



2010

# “There Was Nothing in Sight but Nature, Nothing...”: Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail

Andrea J. Savadelis  
*Gettysburg College*  
Class of 2010

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj>

 Part of the [Social History Commons](#), [Women's History Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Savadelis, Andrea J. (2010) "“There Was Nothing in Sight but Nature, Nothing...”: Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol9/iss1/3>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# “There Was Nothing in Sight but Nature, Nothing...”: Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail

## **Abstract**

One hundred and seventeen years ago, between 1841 and 1867, the Overland Trail saw approximately 350,000 Oregon and California bound North Americans traverse its landscape. This westward migration painted the American frontier with a white sea of wagon covers, spotted the grassy plains with brown patches of oxen herds, and lighted the night sky with open cooking fires. Men and women Overlanders experienced this life-changing event in different ways, which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and interaction between these people and their frontier context. Gender-specific roles and social standards of masculinity and femininity carried from emigrants' previous lives influenced their perception of the Overland Trail, interaction with the environment, and their future on the western frontier. These influences affected the settlers throughout the entire journey, beginning with their decision for such a move.

## **Keywords**

Overland Trailing, North Americans, gender-specific roles, social standards, masculinity, femininity

“There Was Nothing in Sight but Nature, Nothing...”: Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail

Andrea Savadelis

One hundred and seventeen years ago, between 1841 and 1867, the Overland Trail saw approximately 350,000 Oregon and California bound North Americans traverse its landscape.<sup>1</sup> This westward migration painted the American frontier with a white sea of wagon covers, spotted the grassy plains with brown patches of oxen herds, and lighted the night sky with open cooking fires. Men and women Overlanders experienced this life-changing event in different ways, which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and interaction between these people and their frontier context. Gender-specific roles and social standards of masculinity and femininity carried from emigrants' previous lives influenced their perception of the Overland Trail, interaction with the environment, and their future on the western frontier. These influences affected the settlers throughout the entire journey, beginning with their decision for such a move.

Historically, scholars addressed this westward movement in various ways and have produced great Overland Trail literature. Frontier scholarship began with Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner argued the frontier provided for the development of unique American cultural characteristics and was responsible for the way in which Americans at large defined themselves.<sup>2</sup> Turner influenced women's initial absence from western history by emphasizing the physical harshness frontier inhabitants consistently struggled through.<sup>3</sup> Despite receiving criticism, Turner significantly influenced the historical approach to westward Overland Trail migration and propelled frontier literature into romantic, environmental, and gender-specific directions.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Mack Faragher and Christine Stansell, "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867," in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1979), 246.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History*, ed. David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Armitage, "Women and Men in Western History: A Stereoptical Vision," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (October 1985): 383. <http://www.jstor.org/>.

Early twentieth-century historians acknowledged the frontiersmen's vulnerability and subordination to the plains' commanding natural forces, but also strengthened the notion of Americans as hardworking and self-sacrificing through romanticized visions of western heroes such as the cowboy.<sup>4</sup> Some historians were unsatisfied with such invincible and domineering white male figures. Stemming from liberal social movements of the 1970s, New Western historians rejected romanticism, re-examined previous western literature, and acknowledged previous literature's inadequacy in representing the west in a non-skewed light.<sup>5</sup> To improve upon such faults, New Western historians emphasized the analysis of race, class, and gender<sup>6</sup> and portrayed a much more personal, accurate, and all-inclusive western image. They accomplished this fresh approach by studying letters, diaries, newspapers, travelogues, and biographies.<sup>7</sup> These factors created an ample environment for women's western history to make its debut.

Historians of the West set out to determine if women felt liberated or further confined to gender roles through their Overland Trail journey. Initially, they proclaimed that despite various personal experiences, the migration neither liberated nor abused women.<sup>8</sup> Most historians however, contradicted this conclusion and asserted that the westward movement separated women from female companions, strengthened their subordination to male authority, and extended their domestic duties.<sup>9</sup> Although these scholarly findings focused on women, male influence remained entwined with female Overland Trail perception and experience. New Western historians who focused on female experiences viewed primary sources through new lenses that altered reflections and definitions of Overland Trail women. These lenses, fueled by feelings of female empowerment from various feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s,

---

<sup>4</sup> For significant historical works regarding frontier environmentalism and romanticized visions of western heroes, see Andy Adams, *The Log of a Cowboy: A Narrative of the Old Trail Days* (Boston, 1903); Rodman W. Paul and Michael P. Malone, "Tradition and Challenge in Western Historiography," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (January 1985). <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, for historical works analyzing these categories, see Paul and Malone, "Tradition and Challenge in Western Historiography."

