of the westward bound immigration decreased, the percentage of Oregon bound immigrants increased.

This situation is reflected in the fact that the largest number of diaries by women available in Oregon were written during the years 1851-1853.

These diaries reflect certain experiences in common, such as the cholera epidemic of 1852, and the vast number of graves resulting from it, which were passed by the travellers of 1853.

This essay offers the perspective of a particular
group of people on the trip to Oregon. They were women, they were coming to Oregon to settle and build homes (as opposed to missionaries whose motivations for undertaking the trip were different), and most of them came during the same three-year period. There were, however, differences among them. Those differences which are discernible through the diaries will be noted when relevant.
CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF THE MIGRATION TO OREGON

Until 1843, the Pacific Northwest, then known as the "Oregon Country," was inhabited by American Indians; small enclaves of British, French Canadian, and American fur traders; missionaries; and a tiny handful of American settlers.

In the early 1840's, interest in westward expansion gathered momentum in the United States. Seeking to strengthen American claims on the area by enlarging the colony of settlers, missionaries and midwestern congressmen began to promote the virtues of the West. Newspapers and magazines carried a spate of glowing reports on the Far West, written by explorers and missionaries, and numerous "Oregon meetings" were held to discuss the possibilities of settling the Pacific Northwest. Although the bill introduced by Senator Linn from Missouri—to occupy, grant lands, and extend United States privileges and laws to the Oregon country—had received no congressional action, the public was urged by the promoters of the West to move into the western lands in order to pre-empt British claims on the area. 41

Hard times in the Mississippi valley created a
receptive audience for Oregon enthusiasts. Agriculture had never fully recovered from the panic of 1837. Prices for farm products were depressed and inadequate transportation in many parts of the Midwest aggravated the difficulties facing farmers. "Oregon Fever" spread quickly through the frontier settlements of the Middle Border. According to Billington, "... by 1840 not a farmer or shopkeeper in the Mississippi valley but carried in his mind a golden—and largely false picture of the Willamette and Sacramento valleys." 42

Edward Lenox, in Overland to Oregon in 1843, describes the following speech by Peter Burnett, a leader of the 1843 emigrant party, which he heard in Platte City, Missouri.

... he told of the great crops of wheat which it was possible to raise in Oregon and pictured in glowing terms the richness of the soil and the attraction of the climate, and with a little twinkle in his eye he said, "and they do say, gentlemen, they do say, that out in Oregon pigs are running about under the great acorn trees, round and fat and already cooked with knives and forks sticking in them so that you can cut off a slice whenever you are hungry." 43

Since prevailing ideology rationalized the intrusion upon Indian lands by assuming the superiority of Christian, agrarian civilization, the fact that treaties with the Indians had not been negotiated did not deter nine-hundred people from embarking on the first massive immigration of families to Oregon in 1843.

Each successive year the number of immigrants seeking
the promised land in the Oregon country increased. Election of Polk to the presidency in 1844 on an expansionist program, conclusion of a treaty with Britain in 1846 giving the United States all land south of the forty-ninth parallel, and the organization of a territorial government in Oregon in 1848, further stimulated the growth of the westward movement. 44

Most of the Oregon bound travellers were born in the Atlantic states but had settled in frontier settlements in the Midwest, the area which has been called, "... the crucible in which the population of the Pacific Northwest was molded." 45 Dorothy Johansen, in "A Working Hypothesis for the Study of Migrations," used the term "respectable" to describe the average immigrant, defining respectable as:

... recognition of law and order and the United States government, and the Protestant as opposed to the Catholic faith, and... basically a Puritan morality with emphasis upon sobriety and thrift, with confidence in the rudiments of education and in modest ambitions of competence and self sufficiency." 46

The immigrants were mostly small farmers, many of whom sold their land in order to outfit themselves for their trip west. Those that did not have the eight hundred to twelve thousand dollars necessary to equip a wagon secured passage with other parties in return for their labor and/or a sum of money.

The precise number of women in the overland parties remains a matter of conjecture. A count of the westward
bound travellers taken at Fort Kearney (in what is now Nebraska) in 1852, recorded 9,909 men, 2,252 women and 3,058 children.

Two thousand miles lay between Independence, Missouri, where the travellers gathered each spring to prepare themselves for the journey, and their destination. Much of this was to be travelled on foot in order to lighten the load for the fatigued oxen. The journey took from five to seven months. Guide books and maps, prepared by earlier travellers, gave the immigrants an idea of what to expect along the way and made suggestions about how to deal with the many problems presented by the trip. Most guidebooks, however, failed to advise the travellers that the hardest part of the journey was the stretch between Fort Hall (in what is now eastern Idaho) and the Columbia river. As Helen Kroll pointed out,

Those who were interested enough in furthering the expansion of settlement to the Oregon country to write books about it were usually trapped by their enthusiasm into exaggerating the possibilities and magnifying the attractive features of the country and the ease of travelling there. 48

There were many attempts to find cut-offs to shorten the distance of the journey. These cut-offs were often not clearly marked and a number of parties travelling on them got lost and faced starvation. 49

The degree of suffering on the trip west has been questioned by some historians and writers. Harvey Scott,
for example, wrote, "... to those who never knew any life other than that of labor and hardship, with intervals mayhap of real privation, the journey was not terrible nor in many cases even irksome." 50 I will not attempt to make judgements about the amount of suffering on the trip. It suffices to say that there were many deaths among the immigrant parties, 51 most of which were incurred by sickness, aggravated by inadequate diet, 52 and inclement weather. 53
Route of the Immigrants from Old Oregon Trail
by Walter Meachum pp. 50-51.
CHAPTER III

OREGON FEVER: A MALE DISEASE

Today we started across the dreary plains. Sad are the thoughts that steal over the reflecting mind. I am leaving my home, my early friends and associates never to see them again, exchanging the disinterested solicitude of fond friends for the cold and unsympathetic friendship of strangers. Shall we all reach the "El Dorado" of our hopes or shall one of our number be left and our graves be in the dreary wilderness, our bodies uncoffined and unknown remain there in solitude? Hard indeed that heart be that does not drop a tear as these thoughts roll across the mind. 54

When Elizabeth Goltra, who wrote this diary entry as she was leaving for Oregon from Kansas in 1853, speaks of the sad thoughts that steal over the reflecting mind, she is very specific and detailed. When she speaks of the destination of the travellers, she is abstract and even slightly sarcastic. The entry conveys a kind of skeptical distance from the dreams which activated the westward movement. This tone is echoed in many women's trail diaries. It illustrates what Charles Moore, a pioneer of 1852, commented on in his address to the Oregon Pioneer Association in 1904, when he asserted that: "For the average woman there was an utter lack of incentive. It was a forced and cheerless march to the promised home on the frontiers of civilization." 55

As David Potter suggested in his article, "American
Women and the American Character," the promised land towards which the pioneers were heading was not a land of opportunity for women.

