Un-Romanticizing the American West: White Frontier Women's Daily Lives, 1860-1900

By: Kelly Lanko

Abstract

The goal of this research paper is to give a realistic picture of women's life on the frontier. Popular culture, including books, folk tales, and movies, have placed stereotypes on the Western trailblazers. Aside from the Mae West prostitute and the renegade cowgirl Annie Oakley, common women on the frontier have been largely ignored by history. Far from being a romanticized "Little House on the Prairie," the realism was one of poverty, subsistence living, and danger. This paper will examine the experiences of white women on the frontier and analyze homesteading, daily domestic activities, and family life, as well as the various roles women portrayed. After discussing the themes, the conclusion must be drawn that through all the perils, women persevered, and together with their next generation of hard working women, fought for recognition and respect. These women did not live wondrous lives, but ones of work, sweat, and tears and they should be honored and understood, not stereotyped or romanticized.

For over a century the westernizing frontiersman has been romanticized through folk tales, books, and movies. The women who accompanied these brave men have also had exaggerated lives. Although often seen in stereotyped lifestyles, most of the frontier women were not prostitutes or gun-slinging cowgirls. Still, 19th century women have been historically pigeonholed into the "sphere of domesticity," and often left out of essential accounts. In past theory women were pure, moral and extremely domestic. In comparison, the West was wild, woolly and the picture of gun-slinging men and crime (Dunlap xii). This contrast is striking and, combined with past indifference or disinterest, can be the reason that women are often left out of western history. In fact, white women went west in thousands. The lack of fact-based material on women's lives is another cause of their absence in historical accounts. Women's work was mostly tied to the home and child rearing, and this type of labor was viewed as natural and as historical as breathing (Armitage 467). It is through women's own records that much of the information is found. Diaries and correspondence, as well as family histories, newsprint, memoirs and public records, are the main sources of women's history. Diaries are especially important and abundant. Many who went west continued to write in their journals as a way to keep some aspect of their "civilized" life as well as their identity. Through mainly personal papers, historians are slowly beginning to study these fascinating individuals.

A 1917 magazine article, "The Lure of the West for Women," analyzed why women were under less social pressures in the West and were therefore "New" women. They theorized it was the West's acceptance for what they were, not for what they had; and it was the spirit of cooperation and helpfulness that was unique to the West. Their final reasoning why women became renewed in the American West was because of the "independent spirit" that allowed them to live one's own way (Hallgarth 30).

Women's lifestyles depended on their region of homesteading. Underdeveloped regions were usually poor, but women rarely turned to wage labor to supplement family income. Their main priority was food preparation and children. This is not the romanticized version of the frontier woman. This essay will expose the truth of white women's experiences with homesteading, daily activities, dangers, and family life. It will give a realistic portrayal of the frontier, discrediting past notions. These women did not live fantastical lives, but rather lives of work, sweat and tears.

Most white women came west with their husbands and families. Yet many of them longed for their Eastern homes, for comforts and their friends. Some relished the experience, and still behaved in the "acceptable" ways of the East. A different group of female trailblazers were nonconformists; they came west for opportunity and adventure. Some lived atypical lives as social outcasts, such as gamblers, prostitutes, or in a man-like manner (Dunlap 3). All left their previous residences for personal reasons that could include kinship ties, adventure, health or better economic opportunities. Women could find employment readily in the developed areas of the West. Female schoolteachers could be paid more and were needed more than in the East, and domestic services were in constant demand from successful westerners. Women performed laundry services, sewing, and ran boarding houses. They were also in the trades as farm laborers, teamsters, bakers, nurses, midwives, seamstresses, writers, actresses, journalists, lawyers and doctors (Hallgarth 25). These women are often left out of western history and pop culture. Still, these entrepreneurial women were rare, as most went with their husbands, or followed them out to their claims. In her diary, Martha Farnsworkth writes about leaving their home in Topeka, Kansas to homestead in Colorado in 1891. She was not happy about the move, especially

since she was pregnant, but it was required for her husband's health. She writes, "...it is good-bye to home and friends, and away to the West, for a *new* home and *new* friends, in a *new* country, almost a Desert. But I am *willing* to make the sacrifice, if it will but restore my husband's health" (Farnsworth 84). This is one example of a woman's reason for traveling west. Farnsworth obviously does not want to leave home, but sees no choice since she must follow her husband's wishes. Many white frontier women shared her experience and concerns.