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Walsh, *The American West: Visions and Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Paul and Malone, "Tradition and Challenge in Western Historiography," 46.

<sup>9</sup> Limerick, Milner II, and Rankin, *Trails*, 40. For historical works that came to these conclusions, see John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Faragher and Stansell, "Women and Their Families," 246-67.

influenced the rejection of stereotypical female passivity and presented an assertive female Overland character that perceived the westward journey as a positive experience, and was no more physically or mentally taxed than the male emigrant was.<sup>10</sup> Through contexts such as trade and the task of cooking, historians exposed these characteristics and analyzed women's importance to Overland Trail migration.<sup>11</sup>

These historical Overland Trail approaches relied on positive social dynamics within family structure and primarily focused on female Overlanders without discussion of their male companions.<sup>12</sup> However, most recent scholarship reverts to analysis of both genders and does not conveniently ignore contradicting evidence to accepted Overland Trail views. Discussion of divorce on the frontier and during the westward journey exposed how marriage and complete family structure was neither always present nor necessary for successful completion of the journey.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledgment of this negative familial aspect punched holes through previous literature, which heavily relied and focused on marriage as the pivotal driving force of nineteenth-century migrants' Overland Trail completion. Furthermore, historians analyzed the perspectives of both genders by comparing cross-generational Overland travelers.<sup>14</sup> While Overland Trail literature varies throughout its trajectory, there is consistent examination of female and male interactions, gender role application to trail life, and the importance and consequences of male and female presence during the westward migration. Regarding gender perspectives, historians have traditionally focused on women and men's apparent reactions to their surroundings. Women found the Overland Trail to be a volatile place with little comfort or resemblance of their eastern lives, and where the ability to keep their family intact was

---

<sup>10</sup> For historical works presenting this type of female Overland character, see Beverly Beeton, review of *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915*, by Sandra L. Myres, *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 33, no. 4 (Autumn 1983). <http://www.jstor.org/>; Lucy Jane Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women on the Oregon Trail: 1840-1867," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984). <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> For historical works presenting the female Overland character through these specific contexts, see Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women"; Joseph R. Conlin, "Eating on the Rush: Organizing Meals on the Overland Trail," *California History* 64, no. 3 (Summer 1985). <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> For a historical work with this primary female focus, see Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> For accounts of Overland Trail divorce, see Armitage, "A Stereoptical Vision."

<sup>14</sup> For this type of analysis, see Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2007).

constantly threatened.<sup>15</sup> Men, however, perceived the trail as an adventurous process to new beginnings where trials and tribulations were times for personal growth.<sup>16</sup> One cannot accept these claims without further investigation of how gender-specific influences were the foundation for these Overland Trail perspectives.

To constructively evaluate why such views were held and by whom, this study examines how Overland Trail participants' lives were previously defined. Primary sources are essential to the originality of this study. Diaries, whether factually descriptive or dry, provide firsthand accountable evidence of how gender roles and social standards defined the individual's frontier perspective. Historians must interpret a diary, reflective of personal experience, with an understanding of biases and situational circumstances within which it was written. Primarily nineteenth-century women wrote diaries to pass on family histories. In contrast, Overland diaries were practical, meant as a guide for eastern relatives who followed westward. Others expressed emotions and reactions to daily Overland trials and tribulations.<sup>17</sup> Within these personal narratives resides bias and conscious awareness for a lack of privacy. Women and men disliked portrayal in a disgraceful light, which influenced their diary's content. While there are exceptions, such as women who traveled independently, the majority of men and women reflected daily accounts in congruence with social standards and behavioral expectations. Diary entries written during the few minutes spared before sleeping recalled the day's events and were susceptible to deviating from accuracy. Despite limitations and skewed accounts, Overland diaries are essential; without such keys to the past, much secondary Overland Trail history and literature would not exist.

With careful evaluation, evidence from diaries, letters, biographies, and autobiographies challenges Frederick Jackson Turner's belief that the frontier defined larger things, such as United States' culture and its people,<sup>18</sup> proving instead that gender roles and ideas of masculinity and femininity defined the frontier. Turner argued that American development reflects "a return

---

<sup>15</sup> Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Faragher and Stansell, "Women and Their Families," 251.

