

Diaries and Journals of Pioneer Women and Their Significance

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Abstract

Pioneer women who took the trails west and carved homes out of the wilderness often kept diaries or journals. In them, they recorded their everyday activities and their adventures. These diaries were often among the dearest possessions of the women who owned them. They are also some of the best primary sources that historians have and are used to reconstruct a picture of the lives of these women and their families. Furthermore, they hold great value for the ordinary Americans of today. This thesis will be examining how and why these diaries and journals hold such great significance.

Diaries and Journals of Pioneer Women and Their Significance

The Old American West, the “Wild West,” as it is often called, has been perhaps one of the most romanticized eras of American history in popular culture. Books, both fiction and non-fiction, have been written about the pioneers, the cowboys, and the American Indians. Countless Hollywood movies and television shows have been made that idealize the West’s “gallant” heroes and notorious outlaws. However, due to the abundance of myth that surrounds this era, most people are not aware of many historical facts about the West; they cannot distinguish between the fact and fiction. Further, in recent years, interest in the Old West has been waning. Yet to forget this era would be to forget a piece of America’s past and the lessons that can be learnt from it.

Pioneers who took the trails west were among the first, after the American Indians, to experience the West. They left behind their homes and all that they had ever known to travel for months across the Great Plains and the rugged western mountains, facing countless dangers. Their motivations were many. Some desired adventure, fame, or wealth. Others just wanted a better life than the one that they had known; many of them believed that the West was a land of promise and even paradise. In fact, Lillian Schlissel, in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, states, “California, that far-off Mexican province, was said to be an earthly paradise where the sun always shone and fruit grew wild.”¹ Almost all believed that it was their “Manifest Destiny” to settle the West.² Settling and exercising stewardship over the West was a privilege

¹ Lillian Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1982), 19.

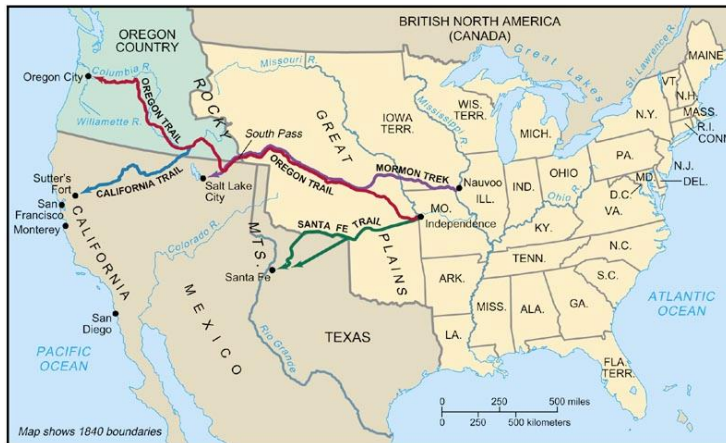
² Albert Katz Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago, IL: Barakaldo Books, 2020), 96.

and a responsibility given to them by God. Thus, pioneers often took their role in the development of their nation very seriously.

These pioneers were not just men: they also included women and children. Many of the women who went on these journeys and attempted to build a home for their families on the frontier left diaries or journals. These painted a deeply personal picture of their everyday lives. While diaries and journals left behind by pioneer women give us a clear picture of life on the westward trails and the frontier, they also hold incredible importance both for the women writing them and for Americans today.

Life on the Trail

Three main overland trails led west—the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail—the first two of which followed the same route for some time. The two primary towns



Westward Pioneer Trails

from which many of the emigrants began their long and arduous journeys were Independence, Missouri, and Council Bluffs, Iowa.³ The first reactions of the women to their journeys are varied. Some seem to have felt primarily excitement,

although mixed with a bit of uncertainty, and were very optimistic about their new life. Lydia Rudd, who set out with her husband Harry for Oregon on May 6, 1852, from Missouri, records, “As we left the river bottom and ascended the bluffs the view from them was handsome...farther

³ John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 73.

down lay the busy village of St. Joseph looking us a good bye and reminding us that we were leaving all signs of civilized life for the present. But with good courage and not one sigh of regret I mounted my pony...and rode slowly on.”⁴ Others felt resentment towards their husbands for taking them from their homes to a strange and wild new land. For almost all of them, leaving behind their homes and their loved ones was an agonizing event. In 1852, while preparing garments for their journey, Abigail Jane Scott wrote, “...the tears that fell upon these garments...the heartaches that were stitched and knitted and woven into them...as relatives that were to be left behind and friends of a lifetime dropped in to lend a hand in the awesome undertaking of getting ready for a journey that promised no return.”⁵ Margaret Wilson wrote her mother in 1850, “Dr. Wilson has determine to go to California. I am going with him, as there is no other alternative...I thought that I felt bad when I wrote you...from Independence, but it was nothing like this.”⁶ Many did not realize the extent of the hardships that they would face. Some did, yet they were courageous enough to follow their husbands and families into the unknown anyway.

However, the reality of the trip began to dawn upon many of these women soon after they left, particularly after they had spent one or two long days on the wagons, on horseback, or on foot. Catherine Haun, a young bride who left Iowa and followed her husband west in 1849, later wrote after their first day on the trail: “That night we stopped at a farm and I slept in the farm house. When I woke the next morning a strange feeling of fear at the thought of our venturesome

⁴ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 188.

