

The Pioneer Women in Fact and Fiction

by Dorys Cruw Grover

There is a scarcity of important female figures in the fiction and nonfiction of the American West, yet many kinds of women lived on the frontier, including pioneer mothers, missionary wives, school teachers, prostitutes, and lady outlaws. I propose to focus on the role of the pioneer woman during the settlement period as she is depicted in American literature, to determine whether or not there is a disparity in her portrayal in fact and as she is romanticized in the literature. For example, Zane Grey's western heroine is an entirely different kind of woman from the pioneer mother who made a home for her family on the edge of civilization. The same holds true for the heroines of Bess Streeter Aldrich, Herbert Quick, and Emerson Hough. Their heroines are usually refined, educated women who are generally unencumbered with a husband, children or household chores. As Henry Nash Smith points out, "the genteel female has been the primary source of refinement in the . . . novel."¹ Beadle's Dime Novel heroines are often incredible in their daring and feats. Some were captured as children and had lived among the Indians for years. Sometimes a hero rescues them from their captivity, or there may be a reversal of the roles. The Dime Novel heroine may also be a woman who can run faster, ride better and shoot straighter than any man around.

In contrast to the popular romances, the diaries and letters of Narcissa Whitman, Eliza Spalding and other missionary women give daily accounts of their lives. And, serious novelists such as Ole Rolvaag, Vardis Fisher and Willa Cather interpret the lives of pioneer women with varying degrees of realism. The romanticizing of the pioneer woman may have gotten its impetus from Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Cooper views society as patriarchal, in which women are not full members, except for Hester Bush, the only mother in all of the *Tales*. She is full partner to her squatter husband, and full member of the group. Marriage is the matrix of Cooper's romances, and his women appear to be either marriageable or not marriageable.² When they are not marriageable, they may get killed or come to some other misfortune. If they are marriageable, they meet a hero who is of their status in society. Judith Hutter, for ex-

ample, is of noble birth, and escapes during an Iroquois Indian attack in which her sister, Hetty Hutter is killed. Judith is saved to marry a titled British officer. Ellen Wade, on the other hand, is a truly romantic heroine, yet she is also realistic in that she is more liberated than Hester Bush because she talks back to men. Hester does not talk back to Ishmael, but she has a way of maneuvering him. Cooper includes women in the *Leatherstocking Tales* because he feels they are the bonds of civilization, and thus he does set an example for the future portrayal of women in romantic fiction.

Zane Grey's stories deal chiefly with cowboy life. They are melodramatic and his characters lack development. In novel after novel, Zane Grey's Eastern bred, educated heroines rescue the heroes from a wayward life, and the heroes, in turn, usually have an opportunity to rescue the women from some dangerous villain or evil fate. Owen Wister's hero, *The Virginian*, is said to ride trail and work the beef round-up, but he never actually works in the novel. He is not one of Eugene Manlove Rhodes' Bar Cross men, but he is an improvement upon Zane Grey's heroes. *The Virginian* spends much of his time courting the school teacher, Molly, a refined and educated woman from Vermont. Molly, however, is a stereotype.

Emerson Hough is ambivalent about his pioneer woman. At one point he refers to her as "the mother of the West," and says,

The chief figure of the American West, the figure of the ages, . . . is not the long-haired, fringed-legging man riding a raw-boned pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced woman sitting on the front seat of the wagon. . . . her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which had crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before. . . . There was the great romance of all America—the woman in the sunbonnet; and not, after all, the hero with the rifle across his saddle horn.

In *The Covered Wagon* (1922), Hough's story of the Oregon Trail, the heroine Molly Wingate, is a beautiful, refined school teacher who rides with the wagon train through dust and heat and wind and rain and never gets dusty or ruffled. Thus, the popular writers tended to make their characters highly romantic and appealing to the mass audience, and perhaps wrote with an eye to the movies.