<sup>17</sup> Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch, *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994), 4.

to primitive conditions” which was central to westering peoples starting anew.<sup>19</sup> To support this claim, Turner relied on census reports to define the frontier as a place of free land occupied by less than two people per square mile.<sup>20</sup> For Turner, the frontier was a place where the sparse population of inhabitants recreated their lives and gradually became distinct from their eastern roots.<sup>21</sup> Examination of Overlanders’ conduct and attitude suggests otherwise. Women never intended to recreate their lives; they strove to emulate their eastern practices as accurately as possible. For Overland travelers, the frontier was not a specific place, rather an experience that challenged their previous lives and forced them to interact with their surroundings in self-conflicting ways.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that male and female expectations of western territory differed due to their unique relations to the land. A key aspect to David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch’s definition of a frontier is that it is a place where members of a culture challenge their physical surroundings and create a dynamic unique to time and place.<sup>22</sup> The Overland Trail was a place and process, which exhibited different frontiers among its male and female travelers. While a man’s interactions often tested his manhood and position as leader and provider of the family unit, male Overlanders were successful in upholding and strengthening their roles and masculinity. To women, the Overland Trail was a menacing place where their struggle to defend their femininity seemed a lost cause. Therefore, distinctive male and female relations to the western landscape, influenced by self-images reflective of gender standards, formed their perception of the Overland Trail. This supports David J. Weber’s and Jane M. Rausch’s argument that values placed on land depended upon the people who came to it.

Between 1841 and 1867, numerous Americans throughout regions east of the Mississippi moved westward, primarily to Oregon or California. The government offered incentives to carry out an expedition to a supposed western paradise. Congress passed the Donation Land Act of 1850 that offered single male Oregon settlers over the age of eighteen, 320 acres of land and 640

---

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Where Cultures Meet*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Weber and Rausch, *Where Cultures Meet*, xiv.

acres to those married, if they arrived prior to December 1850.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, established Oregon residents who wanted more property were encouraged to stay and newcomers were enticed by the opportunity to acquire large amounts of land. The bill offered the same deal to single white males over twenty-one who settled the territory between 1850 and 1853. Those who did not own 320 acres had the opportunity to purchase up to 160 acres of land in Oregon and Washington at one dollar and sixty cents per acre through the Preemption Act of 1841.<sup>24</sup> Despite specifications to acquiring official ownership of land such as completion of a four-year residency and cultivation period, governmental descriptions of land and opportunity made these offers irresistible:

This land is among the richest lands in the world, that it is nowhere surpassed in productiveness, and in all kinds of grain nowhere has its equal... Besides this, we have mines of coal, of iron, or marble, or granite, or salt, and probably mines of gold... you will find ready employment at from five to fifteen dollars per day, according to your trade, corresponding wages by month or year... here you will see things are ready and waiting for the coming emigrant... five years in this country, with the inducements offered, are worth as much in point of property as twenty years east of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>25</sup>

Publicized descriptions of western territory were hard to disregard since people in various business sectors experienced financial difficulty by the mid-nineteenth century and looked to improve their economic situation.<sup>26</sup> At only eighteen years of age, Mollie Dorsey Sanford understood that “we cannot go through life ‘on flowery beds of ease,’” and was sympathetic toward her family’s situation.<sup>27</sup> Her “father and mother have eight children... My father... is obliged to make a change. It is very hard in a city for one pair of hands to support so large a

---

<sup>23</sup> Samuel R. Thurston to The People of the United States, 19 December 1850, in *African American Newspapers* (Washington, D.C.: The National Era, 1850).  
<http://www.accessible.com/accessible/print?AADocList=1&AADocStyle=STYLED&AAStyleFile=&AABeanName=to1&AANextPage=/printFullDocFromXML.jsp&AACheck=1.6.1.0.1>.

<sup>24</sup> Weldon Willis Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail, 1852: As Told by Mary Ann and Willis Boatman and Augmented with Accounts by other Overland Travelers* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel R. Thurston to The People of the United States.

<sup>26</sup> Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Mollie Dorsey, *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories: 1857-1866*, ed. Donald F. Danker (N.p.: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 3.

family.”<sup>28</sup> As breadwinners, husbands and fathers proposed the idea and made the final decision to emigrate westward.<sup>29</sup> While men and women shared monetary concerns,<sup>30</sup> they perceived the decision to improve such factors via westward movement in contrasting light.