Arriving at the homestead, women were at once challenged by their new life. The homes they found, if any, tested the women's courage. Living quarters could be crude log cabins without windows or doors, mining shacks with dirt floors, simple dugouts, sod houses or even tarpaper shacks. Sometimes the immediate need to get the ground broken and crops planted put housing on hold. Many lived in tents or wintered in wagon boxes. Hasty or poor construction caused leaky roofs and walls. One cabin was "built of lumber and every crack or cranny the snow came through and made mounds [of] snow by the walls" (Myres 141-142). In the Southwest, Spanish families took over abandoned Native American dwellings. In Texas, "pole houses" were popular; these were cabins with vertical limbs stuffed with moss and grass to fill cracks (Myres 143). On the prairie, sod houses made of mud bricks were common. With the dirt floors and walls, the homes were constantly filthy. The walls were rarely smooth and the dirt would crumble, falling on furniture or people. They often leaked and became muddy, dark and cave-like. There were benefits of the two foot thick mud walls, however, since they insulated from the summer heat and winter cold as well as provided an escape from the constant winds (Austin 40). Once homesteaders had some economic successes, they would often build new houses, usually wood framed. Many women had to "make do" with their crude houses, and often tried inexpensive improvements, such as curtains or white washing the walls. The constant cleaning and house upkeep, combined with the labor intensive farmwork was very different from the typical Victorian lifestyle enjoyed by those in the East. Domestic labor is another factor often left out of westerns and popular history. Still, looking back, most women still viewed their first dwellings as homes and as a remarkable accomplishment (Myres 144-146).

With new types of living spaces came the need for new types of housekeeping. Food preparation in a sod house was vastly different from food preparation back East. Only a few staples were bought, including flour, beans, salt, and sweeteners. Most frontier women were responsible for tending gardens, raising chickens, milking cows, if affordable, and they also picked wild berries and greens. Surviving the winters required long range planning, and beginning in spring women canned and preserved as much as possible (Armitage 469). Until the homesteader acquired a cast iron stove, women cooked over an open fireplace or campfire. This was dangerous with the long skirts women wore and it was arduous to keep the heat constant or high enough (Myres 147). One homesteader's advice for judging the heat was to, "Just spit on your finger and when the stove's sissin' hot it's time to pop in the pie" (Austin 41). Even with a cast iron stove the fire had to be kept burning. All cooking required a constant supply of chopped wood, which was a chore often assigned to children or women. Refrigeration was also difficult. Milk and cheeses were kept in a box in a dug well or in crocks buried in the kitchen floor. Often the food supply's sanitation was in danger from high heat or exposure. Many women had difficulty finding food to cook. Many supplies could become unavailable and substitutions were necessary. Such exchanges included ersatz coffee that was made from browned wheat or corn (Myres 148). Without manuals, women used experimentation and advice from other homesteaders. Clothing was another responsibility of the wife. Men's work clothes were usually store bought, but children's clothing was homemade. Flour sacks were often printed in calicos so they could be recycled into boys' shirts, or little girls' dresses. Women's dresses were simple and easy to sew (Armitage 469). Again, women relied on skills learned from the East or their mothers or friends. The rudimentary tasks of sewing and food preparation are frequently left out of historical accounts, and the study of daily chores requires the use of personal papers and diaries in order to understand the daily hardships. Women's creativity and willingness to share their recipes and ideas made neighbors dependent on each other, and accept sacrifices for one another in order to survive.