But, historical accounts of pioneer women, realistic portrayals by writers of fiction, and excerpts from the diaries and letters of the women themselves tell how they suffered the hardships of the long trek across the plains. They knew the heartbreak of burying a child along the trail, or of having to leave cherished possessions behind when a wagon broke down. The role of the pioneer woman was usually that of the follower of her husband or father, and it was a role

she accepted with varying degrees of willingness and adaptability. Many women were forced into situations for which they were ill-suited; others met challenges they never dreamed they could conquer. Somehow, most of them did adapt to frontier conditions, and they carried out routine, everyday chores in spite of fatigue, pregnancy, illness, and isolation. Such women were equally adept at handling emergency situations such as Indian attacks, droughts, and death.

On the frontier, women lived with their families in meager cabins which were, according to one traveler, "miserable holes, having one room only, and in that room, all cook, eat, sleep, breed, and die, male and female all together." Women not only performed all of the domestic chores, but helped with the planting and harvesting, or did the work alone when their husbands were off hunting or drinking. Many travelers to the frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century commented on the hard-working women and the lazy men. The women yearned for company and were extremely hospitable to passing travelers. When Thomas Ashe stopped at a frontier home in Kentucky in the late eighteenth century, he noted that the husband "never exchanged a word with his wife or his children . . . notwithstanding he had been absent several days."⁴

Women continued to be a part of the westward movement, and in the years between 1830 and 1857 approximately twenty-thousand of them crossed the plains, some bound for Oregon, some for California, but the goal of the majority was the new Zion of the Mormons in Utah. Vardis Fisher (1895-1968) gives a realistic treatment to the plight of the Mormon women in his Harper prize-winning novel, *Children of God* (1939). Plural marriage had forced an exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois, where the Latter-day Saints had settled, and thousands of female converts walked from Illinois to Salt Lake. They not only walked the thousand miles or more across the plains and mountains, taking their place beside husbands, but they pulled behind them the two-wheeled carts that held all of their worldly possessions. A majority of them got through, but hundreds died of exhaustion and starvation, or froze to death in the snows and below zero temperatures in the early winter storms of Wyoming. Probably the only frontier in the nation to have a surplus of women was that of the Mormon.

The missionary frontier also drew many brave women. Some of them came to the frontier missions alone, and some died alone. In 1834, Anna Mari Pittman left New York, making the long voyage around Cape Horn in order to marry a man she had never met, Jason Lee, and to help him establish a mission in the Willamette Valley in the Oregon Territory. Ten months later her husband was

Pioneers at the end of a day's journey in a Benjamin Reinhart painting (1867).