Men carried out their gender-specific roles as provider and protector in the family’s interest but did not depend on its constant structure. Some men, such as Winfield Scott Ebey, initially favored traveling ahead to claim land and later send for the remaining family when the western situation was appropriate for their presence. Within the family, women were traditionally subordinate to men’s authority and conceded to make the westward journey whether they wanted to or not. Entwined with family structure, women’s roles relied upon its continuity. Women’s familial dependence resulted in apprehensive female Overland Trail perceptions. Women feared the journey’s potential to end family members’ lives, which for many women became a reality.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the journey, it was common to observe wagons returning east with “not a man left in the entire train; -all died...and the women were returning alone.”<sup>32</sup> Contrary to Ezra Meeker’s eastbound wagon sightings, many widowed women felt compelled to continue westward to fulfill their husband’s wishes and claim their land at the journey’s completion.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Smith Geer was “left in a strange land, without money or friends, and the care of seven children,”<sup>34</sup> but eventually established and maintained a life in Oregon. When left without a husband’s support, many women struggled to accomplish their duties from the pressures of filling both parent roles. Disease, accident, and physical disaster could cause the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 250.

<sup>30</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> For additional accounts of women who became widowed during their journey, see Francis Sawyer, “Kentucky to California by Carriage and a Feather Bed,” Polly Coon, “Journal of a Journey Over the Rocky Mountains,” Anna Maria Goodell, “Vermillion Wagon Train Diaries, 1854,” and Mary Ringo, “The 1864 Journal,” in *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries & Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1865*, ed. Kenneth L. Holmes (1983-1989; repr., Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995-1999), 4:97, 5:87, 7:105, 8:200; Lucinda Cox Brown and Caroline Findley, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 54, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Ezra Meeker, quoted in Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 15. For additional accounts of widows who continued their journey, see Lucia Loraine Williams, “Letter to Mother,” and Abigail Jane Scott, “Journal of a Trip to Oregon,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 3:133, 5:67; Ellen Smith, Nancy Hunt, Elizabeth Dixon Smith, and Mary Perry Frost, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 47, 122, 122, 123; Jane Gould Tourtillott, “Touring From Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862,” in *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 226-227.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Smith Geer, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 55.

family to fall apart, a possibility many women strove to avoid. Therefore, breadwinners who attempted to make the journey without their wife threatened family unity from the beginning and spurred female challenge to male dominance.<sup>35</sup> Mary Jane Hayden blatantly told her husband that “We were married to live together...under these circumstances you have no right to go where I cannot, and if you do you need never return for I shall look upon you as dead.”<sup>36</sup> Threatened by the dismemberment of her support structure, she perceived the Overland Trail journey as the source of such problems and attempted to dissuade her husband’s decision.

Even though women had little influence over the final westward movement decision, they used such threatening tactics to influence the time at which the journey embarked to ensure the family unit travelled together. However, this did not always simply include the immediate family; as Jacob Hammer recalled, “A letter from my father and mother-in-law gave an account that our relations were very much opposed to our moving so far away from them.”<sup>37</sup> It was common for many generations of kin to settle in a particular area, which provided women social contacts.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, many Overland Trail parties consisted of large, multi-generational families. Charlotte Stearns Pengra felt “...lonely and almost disheartened...our folks not having come.”<sup>39</sup> The immediate and larger family unit provided more than simply social relations for women; it acted as the outlet for implementation of their roles. Women were accustomed to living their life and implementing these roles within the “sphere of domesticity,” which shaped appropriate methods to perform domestic duties in a respectable manner. Daily Overland Trail turmoil threatened this “sphere of domesticity,” thereby affecting women’s ability to keep house and influencing their perception of the Overland Trail as “not very homelike.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 250.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Jane Hayden, quoted in Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 251.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Hammer, *This Emigrating Company: The 1844 Oregon Trail Journal of Jacob Hammer*, ed. Thomas A. Rumer (Spokane, WA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1989), 44. Although Jacob Hammer received the letter, it was written from his wife’s family. This suggests that females were crucial to extended family unity because other family members were unhappy about her moving away.

<sup>38</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Stearns Pengra, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> Helen Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” in *Ho for California!: Women’s Overland Diaries from the Huntington Library*, ed. Sandra L. Myres (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1980), 97.