... for American women, as individuals, opportunity began pretty much where the frontier left off. For opportunity lay in access to independent employment, and the employments of the frontier were not primarily accessible to women. 56

Most women were embarking on a journey full of risks and uncertainties, not in the hopes of fulfilling their dreams, but, as illustrated by the following letter in the National Intelligencer in 1843, as accessories to their husbands.

You of the old states cannot readily conceive the every-day sort of business an 'old settler' makes of selling his improvements, hitching the horses to the big wagon, and with his wife and children, swine and cattle, pots and kettles, and household goods, starting a journey of hundreds of miles to find and make a new home. 57

Yet these accessories had thoughts and feelings of their own. Alongside the "Oregon Fever" consciousness--expansionist, restless, seeking success and adventure--existed the consciousness of women. From women's diaries, hidden between descriptions of scenery and events, emerge a set of values, beliefs and feelings born of female experience.

When she wrote the following diary entry, Maria Belshaw's party had arrived in Oregon and was looking for land on which to settle.
I thought Salem and Albany surpassed all the
towns of Oregon - but in Marysville we have the
most beautiful hills on the right with occasion-
ally the branches of a lone Fir bidding us wel-
come to their home where grandeur and beauty are
displayed by the God of Nature - but yet our minds
are not satisfied, they meditate on past plea-
sures - then imagine those that they may enjoy if
they can find better land. Human beings are so
constituted that they are ever grasping at some-
thing ahead. 58

Although Maria writes of "human beings," she makes it
clear that it is not she who wishes to keep going. She does
not identify with the search for perfect land. Her own
yearnings, her own desires "to grasp for something ahead"
are buried. We don't know what form they would take if they
had a chance to grow.

Similar alienation from the spirit of geographic
mobility was expressed by Agnes Stewart, who celebrated her
twenty-first birthday on the Oregon trail.

Passed the grave of a young man just twenty one
years of age. Starting with all the pride of his
heart, thinking no doubt of wealth and pleasure,
when he possessed the wealth that thousands had
done before him, but left with all his wild ambi-
tions to wander away on the plains. Perhaps some
romantic notion filled his heart before he started.
Such things happen to people. 59

Enthusiasm for the trip to what Mrs. Cornelia Sharp
called "the far off and much talked about plains of
Oregon" 60 is rare in women's diaries. Even Rebecca Ketchum,
who travelled without her family, evidently on her own
initiative writes: "I do not think it such a wonderful
thing to come to Oregon, but I am not there yet." 61
It seems fairly clear that when wives and husbands came together the decision to come to Oregon was made with little regard for women's feelings. The following reminiscence illustrates the reluctant accession to the will of their husbands that characterized so many women's participation in the trip.

It is vivid in my memory of how my father, John Tucker Scott, with much of the pioneer spirit in his blood, became so interested about this news of the west, and the possibilities of acquiring land, and a chance for his growing family that he decided to "go West". My mother did not oppose him. She was not physically strong; had the care of a large family. She tried to put down her fears for the perilous undertaking and her heart was torn with the thought of leaving behind her father and mother, many loved relations and home associations. Her health was not very good and she had dreads and fears but hoped she would live to get to Oregon.
CHAPTER IV

THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Patterns of decision making along the trail varied among the westward bound caravans. In some wagon trains, the captain made most of the decisions, while others were more democratic. On the extreme end of the spectrum was Rebecca Ketchum's party, led by the authoritarian William Gray. In this case, it was clear that others, both male and female, shared (perhaps in an even more extreme version) Rebecca's sentiments when she recorded feeling herself to be, "... in the power of the most arbitrary and heartless man I ever saw."63 While less outstanding than the attitude towards Gray, there are, in diaries and reminiscences about other parties, allusions to the power of the leaders. "When I think of the ignorance and shiftlessness of our leaders," recalls Mary Elizabeth Warren, "I wonder that we ever got there."64 In Agnes Stewart's party, the will of others prevailed over that of the leader at one point, after which he refused to lead.

In most diaries there are references to group decisions. The extent of women's participation in the decision making process is difficult to ascertain. One of the chief reasons for this difficulty is the confusing (and revealing) use of
pronouns in women's diaries. When "we" is used in connection with an action, it is not always clear who in fact was the person or persons responsible for the action. Elizabeth Goltra, for example, used "we" throughout her entire diary, except in one instance when she described a hot springs they passed and reported, "... cannot hold my hand in the water ten seconds."65

"Elected officers tonight" reads a diary entry of Cecilia McMillen. Since women did not participate in electoral activity any place else in the United States, it seems reasonable to assume that the elections of the wagon train leadership would also exclude women. The fact that Cecilia, when referring to the above elections, did not mention who was elected nor what her own feelings about the election were is further indication that she did not participate. Why, in this case, did she not say "they elected officers"? Cecilia's need to save space may partially explain her omission of pronouns. Her decision to leave this particular pronoun out, however, does indicate that she did not consider it significant. She evidently had no expectation of women participating in the election of officers and, therefore, it was evident to her that "elected officers" meant "they elected officers."

