

# The Importance of Recognizing the Histories of Single Women who Participated in the American West Experience

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In numerous historical accounts and analyses, including those which are concerned with recovering women's history, the decision to migrate to the American West during the nineteenth century is portrayed as a man's decision. Lillian Schlissel states, "Women understood the decision to cross the continent as a man's decision" (28). In Schlissel's view, migration was a painful experience for women, a time for enduring loss and hardship. Women were forced to leave behind the comforts of home, family and friends. If there was anything that saved these women and gave them the courage to continue, it was "the determination to keep their families together" (Schlissel 150). Schlissel reiterates that "the decision to go West was not theirs to make . . . . The overwhelming majority of women who made the overland crossing were married—they went West because they were the wives and daughters of men who made the journey" (150). There is much evidence to support this point of view. Elizabeth Jameson, however, brings up the interesting point that one should be careful to not simply reduce pioneer women to the role of "reluctant pioneers" (149).

A number of factors affected a woman's attitude toward migration, including her stage of life and marital status. Schlissel herself found that "newlyweds and single women liked the journey more than did women of child-bearing age" yet single women do not receive much attention in her book *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (149). Also, Sheryll Patterson-Black found single women and widows and independent women homesteaders showed "considerable enthusiasm for establishing homesteads" (149). Examining single women's attitudes concerning the journey towards and settlement in the West, then, would seem to reveal an important component of both women's history and of the entire western experience, yet the experienc-

ences of single women in western history are often ignored or undervalued. Julies Roy Jeffrey asserts, "It was as married women, then, that most women on the frontier made their most significant contributions to their communities" (95). It is true that the majority of frontier women were married. It is also true that they made significant contributions to their communities. Jeffrey's statement, however, seems to imply that the contributions of single women were not only less significant because single women were less in number but also that the quality of their contributions to the community was inferior. Furthermore, since their contributions to the community were less valuable, a debatable notion, it is justified to ignore single women's accounts or to give them a minute amount of attention. On the other hand, men's experiences in the West are valuable in their own right, regardless of what they contributed to community life. In this paper, I will examine some of the experiences of single women in the West through exploring three prevalent professions in which single women participated and also several accounts of single pioneer women's lives. I will show that, although they were a minority, single women led rich, interesting lives, and that they were a diverse group who cannot be reduced to a stereotype. Some suffered hardship. Some enjoyed independence, a sense of purpose, and control over their own lives. Most often, they experienced some combination of misfortune and joy. If it was acceptable that men went West for personal reasons, to gain wealth, land and freedom, for exploration and adventure, and to find a better life, and that these experiences were not only acceptable but are also a valuable part of American history, then single women's experiences should also be held as valuable, for they often went West for the same reasons.

### Single Women at Work: Teachers

Single women's hopes for their lives in the West often included achieving a degree of economic independence and also developing a sense of usefulness. Teaching allowed them to accomplish both of these goals, though it was also a career filled with hardship. "Teaching was, for a woman, as Catherine Beecher had pointed out, 'the road to honourable independence and extensive usefulness'" (Jeffrey 90). Beginning in 1846, the National Popular Education Board began to recruit single women to teach in the West (White 313). Soon, women made up the majority of schoolteachers, and the majority of these women were single. Some just wanted to earn money for a while until they married. Others looked at teaching as a vocation; they wanted to be a part of the "civilizing" mission of the West. White says that these women went west "from a missionary idealism and also because young adulthood otherwise promised to be a bleak and empty period of their lives" (313). Changing demographic

and economic patterns meant that young women might not find husbands as easily as previous generations had. Denied the option of marriage, these women had to find alternative ways to provide for themselves. Teaching was one solution.

Some of the women who went west hoped to teach for a while and then find a husband on the frontier. Others came "as part of the crusade to save the West or shared the crusading viewpoint that education was the key to civilization on the frontier. Teaching was their vocation" (Jeffrey 90). Soon, however, women "began to see teaching as a career. They no longer thought of it as merely a prelude to eventual marriage or as a temporary mission to save the West. Teaching allowed young women to become independent, if poorly paid, professionals" (White 314). Often, Colorado teachers chose their careers over marriage (315).