⁵ Kenneth L. Holmes and David C. Duniway, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 5: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1852: The Oregon Trail* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2020), 29.

⁶ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 28.

undertaking crept over me. I was almost dazed with dread.”⁷ The bright sunshine was “a restful scene—a contrast to our previous day of toil and discomfort and caused me to brake completely down with genuine homesickness and I burst out into a flood of tears.”⁸ Some pioneers turned back, but most continued on. Nearly all of these women followed their husbands in whatever choice the men decided to make. Schlissel states, “If any passion drove the women forward, it was the determination to keep their families together.”⁹

Women were responsible for the cooking, for whatever cleaning could be done, and for taking care of the children. On the Great Plains, they often had to use buffalo chips for building fires to cook with, as it was the only fuel available. In 1846, Tamsen Donner wrote, “Wood is now very scarce, but ‘Buffalo chips’ are excellent—they kindle quick and retain heat surprisingly.”¹⁰ According to Dee Brown in *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West*, “Women unused to the ways of the West had a tendency to resist the use of buffalo chips as fuel for cooking. But when wood was no longer available on the treeless plains, there was no alternative.”¹¹ Rice, hard biscuits, bacon, and dried fruit were staples of the pioneer diet. Dried apples were eaten to prevent scurvy and were consumed so often that most pioneers hated them

⁷ Ibid., 169.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Holmes, ed., *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1849* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2020), 54.

¹¹ Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 104-105.

by the journey's end.¹² One woman, upon finally reaching Sacramento, California, paid \$2.50 for her dinner and was served "bear steak, and—oh horrors—some *more* dried apples!"¹³

Women also helped the men in whatever needed to be done at the time. They would hitch up the oxen and sometimes even help their husbands shoe them. Lydia Waters recorded the experience of helping her husband shoe an ox while crossing the plains of Wyoming.¹⁴ There are also stories of women driving wagons, loading guns during Indian attacks, and even taking over the responsibilities of their husbands if their husbands became ill or died.¹⁵

The dangers that these emigrants faced on the trail were many. In 1854, Tabitha Brown wrote, "We had sixty miles desert without grass or water, mountains to climb, cattle giving out, wagons breaking, emigrants sick and dying, hostile Indians to guard against by night and by day to keep from being killed, Dr. [sic.] having our horses and cattle arrowed or stolen."¹⁶ For many people, death became a grim reality soon after they began their journey. On May 9, only three days after she and her husband had begun their journey, Lydia Rudd states, "We passed a new made grave today...a man from Ohio. We also met a man that was going back he had buried his wife this morning. She died from the effects of measles."¹⁷ Some women recorded the number of graves that they saw each day along the trail. Cecilia McMillan Adams traced her family's journey from Illinois to Oregon in 1852 by keeping a detailed list of the number of graves that

¹² Ibid., 106.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 45.

¹⁷ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 188.

they passed each day.¹⁸ For instance, she writes, “June 25, passed 7 graves, made 14 miles. June 26, passed 8 graves. June 29, passed 10 graves.”¹⁹ Her account continues in this manner through October 17.²⁰

Measles, cholera, and other diseases were one of the greatest perils of the journey west. In 1846, Anna Maria King wrote, “...sickness and death attended us the rest of the way...the whooping cough and measles went through our camp, and after we took the new route a slow, lingering fever prevailed.”²¹ Disease killed more pioneers than anything else, by a large margin.²² Dee Brown states that “all the Indian tribes combined were far less of a peril to western emigrants than one raging epidemic of disease.”²³

Cholera was the most widespread and dangerous disease for these pioneers.²⁴ It was spread by drinking contaminated water, and thus the disease thrived in the unsanitary conditions along the overland trails. Furthermore, it was made worse by the difficulty of finding clean water to drink along the trail. Betsey Baley recorded in 1849, “We had men out in every direction in search of water. They traveled forty or fifty miles in search of water, but found none.”²⁵ Cholera was known as the “unseen destroyer.”²⁶ According to “Disease and Death on the Overland

¹⁸ Ibid., 112-113.

¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

²⁰ Ibid., 113.

²¹ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 38.

²² “Disease and Death on the Overland Trails,” *Legends of America*, <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/disease-death-overland-trails/>.

²³ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 18.

²⁴ “Disease and Death on the Overland Trails.”

²⁵ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 33.

²⁶ “Disease and Death on the Overland Trails.”

Trails,” “Symptoms started with a stomach-ache that grew to intense pain within minutes. The disease progressed rapidly, attacking the intestinal lining, producing severe diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and cramps.”²⁷ Typically, the person who had been infected with the disease died within twenty-four hours.²⁸ Measles killed nearly as many people as cholera did.²⁹ These diseases were also spread to the American Indian tribes that these emigrants encountered and often wiped out much of their population.³⁰

Another dreaded threat to the pioneers were the American Indians. When settlers first began moving west, the Native Americans did not typically attack them. Mrs. Martha Reed, writing about her journey to Oregon with her family in 1841 as a girl of twelve, said, “We had no trouble with the Indians...This was before they got to molesting the settlers.”³¹ Another young girl wrote in 1847, “We suffered vastly more from fear of the Indians before starting than we did on the plains.”³² They often conducted trade with the emigrants and sometimes even welcomed them. One young American Indian attempted to trade six horses for Caroline Bayley as a wife; the story later became legendary, with the horses growing in number from six to sixty.³³ However, later on, after thousands more began to move west, particularly during and after the California Gold Rush of 1849; missionaries attempted to convert the Indians to Christianity; and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 60.