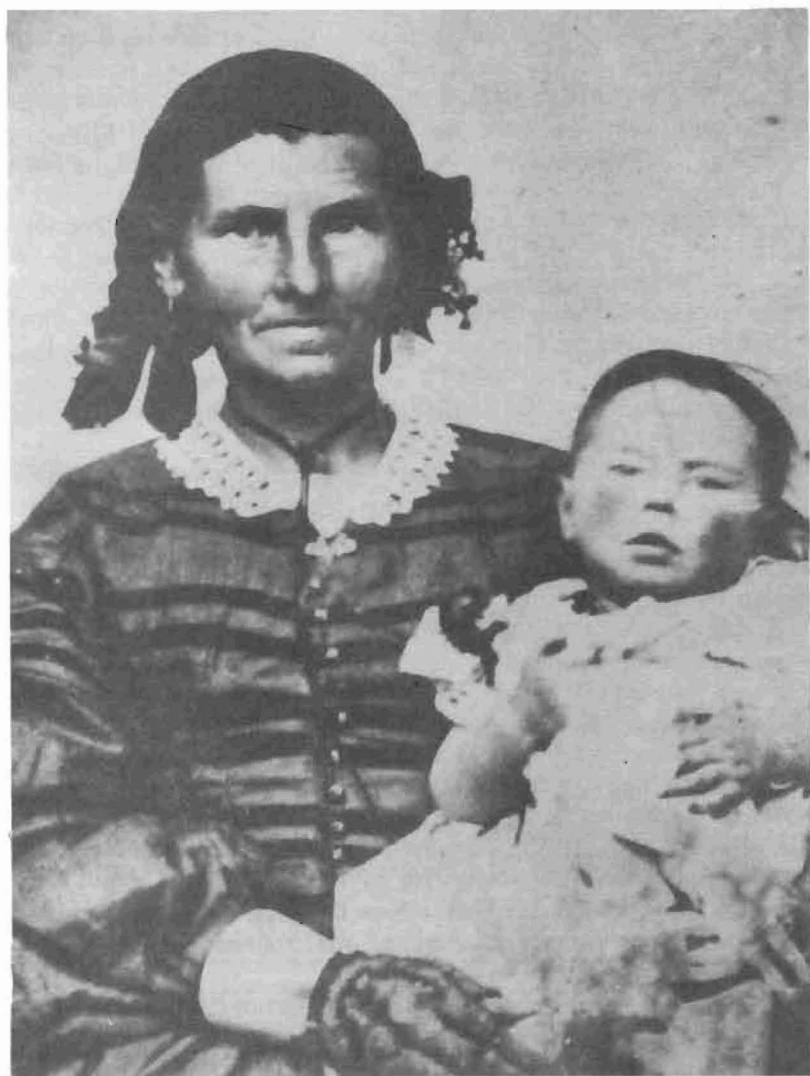


called East on missionary business, and he left her to continue their work with the Indians. Before he could return, she died trying to deliver their stillborn child. Two women, Narcissa Prentiss Whitman and Eliza Hart Spalding, crossed the continent in 1830, accompanying husbands to missions in the Oregon Territory. They were the first white women to cross the Rocky Mountains. Their letters and diaries tell of their toil and sacrifice while with the Cayuse and Nez Perce Indians. Dr. and Mrs. Whitman were among those massacred by the Cayuse Indians in 1847 at Waiilatpu. Mrs. Spalding's death was not tragic like the Whitman's, but she paid a price in years of hard work and privation as a lone white woman in a wilderness mission outpost [now Lapwai, Idaho].

Because the frontier was first settled by men, it is possible to note the change brought about by white women after their arrival. Many women who came to the cattle frontier are depicted as refined, educated women, yet even on that frontier, women were the "scarcest article in the territory." On the Texas frontier, novelist Conrad Richter tells how powerful cattleman Colonel Jim Brewton imports one of the "scarce articles," a woman he had never seen, all the way from St. Louis to marry him. In the novel *The Sea of Grass* (1936), the young narrator Hal tells of waiting for Miss Lutie Cameron's train and how he "looked for a woman bold and painted like Ready Money Kate from St. Louis, . . ." Instead, Hal meets a slender woman of unmistakable quality and tailoring.⁵ But, Lutie Cameron's marriage to Colonel Brewton is not a happy one, and she leaves him and their children. Her loneliness in the open spaces of the prairie with its treeless, dusty stretches reminds one of the loneliness of Beret Hansa, heroine of Ole Rolvaag's novel, *Giants in the Earth* (1927). Beret too is intimidated by the constant blowing of the wind and the endless open land where "there isn't even a thing that one can *hide behind!*" Beret dreams of the forests of her native Norway. Her clapboard home with its hand-hewn furniture is contrasted to the one item she brought with her—a trunk that holds the few fragile treasures of her past.

Antonia, Willa Cather's Bohemian heroine, is able to adapt to her environment more easily than either Beret or Lutie. Antonia works like a man on the Nebraska frontier, and as a girl hitches herself to a plow. She weathers disillusionment and disgrace, and like a man, she pays for her mistakes. Antonia shares the rigors of building a home in complete freedom of choice.