Still, teaching was a career filled with hardships, too. Western women earned more than their eastern counterparts, but they also had to work for half of what men demanded (Jeffrey 90). The school was often the center of community. Teacher often boarded with their pupils' families. These women had little or no privacy, yet they also experienced a sense of isolation because of their single status (92). They might be the center of attention, but they were being looked at as curiosities rather than feeling a part of the community. Jeffrey notes that they were under constant surveillance and had to "prove competence and character" (91). They also faced "bad food, poor quarters," and were sometimes asked to help with household chores in the homes where they boarded. An Iowa teacher said, "I find among strangers we are judged by outward appearances and that we cannot be too careful in giving the world's people occasion for slander" (91).

In the classroom, teachers often faced numerous constraints, such as short terms. They might be expected to teach students who would be with them for only a short while. They were faced with a wide range of students' ages. Teachers might be expected to teach students ages five to twenty all in one classroom. Students were equipped with different learning materials. Johnny might have one reader, Susie might have another, and Elizabeth might not have one at all. "Finally, a casual attitude toward school kept attendance irregular and unpredictable" (Jeffrey 91). Still Jeffrey holds that "certainly teaching offered the most satisfying career for single women," and if this is not exactly true, teaching was at least an important career option for single working women who "expressed the desire to be useful and to avoid being an economic drain on their families. 'Next winter I *must* be where I can make some money for myself,' Irene Calbraith wrote to her father, "instead of being a dead expense on you. I must and I will" (94). Irene Calbraith was determined

to provide for herself, and, despite the hardships, teaching was one way that single women like Calbraith could accomplish this goal.

### Single Women at Work: Prostitutes

Another profession open to single women was prostitution. In an 1880 Wyoming census, which identified seventy-one prostitutes, thirty-seven listed themselves as single, and thirty-four listed themselves as married, divorced, or widowed. Of course, those who were divorced or widowed were basically also single women on their own, and some of those listed as single probably had husbands, though they may not have been living with them or supported by them. An 1880 Denver census also showed that "single women appeared to dominate among the prostitutes in that urban center" (Butler 27). In any case, even those prostitutes who were married were basically on their own; "marriages appeared to be on-again, off-again associations" (28). "Other than in the role of the pimp, husbands did not often assume the role of guardian and protector for prostitutes" (30).

Women who turned to prostitution as a career were often poor and young. They were uneducated (Butler 151). Mining towns attracted women "from working-class families with few attractive economic alternatives" (Jeffrey 122). These women "suffered at the hands of customers who inflicted assault and mayhem . . . at the hands of each other through beatings and thieveries . . . at their own hands from alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicide" (Butler 154). Violence played a major role in their lives. They were not particularly good at saving money, and, in any event, profits were slim. They had to pay off "pimps, officials, and madams" (152). The press portrayed these women with humor and scorn. Public authority figures used extortion against them. It is hard to imagine why any woman would turn to prostitution or how she could gain any benefit from such a hazardous career.

Still, "prostitutes were not passive in these events and showed themselves to be pragmatic about the conditions of their lives. They . . . spent their efforts on ways to capitalize on their own role in the community" (Butler 154). They learned how to use "the agencies of society" to their advantage whenever possible (154). As Anne M. Butler says, prostitutes hardly ever left personal records, and their inner feelings about their career choices and lives are unknown. One should avoid the temptation to stereotype these women as "bad" girls with hearts of gold, victims, or professionals plotting out career paths (154). Numerous factors led them to prostitution. These women "faced a life that necessitated they find employment . . . few jobs awaited them, and the existing ones offered less than lucrative pay" (16). They saw the opportunities which men were receiving from boom profits and wanted some of these benefits for themselves. For many of these women, prostitution was simply

another career choice, and "required little adjustment in their concepts of life, survival, or femininity" (16). "Successful prostitutes considered their occupation a business, and a prosperous one at that" (Jeffrey 121). One Denver madam said, "I went into the sporting life for business reasons and for no other. It was a way for a woman in those days to make money and I made it" (121). "The relationship between prostitute and client was a marketplace transaction" (Murphy 202). The client often tried to get as much as he could for his money; it was most often when he was unsatisfied that violence occurred. On the other side, prostitutes often took advantage of drunk customers, feeling that it was "against their religion' to let a man get away with a penny in his pocket" (202).

