

PLAINS WOMEN, HISTORY AND LITERATURE:

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

by

June O. Underwood

Fiction and Diaries, Journals and
Memoirs

Literature--fiction, diaries, journals, memoirs--can make the lives of pioneer Plains women vivid and fully imaginable. Because they are personal and emotional, however, they need the correction of historians and literary critics. For the truth of "feeling," primary sources--fiction, journals, and memoirs--are preferable. However, for the truth about the experiences of the majority of women at a given time and place, secondary sources--historical and literary studies--are more functional. Materials especially suited for high school students are marked "HS."

Fiction

Babb, Sanora. An Owl on Every Post. New York: New American Library, 1970. A fictional autobiography of a young girl on the Plains. Excellent for its description of pioneer poverty, as well as Babb's spiritual exaltation brought about by the Plains environment. HS.

Cather, Willa. My Antonia. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961. A classic Plains novel, portraying the mythic pioneer earth mother and the jaded young eastern male. HS.

_____. A Lost Lady. New York: Vintage, 1972. A realistic novel with a disillusioned male narrator, focusing on the wife of a failed railroad mogul in a small Nebraska town. Provides a fine portrayal of one woman's sexual and emotional psyche.

_____. O Pioneers. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1941. A classic opening with a woman's lyrical vision of the land and moving quickly to personal tragedies in the settled and prosperous Plains.

Morris, Wright. Plains Song. New York: Penguin, 1980. A sometimes puzzling, sometimes provocative novel about three generations of Plains women by one of the greatest chroniclers of the Plains.

Rolvaag, O.E. Giants in the Earth. New York: Harper & Row, 1927. A classic, often misread as the story of the pioneer woman, driven mad by the hardships of pioneering and victimizing others in her madness. Critics caution that culture, personal relationships, etc., play an important role in the trauma this woman faces. HS.

Scarborough, Dorothy. The Wind. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1979. A young southern woman moves to the Texas Plains under protest and ultimately goes mad. Critical reading, especially using culture and experience as a test, is necessary. Powerful, hence needs careful interpretation.

Diaries, Journals, and Memoirs

Alderson, Nannie T. and Helena Huntington Smith. A Bride Goes West. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1969. A memoir of a southern belle who married a Montana rancher. Self-pitying, but insightful about the harsh realities of pioneer work and personal relationships.

Carlson, Ava. Small World, Long Gone. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1977. Growing up near Winfield, Kansas around the turn of the century. Vivid detail, intelligently remembered. HS.

Eastman, Elaine Goodale. Sister to the Sioux. Ed. Kay Graber. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1978. A missionary recollection, sympathetic to the Indians and to nineteenth century women's lives. Well written. HS.

Ellis, Anne. The Life of an Ordinary Woman. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1929. A forgotten classic of the traveling, enterprising woman who was incidentally also wife and mother. Funny and poignant. HS.

Ise, John. Sod and Stubble. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. A family memoir of the hardships of pioneer days. Bleak but effective. HS.

Linderman, Frank B. Pretty Shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1972. Linderman recreates his conversations with a woman who remembers the days before the Anglos drove the Crows onto reservations. Good for information about Native American women's lives and viewpoints. HS.

Roe, Francis. Army Letters of an Officer's Wife, 1871-1888. New York: Appleton and Co., 1909. Clearheaded, unsentimental depiction of the life of an army officer's wife during the Indian wars. HS.

Sanford, Mollie Dorsey. Mollie, The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1959. On-the-spot record of the growing into maturity of a pioneer girl. Excellent for insights and details of the early years on the Plains for a middle-class woman. HS.

Sandoz, Mari. Sandhill Sundays and Other Recollections. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1970. A collection of essays from western Nebraska. Sandoz grew up on a homestead and her stories about her mother are especially rewarding. HS.

Stegner, Wallace. Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier. New York: Viking, 1952.

Not about women, but contains some of the best materials for guiding ones thinking about Plains experience. His cowboy story is fiction; the rest is essay and history.

Stewart, Elinore Pruitt. Letters of a Woman Homesteader. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1961. A cheerful recollection from the Wyoming frontier. Perhaps errs on the side of the pollyannaish, but a good corrective to the "woman as victim" school of Plains literature. The movie, Heartland, taken from these letters, does more justice to reality. HS.

Historical and Literary Studies of Plains Women

The best recent scholarship of women's lives on the Plains is based on women's diaries and letters. Those documents show that women's experiences on the frontier Plains were incredibly diverse. Some older, standard social histories of the frontier Plains, such as those by Everett Dicks and Richard Bartlett, are not included in this bibliography because they appear to be based entirely upon male materials.

DeGraff, Lawrence B. "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Woman in the American West, 1850-1920," Pacific Historical Review, 49 (May 1980), 285-313. Analyzes the demographic characteristics of western black women and compares their experiences to those of white women. Insists on a multi-cultural, historical context.

Faragher, John M. Women and Men on the Overland Trail. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Careful study of diaries and memoirs to understand the roles of men and women, as well as the differences between the early migrations and the later ones. Claims women did not want to go west and suffered greatly on the move.

Fischer, Christiane, ed. Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900. Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoestring Press Inc., 1977. Original documents with a good introduction. Focuses on California, but rich in other materials also.

Fuller, Wayne C. "Country Schoolteaching on the Sod-House Frontier," Arizona and the West, 17 (Summer, 1975), 121-40. An excellent study of the most common professional career of Plains women.