³⁰ “Disease and Death on the Overland Trails.”

³¹ 1841 Trail Reminisces of Martha Williams Reed, “Diaries, Memoirs, Letters, and Reports Along the Trails West,” <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/diaries.htm>.

³² Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 18.

³³ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 32.

diseases brought by the pioneers began to spread, many of the tribes determined that the emigrants were a growing threat to their homeland. Thus, they attacked wagon trains and pioneers, often leaving no one alive.

The greatest fear of many pioneer women was to be either kidnapped or killed by American Indians.³⁴ Those who did and survived to tell the tale did not neglect to record their experience. Anna Maria Goodell, who traveled west with her husband and five-month-old baby in 1854, writes, “We are some afraid of the Indians. We can hear them whoop. We have not seen any since we left the Missouri River. I hope we will not see any or have any trouble with them.”³⁵

Many of the tribes that had had past troubles with the settlers or those who were angry with the pioneers for moving in and taking over the land and slaughtering the buffalo would attack the emigrants. Mary Perry Frost, who traveled west in the summer of 1854, records:

Then Indians...came up squarely in front of our train and stopped the teams, but appeared friendly, shaking hands and asking for whiskey; upon being told that father was talking of trading a pistol for a pony, they opened fire on us, shooting my father, my uncle, and my father’s teamster...The women and children in the forward party presented a sickening spectacle, having been burned by the savages.³⁶

Helen M. Carpenter, a young bride when she made the crossing in 1857, writes, “...there was suddenly heard a shot and a blood curdling yell, and immediately the Indians we saw yesterday were seen riding at full speed directly toward the horses...The Indians kept...circling...and halooing...bullets came whizzing through the camp. None can know the horror of it, who have

³⁴ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 18.

³⁵ Kenneth L. Holmes and Shirley A. Leckie, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 7: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1854-1860* (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 60.

³⁶ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 122.

not been similarly situated.”³⁷ Countless others did not live to tell their stories, and those women who were captured often faced, as they put it, a “fate worse than death.”³⁸ Some women who had lived with the Indians in captivity would not even return home when they were found because they believed themselves to be so degraded.³⁹ The settlers and soldiers committed atrocities against the Indians as well. Long after the rush into the West was over, the ill relations between the settlers and the American Indians continued. In fact, the last Indian war in the United States was fought in 1923 in southern Utah, several years after the end of World War I.⁴⁰ In some places, distrust of the other still remains.

The emigrants faced countless other problems as well. River crossings were often very perilous. Celinda Hines, who made the overland trip to Oregon in 1853, records:

Made preparation to cross the Platt by fording or rather the South Fork. The river is about a mile & a quarter wide in low water it is shallow now but it was high water. Yet it was though that we could cross without raising the wagon beds as was usual in such times...Water came into the box some but we had no trouble in getting across...In the river a chain broke which detention caused the mules to become so restless as to be almost unmanageable & in the meantime a team which had been trying to get ahead ran against the carriage & almost upset it. They however got through without any very serious difficulty.⁴¹

Others were not so fortunate. Abigail Jane Scott recorded about the Platte river: “...it is very deep and swift and it is almost impossible for a man to swim across it. We have heard of two

³⁷ Ibid., 127.

³⁸ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 19.

³⁹ Ibid., 35-36.

⁴⁰ Steve Lacy and Pearl Baker, *Posey: The Last Indian War* (Kaysville, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2007).

⁴¹ Kenneth L. Holmes, Linda Peavy, and Ursula Smith, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 6: Diaries and Letters from the Western Trails, 1853-1854* (Lincoln: UNP - Bison Books, 1998), 20c.

men being drowned in the act of swimming this river (*in places*) where to look at it (*many a*) one would (*he*) had waded much more dangerous looking streams.”⁴²

Children were especially susceptible to these hazards. Elizabeth Austin, who traveled west in 1854, writes in her diary, “This morning Lucretia and I visited two small graves—Catherine Gibson two years old, John Crabb, 7 years old—died July 6, 1853.”⁴³ Children and babies were often more likely to succumb to the illnesses that plagued the pioneers and were also more likely to die from them. Further, many children drowned in river crossings or floods. There are also myriad accounts of children being run over by wagons and either killed or crippled. Cynthia Cox wrote in a letter to her brother and sister from Independence Rock in 1847: “if you ever come to Oregon be shure to have your family waggon made so that yo [sic.] can get in and out at the hind end on account of the children while we was traveling on big plat their was a boy 8 years old fell out of the waggon when both of the wheles run over his head and killed him instantly.”⁴⁴ Children who wandered off could become lost out on the endless prairies and never found.⁴⁵ Looking after children on the trail could certainly be an exhausting task.

Some of these pioneers are recorded as having been killed by eating poisonous plants or even by being bitten by poisonous snakes.⁴⁶ There were often no doctors for hundreds of miles. Even if a doctor did happen to be a part of the wagon train, he often did not have much to work with, not even clean water.

⁴² Holmes and Duniway, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 5*, 55.

⁴³ Holmes and Leckie, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 7*, 61.