In many ways, prostitutes were seeking independence, fighting to take care of themselves, and to build a place for themselves in this new part of the country, just as were many of the men who decided to go west. "They aggressively sought customers, fought publicly, and cursed not only among themselves but with patrons and the police" (Murphy 193). Whether they worked in parlor houses, shabby brothels, small cottages or the dens and cribs, "they were freed from maintaining the façade of middle-class respectability" (195). Although there was much competition, rivalry and physical fighting among prostitutes in the West, these women "frequently traveled in pairs and sought jobs together" (199). Some friendships did exist, such as the one between Laura Evans and Spud Murphy (199). Despite the fact that Murphy abandoned Evans to set up her own business, years later, when Murphy was a destitute alcoholic, Evans offered to take in her old friend. These women, then, experienced the same sense of isolation and constant community surveillance that single women teachers faced, yet since they lived in a community of many prostitutes, they sometimes at least had one or two friends to whom they could turn.

Prostitution often meant a life of addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling. It meant facing abuse and scorn at the hands of customers, public authority figures, "respectable" women and the press. Prostitutes often committed suicide while still young. Yet, prostitution also offered benefits. It was a way for a single, often poor and uneducated, woman to make a life for herself. "Some women decided that prostitution would provide them with fancy clothing, a desirable social life, sexual freedom, or simply a better standard of living . . . Some found the luxury and excitement they desired" (Murphy 199). Mary Murphy echoes Butler's warning to avoid seeing these women as hapless victims:

just as women exercised some choice in the process of becoming prostitutes, they sometimes exercised power in their trade and had some pride

in their accomplishments. Prostitutes like Dolly Arthur were proud of their popularity, of running a "clean" house where men had a good time . . . They enjoyed men, they enjoyed their work, and they considered the money they were paid a flattering reflection of their worth. While they disbursed their share of bribes and fines, they also used skill and charm to play upon men's vanities and to protect themselves from the courts, the police, and difficult customers. (201)

### Single Women at Work: Waitresses

Waitressing was also another career option for single women in the West. Since men far outnumbered women, there was a demand for waitresses to fill lodging houses and eateries. As women filled this demand, they contributed to the movement from women providing service in private homes to women working in public service occupations (Spence 219). "Waitressing was strenuous work, notorious for long hours, low pay, and backbreaking and bone-tiring labor. But to the young woman, it brought a sense of freedom and camaraderie not experienced in the dreary isolation of service in the private home" (220). It made less money than being a seamstress, but it was far more interesting and gave a woman more independence and contact with other people. A woman could sit quietly stitching all day, or she could be a waitress, surrounded by people, conversation, and the hustle and bustle of customers coming in and out.

Some waitresses, known as "pretty waiters," were little more than prostitutes (Spence 222). As such, their lives were somewhat better but mostly similar to what I discussed in the previous section of this paper. Harvey Girls, however, were considered respectable and did not experience the same kind of violence, abuse, and ridicule. Fred Harvey established his first lunch counters and dining rooms along the Santa Fe Railroad in 1876. Harvey Girls worked hard and had to be prepared for train passengers whenever they appeared, no matter how many passengers there were. "Fred Harvey demanded a high standard of performance and sought young women who were strong, healthy, independent, and unafraid of hard work" (226).

Harvey Girls received many benefits in reward for their hard work. Though some used the job to pass the time until they could find a husband, "some seemed in no hurry to marry at all," enjoying the freedom of making their own money, having easy access to the trains, and living with other single women in dormitories or upper rooms of the hotels where they worked (Spence 225). Their freedom was somewhat limited by matrons who enforced curfew and other rules, but this also gave them an image of respectability which

allowed them to escape the degradation which they might otherwise have suffered if they shared in the image of the "pretty waiters."

In the early days, Harvey Girls received board, room and tips, plus \$17.50 a month. Waitresses were provided with uniforms. They could work up to managerial status. Their living accommodations varied in quality and luxury. Some were cramped, but those in the "El Garces Hotel in Needles were reported to be identical in most respects to those of the guest rooms except that they lacked private baths and telephones" (Spence 227). These waitresses also had access to a \$75,000 library-reading-room-gymnasium. Waitresses at the El Tovar Hotel had access to steam heat and baths with water. "Most western waitresses were mobile, especially the Harvey Girls whose access to free railroad passes permitted easy movement within the system" (228). Harvey waitresses "performed truly strenuous and demanding work under rush conditions" (228). In return, they experienced a degree of economic independence, were able to travel, and enjoyed camaraderie with their fellow workers.