Other work women performed could be for profit, and homemaking skills were needed more in the West than elsewhere in the country. In mining areas with an abundance of working men, single and married women did laundry, cooking and baking for bachelors. A California woman, for example, in less than one year, baked and sold $18,000 worth of pies, and one third of that was clear profit (Dunlap 15-16). Domestic duties could be very rudimentary due to lack of new technological purchases. With the profit and success of a homestead reliant on farming, all new purchases were made on more basic items, like new plows, mowers, and other farming necessities. Until the 1930s, and long after time-saving appliances were available, women in the West cooked on wood burning stoves and used oil lamps, which had to be cleaned, refilled, and wicks trimmed daily (Riley 17). Many women were required to

do both the domestic labor as well as run the farm or ranch. Matilda Pietzke Paul was an Iowa homesteader. She was required to make gallons of apple pickles, canned plums, mincemeat, and sauerkraut for wintering. Her husband was often of poor health, so along with her daily duties, she had to drive the harvester and mower and rake hay. In 1891 she had twelve cows to milk, and she sold the cream for profit (Riley 166-167). This is an example of a strong frontier wife taking over the necessary duties and chores in order to run a successful farm.

The worst enemy of the homesteader was nature. In the spring, melting snow and rainstorms brought floods, and spring storms brought tornadoes. In the summer, droughts, hot winds and insect plagues threatened crops. In the winter the numbing temperatures and crushing blizzards threatened lives. The prairies offered little protection without trees or natural barriers. Winter blizzards often came without warning and had below freezing temperatures and fifty mile per hour gales. One Kansas homesteader describes these blizzards, "They came with a mighty blast, sweeping with almost the strength of a cyclone, raking the life of stock and sometimes human beings" (Stratton 89-91). Another terrible hardship endured was insect infestation. In the summer of 1874 Kansas was swarmed with grasshoppers that ate everything. People tried to cover gardens with bedding and clothing, but the grasshoppers ate through the cloth. Chickens, turkeys and pigs that gorged on the insects tasted of them and were inedible (Stratton 102-105). Other infestation problems came from flies, snakes, and field mice. Fires, exposure and wild animals were a constant threat too, along with the fear of young children wandering off and becoming lost. All of these fears and trials taxed the homesteaders, and brought extra burdens and worries to wives and mothers.

Motherhood was a constant concern of the frontier woman. Before the 20th century, married women were expected to become pregnant every two to three years, have their last child in their forties, and have an average of six to eight children. In the West, less than two thirds of infants lived to become adults, usually due to the lack of prenatal or infant care, or the prevalence of childhood diseases, or other hazards. Childbirth itself was dangerous, and without medicine or antiseptics, infections were common, including "childbirth fever" or "Bright's disease,"a kidney illness (Dunlap x). Without doctors or trained midwives, mistakes and problems arose. Breech births could be deadly to both mother and child. Vaginal tears, fevers, prolapsed uteruses, as well the psychological strain, were very dangerous. In the mid-1890s, Martha Farnsworth writes of her child birthing experience in her diary. Without a doctor near, her husband fetched the neighbor, Mrs. Gordon, who lived five miles away. As the mother of fifteen children, she was considered trained from experience, a view not uncommon in the West. Martha writes, "there are not doctors near here and *motherhood* was *all* but *impossible*; by *stopping* my pains, I *had worn* them *out* and *nothing could* be *done* to *bring them* on, and *part* of the time, I *lay exhausted* and *unconscious*, until in *sheer desperation*, Mrs. Gordon, *tore me*, with her *fingers* and *pulled* baby *away*, ...the darling was *black* with *strangulation*-the cord *twice* around her neck" (Farnsworth 91). Abortion was not surgically available, but remedies were, and these included ergot, oil of tansy, and black hellebore. Strong purgatives and various douches were also recommended to bring on spontaneous abortion. Birth control was not spoken nor written of often in the 19th century, but there are samples available to decipher what was known. Sponges and condoms were available to some, and *coitus interruptus* was an easy solution. During the 1870s further studies of the menstrual cycle led to publication of books on the rhythm method, which became very popular and practical and gave women some control over their own bodies (Myres 154-155). Yet, the risks involved in pregnancy, child birth and child rearing were burdens on the whole family. The loss of the woman affected a family's survival. As medicine and science advanced, the dangers lessened and more children were born and reared with greater success.