For the above reasons, entries like the following are inconclusive, "... we held a council and it was agreed to leave young Haft with the carriage, and Mr. Hanna and I to
go on and either send for it or Mr. Hanna to come himself in
the course of the week . . . . "67

One instance of women as a group influencing a decision
is recorded by George Belshaw in explaining why his party
stayed over at a campsite one day. "The women ruled and
would wash."68

But while the diaries leave us guessing about the
extent of women's participation in decision making, the per-
vasive apprehensiveness and anxiety which they express com-
municate their feelings of powerlessness. From this we can
deduce that whatever way women did participate was insuffi-
cient to relieve the psychology of powerlessness.

Pull off your coat, roll up your sleeves
For Jordan is a hard road to travel I believe.

This song extract, jotted down in the diary of
Enoch Conyers, a young man travelling with his relatives,
expresses an enthusiasm for the challenges of the trip which
is uniformly missing from women's diaries. Instead we find
recurrent anxiety and preoccupation with death.70 It was
women who noticed the graves along the way and consistently
reported death and illness on the trains. Sarah Cranstone,
a pioneer of 1851, counted every single grave which she
passed and recorded them every day. When she doesn't see
many graves she explains in her diary that they would
probably see more if they weren't travelling on the river
bottom. "It makes it seem very gloomy to us to see so many
of the emigrants buried on the plains," remarked Cecilia Millen Adams. Mrs. Lodisa Frizzel, en route to California in 1852, remarked when half-way to her destination that the journey "tires the soul." She went on to say:

That this journey is tiresome no one will doubt, that it is perilous, the deaths of many will testify, and the heart has a thousand misgivings, and the mind is tortured with anxiety, and often as I passed the freshly made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the wagon, not knowing how soon it might serve as the coffin for some one of us; but thanks for the kind care of Providence, we were favored more than some others.

A strong element of the sense of apprehension which women's diaries express is the feeling of helplessness. Women felt themselves to be dependent on chance, Providence, and the wisdom of their leaders. As participants in a venture designed and led by men, they had little or no control over the many factors which might determine whether they lived or died. Women's trail diaries illustrate, in an extreme form, a fact of female experience both yesterday and today: powerlessness and uncertainty interact to breed perennial anxiety.

Women also had more physical problems to deal with than men. There were numerous babies born on the plains and in the mountains. The wagon trains would stop for the amount of time it took for a baby to be delivered and then recommence the journey over the uneven, pitted roads. Amelia Knight, who reported herself continually sick during the first six months of the journey, described herself as "sick" again on
October 17. "A few days later," she wrote, "my eighth child was born. After this we picked up and ferried across the Columbia River, utilizing skiff, canoes and flatboat to get across, taking three days to complete." But even for women who did not deliver on the trail, the trip was often physically painful. In mid-nineteenth century America, large numbers of women suffered from various mystified female ailments for which there were no known cures. One common illness was 'prolapse uteri' or 'fallen womb,' now thought to be caused by the combination of successive childbirth and taxing physical labor. 'Prolapse' was often very painful and resulted in many women being continually unwell. Life in the frontier communities of the Midwest from which many Oregon bound women came aggravated women's physical difficulties.

The frontier graveyards show how hard the early life was on women of the family. The patriarch laid to rest in his family tract, beside two, three or four wives who had preceded him, is much more common than the hardy woman who outlived her husband.

Almost all the women's diaries report their authors sick at least once and usually more during the trip. "Sick as usual," read Agnes Stewart's diary entry of May 21.

Weakened by illness, childbirth, and hard work, women were more susceptible to the illnesses of the plains, the most prevalent of which was cholera. Mrs. Scott, whose dreads and fears were mentioned earlier in this paper, was
the mother of nine children when she started on the journey, hoping to reach Oregon. Her daughter, Harriet Scott Palmer, writes:

Fate willed it otherwise and being frail and weary with the long journey, she fell victim to the cholera, so prevalent that year on the plains, leaving her sorrowing family to grieve for her. 76

Fear of abandonment augmented women's anxiety during the trip. The contradictions of family life in the overland journey are painfully illustrated by the plight of widows. One finds frequent references in diaries to women and children travelling alone on the trail. Enoch Conyers' diary reports passing a woman who had buried her husband on the plains.

She had four or five little helpless children to care for. All the rest of her company had gone on, leaving her alone with her team to get over the mountains the best she could. She had three yolk of cattle to her wagon. When we overtook her she was driving wooden wedges between the fellows and tire of the wagon wheel. Mr. Burns offered the lady his services. The wheels of the wagon had shrunk so much that it required wooden wedges three quarters of an inch thick driven around the wheel to keep the tire on, and then there was no assurance of it lasting until she got down the first hill. After the wheel was repaired Mr. Burns offered to drive the team and help her down the mountain, but she very kindly declined the offer, picked up her whip, gave it a whirl and a crack and started down the mountain. We did not see or hear anything more of her after leaving the summit. 77

It is not clear why the rest of the party left this woman to travel with four or five children, wagon, and cattle on a journey which men were afraid to make alone on horseback. 78 Perhaps her husband had secured passage with a
wagon train in exchange for his labor and after his death his wife and children were regarded as a burden to the rest of the company. Conyers explains it with the following wry comment: "But such is life on the plains. Here it is everyone to himself and devil take the hindmost." At any rate, it was not an unusual occurrence. Oliver Goldsmith recorded the following scene on the trail in 1849.

We saw a woman on her knees, weeping and praying; three young children were with her, each having on its back a pack as large as it could comfortably carry. The packs were made of shirts, the lower part tied into a bag shape with a string, the sleeves securing it to the little bearer's body. We saw that one child was too small to travel very fast and waited for them to come into the road, when we told the woman we would keep with her till we met a wagon or someone who could help her.

The irony of the plight of widows is striking in the context of the rigid role distinctions which shaped wagon train life. In one of the guidebooks which Oregon travellers used one finds the following admonition.

However much help your wives and daughters have been to you at home, they can do but little for you here -- herding stock through either dew, dust or rain, breaking brush, swimming rivers, attacking grizzly bears or savage Indians, is all out of their line of business. All they can do, is to cook for camps, etcetera, etcetera; nor need they have any wearing apparel, other than their ordinary clothing at home.