Men's roles, centered upon their ability to provide for family members, influenced their Overland Trail outlook as a transition period to becoming a more adequate provider. Women, however, could not so easily suspend their roles. There was a constant need for female contribution, and traversing the Overland Trail was no excuse not to fulfill daily expectations of cooking, cleaning, and childcare among many others. However, almost every aspect of the Overland Trail hindered preservation of women's domestic sphere. Lansford W. Hasting's popular westering emigrant guide suggested that

Very few cooking utensils, should be taken, as they very much increase the load...A baking-kettle, frying-pan, tea-kettle, tea-pot, and coffee-pot are all! The furniture of this kind, that is essential, which, together with tin plates, tin cups, ordinary knives, forks, spoons, and a coffee-mill, should constitute the entire kitchen apparatus. Bedding should consist of nothing more than blankets, sheets, coverlets and pillows, which, being spread upon a buffalo robe, an oiled cloth, or some other impervious substance, should constitute the beds...because of their being much less bulky, and weighty.<sup>41</sup>

Catherine Haun proves that women perceived the Overland Trail as a barren place by referring to "rocking chairs, mirrors, washstands, and corner-whatnots" as "luxuries."<sup>42</sup> Prior to embarking on the journey, women took these items for granted and saw them as standard household items. The trail's lack of accommodation for such items in turn made women see their previous life as plentiful, in contrast to trail life. Due to the physical limitations that the trail imposed upon women's ability to make their surroundings resemble a home, they consistently struggled to accept load reduction to the bare essentials.<sup>43</sup> Far along the journey, Lavinia Porter observed a "stove which some emigrant had hauled all those weary miles of mountain and desert, only to discard it at last."<sup>44</sup> Finding an abandoned stove beyond the mountainous region of the trail proves women's attachment to such items and resistance to cutting ties with their previous lives.

---

<sup>41</sup> Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrants' Guide, to Oregon and California, Containing Scenes and Incidents of a Party of Oregon Emigrants; A Description of Oregon; Scenes and Incidents of a Party of California Emigrants; And A Description of California; With A Description of the Different Routes to Those Countries; And All Necessary Information Relative to the Equipment, Supplies, and the Method of Traveling* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1845), 144.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Haun, "A Woman's Trip Across the Plains in 1849," in *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Lavinia Porter, quoted in Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 170.

Many discarded items were family heirlooms, such as pieces of furniture and china that served as a physical connection to the previous life many women so desperately continued to cling on to.<sup>45</sup> While “no useless trumpery should be taken,”<sup>46</sup> many women refused to part with sentimental items until required by a dire situation. Helen Carpenter recalled, “The keeper of the bridge... wanted mother’s baby wagon and as it had been of little use and was always in the way when anything in the wagon was wanted, she let it go for toll.”<sup>47</sup> Initially a difficult task for Helen Carpenter’s mother, she eventually came to terms with letting such valuable pieces go for the journey and her family’s sake. However, other adjustments to the “sphere of domesticity” were consistently more difficult throughout the Overland Trail journey.

Constant hardships while traveling threatened the clean, healthy, and safe environment women created and maintained for their family.<sup>48</sup> Helen Carpenter observed, “The dust and wind has given everybody sore lips. The worse cases ache, swell, crack open, and bleed.”<sup>49</sup> As caretakers of the family, women were concerned with nature’s affect on health rather than on efficient traveling. Women constantly struggled to keep ill family members alive because the trail was “a far off place where a Doctor can only be obtained by accident.”<sup>50</sup> Lodisa Frizzell was “tortured with anxiety and often as I passed the fresh made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the wagon, not knowing how soon it might serve as a coffin for one of us.”<sup>51</sup> The scarcity of effective remedies for even the most basic ailments, and the ease with which people contracted them, influenced women’s view of the Overland Trail as a dangerous and inevitable death trap for many who made the journey.

Unfortunately, simple ailments like chapped lips were the least of women’s worries. Many families consisted of young children in direct care of their mother, who were constantly threatened throughout the journey. Children got lost during breaks wandering among the sea of

---

<sup>45</sup> Thomas A. Rumer, “This Emigrating Company,” in *This Emigrating Company*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Joel Palmer, quoted in Hammer, *This Emigrating Company*, 69.

<sup>47</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 128.

<sup>48</sup> Sandra L. Myres, ed., *Ho for California!: Women’s Overland Diaries from the Huntington Library* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1980), 43.

<sup>49</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 112.

<sup>50</sup> Winfield Scott Ebey, *The 1854 Oregon Trail Diary of Winfield Scott Ebey*, ed. Susan Badger Doyle and Fred W. Dykes (Independence, MI: Oregon-California Trails Association, 1997), 72.