Once frontier children grew past the stage of infancy they were put to work around the ages of four or five. Children were expected to perform their chores and to amuse themselves while staying out of the adults' way. Chores often did away with the division of labor based on gender. Boys helped with younger siblings, the housekeeping, laundry, and food preparation. Girls helped drive cattle, learned to fire guns, repair fences and help with the farming. The traditional male/female division of labor was superceded by the expectation that the most able-bodied and available would do the work. The family was a unit that worked to make themselves successful, and everyone was expected to labor and enjoy the profits and benefits. As the western generations grew, the expectations of gender division lessened, and many women were able to win civil rights based upon their work on the frontier. The portrayal of women as equals is another aspect of western life that is often overlooked.

Aside from child rearing, another important role women on the frontier played was medical practitioner. Without formal doctors available or even good medical manuals, homesteaders relied on home remedies. Women learned to treat various diseases from colds to small pox and diphtheria, as well as snakebites, scorpion stings and wounds. Most relied on simple home

medical recipes, careful nursing and prayers (Myres 157). The causes of medical problems varied from filthy conditions, poor nutrition and over work. Common drinking cups, open dug wells, outdoor or nonexistent toilets, lack of ventilation, crowded quarters, insects, lack of refrigeration, exposure and improper food preparation cause edthe infestation or spread of diseases and bacteria. Wives learned to treat their families and if they were successful, as with Mrs. Gordon, they were called upon to help neighbors. It was difficult to acquire formal education or proper training as a woman, but on the frontier the supply of experienced medical personnel was so low and the demand so high, that the anxiety over gender was quickly forgotten (Dunlap 145-146). Georgia Arbuckle Fix was a Nebraska homesteader in the 1880s and by 1917 owned 1,480 acres and was widely respected as the only doctor within seventy-five miles (Hallgarth 26). Living under the threat of fragile health and a dangerous environment, the home remedies of frontier women were very important.

Fulfilling a woman's role as wife, mother, chef, dressmaker, and nurse was a crucial element to the survival of the frontier family. The romanticized view of the frontier and women's lives is not correct. The West was not all cowboys, crime, and showdowns. It was made up of homesteaders, trying to make a new life for themselves, trying to survive, prosper, and pass on their experiences and wisdom. Women, side by side with men, fought daily hardships in order to achieve a new home and new future. The greatest achievement of these pioneers can be found in the generations that followed. Being raised on the frontier as a girl meant you were treated the same as your brothers. Girls learned to shoot and ride astride, and how to farm, ranch and mine. In addition, these girls typically had female schoolteachers, who provided another important role model, one that was educated and independent. (Dunlap 59-62) Girls saw their mothers multitasking, thus learning women are the basis for the family's survival. Women worked exceedingly hard for a better life for their offspring, yet they sometimes had to bury children and husbands. They managed to put food on the table everyday and clothes on everyone's back. They saved lives and families. By doing this, these frontier women forged American history from coast to coast. Although women were often tied to the land, home and family, these frontier women should not be ignored or romanticized, but respected and studied as role models that brought civilization to a land of danger, opportunity and freedom.

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Kelly Lanko graduated in May 2003 with a degree in History. She wrote her paper, *Un-Romanticizing the American West: White Frontier Women's Daily Lives, 1860-1900*, for Dr. Les Lamon.