When women were with men on the wagon trains, the labor was generally divided in accordance with the ideas expressed in the guidebooks, but alone women did all those things which they were allegedly incapable of doing with
impressive resourcefulness.

The experience of women with dependent children who arrived in the "promised land" as widows was often quite grim. Following is an excerpt from the diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Gear, one of the few women with children to write a diary.

Today we buried my earthly companion. Now I know what none but widows know; that is how comfortless is that of a widow's life, especially when left in a strange land, without money or friends and the care of seven children. Cloudy. 82

Mrs. Smith lived as a widow on a farm with her children one year and four months, during which time she describes herself in a letter as having become "poor as a snake." She
The children cried and begged for water and became so famished and sick that their tongues hung from their mouths and they came near dying. But we had to journey on, through it all to reach water, which we did not until night. That was the most terrible part of our journey. Our sore eyes became so painful that they had to be bandaged, and there were scarcely any of us who who could see to do anything. The children, who could be cared for recovered, but sister Mary, who was obliged to cook and care for children, became blind and remained so for seven years.
CHAPTER V

FEMALE CULTURE: VALUES AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Towards the beginning of Cecilia Mc Millen's diary, one finds the following poem:

Home

What so sweet
So beautiful on Earth: and Ch so rare
As kindred love and family reposes!

The busy world
With all the stir of life
Pursues its wonted course; on pleasures some
And some on commerce and ambition bent
And all on happiness, while each one loves
One little spot in which his heart unfolds;
With nature's holiest feelings. One sweet spot
And calls it Home. If sorrow is felt there
It seems through many bosoms and a smile.

Lights up in eyes around a kindred smile.
And if disease intrudes the sufferer finds
Rest on the breast beloved. 85

While this poem may lack literary merit, it echoes a theme recurrent in women's overland diaries, preoccupation with home. "Oh for a little home to call my own!," laments Velina Williams. 86

If we examine this theme in the context of the realities of women's lives in the mid-nineteenth century, it assumes a deeper significance than the maudlin nostalgia which it appears to be at first glance. Home was extensively glorified in nineteenth century American culture, as exemplified by the following excerpt from Woman in America
by Mrs. A. J. Graves.

Home, if we may so speak, is the cradle of the human race; and it is here the human character is fashioned either for good or for evil. It is the "nursery of the future man and of the undying spirit"; and woman is the nurse and the educator. Over infancy she has almost unlimited sway; and in maturer years she may powerfully counteract the evil influences of the world by the talisman of her strong, enduring love, by her devotedness to those intrusted to her charge, and by those lessons of virtue and of wisdom which are not of the world. 87

Home was the only place in which women felt respected and it was the only place in which they had any power. Women poured their creative energies into their homes and families, creating beautiful things with which to decorate their houses, inventing new ways to cook, forming societies in which to discuss the care of children.

When Maria Belshaw remarked on passing through an attractive part of the countryside, "It's quite pleasant - still give me the home I left in the state of Indiana.,"88 it is not Indiana which she is referring to so much as home and community. What community meant for women was primarily the association with other women, the social life centered around church and visiting in which women shared experience and wisdom. Women attempted to recreate this sense of community on the trail. "During the day," recalled Mrs. Hann,

We women folk visited from wagon to wagon or congenial friends spent an hour walking ever westward, and talking over our home life 'back in the states' telling of the loved ones left behind;
voicing our hopes for the future in the far west and even whispering a little friendly gossip of pioneer life. High teas were not popular but tatting, knitting, crocheting, exchanging receipts for cooking beans or dried apples or swapping food for the sake of variety kept us in practice of feminine occupations and diversions. 89

"At night," remembered Mary Warren,

The women would sit around the fire and visit while the men would take the oxen to grass and water. As soon as the fire was big enough to furnish coals all the women would steam up their clay pipes. Everyone smoked then and the tobacco was our own home grown brand. 90

But while women's reminiscences recall the successful aspects of social life, the diaries more often record the loneliness of women who left close friends behind. In an age without telephones, highways, and airplanes, closeness depended on geographical proximity. The relationships which women had developed in the small farming communities from which they came were terminated by the trip west. The finality of separation from friends became more of a reality each day on the trail. In frequent expressions of grief over the friendships they left behind, women communicated a profound sense of loss, loneliness and disorientation.

The following poem fragment was the first diary entry written by Agnes Stewart.

To Martha

Oh friend, I am gone forever, I cannot see you now
The damp comes to my brow
Thou wert my first and only friend, the hearts best treasure thou;
Yet in the shades of troubled sleep my mind can see you now, And many a time I shut my eyes and look into the past. Ah, then I think how different our fates in life were cast, I think how oft we sat and played Upon some mossy stone, How we would act and do when we were big girls grown And we would always live so near That I could always come to you, And you would come to me, and this we would always do When sickness came in fevered brow and burning through each vein...

At this point Agnes' poem stops, but her mind returns to Martha continually throughout the trip.

Oh Martha, my heart yearns for you my only friend, and would that I could see you now. I would not ask for many a day -- and I had built myself on the idea that I should send, and you would come to Oregon. But this I pass and must submit to Providence, but oh my friend thou art dear to me ... I know I can never enjoy the pleasure of communing with you again. Yet mourn for the loss of one I can never see again on earth. Yet stop painful reverie, for I cannot help it. 92

Both Agnes and Martha were at this point unmarried and their relationship was a good deal more intense than the friendships of married women. Rebecca Ketchum, another unmarried woman, also expressed a good deal of loneliness and need for friends. "I wonder," she says, "if I shall have good friends in Oregon. I don't love many in this company very much." 93 Travelling in a company beset by constant interpersonal tensions, Rebecca often felt alone and uncared for. While she managed to maintain her sanity
remarkably well by remaining neutral in most arguments and confiding her feelings to her journal, when she was sick, as in the following entry, she felt particularly lonely. "Oh how I thought of Cynthia and her dear Mother! If they had been with me I don't believe I would have sat there all that time without a word of care or sympathy." 