⁴⁴ Cynthia Cox Letter 1847, “Diaries, Memoirs, Letters, and Reports Along the Trails West,” <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/diaries.htm>.

⁴⁵ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

The trail was also hazardous for animals. Countless oxen died. Ox skulls and skeletons lined the trail in many places.⁴⁷ In 1853, Maria Parsons Belshaw recorded the number of graves and of dead cattle along the sides of the trail.⁴⁸ The desert of the Santa Fe Trail, which took pioneers, primarily Mormons, to Utah, was one of the most notorious places for dead oxen.⁴⁹ Dee Brown states, “A traveler approaching Carson River counted an average of thirty abandoned wagons to the mile for forty miles. ‘The dead animals will average about 100 to the mile for 40 miles—4,000’.”⁵⁰ If a family were to lose the oxen that pulled their wagon, they would generally either have to load their belongings into a kindly fellow-traveler’s wagon, which would make the load for his oxen harder to bear, or would have to leave their belongings behind.

For women in particular, pregnancy and childbearing could be an especially difficult time. During the nineteenth century, childbirth could be dangerous and difficult even with the best of care. On the trail, with few doctors, little water, and unsanitary conditions, having a child was a perilous task. In addition, caring for a newborn baby in the same conditions was extremely difficult, and many of these babies died. Mothers often lost other children on these journeys as well. Martha Ann Morrison was thirteen when her family went west in 1844. She recorded later, “Some of the women I saw on the road went through a great deal of trial and suffering. I remember distinctly one girl in particular about my own age that died and was buried on the road. Her mother had a great deal of trouble and suffering. It strikes me as I think of it now that Mothers on the road had to undergo more trial and suffering than anybody else.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 102.

⁴⁸ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 113.

⁴⁹ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 102.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 35.

Children also had a particularly difficult time on the trails west. They were often more susceptible to disease and other dangers than the adults. Further, children who lost their parents on the trail faced almost insurmountable obstacles. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of such an occurrence is that of the Sager children. The seven children of the Sager family lost both their parents to fever on the Oregon Trail.⁵² They were then cared for by other members of the wagon train before pressing on alone to meet missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman in Oregon. The Whitmans cared for the children until the “Whitman Massacre” in 1847, during which both of the Sager boys were killed.⁵³ One of the girls was taken into captivity, where she was later killed, and yet another died as a young adult.⁵⁴ Only three of the seven children lived to old age. The story of the Sager children provides only one example of the hardships that families faced on the trails west.

Further, becoming separated from the wagon train was an unthinkable possibility. Sometimes this happened as a result of some deciding to turn back or to go a separate route; sometimes it happened because of the death of a large percentage of people on the wagon train due to Indian attacks or disease; and sometimes people merely became lost or were left behind, whether accidentally or purposefully. However the separation may have happened, a few people alone on the plains were vulnerable to all kinds of threats, particularly from the Native Americans. Helen Carpenter, who, along with her husband and a small group of people, were separated from the rest of their group, says in her diary, “Such a mere handful of humanity, four men, four women, three young boys, and three children, one my mother’s little six month old

⁵² “Sager Orphans on the Oregon Trail.” Legends of America. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/sager-orphans/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

baby. In no way could we turn for assistance.”⁵⁵ When they finally met another wagon train, their relief was immense: “None...can ever know the inexpressible joy and relief...on seeing those old dust begrimed wagons.”⁵⁶

Additionally, if a group of travelers left too late in the season or strayed from the path that they were to follow, the likelihood was high that they would be trapped in the Rockies or, if going to California, the Sierra Nevada mountains, by the early snow falls that characterize the western high country. When this happened, the group of pioneers would often either freeze or run out of food and starve to death. The infamous Donner-Reed party, which was trapped in the mountains of California and were forced to eat those who had died to survive, is probably the most well-known example. The Donners and Reeds were trapped in the Sierras by the autumn snows and were forced to survive for months on very little.⁵⁷ They ate field mice and their dogs, and then began to boil strips of rawhide into a gluey paste.⁵⁸ Virginia Reed, a thirteen-year-old girl who was a member of the party, wrote, “...thare was 10 starved to death...we lived on little cash a week and after Mr. Breen would cook his meat we would take the bones and boil them 3 or 4 days at a time ma went down to the other caben and got half a hide carried it in snow up to her wast.”⁵⁹ After everything else was gone, they began to eat those of their party who had already died. Reed records shortly after, “There was 3 died and the rest eat them, they was 10 days without anything to eat but the dead.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 127.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 56-59.

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 98-99.

⁵⁹ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 58.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

Even through all of their hardships, most of these women tried to keep their spirits up and be strong for their husbands and children. They still attempted to make life enjoyable or at least bearable. Women on the trail shared a camaraderie that arose from their shared experiences. Catherine Haun wrote that while “high teas were not popular,” practical diversions such as sewing, knitting, crocheting, exchanging recipes, and “swapping food for the sake of variety” allowed the women to keep “in practice of feminine occupations and diversions.”⁶¹ Also, on evenings in safe territory, the emigrants would spend time around the campfire reading, telling stories, and even playing instruments if they had them and singing or dancing.⁶² There were also other games and amusements, including baseball games, debates, spelling bees, hunting, fishing, and sometimes even Sunday services.⁶³ Later on, many of them recalled their journeys and remembered the good as well as the bad. Often while relating their experiences, they would even downplay the dangers that they had experienced. Yet the trials that they faced on the trail were only the beginning of their lives on the Western frontier.

