

Pioneer Women in the Midwest:

The Role of the Women in 19th Century Agriculture

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The story of the settlement of the Midwest has been presented from the perspective of the pioneer men. Narratives such as Buley's *The Old Northwest* have included a chapter or two describing domestic life and the pioneer family. Published diaries or correspondence written by "ordinary" people describing experiences during the westward movement and frontier settlement were those written predominantly by men.

The reasons that so little documentation exists, according to Jensen, is that 1) the illiteracy rate for women in rural areas was higher than that for women in urban areas in the 19th Century, 2) the long and exhausting work hours in rural areas 3) left little time for uninterrupted leisure for writing, and 4) until the westward migration, there was not a practical need for written communication.

One exception is Fowler's *Women On The American Frontier*, published in 1876, in which the author related the stories and adventures of numerous women. Recently the situation has changed with the publication of a number of diaries and letters written by women during the westward movement. These journals and fragments describe the everyday life of women who moved with their families from rural areas to settle as far west as Nebraska.

The narratives reveal that the women who lived on the frontier not only assisted with the farm tasks but could operate the farm while the men worked in town, hunted game, or prospected to supplement their income. Women endured isolation, limited food supply, family illnesses, and the dangers of Indians, bandits, and wild animals. As the nearby towns became settled, the daughters worked in the boardinghouses or shops to aid the family finances while their brothers worked on the farm.

A brief review of some of the literature concerning the role of women in pioneer agriculture is given in the following list.

Buley, Roscoe Carlyle. *The Old Northwest; Pioneer Period, 1815-1840*. Indianapolis, Indiana Historical Society, 1950; Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983. 2 volumes.

This book, which won the Pulitzer Prize in history for its author in 1950, was reprinted in 1983. It is almost encyclopedic in scope documenting the move from the Atlantic Seaboard into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Some information on the role of women is presented in Chapter IV "Pioneer Life—The Material Side."

Fowler, William W. *Women On The American Frontier*. Hartford CT, S.S. Scranton & Co., 1876. 527 p. Reprint Ann Arbor MI, University Microfilms Inc., 1965; reprint Detroit, Gale Research Co., 1974.

The subtitle is "A valuable and authentic history of the heroism, adventures, privation, captivities, trials, and noble lives and deaths of the 'Pioneer mothers of the Republic.'" Commencing with the Colonial period, the author narrates the stories and adventures of innumerable women. The narratives for the settling of the Midwest begin in Chapter VII. Unfortunately this edition does not include a list of the sources for the stories.

Hampsten, Elizabeth. *Read This Only To Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 242 p.

The author uses letters, journals, and some memoirs to describe the women who settled in North Dakota at the end of the century.

She is especially interested in class differences, working women's language, and the information women shared only with each other.

Jeffrey, Julie Roy. *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880*. 1st ed. New York, Hill and Wang, 1979. 240 p.

The book focuses on the thousands of white American women going to the trans-Mississippi west in the decade of heavy migration between 1840 and 1880. The emphasis is on the agricultural frontier and then later the mining frontier. The study is drawn from journals, reminiscences, collections of letters, and interviews.

Jensen, Joan M. *With These Hands: Women Working On The Land*. Old Westbury NY, Feminist Press; New York, McGraw-Hill, 1981. 295 p.

“. . .the documents in this anthology reveal women as active participants in every stage of agricultural production and in every period of agricultural history . . .” The author includes the stories of women from all areas of the country and from various cultural backgrounds—American Indian, Black, Caucasian and Hispanic—up to and including the 1940's. The literary forms that are quoted are letters, journals, novels, and poetry.

Luchetti, Cathy, in collaboration with Carol Olwell. *Women Of The West*. St. George UT, Antelope Island Press, 1982. 240 p.

The photographs provide a stunning picture of the life of pioneer women. The narrative is drawn from the diaries, journals, and letters of eleven women of different races, creeds, and occupations. Despite the limited sources, the authors include a special section on minority women, highlighting the contributions of Indian, Jewish, Black, Chinese, and Japanese women to American development.

Myres, Sandra L. *Westering Women And The Frontier Experience 1800-1915*. 1st ed. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982. 365 p.

The study is based on more than 400 diaries, letters, and reminiscences of those who participated in the westward migration. The author includes information on family life on the trail and in the new home, the women's suffrage movement, and the Western woman as entrepreneur. The book contains accounts by Caucasian, Hispanic, Indian, and Black women.

Plain Talk. Edited by Carol Burke. West Lafayette, IN, Purdue University Press, 1983. 140 p.

The book is a collection of reminiscences and stories gathered in tape-recorded interviews with residents of north-central Indiana, most of whom are from families who have farmed in White, Jasper, and Benton counties. The interviews were collected by 300 sophomores and juniors in the Tri-County School Corporation in Wolcott. The original tapes and transcriptions of *Plain Talk* are divided between the White County Historical Society and the Wolcott Public Library.

Riley, Glenda. *Frontierswomen, The Iowa Experience*. 1st ed. Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1981. 211 p.

The author presents a study of the Iowa family farm frontier between 1830 and 1870. The material is gathered from diaries, letters, and memoirs.

Sachs, Carolyn E. *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production*. Totawa NJ, Rowman & Allanheld, 1983. 153 p.

The family farm was the basis of the American dream of democracy; and, in the United States, agriculture has often been organized as a family enterprise. However, prior to the 19th Century, widows had no control over their families' land. The author traces the history of women's involvement in agricultural production up to the present. There is a ten-page bibliography.

Sanford, Mollie Dorsey. *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska And Colorado Territories 1857-1866*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1959. 201 p.

In 1857 at the age of 18 Mollie left Indianapolis with her parents to settle on the Nebraska frontier and in 1860 moved with her husband to the Colorado frontier.

Sprague, William Forrest, *Women And The West: A Short Social History*. New York, Arno Press, 1940, 1972. 294 p.

The Preface states that “. . .The chief purpose of the works are to portray the hardships and accomplishments of female pioneers in the trans-Alleghany region and to mention somewhat more sketchily the important effects of the westward movement upon the lives of women in the older sections of the nation . . .”

Stratton, Joanna L. *Pioneer Women: Voices From The Kansas Frontier*. 1st Touchstone ed. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1981, 319 p.

A series of first-person accounts by 800 women who helped settle the state of Kansas 1865-1905. The narratives originally were collected by the author's great-grandmother and grandmother but were not published.

Women's Diaries Of The Westward Journey. Collected by Lillian Schlissel. New York, Schocken Books, 1982. 262 p.

The author quotes from the diaries and letters of 103 rural women, both Black and white, who made the trip across the continent to Oregon or California between 1840 and 1870. Many came from Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. She examines “. . . whether the overland experience, studied so many times before, would be revealed in a new aspect through the writings of women, and whether such perspective as the women bring might prove to be historically valuable . . .”

Wyman, Walker D. *Frontier Woman: The Life Of A Woman Homesteader On The Dakota Frontier.* River Falls, University of Wisconsin-River Falls Press, 1972. 115 p.

The author retells the story, from the original notes and letters, of Grace Wayne Fairchild, a Wisconsin schoolteacher who went to South Dakota in 1898.