But married women too expressed a need for friends. Despite injunctions such as the following by William Alcott, "... if a married lady has a bosom friend at all ... it should be her husband," women's relationships with their husbands were often quite formal. While women regarded their husbands as protectors and providers and sometimes as friends, they seemed to spend little informal time together and always referred to them as "Mr." While there are many references in the diaries of women exploring the surrounding countryside with each other, there are only one or two instances recorded of women doing so with their husbands.

"How sad and dreary," commented Maria Belshaw as she set off across the plains, "when we behold for the last time perhaps on earth friends we have spent so many happy hours with." Later she wrote:

Our company divided this morning, eight wagons in each company - but there were too many captains so that divided the company. It makes me feel very lonely for all of my friends but a husband dear are in the other company or those that I claim as true and honest ones, that are near by the ties of nature."
These kinds of thoughts would often come to women on the Sabbath, a day on which there was sometimes more time for reflection and one which reminded them of the communities they left behind. One Sabbath morning, Mrs. Hanna, the wife of a Presbyterian minister, wrote the following lines.

This is a beautiful morning. I think of home and the dear ones there; each day I am getting farther from them. I feel a sadness steal over me at times when I think that I shall see them no more on earth, but it is all for the best, it is better for me that my affections should be more turned from earth. Oh that I could set them more on 'things heavenly and divine.'

Since the wagon trains were led by men, it is difficult to know what women's priorities were on the trip. The diaries and reminiscences do indicate that they were different from those of men. Women seemed to want to stop and rest more often—to clean, bake, wash, allow the sick to recuperate, and observe the Sabbath. A fast pace was deemed necessary because in the periods of large westward migration the grass was eaten away by the herds of cattle, and latecomers might find themselves without food for their animals. Arriving at their destination before the cold weather set in was an additional impetus for moving as quickly as possible. But women did not have responsibility for leading the wagon trains to their destination. They did, however, feel responsible for keeping their families clean, healthy, and well fed, and these goals often conflicted with the goal of
moving quickly. Mrs. Katherine Haun, in a reminiscence of
the California-Oregon trail in 1849, made the following
observation about the effect of women and children on the
wagon trains.

Our caravan had a good many women and children and
although we were probably longer on the trail owing
to their presence - they exerted a good influence,
as the men did not take such risks with the Indians
and thereby avoided; were more alert about the care
of the teams and seldom had accidents; more
attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation
and lastly but not of less importance, the meals
were more regular and better cooked thus preventing
much sickness and there was less waste of food. 99

Nowhere was there more tension over food than in
Rebecca Ketchum's party. Gray, the leader, assumed authority
over cooking as well as everything else and Rebecca seethed
with anger about his willingness to sacrifice health for
economy. The entire company was beset by diarrhea on and off
throughout the trip.

Mr. Gray does the most of the cooking and it is
most amusing to see some of his operations. I
believe he generally makes out to wash his hands
before he commenced but I must say I think there
is some dirt in our food. He will not let us wash
our dried apples and peaches in more than one water
nor cut out the cores of any we would call bad
places. In looking over the beans he will not let
us throw away any of the black ones and rice and
coffee he doesn't think it worth while to look over
at all. Of course his way is the way when he has
anything to do with it. 100

Although many of the women whose diaries I read shared
the condescending, ethnocentric attitude towards American
Indians typical of European-American ideology of the period,
few sympathized with the aggressive hostility with which
many westward bound men treated the Indians.

"The Indians were more or less troublesome," recalled Mrs. L. A. Bozarth, a pioneer of 1852, "but to a considerable extent that condition was the result of wrongdoing upon them on the part of unprincipled white men. . . . we were attacked by Indians who were greatly provoked because some boys had killed an Indian woman." 101

In the diaries of Harriot Buckingham and Agnes Stewart we find critical awareness of the inhumanity and injustice of the United States government policies towards American Indians.

. . . large tribes of Indians from the Middle states had been pushed off by our government to this frontier region to make room for white settlers, and here perished in large numbers by starvation consequent upon removal from familiar hunting grounds . . . . 102

The vast territory lies stretched before me, and nothing but wide forests can be seen as far as the eye can reach, and yet it seems small compared to the great continent once all their own (the Indians). But now the government allows them part to themselves as a great favor, and taken by them as such, but that does not make it right. 103

These entries indicate that these women were aware of the part they themselves were playing in the confiscation of American Indian land, but as people whose opinions on such subjects were rarely consulted, they could only record their doubts in their diaries. "Who can blame the red-man," asked Velina Williams, "for striving ever to retain these beautiful hunting grounds?" 104
On the wagon trains women were around groups of men more often than they were in their home communities. A number of women's diaries express distress about men's behavior with each other.

Fred and his man [Fred Warner, Agnes Stewart's brother-in-law] quarreled about striking some loose cattle. Fred struck him with his hand, and then knocked him down with his whip stock. A mean, low, dirty trick of his. I feel so mortified about it... 105

Tom and Fred are always quarrelling about something. I do wish they had not come with us, but it cannot be helped now. 106 Agnes Stewart

One of the most continual sources of annoyance to women about men's behavior in groups was swearing. Agnes Stewart, after watching some men struggling with the cattle comments:

Some of them were swearing. I think they might do without that, sinning their souls away for nothing. How plain we are told, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain." And yet one would think there was no hereafter, or no God to serve. 107

The swearing was most troublesome to women on the Sabbath, "I have heard more swearing today than I have ever heard in one day before or ever wish to again," 108 complained Elizabeth Goltra one Sunday. Maria Belshaw recorded that she "never spent a Sabbath that reminded me more of my duty than this day when I hear people profaning the name of God and breaking the holy day of rest. I then feel like shrinking from the vanities of the world and living near the bleeding side of my redeemer." 109
As Barbara Walter has pointed out so well in "The Cult of True Womanhood," piety in mid-nineteenth century America was an essential ingredient of the standard conception of the "true woman." Women were considered the guardians of morality in a world of change and instability.