Likewise, Hamlin Garland's women on the midwestern farming frontier followed husbands and fathers to the unsettled region where the women had a hard life. In a brief sketch of his mother, Garland



Pioneer woman and child.

says, "She was neither witty, nor learned in books, nor wise in the ways of the world, but I contend that her life was noble." The Garland family moved often and always further West to a ruder cabin. Garland's romantic heroine, Rose Dutcher, in *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), has an easier life than his pioneer mother because Rose's father works hard on his farm to give her an education and other advantages. It was the pioneer mother who made a home in the dugouts, the log cabins, and the shanties on the frontier. The women who moved from New York, Kentucky, Illinois, Ohio, and Missouri, never in all of their toiling days forgot that they were looking for a better place, if not for themselves, at least for their children.

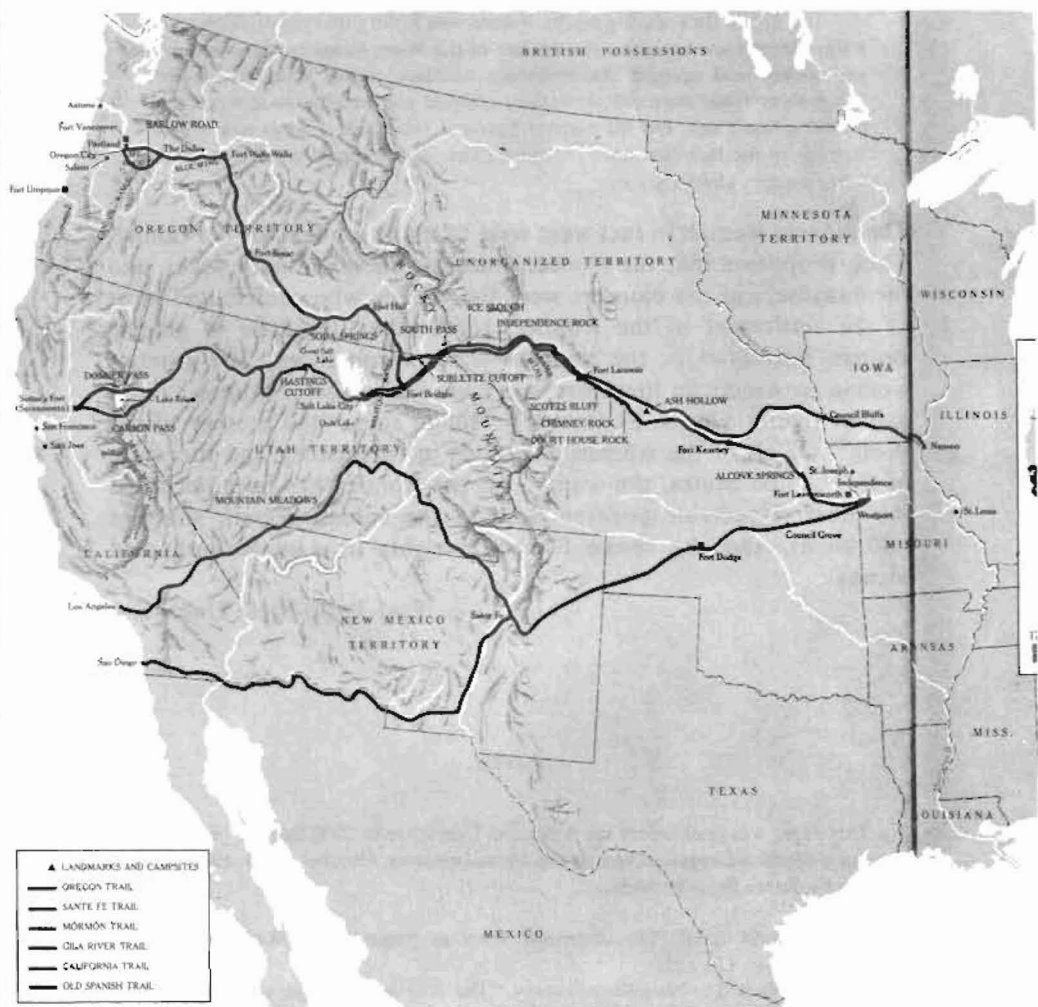
Of course, not all of the women who came West were respectable. Sex played a part in the settlement of the West, and the ladies in the mining camps made a fortune in their trade. Bret Harte in his story, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," (*Overland Monthly*, 1868) tells about a shady lady and a gambler who are driven from a mining camp. But, Bret Harte's ladies often have "hearts of gold," and tarnished reputations, but they are the kindest, best-looking, most faithful, and honest whores of the West.