### Personal Accounts of Single Women's Lives

Rebecca Ketcham was a single woman who traveled alone from New York to Oregon in 1853. She set out with \$240 from family and friends. Her purpose in traveling west was to become a schoolteacher. She traveled alone by stage-coach to Missouri, then joined an overland group in Independence. Rebecca's diary "shows that instead of being in the wagons with the women, she was excluded by them and often found herself riding horseback with the men" (Schlissel 100). She wrote of one occasion when she was stuck riding an old, tired horse and the wagons passed by her. "I felt angry and hurt both, and very much afraid. I had been told females were in great danger of being taken by the Indians because they think a high ransom will be paid for them. For myself I have no particular desire to go among the Indians in that way" (100). This passage in Rebecca's diary shows that she was aware that her journey was possibly dangerous, yet fear did not hold her back. It also shows a certain amount of daring and curiosity on her behalf. She has no desire to be forced to go among the Indians as a prisoner, but her statement seems to imply that she might be interested in going among them under other circumstances. It shows that she has a certain amount of interest in new experiences; she is not a frightened little mouse who is being forced against her will to journey west. Rebecca seems to be a woman who seeks to expand the boundaries of her life.

Another entry in Rebecca's diary shows further her independent, assertive nature. "I had the curiosity to ask James how much [Mr. Gray] charged him for taking him over . . . . He said from \$50 to \$100. Thinks I to myself, if that is the case, I don't work any more . . . . Charge me \$150 and then

expect me to work my way. I think I shall find more time to write hereafter” (Schlissel 100). Rebecca is willing to stand up for herself. When she discovers that she has been charged more and is also expected to work, she protests. She decides to take time for her own interests. She spends more time writing.

Rebecca's diary is “lively with vivid accounts of her surroundings and details of the journey,” but it also expresses her loneliness and sense of being separate from the other women, who were married or traveling with family members (Schlissel 101). Rebecca says, “Was very faint and sick at my stomach . . . 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 . . . [Oh] the loneliness I felt” and also “So many times I feel so wronged, so illy treated that I hardly know how to restrain my feelings” (101). Besides being left behind on her tired old horse, Rebecca also recounts being left out in the rain by her traveling companions and going without much food, when the men ate all the dinner before the women even sat down. Yet it seems what really pains Rebecca is the absence of supportive women friends. She sees this as the real hardship. Eventually Rebecca reaches her destination and becomes a schoolteacher.

The westward journey had its share of hardships, but it was only the beginning for women who migrated. Once in the West, these women had to create lives for themselves, which often meant finding a way to support themselves. As discussed above, teaching, prostitution and waitressing were all available options. Some women, however, found success in other areas. Two successful, single, black women were Bidy Mason and Clara Brown. Bidy Mason arrived in Los Angeles in 1851. She made the journey from Georgia by ox cart. Her first job in the West was as a confinement nurse, making \$2.50 per week. She saved her earnings to buy two lots of land. “These first lots were followed by two more, until she had amassed a fortune in real estate” (Luchetti 46). Bidy's original investment was \$250. Thirty years later, “her heirs refused an offer of \$200,000 for only part of the land” (Schlissel 138). Bidy turned her home into “a refuge for stranded and needy travelers” (Luchetti 46). She also “paid grocery bills for black families who had been left destitute” (Schlissel 46). Bidy Mason was able to turn her life in the West into a success and helped others to have better lives.

Clara Brown went from being penniless upon her arrival in Colorado in 1859 to having almost ten thousand dollars in 1866, only seven years later (Luchetti 46 and Schlissel 138). Clara earned her money by opening a laundry in Central City. At fifty cents a shirt, it took quite an industrious worker to earn and save so much money (Luchetti 46). Clara was eventually able to “form her own wagon train company to transport blacks from the

post-Civil War South to safety in the West" (46). All her wagon trains were manned by freed slaves. Certainly both Bidy Mason and Clara Brown were shrewd and remarkable businesswomen to be able to amass such wealth and compassionate to share their success with others. Unfortunately, most historical accounts seem to contain little or no information about these women.