<sup>51</sup> Lodisa Frizzell, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 72.

families and livestock or parents left them behind due to the confusing disorder of every day trail life.<sup>52</sup> Amelia Stewart Knight had a frightful experience concerning her daughter when

We unknowingly left our Lucy behind...She was terribly frightened and so were some more of us when we found out what a narrow escape she had run. She said she was sitting under the bank of the river, when we started, busy watching some wagons cross, and did not know we were ready...It was a lesson to all of us.<sup>53</sup>

She was disappointed that such carelessness occurred and her reaction proves how fear provoking the trail was to women. Margaret S. Frink had a more traumatic experience because of her awareness to her child's absence. "I suffered the agony almost of death...But just at dark, Aaron came in sight having the lost boy with him. My joy turned to tears."<sup>54</sup> While episodes like this caused women to perceive the Overland Trail as a busy, overwhelming, and difficult place to keep track of children, cases of lost children were less disheartening than the physical pains inflicted on youth. Most commonly, children incurred injury or death from falling out of wagons. Amelia Stewart Knight had several children and like most women, was consistently unable to be physically by their side watching for danger. "Chat had a very narrow escape from being run over...he kept from under the wheels and escaped with only a good or I should say, a bad scare. I never was so much frightened in my life."<sup>55</sup> Witnessing the near death experience of her son further supported her perception of the Overland Trail as a wild and unpredictable place that could destroy the family she worked so hard to nurture. Lucy Henderson Deady lost her sister when trail life distracted her mother's attention away from child supervision. "Mother had brought some medicine [laudanum] along...my little sister, Salita Jane...drank it all...when

---

<sup>52</sup> Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Amelia Stewart Knight, "Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight," in *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 212.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret S. Frink, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 49.

<sup>55</sup> Knight, "Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight," 210. For additional accounts of the death, injury, or survival of children who fell out of wagons, see Keturah Belknap, "The Commentaries of Keturah Belknap," Lucena Parsons, "An Overland Honeymoon," Lucia Loraine Williams, "Letter to Mother," Jean Rio Baker, "By Windjammer and Prairie Schooner: London to Salt Lake City," Elizabeth Myrick, "Northern Route to California," Sarah Maria Mousley, "Delaware to Utah, 1857," Mary Elizabeth Lightner, "Journal of a Mormon Woman, 1863," and Mary Ringo, "The 1864 Journal," in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:223, 2:247-48, 3:131, 3:264, 6:273, 7:168, 8:104, 8:206; Katherine Dunlap, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 135; Tortillott, "Touring From Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862," 222.

mother tried to awake her later she couldn't arouse her."<sup>56</sup> Many mothers could only watch their children's fate unfold while hoping for the best. Although trail life prohibited women from constantly watching over children, women dedicated much of their attention to them, often times at the detriment to themselves.

In their previous life, the "sphere of domesticity" not only provided a structure of safety in which women raised their children but also some form of sociability with their female companions. Thus, women perceived the Overland Trail as a lonely venture where lasting female companions and friendships were hard to come by. Women took advantage of opportunities to be in the presence of fellow female westward travelers regardless of the way in which enjoying their companionship took place. Catherine Haun attempted to continue her social life whenever the situation permitted her to do so. "During the day we womenfolk visited from wagon to wagon or congenial friends spent an hour walking, ever westward...voicing our hopes for the future in the far west and even whispering a little friendly gossip of emigrant life."<sup>57</sup> Women enjoyed "comfortable conversations," but the sharing of chores with female kin and trail friends allowed them to reconnect to their previous life. During permissible times of her journey, Catherine Haun enjoyed "...tating, knitting, crocheting, exchanging recipes for cooking beans or dried apples or swapping food for the sake of variety" because it "kept us in practice of female occupation and diversions."<sup>58</sup> While such talk about female activities and diversions was a comforting past time women enjoyed between each other, their reflection upon the life they left behind reinforced their negative Overland Trail views. Together, women shared the difficulty the trail posed in carrying out important roles, especially cooking, which consequently influenced women to identify the Overland Trail as a volatile and capricious setting not conducive to carrying out even the most basic of domestic duties.