Life on the Frontier

Even after these pioneers had reached their destination, they still faced many difficulties. Many believed that they would find a land of paradise at their journey’s end. In 1849, Catherine Haun wrote of California, “we...longed to go to the new El Dorado and ‘pick up’ gold enough with which to return and pay off our debts.”⁶⁴ However, life on the frontier was not easy. Life for women was especially hard, particularly for those women who were used to a more comfortable

⁶¹ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁶⁴ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 166.

life in the East. According to Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith in *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier*, “Many pioneers found that ‘home’ in the West was quite different from the home they’d left behind in the East and, in most cases, ordinary domestic chores were made more difficult by the isolation in which the pioneers found themselves.”⁶⁵ Yet these women had to make do and build a home with what was available to them.

The first task that settlers had was to build their houses. When the pioneers first arrived at their destinations, often they would use their wagons that they had used to cross the Great Plains and the mountains as their temporary abode.⁶⁶ Even if they did not use the wagons as houses, they often used the lumber from them or used them for storage or extra sleeping space.⁶⁷ The canvas from the top of the wagons could also be used to form makeshift tents.

The more permanent houses that the settlers built were still less than luxurious. The materials that were used for these homes depended upon the area where the emigrants settled. Settlers who traveled farther west to the mountains typically built log cabins. Settlers opting to stay on the prairie often had to build their new homes out of blocks of earth, which houses were referred to as “soddies,” or out of crude boards and tarpaper, which were simply called “tarpaper shacks.”⁶⁸ These houses let in insects, dirt, and snakes, and often, when it rained, a good amount of water.⁶⁹ The roofs of soddies, since they were made of earth, would sometimes cave in and had to be replaced. Though the soddies were not necessarily elegant or pleasant to live in,

⁶⁵ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁹ “Living in a Sod House,” Nebraska Studies, <http://www.nebraskastudies.org/en/1850-1874/the-challenges-of-the-plains/living-in-a-sod-house/>.

they provided much more protection from the elements than did the rickety tar-paper shacks. Frequently, tar-paper shacks would be blown over by the strong prairie winds.⁷⁰ Typically, tar-paper shacks would only be lived in to establish the pioneers' claim to that land until something better could be built.⁷¹ Some families even lived in dugouts, which were literally houses dug out of the earth, usually into the side of a hill, with only the front or a lean-to sometimes consisting of sod blocks.⁷²

Some women were completely dismayed by their new homes. Anna Shaw records the reaction of her mother upon first seeing their new house: "Something within her seemed to give way, and she sank upon the ground."⁷³ Most women, however, determined to make the most of what they had and tried to make home as comfortable as they could for their families. They stuffed the cracks in the walls so that the wind, rain, and small animals could not get through. They kept their houses as clean as they could, even though most of them, at least to begin with, had only a dirt floor.⁷⁴ Bertha Anderson, whose family settled in Montana in a log house, whitewashed the walls and later hung material on them to make them look more presentable.⁷⁵ She also hung "a cheese cloth curtain on which she had crocheted some lace" over the one window in the front room and sewed carpet rags for the rough plank floor.⁷⁶ Peavy and Smith

⁷⁰ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² "Searching for Shelter," Nebraska Studies, <http://www.nebraskastudies.org/en/1850-1874/the-challenges-of-the-plains/searching-for-shelter/>.

⁷³ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 52.

⁷⁴ "Sod House," Oklahoma Historical Society, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=SO002>.

⁷⁵ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

state, “All across the frontier, women like Bertha Anderson showed resilience and ingenuity as they sought to make less-than-ideal dwellings into comfortable homes.”⁷⁷ Pioneer women showed amazing fortitude through the hardships that they faced.

In addition, these women had to face the problems of the lack of water, lighting, and waste disposal. They also had to face natural disasters in their small homes, including such things as flooding, blizzards, and especially the tornadoes that were common across the Great Plains. Furthermore, insects and animals could be a problem. Although insects were pesky, the most concerning issue was that certain insects, particularly mosquitos, could spread diseases. Rattlesnakes were an especially dangerous visitor for settlers in many places.⁷⁸ Also, wild animals such as bears, mountain lions, and even skunks could prove dangerous or at least, in the case of skunks, a very bothersome nuisance.

Indian attacks on settlers could also still be a danger after the pioneers had set up homes on the frontier. However, much of the time Indians did not attack the settlers. Often the American Indians were merely interested in trading. The friendliness or unfriendliness of the Indians typically depended upon the tribe that was in the area that a family settled, though there were exceptions to that as well. If emigrants settled in an area where there were ongoing conflicts over past grievances or where there was feuding over treaty violations, then the Indians could be dangerous.⁷⁹ Otherwise, they tended to be more peaceful.⁸⁰ Regardless, they were still the people who were the most feared and were usually disdained. In 1849, Catherine Haun wrote,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁸ Jay W. Sharp, “Profiles of Pioneer Women: Life for Women in the Southwest in the 1800s,” <https://www.desertusa.com/desert-people/pioneer-woman.html>.

⁷⁹ Paul Howard Carlson, *The Plains Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 130.

⁸⁰ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 64.