Religion belonged to woman by divine right, a gift of God and nature. This "peculiar susceptibility" to religion was given her for a reason: "the vestal flame of piety, lighted up by Heaven in breast of woman" would throw its beams into the naughty world of men. She would be another, better Eve, working in cooperation with the Redeemer, bringing the world back "from its revolt of sin." The world would be reclaimed for God through her suffering, for God increased the cares and sorrows of woman, that she might be sooner constrained to accept the terms of salvation.

These ideas, imbedded in the socialization of women as they grew to maturity, were taken with varying degrees of seriousness by different women. In general, however, women's diaries communicated a good deal more religious concern than those of men. On a journey into an unknown land, women were particularly conscious of their roles as carriers of Christian morality.

It requires a great effort to live as a Christian should on this journey. We have not had evening prayers for nearly a week and there is not time nor opportunity for anyone to pray except as they travel along. Rebecca Ketchum

Woman often missed the institutions which support Christian worship. "This morning air is delightful," commented Rebecca Ketchum, "but there is nothing but one's own heart to remind them of its being the holy Sabbath."
We hear nothing but vain and trifling conversation," complained Maria Belshaw; "Oh how thankful I will be when we get settled in a quiet place where we can enjoy religious privileges again."114

Faith in ultimate redemption sustained women who had little control over their lives. Almost every entry of Maria Belshaw's diary includes a different prayer to God, reflecting her anxieties about the trip. "Oh God, keep us from going astray." "Oh Grant us Grace to Overcome every sin and temptation through life." "Oh God lay thy helping hand."115 The numerous uncertainties about the journey intensified women's need for faith in an all knowing God. Belief in the ultimate righteousness of suffering both sustained them through hardships and rationalized their submissive roles. "It is very trying on the patience," wrote Mrs. Esther Hanna, "to cook and bake on a little greenwood fire with the smoke blowing in your eyes so as to blind you and shivering with cold so as to make your teeth chatter. But this is one of our crosses and we must bear it."116
I was, and I still am convinced that women, being the victim of all social institutions, are destined to misery if they make the least concession to their feelings and if in any way whatever they lose control of themselves.

--Mme. de Vernon in Delphine, a novel by Mme. de Stael

CHAPTER VI

CONTAINMENT

The prevailing standards for female conduct in the mid-nineteenth century were heavily weighted against the expression by women of feelings, particularly those which ran counter to those of their husbands. Self control and cheerfulness were prime female virtues. In the Young Wife, by William Alcott, a popular book in the pre Civil War era, we find a representative expression of the cultural norms for female conduct. "By her union with her husband," says Alcott, "by becoming bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh according to the divine intention - she promised to follow his destiny - to rejoice when he should rejoice - and to weep when he should weep."117 The young wife should remember that, "the balance of concession devolves upon the wife."118 If she feels she must influence her husband, Alcott advises that she do it "by indirect if not by silent efforts."119 The ideal marriage, according to Alcott, is one in which the man can say of his wife: "Oh that I had such control over my feelings as she has over hers."120
Women on the Oregon trail, acclaimed by pioneer men for marching "... side by side with father, son and brother, firing his courage, nursing his patience and cheering his hopes"... 121 wrote in their diaries of their struggles to contain their feelings and approach more closely the model described above.

... feel very uneasy at times as to our safety... try to be calm and trust in an Overruling Providence but my foolish fears often arise in spite of all my attempts to quiet them.

Mrs. Esther Hanna

Oh I feel so lonesome today. Sometimes I can govern myself but not always but I hold in pretty well considering all things. 123

Agnes Stewart

I try to trust in God that He will do all things well for me, but I have wicked fears sometimes. I will try to be patient. 124

Rebecca Ketchum

Can it be I have left my quiet little home and taken this dreary land of solitude in exchange? It is truly so but I must not let my mind run in this channel long or my happiness is gone. 125

Maria Belshaw

A more subtle example of this struggle is the following reflection on an apple orchard which Maria Belshaw's party passed on its journey. While recording her feelings, the author shifts from the first person to the impersonal third person, distancing herself from her feelings.

It looks like an old eastern orchard but the silvery mellow apples were not there, and when I think of those things it makes one feel disconsolate. 126 (emphasis mine)

When the Hanna party met a group of people heading back home because of a cholera epidemic, Esther Hanna wrote in her
diary, "I feel a little discouraged but will try to be calm and submissive." 127

During the last part of the journey, in what is now Idaho and eastern Oregon, many groups of westward bound travellers ran short of provisions and their cattle often gave out from fatigue and lack of grass to feed on. Agnes Stewart's party got lost and several people faced starvation. It is in this part of the journey that a few unqualified feelings of discouragement can be found in women's diaries, often sandwiched in between narrative descriptions of life on the trail. "I feel completely dispirited," 128 Rebecca Ketchum confided to her diary. "Oh we are so tired of this business," 129 wrote Elizabeth Goltra. "Hard times . . . ," 130 commented Cecilia Mc Millen Adams. Agnes Stewart was the most expressive.

I am weary of this journey, weary of myself and those around me. . . . How dreary everything looks to me. I feel like saying that life is a weary dream, a dream that never wakes. We do not know what is to be our lot in life, nor do we know what is before us in the world. 131
CHAPTER VII

RESISTANCE AND REBELLION

The image of women on the overland journey which emerges from the trail material is not one of unmitigated quiescence. Although the ideology of submission permeated the culture in which women lived, it was not successful in destroying in all women a spirit which enabled them to stand up for what they considered their rights.

A number of instances of women standing up for themselves against men are mentioned in Rebecca Ketchum's journal. Whether this is because Câptain Gray inspired resistance by the other members of his company or because Rebecca's journal includes more detail about interpersonal relations than the others is unclear.

The chief advocate of the Godley family, in its continual tension with Mr. Gray, was Mrs. Godley. Rebecca records numerous arguments between her and Mr. Gray, the subjects of which are not specified. One of the most explosive episodes of the Gray party's journey was an altercation between Gray and a couple who had joined the party in the middle of the trip. Mr. Gray had kicked the couple out of the company. When the couple, Dr. and Mrs. Noland, (Rebecca doesn't mention Mrs. Noland's first name) returned for their
share of the provisions, they were met by Phil, a young man on the wagon train, who had orders from Gray not to let them have any provisions.