Within the "sphere of domesticity," cooking was a central task that allowed women to display their home-making skills. While cooking was a necessary skill essential to survival, women compared conveniences eastern life provided for such work to their current situation, which furthered their perception of the frontier as an inconvenient and difficult place to fulfill

---

<sup>56</sup> Lucy Henderson Deady, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Haun, "A Woman's Trip Across the Plains in 1849," 180.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

such essential tasks. Contrary to this common perception, some westering women possessed a very different view due to luxuries afforded in regards to the way they traveled. Hired hands, particularly a cook, were a pleasurable addition to the travel company.<sup>59</sup> Hired cooks however, represented wealth, which few Overlanders possessed. As a southern woman, Catherine Haun did not know how to cook and “had never made even my first cup of coffee.”<sup>60</sup> Although having a hired cook was a rare luxury during westward travel, if available, travelers took advantage of it. Catherine Haun depended upon a hired cook and would have perceived the Overland Trail as more difficult had she been forced to cook as the majority of westering women. Women who had no other option other than to cook for their family experienced many hardships that conveniences of eastern life had eliminated. Lansford W. Hastings’ emigrant guide recommended a light travel load, therefore, many women abandoned their stoves and cooked by an open fire and used a tin reflector for baking.<sup>61</sup> While this alternative cooking style was not reflective of the methods in the “sphere of domesticity”, there was a general female consensus that “what we are to have to eat is going to be of much more importance than how it is cooked or served.”<sup>62</sup> Although preparing food over an open fire was necessary for completion of this domestic duty, the process in doing so posed various problems. Cecilia Adams failed to produce a meal because she “could not raise enough fire to cook breakfast.”<sup>63</sup> Unlike their previous life, which provided the comfort of a permanent shelter, the Overland Trail exposed travelers to nature’s elements.

---

<sup>59</sup> For another account of a family with hired hands, see Rebecca Nutting Woodson, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” 169. Catherine Haun makes mention of her southern origin and stated that “having been reared in a slave state my culinary education had been neglected....” It was common during this time period for southerners to live a plantation lifestyle and have slaves, considered hired hands after their legal freedom had been enacted. Therefore, the amount of hired hands that traveled with the Haun family suggests that they continued their plantation-type lifestyle, which allowed for Catherine Haun to neither learn nor need to cook during her journey.

<sup>61</sup> Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 13. For additional accounts of women cooking by an open fire, see Margaret A. Frink, “Adventures of a Party of Gold-seekers,” Lucena Parsons, “An Overland Honeymoon,” Eugenia Zieber, “Journal of Our Journey to Oregon,” Lucy Rutledge Cooke, “Letters on the Way to California,” Louisa Cook, “Letters from the Oregon Trail, 1862-1863,” and Harriet Hitchcock, “Thoughts by the Way, 1864-1865,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 2:97, 2:286, 3:185, 4:258, 8:36, 8:261; Lodisa Frizzell and Catherine Bell, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 80, 128; Tourtillott, “Touring From Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862,” 219.

<sup>62</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 95.

<sup>63</sup> Cecilia Adams, quoted in Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 76.

Inconvenient surroundings forced women to become creative in fulfilling their culinary tasks. James Clyman observed a woman within his party who “having kneaded her dough, she watched and nursed the fire and held an umbrella over the fire and her skillet with the greatest composure for near 2 hours and baked enough bread to give us a plentiful supper!”<sup>64</sup> While men were impressed with women’s determination and dedication to their duties, women were less enthusiastic about doing so. Esther Hanna’s patience was tried when cooking and baking “on a little green wood fire with the smoke blowing in your eyes so as to blind you, and shivering with cold so as to make the teeth chatter.”<sup>65</sup> Her emphasis on the negative affects from this particular duty and her surroundings shows that her focus was on the troubles she endured rather than anything positive such as learning a new method for an old task. The cumbersome elements women overcame simply to prepare a meal were taxing and carried over into the final product and its presentation.

Women accepted the fact they were not able to serve their meals from platters or onto fine dinnerware, but remained particular about its taste, which although at times most unfavorable, was essentially unavoidable. “Got breakfast over after a fashion. Sand all around ankle deep; wind blowing; no matter, hurry it over. Them that eat the most breakfast eat the most sand....”<sup>66</sup> By stating this so matter-of-factly, Amelia Stewart Knight proves that she could not control her surroundings and grudgingly accepted the outcome of the meal. While all of these factors within cooking were troublesome, the entire process was a never-ending aggravation. Helen Carpenter stated with discontent and frustration that

Although there is not much to cook, the difficulty and inconvenience in doing it amounts to a great deal. So by the time one has squatted around the fire and cooked bread and bacon, made several trips to and from the wagon, washed the dishes (with no place to dry them), and gotten things ready for an early breakfast, some of the others already have their night caps on.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> James Clyman, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Esther Hanna, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 80.