“...Indians were a source of anxiety, we being never sure of their friendship. Secret dread and alert watchfulness seemed always necessary for after we left the prairies they were more treacherous and numerous being in the language of the pioneer trapper: ‘They was the most onsartainest [sic.] vermint[sic.] alive.’”⁸¹ However, the Indians generally felt similarly about the settlers. Yet the Indians often learned that there were advantages to making friends with those who had invaded their homeland. They often relied upon trade with the settlers to acquire many of the items that they needed, particularly those that were made of iron.⁸²

One of the hardest times for women living on the frontier was pregnancy and childbirth, as it had been on the trail. There were usually no doctors around, at least early on, to deliver the baby. If there were other women nearby, one of them, usually an older woman, would often act as midwife for the area.⁸³ Giving birth without the help of another woman was a terrifying ordeal. While in labor with her sixth child, Emma Batchelor Lee wrote that she “prayed she wouldn’t die...with all those children playing happily outside, she MUST NOT die.”⁸⁴ There are stories of women whose babies were delivered by their husband or even their older children.⁸⁵ If there were complications and no doctor around that could be sent for, the woman and the baby would often die in childbirth.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 175.

⁸² Carlson, *The Plains Indians*, 130-135.

⁸³ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 77.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Taking care of children on the frontier was no easy task. Mothers had to nurse their children through illnesses, usually without any doctor. Many children died, generally when they were still very young. Besides disease, there were many other dangers that mothers had to worry about, including such things as rivers, hot stoves, farming equipment, snakes, and the miles of wilderness that typically surrounded a frontier home that children could easily get lost in. Bessie Wilson, who grew up on the Kansas frontier, recalled an experience that she had had with a rattlesnake: "I was too young to be frightened but called, 'Oh mamma, come and see the snake!' She came running, catching me by the arm and ruthlessly snatching me from my perilous position. By the time she had finished killing this snake with the garden hoe, she was ready to collapse."⁸⁷ However, children were most often considered a blessing. Having many children meant that at least some of them would probably survive. It also provided extra hands to help with the chores and farm work that the settlers had to do.⁸⁸

Life on the frontier was not all work. There were enjoyable times as well. Reading was a favorite pastime. For women especially, the fairly rare women's magazines from back East, such as the *Godey's Ladies* book, were pored over, and the rare and long-awaited letter from loved ones still in the East were cherished.⁸⁹ The Bible was also regularly read in many western homes. For many women, church socials and functions, when the community became large enough to have a church, were not only spiritually fulfilling, but were also a place to socialize with other women.⁹⁰ Music and dancing were some of the most popular amusements. Peavy and Smith

⁸⁷ Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1982), 153.

⁸⁸ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 79-80.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

state, “Outdoor events were also fun for families, with sleighing, skiing, and skating being wintertime favorites, while picnics, swimming, fishing, and camping were enjoyed in warmer months.”⁹¹ They also had holiday celebrations. Additionally, of course, they kept diaries or journals. There were plenty of amusements to fill up the little extra time that a pioneer woman had.

For many pioneer women, their faith in God was the rock that sustained them throughout their struggles. In almost every diary, there is some sort of reference to the goodness of God or a prayer of thanksgiving to Him.⁹² Dee Brown writes, “A phrase often repeated in the diaries of the period is this manifest witness to woman’s need for religion in that time of stress: *The sustaining hand of God.*”⁹³ Tabitha Brown recorded in 1854, “...the same kind Providence that ever has been was watching over me still. I committed my all to Him and felt no fear.”⁹⁴

Importance to the Women Themselves

The diary or journal of a pioneer woman was often one of her most prized possessions. These women had been able to bring little other than necessities from their homes in the East, and often had to leave much of the little that they had been able to bring out on the prairies if the wagons were too heavy for the animals to pull. Diaries, however, were small, light, and easy to carry. They could potentially even be carried on a woman’s person. Their diaries were incredibly important to them for many reasons.

⁹¹ Ibid., 84-85.

⁹² Brown, *The Gentle Tamers*, 41.

⁹³ Ibid., 42.

⁹⁴ Holmes, *Covered Wagon Women, Volume 1*, 46.

Diaries could remind women of their homes in the East. They could provide women with a sense of connection to those homes and to the loved ones that they had left behind. First of all, these diaries were sometimes given to them by loved ones from home. Also, letters and communication with the East were very rare, if not almost non-existent, on the frontier. Diaries could be used to keep an account of their journeys and their new life for their family members and friends that they had left behind in case they were to see them again. Even if these women were never to see their family and friends again, writing in their diaries may have helped keep the hope alive that someday they would. Some women even sent their diaries back to family members or friends in the East so that they could know where they were and what they had done.⁹⁵ For instance, in 1848, Elizabeth Dixon Smith sent her journal, in which she had recorded the events of her journey, back to her friends in the East, with the note, “Dear Friends, by your request I have endeavored to keep a record of our journey from the States to Oregon though it is poorly done owing to me having a young babe and besides a large family to do for and worst of all my education is very limited.”⁹⁶

Furthermore, they could serve as a way of keeping a record of the journey and life in general for the immediate family that had moved west. Many women recorded detailed accounts of graves that were passed, animals that were bought, and other things of like nature. Sometimes a journal was one of the only things in which a woman or even a family had to write; thus, women made certain to do so.