Some single women made their way on the frontier by homesteading. Alice Newberry was one of the single woman who took advantage of the Homestead Act. "The Homestead Act initiated a policy of permitting spinsters twenty-one years of age and older, as well as single men, widows, and heads of households, to file on federal land" (Harris 34). It "opened up a whole new area of power for single women" (20). Alice Newberry earned her living as a schoolteacher. The failure of her parents' marriage led her to find work. Her parents were homesteaders, but her mother returned to the East with the other children after the breakup. Alice stayed behind "to ease her mother's financial burdens" (146). Alice's first job was at the Seibert school where she earned thirty dollars a month.

At first, Alice was "terribly homesick" but she managed to earn enough from her teaching to support herself, send money to her mother, make periodical visits to Illinois where her mother lived, and to receive her high school diploma (Harris 146). At twenty-three, Alice was simply drifting through her life. Long-term goals loomed through her mind, but she was unsure of what she wanted. Would she marry? Would she seek a university education? Or, would she possibly homestead? Earlier, Alice had expressed no desire to homestead, but a family friend convinced her that she should get her land while she could. Alice did so, even though at the time she "thought it all foolishness" (145). Alice's "foolishness," however, would pay off.

Alice dreaded having to deal with the snakes and the centipedes, but she began to take pride in owning land. When a newcomer said that he was waiting to buy her land, she said that she wouldn't sell. She planned to live and die there. Though perhaps these weren't Alice's plans, she did want to keep her land for a while, anyway, and she wrote to her mother that she knew that "mak[ing] any negotiations toward selling" was dangerous. Anyone who wanted to could "take up the matter against you . . . [and] he can make you lose your right to the quarter" (Harris 147). This was something that Alice wanted to avoid.

As a single woman teacher, Alice faced the usual arrangement of living with members of the community and being the center of community focus. "Like so many single schoolteachers who boarded and roomed with local families, Alice chafed under the forced intimacy such arrangements compelled" (Harris 147). She came to love the freedom with which her claim provided

her. For Christmas and summer breaks, she returned to live on her claim. She wrote to her brother, "I have never felt so rested to go back to school" and "I am glad I have a place of my own to go to. I can feel a little more independent" and "It has been such a carefree life the last month with nothing weightier to worry about than wonder if my baking will be 'as nice as it ought'" (147).

Alice combatted loneliness by taking comfort in the pleasantness of her claim and also by meeting "bright, interesting women' and engag[ing] in useful occupations" through her involvement with the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She considered marriage, but, after boarding a hired man who worked on her land, she decided that she did not enjoy homemaking for a man. As nice as Henry was, a "respectable married man . . . good, mild, meek, patient," he was still a "bother" (Harris 148). Alice never did marry. Eventually she received the patent to her land and moved to the city where she continued to teach. Even when she wasn't living on the claim, it was still important to Alice's life.

The farm produced the money she needed to build her house in Denver. "Income from the claim, in addition to her teaching salary, gave Alice a narrow measure of financial security" (Harris 149). Alice also received psychological benefits from having her claim. It was something to fall back on in the event that she lost her Denver house. It also "gave Alice an outlet for expressing her considerable managerial leanings" (151). Alice dealt with management of both her finances and her land. She had to save carefully to pay the mortgage on her Denver house, and she also had to be particularly frugal during her retirement years. Often she instructed the men who farmed her land on what she thought was best, using her knowledge of botany and the Kit Carson area. She considered issues such as wind erosion in her decision-making. "In following her convictions, she not only expressed confidence in her superior knowledge of land management but also demonstrated that she could impose her own will" (151).

Many other personal histories of single women exist. Some exist as bits and pieces which must be put together from a number of different sources. Some exist as diaries and letters which have simply been neglected and not put into the public's hands. These women settled in the West in hopes of building independent lives for themselves. They were willing to face snakes and centipedes, long journeys without sufficient food, hard rainstorms, hard work, isolation, and sometimes even violence in order to support themselves and have active lives instead of passively watching the world go by. Their accomplishments, and even their failures, deserve more attention. If the American West symbolized opportunity and what an individual can do to improve

or take control of his or her life, then these women's lives certainly deserve and demand to be studied more in-depth as part of the West's history.

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