The doctor had but a few words with Phil; said he was only acting according to orders and was not to blame, but she said the provisions were hers and no man should keep them from her. She only wanted to take ten pounds of bacon and ten pounds of flour to pay for what she had eaten of other things while with us. Phil put his hand on the sack of flour when he did hers. She struck him in the face with her fist and scratched the skin off his hand in two or three places. 132

Rebecca, herself, while she made monumental efforts to be agreeable during the trip, stood up for her rights against Gray when she felt them being infringed on. Once she refused to ride the horse and once, after discovering that she had been charged more for her passage than a young man on the wagon train, decided to cut down on the amount of work she was doing. She recorded her indignation about the matter in the following diary entry: "Charge me one hundred and fifty dollars and then expect me to work my way." 133

The diaries do not record instances of the authors disagreeing with their own husbands although there are references to arguments between husbands and wives which the authors witnessed. Mary Warren recorded that one couple argued so continuously that the captain of the company (who she calls "boss") threatened to kick them out if "they could not keep their family differences more to themselves." 134

An undercurrent of female resistance to the westward
journey is discernable in the diaries and reminiscences. Sometimes the resistance was successful and the trip to Oregon was forestalled, as in the case of Manthano Brown, Tabitha Brown’s son, whose wife was unwilling to leave her parents. 135

Sometimes parties turned back or stopped on their way west because of women’s resistance. This was the case with the grandparents of Nellie Beckham, who started out for California in 1849 with five children and one on the way. When they got to Missouri, the children were tired and the mother refused to go any further. The mother and children took a squatters claim in Missouri and the husband went on, with plans to send for his family when he settled in California. By the time he got to Colorado, however, he was lonely and came home. The westward journey was continued by his son, who set out for Oregon with his family eighteen years later. 136

Women’s anxiety, weariness, and frustration sometimes exploded in rebellion on the trail. Enoch Conyers recorded the following incident, which he witnessed with shock and disapproval.

About noon we passed a train that had stopped for lunch by the roadside. Just as we came abreast of them we observed three men seated on the tongue of one of their wagons, when a large sized woman, weighing something over two hundred and fifty pounds, with sleeves rolled up above her elbows, stepped out in front of the three men, smacking her fists and shaking them in front of the little man seated in the center, as though she intended to
leave nothing but a grease spot after she got through with him. Then she commenced a harangue of abusive language that ought to shame the most profane person on the face of the earth. This man she dominated was her husband. She berated him for everything that was good, bad or indifferent, charging him with bringing his wife and children out into this God forsaken country to starve and die. 137

But verbal protest by women often went unheard and sometimes women resorted to direct action to make their feelings known.

The woman got mad and would not budge nor let the children go. I told my husband the circumstances, and he and Adam Polk and Mr. Kimball went and drove off and left her sitting. She got up, took the back track out of sight; cut across and overtook her husband. In the meantime he sent his boy back to camp after a horse he had left and when she came back her husband says: "Yes," was her reply, "and I picked up a stone and knocked out his brains." Her husband went back to ascertain the truth and while he was gone she set one of his wagons on fire which was loaded with store goods. The cover burnt off with some valuable articles. He saw the flames and came running and put it out, and then mustered spunk enough to give her a good flogging. Her name is Marcum. 138
CHAPTER VIII

AFTERMATH

Most women's diaries ended when the overland journey was over. From other diaries and reminiscences we can catch glimpses of what life was like for women in Oregon. In many respects, it was similar to life in the Middle Border frontier communities from which most women came, a life characterized by hard work. "When asked to recall incidents of my early life and describe the games we played in my childhood," wrote one female pioneer of early Oregon,

I can truthfully answer that there was no childhood in the sense meant. There were no games. All I can remember is work, work, work. Work long before the sun came up, work long after the sun had set. When I was eight years old I was doing real labor... labor that would draw men's wages today.

A distinguishing characteristic of early Oregon was the large size of the claims granted by the Donation Land Claim Laws of 1850 and 1853. Married couples arriving before 1855 were granted six hundred and twenty acres of land (twice as much as that granted to single men). The large size of the claims meant that there were huge distances between the early homesteads. We have seen from the diaries of women on the trail that women felt the association of other women to be extremely important. Life in early Oregon
was often very lonely. "... think if I had the company of some lively female acquaintance I would feel better," wrote America Rollins Butler in her diary.

Two decades after the period about which this paper is written the movement for women's rights began to take root in the Pacific Northwest. The experiences of women of the previous generation of western women, combined with their own pioneer experiences, helped to shape western suffragist's thought. One prominent suffragist leader, Abigail Scott Duniway, was the daughter of a woman mentioned earlier in this paper who died of cholera on the plains. The following excerpts from her autobiography illustrate the effect her mother's generation of women had on her life.

I remember standing at the bedside when my little sister came to our crowded home, and my mother said, through her tears: "Poor baby! She'll be a woman some day! A woman's lot is so hard!" 141

Later, when Abigail was seriously ill, her brother, Harvey Scott, told her of his feelings of regret about their mother's arduous life. Duniway writes:

"Yes brother," I said in reply, "and her memory, added to my own experiences and those of our surviving sisters, led me long ago to dedicate these maturer years of my life to the enfranchisement of women." 142
NOTES


3-See earlier quote from Ray Billington for example.

4-See unpublished manuscript by Barbara Vatter, "The Racism of the Social Science of Frederick Jackson Turner: Indian-White Relations in Douglas County, Oregon, a Microcosmic Study," paper delivered at the Northwest Social Science Conference, March 21, 1969, for a discussion of Indians as "no persons" by Turner and those influenced by his scholarship.

5-Billington, Westward Expansion, p. viii.


7-An example of the shallow treatment of women's diaries in western historical writing can be found in the introduction to a small excerpt from the diary of Maria Parsons Belshaw, one of the trail diaries which is particularly rich in terms of women's feelings about the overland journey. The editor remarks, "The diary of Mrs. Maria Parsons Belshaw is valuable because it points out landmarks, recounts experiences and describes the physical conditions along the route." "Diary of Maria Parsons Belshaw, 1852," by Joseph Ellison, Oregon Historical Quarterly, XXXIII (Dec., 1932), 318-333.