⁹⁵ Annette Bennington McElhiney, “Diaries of Pioneer Women: Truths Confessed or Society’s Expectations Met?”, 14.
<https://esirc.emporia.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/718/McElhiney%20Vol%2011%20Num%204.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

Also, as mentioned in the previous section, diaries or journals could provide a diversion for women from their often-difficult life on the frontier. They could provide a daily sense of enjoyment and relaxation, if only for a few moments. In a world where entertainment was welcome but not overly common, diaries helped women to make it through the day.

In addition, as for all women and girls who have kept diaries throughout the years, diaries could serve as a sacred place to record a woman's deepest thoughts or feelings that she did not want to or could not tell anyone else. Certain things are too personal to be shared. Moreover, if there were no other women nearby to talk to, things that a woman would not discuss with anyone but another woman would sometimes end up in her diary.

According to Gayle Davis in "Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason," diaries were basically used as mediators between the past and the present, between a woman's life as a lady in the East and as a settler in the West.⁹⁷ Also, a woman's diary was "to become the lonely author's substitute for personal contact with women friends or relatives, mediating between isolation and communication."⁹⁸ In other words, women used their diaries as a substitute for having personal connections with other women. There were certain things, as stated before, that women would only discuss with other women. When there were no other women around, these lonely women would simply tell their "dear diary."

Diaries, according to Carey Voeller, also served as a place for women to mourn or to record her true feelings.⁹⁹ A pioneer woman had to be courageous for everyone else, no matter what situation she found herself in. She had to be strong for her husband and a comforter to her

⁹⁷ Gayle R. Davis, "Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason." *Women's Studies* 14, no. 1 (1987): 5-14.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁹ Carey R. Voeller, "'I Have Not Told Half We Suffered': Overland Trail Women's Narratives and the Genre of Suppressed Textual Mourning," *Legacy* 23, no. 2 (2006): 148.

children. These women displayed amazing courage and fortitude in the face of the things that many of them experienced. Their innermost fears and sorrows could only be expressed in their diaries, which they ordinarily did not have to worry about anyone else finding. For instance, after moving into her new shanty on the Plains, Annie Green wrote, “This had truly been the longest and most dreary week of my life...”¹⁰⁰

However, Voeller believes that these women did not always express their true emotions even in their diaries. She states, “This...pattern of textual mourning becomes apparent only when we read the gaps and silences of these women’s narratives.”¹⁰¹ She believes that women on the Overland Trail simply were not as vocal about their grief as were women authors in the East because they were “less overtly geared toward creating or representing a national identity for a broad audience.”¹⁰² Yet, at least in the opinion of the author of this thesis, while it may be true that pioneer women used diaries as a way to grieve, it is doubtful that they were covertly expressing grief through their diaries without actually writing it down. If they were, it was most likely unintentional and was certainly not done for any larger audience.

Some modern women scholars, particularly Annette Bennington McElhiney, argue that these pioneer women, especially the married ones, did not write down their true emotions or ideas about things because of societal expectations.¹⁰³ Yet was this really the case, or is this simply the attempt of women today to insert their modern feminist notions into history? First of all, although most of these diaries do contain primarily records of activities and everyday life,

¹⁰⁰ Peavy and Smith, *Pioneer Women*, 83.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰³ McElhiney, “Diaries of Pioneer Women: Truths Confessed or Society’s Expectations Met?,” 14.

their authors did write down many of their thoughts. For instance, in 1862, Jane Gould Tortillott recorded in her diary, "Oh dear, I do so want to get there. If I could only be set down at home with all the folks I think there would be some talking as well as resting."¹⁰⁴ Also, a diary was a personal thing that, unless it was sent to loved ones in the East or it was handed down after the woman's death, would not likely be read by anyone else. Thus, the woman would probably be less careful about meeting "society's expectations." Further, most of these women were not unhappily married or chafing under "male domination." They wanted to be married and have homes and children and someone to provide for them. Historians must be very careful to not place modern agendas into their interpretation of history.

Finally, diaries could act as a way to preserve these pioneers' stories for posterity. Although many of these women probably did not think about it, some of them knew that they were making history. After all, they were some of the first to cross the Great Plains and the western mountains and experience life in the still wild and untamed West. They also believed that it was their "manifest destiny" to do so. They wanted their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and further descendants to know what they had experienced and to realize the difficulties and obstacles that they had to face and overcome to settle the West. Gayle Davis states, "By capturing time and enclosing it in a diary's binding, the writer can preserve her experiences for the future."¹⁰⁵ Perhaps they knew that someday someone would desire to know their stories, and they wanted all those who came after them to learn from their lives and their experiences.

¹⁰⁴ Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 226.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, "Women's Frontier Diaries," 6.

Importance for Today

The women who wrote for the sake of their descendants were correct in thinking that someday someone would want to know their story. These diaries and journals that pioneer women left behind are of great value to all of their posterity, including those who are alive now. These diaries are not only of great usefulness to historians, they also have bearing on the lives of all human beings, and especially Americans, in today's world. These women have left behind a meaningful legacy that still lives on.