The shady ladies also inhabited the lumber ports of the Pacific Northwest as well as the mining and cattle frontiers. When a depression struck in San Francisco at the end of the Civil War, a handful of out-of-work Barbary Coast girls were shipped to Seattle, the center of the Northwest lumber industry. Some of the women married; however, many men considered such marriages undesirable. Among them was a righteous young carpenter fresh from the civilized Midwest named Asa Mercer. He had been working on the new Territorial University building, and when it was finished he moved inside as president and faculty of the institution. A major topic of conversation at the time was the shortage of maidens worthy to become the wives of the pioneer lumbermen. So, Asa Mercer devised a scheme. He talked a number of Seattle's frustrated young bachelors into paying in advance, sight unseen, for wives which Mercer would bring from the East. When he arrived in New England, he visited the textile mill towns and persuaded some of the maidens into sailing to Seattle.

Imagine the excitement of the eager young lumberman who standing on the wharf at Seattle, cried:

"The maids are come! Hurrah!"

"Mercer's Belles," as they came to be known, soon found husbands, but whether or not they married the men who had financed Mercer's trip East is unknown. A second trip whereby Mercer was to secure five hundred maidens failed because publicity placed Mercer's



project in a bad light when the *New York Herald* implied most of the women were destined for waterfront dives. Many of the women who migrated became the founders of the first families of Seattle. Mercer himself married one of his imports.

Money and unattached men attracted both good and bad women to the frontier. Certainly after the Civil War the lack of eligible men in the East caused women to migrate. The shady ladies followed men wherever they went, and historian Harry S. Drago says,

It is one of the enduring myths of American history that prostitution made a significant contribution to the settling of the West, based on the charitable and widely held opinion that countless numbers of the so-called "trails" broke away from their old profession, married and become good wives and mothers. Some did. But the number becomes insignificant when one is confronted by the fact that no more--than 50,000 bawds plied their trade in the western United States.

The pioneer woman in fact went west to make a home for her family. Thus, it appears that the pioneer mothers, the missionary wives, and the daughters of the pioneers were the women who contributed most to the settlement of the frontier, rather than the type of genteel woman portrayed in the popular western romances. The frontier woman in American literature is a complex, realistic woman, and a gallant figure. She is, as Emerson Hough says, "the mother of the West." Of all of the women portrayed in the history and literature of the United States, the woman on the frontier has been accorded the most respectable position because she valued herself, she was self-reliant, and she spoke for equal rights in a male-dominated society.

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NOTES

This paper was read before the American Literature to 1900 Section of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association annual meeting, October 21-23, 1976, College of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

1. See *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950), pp. 126-135.

2. I am indebted to Nina Baym's essay, "The Women of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales," *American Quarterly*, XXIII:5 (December, 1971), 696-709, for the above information.

3. See *The Passing of the Frontier: A Chronicle of the Old West* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1918), pp. 93-4.

4. I am indebted to *Herstory: A Woman's View of American History* by June Sochen (New York: Alfred Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 112-15, for the above information.

5. *The Sea of Grass* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1936), pp. 8-12.

6. *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1927), p. 29.

7. *A Pioneer Mother* (Chicago: The Bookfellers, 1922), p. 5.

8. *Notorious Ladies of the Frontier* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969, 1972), p. ix.