Hampsten, Elizabeth. Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Mid-Western Women, 1880-1910. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. A study of letters, journals, and materials deposited in a single archives. Primarily women, but supplemented by some men's materials. Eccentric and stimulating. Punctures a number of myths, including the one that nineteenth century women were afraid of, uninterested in, and/or uninformed about sex.

Jeffrey, Julie Roy. Frontier Women: The Transmississippi West 1840-1880. New York: Hill and Wang, 1979. Perhaps the most useful and carefully researched study of Plains women.

Chapter on Mormon women as well as the standard studies. Although a bit dense, a good place for advanced high school students to go.

Jenson, Joan and Darlis Miller. "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the West," Pacific Historical Review, 49 (May 1980). Discusses what has not been researched, especially minority women and statistical history. Fine for reminding us of what needs to be done.

Juster, Norton. So Sweet to Labor: Rural Women in America, 1865-1895. Viking Press, 1979. Excerpts from popular magazines and books, which show ideals for rural women, ideals which do not necessarily reflect actuality.

LeCompte, Janet. Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn. The Upper Arkansas, 1832-1856. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978. A study of the settlements on the upper Arkansas River, particularly the Bent's Fort region. Especially good for information on women around the trading posts.

Leonard, Carol and Isidor Wallimann. "Prostitution and Changing Morality in the Frontier Cattle Towns of Kansas," Kansas History, 2 (Spring, 1979), 34-53. A study which uses a variety of means to uncover something of the lives of prostitutes.

Luchetti, Cathy and Carol Olwell. Women of the West. St. George, Utah: Antelope Press, 1982. Uses diaries or journals for most of its text, but is also notable for its beautiful pictures. Is careful to include as much information as possible on minority women. The kind of book you wish you had edited. HS.

Meldrum, Barbara. "Images of Women in Western American Literature," The Midwest Quarterly, 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1976), 252-267. One of several studies which shows that Western literature stereotypes women into a few categories: the good woman, the bad woman, the resourceful woman.

Myres, Sandra L. Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. A good feminist overview. Although Myres raves against what she perceives as "feminist scholarship;" by that she means scholarship which sees women as victimized by the westward movements. Her chapter on woman's suffrage in the West is both analytic and complete, the best I've seen. Occasionally Myres lumps all times and places together indiscriminately, but she is careful to differentiate experiences according to class and minority status. Believes women adapted well to the pioneer life.

Riley, Glenda. Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience. Ames: Iowa University Press, 1981. A case study of women on the frontier using diaries and journals. A bit east of the Plains, but good for its analyses of the pioneer experiences. Like Myres, refutes the notion that women are victimized by the frontier experience.

Schlissel, Lillian. Women's Diaries of the Western Journey. New York: Schocken Books, 1982. First hand accounts of women

on the Overland trail. Very useful for their vivid immediacy. Also includes a good introduction. HS.

Stallard, Patricia. Glittering Misery: Dependents of the Indian Fighting Army. Fort Collins, Colorado: The Old Army Press, 1978. A small but important contribution to our information about the kinds of lives women led on the Plains.

Stoeltje, Beverly J. "A Helpmate for Man Indeed, The Image of the Frontier Woman," Journal of American Folklore, 88 (January-March 1975), 25-41. A study of the literary stereotypes. Useful, especially in conjunction with the study of Plains literature.

Stratton, Joanna L. Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981. Very popular, very unanalytic. Makes use of memoirs of pioneer women collected many years after settlement; part of its fascination is the story of the book's origins. HS.

Rosowski, Susan and Helen Stauffer, eds. Women and Western American Literature. Troy, New York: The Whitson Publishing Co., 1982. An excellent collection of essays on women in western literature. Includes insights into most of the primary materials included in this bibliography.

Unruh, John D. The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979. Focuses on folk culture, particularly that of the Missouri immigrants. Rich in detail.

Nineteenth Century American Women's History

Pioneer Plains women existed within the context of nineteenth century America and cannot be fully studied without understanding that context. While most of the historians in this bibliography have included the national context in their work, I have given some of the most important work of American women's history here for those readers who want to explore the larger context.

Bordin, Ruth. Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978. The best history of the woman's Christian Temperance Union, which was the most important single organization for achieving reform and for teaching women how to become public activists. It was ubiquitous, springing immediately into being on every frontier after 1880.

Conway, Jill. "Women Reformers and American Culture 1870-1930," Journal of Social History (Great Britain), 5 (1971-72), 164-182. For those who are curious about the seeming demise of women's activism after they won the vote, Conway provides one provocative answer, an analysis which can easily be transferred to Plains women.

Cott, Nancy F. The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

Along with their religious base, nineteenth century women found their greatest power in their organizing. Cott takes them through 1835, just prior to the first great western migrations; the women carried the impulse to band together west with them, and that in part accounts for many of the social and civic reforms coming out of the west after the Civil War.

Cott, Nancy F. and Elizabeth H. Pleck. A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of Women. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979. A collection of essays, spanning the three centuries of American women's history. The finest collection of its type.

James, Edward T., Janey Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds. Notable American Women, 1607-1950. Vols. I, II, & III. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971. The best "Who's Who" of American women. Biased toward Eastern women, but invaluable as a reference work nonetheless.

Scott, Anne Firor. The American Woman Who Was She? Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971. An excellent general history, using original documents. Specifically aimed at high school students. HS.