For historians specifically, these diaries and journals are often the best, and sometimes the only, primary sources that they have concerning pioneer life. Though other sources, such as newspaper articles, pictures, and archaeological finds, are also important, diaries give historians a very personal glimpse into the lives of these women and their families. Furthermore, they are typically accurate, and they provide information about people who perhaps did not leave behind any other records or would not be seen as important enough to be studied had they not written down their stories. They are written from the perspectives of ordinary people who took these incredible journeys and settled down on the frontier; thus, they can help historians to form an overall picture of life on the trail and on the frontier. However, because they are so personal, they give historians not just a broad, comprehensive view of these pioneer journeys, they also give historians a glimpse into what everyday life was actually life for these emigrants. In addition, they provide scholars of history with a glance into the culture and into the things that people, especially women, thought and believed at that time. This is a rare gift that is not ordinarily bestowed upon the historian in such magnitude.

For all Americans, not just historians, these diaries still hold great importance. Many lessons can be learned from them even now. These diaries and journals that contain the stories of

those who lived before and that hold valuable lessons for today should not be taken for granted or wasted. They should instead be treasured and, of course, learned from.

First of all, these diaries can provide useful information to those interested in family history, if one has a family member or members who traveled west. If one can find the diary or have the diary of their ancestor, it is often treasured as a keepsake and a remembrance of their family. Knowing one's family history can give one a clearer picture of where they came from, who they are, and sometimes even why they are the way that they are.

In addition, these diaries, even if not written by a family member, can provide one with a connection to the past. Through these diaries, modern people realize that these women were humans just as they are, and although culturally these women may have thought, dressed, or acted a bit differently, they had the same emotions and many of the same struggles that humans today do. In fact, because these diaries are so personal, it sometimes even seems as though one who is reading a diary is actually acquainted with the writer, even though the reader and the writer lived more than a hundred years apart. This experience can give one a deeper appreciation for and interest in history as a whole.

Also, people today will find it both helpful and humbling to realize that there have been those in the past who went through far more difficult things than those in the United States today have to go through and who persevered and were stronger and better for it. Modern Americans have a tendency to feel sorry for themselves rather than being thankful for the things that they have been blessed with. Americans must realize that there are others who have been and who still are far worse off than they and be less selfish and more compassionate towards those who are hurting.

Furthermore, in this modern world of emotionalism and drama, people have much to learn from the strength and quiet resilience of these women. Life is not always about “number one.” Sometimes humans must sacrifice their own desires for the good of those that they love, just as these women often sacrificed their own wants and sometimes even needs to try to make a comfortable home for their children and their husbands on the frontier.

Additionally, people can learn from these pioneers that hard work and effort must be put into what they do, and sometimes it may take some time to see the results that they want to see. In the world today, everyone wants “instant gratification.” They want to see the outcomes that they want immediately without putting in the work to get them. Even young people want to start out at the top rather than working their way up from the bottom. Generally, it took these pioneers—men, women, and children—years of effort and backbreaking work in the face of countless obstacles to establish their homesteads on the frontier. Sometimes they did not survive to see their work bear fruit. Yet they worked anyway because they had a purpose that had significance not just for themselves but for their children, and their children’s children. People today can learn from them that the effort that is put into something will usually be equal to the results that they get.

Further, many of these pioneer women learned to make do and even to be happy and content with what they had, though that usually was not much. In modern times, people seem to think that they have to have the most money, the newest technology, the best car, and countless other conveniences. Yet these women prove that one does not need to have a lot to be satisfied. In fact, money, conveniences, technology, and a fast-paced lifestyle often makes people less content. As the old saying goes, the more one gets, the more one wants. Humans need to learn to be content and thankful for what they have been blessed with, because many people then and

now do not have the conveniences that citizens of the modern United States have. Even indoor plumbing and running water are luxuries compared to what many people survived on and, in some parts of the world, still survive on.

Finally, these diaries remind people today of those who have gone before them and who have sacrificed for those coming after them and for this nation. They encourage people to be courageous and to persevere as their writers did. Also, they help Americans not to forget their history and the lessons that can be learned from it. Knowing the past helps one to be better in the present.

Conclusion

Pioneer women left behind comprehensive and personal accounts of their journeys and their lives on the frontier in the form of their diaries and journals. These journals held great importance for the women who wrote them. Now, they are used by historians to form a picture of the passage across what is now the western United States and the lives that pioneers lived once they reached their destinations. They also teach all Americans today lessons not just about the past, but about life and sacrifice and courage.

Today, far too many people do not care about history, especially in the United States. Furthermore, the history of the western United States is often either overlooked or romanticized. Also, many today try to twist history to fit their preconceived modern notions of the way that things should be, rather than looking at historical facts through the lens of cultural context. People need to know the truth about all kinds of history, and many young people are not being taught real history. Whether the things that happened in the past are things that people today think should have happened or not, they still happened. These events, good or bad, cannot be

changed. It is not humanity's job to change history or to forget it; rather, we should learn from it. When people do not know about the past, they cannot expect to learn from it.

The pioneers embodied the "American spirit" of courage and freedom that is now, unfortunately, quickly fading. These women sacrificed a great deal so that the West could be settled. Americans should never forget the sacrifices that those who have gone before them have made so that they can be safe and comfortable.

The Old West, the age of pioneers and cowboys, has passed. Yet the West still lives on in the culture and in the hearts of those who love it. The women who settled the West faced incredible hardships and perils, yet they remained strong and courageous in the face of these obstacles. The world today owes them a great deal, and there is much that can be learnt from them.

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