9-Ibid., p. 18.
10-Ibid., p. 47.
11-Ibid., p. 49.
12-Ibid., p. 78.
13. Ibid., p. 471.


15. Ibid., p. 74.

16. Ibid., p. 133.

17. Ibid., p. 145.


25. The most well known of these novels are: A. B. Guthrie, *The Big Sky* and *The Way West* (from which a movie was made) and D. Berry, *Moontrap* and *Trask*.


27. Ibid., p. 172.

28. Ibid., p. 191.


34 See Alan Lomax, Folk Songs of North America (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), introduction.


37 See Gene Wize, American Historical Explanations (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1973), passim, for discussion of this approach.

38 Ibid., p. 41.


40 Ibid., p. 16.


44 Billington, The Far Western Frontier, pp. 84-89.


47 Nebraska State Historical Society, letter to Priscilla Knuth, Oregon Historical Society.


49 Agnes Stewart, one of the women whose diary is used in this paper, was in a party which got lost on a poorly marked trail.


53 See Donald Clark, "Remember the Winter of . . . ."

54 Elizabeth Goltra, Diary, April 29, 1853, MSS.1508, Oregon Historical Society.


56 Potter, p. 5.

57 Bright, p. 245.

58 Maria Parsons Belshaw, Diary, October 1, 1843, MSS.1508, Oregon Historical Society.

59 Agnes Stewart, Diary, May 21, 1853, MSS.1508, Oregon Historical Society.
60 Mrs. Cornelia Sharp, Diary, 1852, Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association, 1903, p. 171.


63 Ketchum, Diary, p. 280.

64 Mary Warren, Recollections, MSS. 925, Oregon Historical Society, p. 1.

65 Goltra, Diary, August 10, 1853.

66 Cecilia Emily Mc Millen Adams, Diary, June 15, 1852, MSS. 1508, Oregon Historical Society.

67 Esther Belle Hanna, Diary, September 13, 1853, MSS. 1508, Oregon Historical Society.


An examination of five diaries written by men reveals little or no expressed anxiety. While two of these diaries, those of Henry Alyn and Dinwiddie mention graves, the sight does not provoke written expressions of apprehension.

70 Adams, Diary, June 18, 1852.

72 Diary of Mrs. Lodisa Frizzel en route to California, 1852, as cited in Sprague, pp. 28-29.

73 Amelia Knight, Diary, 1853, Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association (1928), p. 53.

74 For further information on prolapsus uteri and other female ailments of the mid-nineteenth century, see William Alcott, The Young Woman’s Book of Health (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1835) and Catherine Beecher, Letters to the People on Health and Happiness (New York: Harper and Bros., 1835).

76. Palmer, p. 3.

77. Conyers, Diary, p. 466.

78. According to the report of Agnes Stewart's son, the leader of Agnes' party, Captain Miller, who travelled alone for a day and a half because of a disagreement with the rest of the wagon train about which road to take, returned to his party (which he believed to be on the wrong road) because he was afraid of the Indians by himself. Cited in C. B. Mc Farland, "The lost Train," MSS.1508, Oregon Historical Society.

79. Conyers, Diary, p. 466.


85. Adams, Diary, MSS.1508, Oregon Historical Society (this poem is not included in the published version).
86. Velina Williams, Diary, April 18, 1853, Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association, 1919, p. 182.


88. Belshaw, Diary, p. 42.

89. Catherine Haun, Reminiscences, as cited by Georgia Willis Read, "Women and Children on the Oregon-California Trail in the Gold Rush Years," p. 3.

90. Warren, Recollections, p. 5.

91. Stewart, Diary, p. 1.

92. Ibid., p. 3.

93. Ketchum, Diary, p. 374.

94. Ibid., p. 338.


96. Belshaw, Diary, March 23, 1853.

97. Ibid., July 18, 1853.

98. Hanna, Diary, May 9, 1853.


100. Ketchum, Diary, p. 275.


103. Stewart, Diary, p. 2.

104. Williams, Diary, May 11, 1853. One of the diaries written by a man, that of Henry Alyn (who is also fervently opposed to slavery) records the same kind of critical awareness. "The Indians have been removed from here eight years only. But I cannot rejoice in the circumstances as I
(note 104 continued), could if justice and equity had been exerted towards this people by our government."

105Stewart, Diary, p. 5.
106Ibid.
107Ibid., p. 2.
108Goltra, Diary, p. 2.
109Belshaw, Diary, May 15, 1853.
111The five diaries written by men which I have read communicated little religious concern.
112Ketchum, Diary, p. 267.
113Ibid., p. 346.
114Belshaw, Diary, Sept. 25, 1853.
115Belshaw, Diary, passim.
116Hanna, Diary, May 8, 1853.
117Alcott, p. 55.
118Ibid., p. 32.
119Ibid., p. 24.
120Ibid., p. 90.
121Charles Moores, Address, Oregon Pioneer Association Transactions, 1904, p. 277.
122Hanna, Diary, March 15, 1852.
123Stewart, Diary, p. 3.
124Ketchum, Diary, p. 374.
125Belshaw, Diary, Oct. 1, 1853.
126Ibid., August 21, 1853.
127 Hanna, Diary, May 12, 1853.
128 Ketchum, Diary, p. 267.
129 Goltra, Diary, August 10, 1853.
130 Adams, Diary, Sept. 5, 1852.
131 Stewart, Diary, p. 9.
132 Ketchum, Diary, p. 384.
133 Ibid., p. 263.
134 Warren, Recollections, p. 3.
137 Conyers, Diary, p. 459.
138 Geer, Diary, p. 165.
139 Oregon Writers' Project, Oregon Oddities, Federal Writers and Historical Records Survey Projects of the Works Progress Administration of Oregon, No. 16, p. 2.
140 Ross, Westward the Women, p. 16.
142 Ibid., p. 9.
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