<sup>66</sup> Knight, “Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight,” 205.

<sup>67</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 114.

She perceives, like most westering women, the frontier as an inconvenient and difficult place to fulfill the basic yet essential task of cooking compared to the conveniences eastern life provided for such work. However, with the exception of hindrances presented by natural elements, such as rain, wind, dirt, and sand, most difficulties women experienced within their cooking duties stemmed from the most daunting of Overland Trail inconveniences: the lack of resources to replenish dwindling provisions.

Women depended on various resources to carry out domestic duties, which had been readily available or easily acquired through markets relatively close to their eastern home. Therefore, westering women perceived the Overland Trail as a barren landscape non-conducive to providing the necessary resources for daily frontier survival. Contrary to information provided by emigrant guides that "...many wild fruits are also found, in the greatest abundance,"<sup>68</sup> women did not find plentiful resources of any kind:

...my husband stopped the team and said,  
 'Mary, did you ever see anything so beautiful?'  
 There was nothing in sight but nature. Nothing....<sup>69</sup>

Mary A. Jones clearly did not find anything appealing about their frontier surroundings as her husband did. Lydia Allen Rudd thought, "we had been in the most desolate looking region," and Mary Stuart Bailey "did not see anything but bones and dead animals."<sup>70</sup> As women, Mary Jones's, Lydia Rudd's, and Mary Bailey's primary concern was acquiring the proper materials to replenish provisions that westward travel demanded. Without nearby markets or means to process foods, the natural surroundings made it extremely difficult for women to be optimistic about their western future. Francis Parkman however, perceived the trail similar to his female westward counterparts:

---

<sup>68</sup> Hastings, *The Emigrants' Guide*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> Mary A. Jones, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Lydia Allen Rudd, "Notes By the Wayside En Route to Oregon, 1852," in *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 193; Mary Stuart Bailey, "Wife of Dr. Fred Bailey from Ohio to California, April-October 1852," in *Ho for California!*, 84. For additional accounts of women who expressed their view of the western landscape as barren, see Betsey Bayley, "Across the Plains in 1854," Elizabeth Dixon Smith, "The Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith," and Martha S. Read, "A History of our Journey," in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:36, 1:124, 5:227.

I can assure him that he need not think to enter at once upon the paradise of his imagination. A dreary preliminary, a protracted crossing of the threshold awaits him before he finds himself fairly upon the verge of the “Great American Desert” – those barren wastes, the haunts of the buffalo and the Indian, where the very shadow of civilization lies a hundred leagues behind him. The intervening country, the wide fertile belt that extends for several hundred miles beyond the extreme frontier, will probably answer tolerably well to his preconceived ideas of the prairie; for this it is from which picturesque tourists, painters, poets and novelists, who have seldom penetrated further, have derived their conceptions of the whole region...As for food, he must content himself with biscuit and salt provisions, for, strange as it may seem, this tract of country produces very little game.<sup>71</sup>

Most men however were not so pessimistic because of various opportunities the trail provided them to improve their luck. Herds of various game or lone animals occasionally came into view and reaffirmed the possibility of acquiring fresh meat:

...up jumped an animal with very long ears...  
 ‘Joe, shoot it, or it will get away from us yet.’  
 ‘No,’ ... ‘I will catch it for it is lame and cannot run far.’ ...the animal made a few leaps and was out of sight... ‘I never was so deceived in an animal in all my life.’<sup>72</sup>

The lighthearted attempt to kill the Jackrabbit and Joe’s passive reaction to its flight exemplifies their optimism that larger, more important game would not so easily escape. Although such hopes infrequently became realized, the thought of opportunities for improvement kept men Overlanders’ enthusiasm for the journey higher than most women’s. Resources needed to fulfill male duties were quite different from those required for female duties.

Primary male roles before, during, and after the westward journey, consisted of being the family’s protector and provider. Men were responsible for providing money that women used to obtain resources. En route to their western destination however, men were not able to earn money nor were there substantial opportunities to purchase goods at outfitting stores. Consequently, hunting was men’s primary means of obtaining game that women used to provide

---

<sup>71</sup> Francis Parkman, “The Plains Described – Francis Parkman on the ‘Oregon Trail.’” *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA) May 23, 1872; Issue 40; col C.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Howard Crawford, *Scenes of Earlier Days: In Crossing the Plains to Oregon and Experiences of Western Life* (1898; repr., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1962), 14.

the family with protein enriched meals.<sup>73</sup> Having such meals was rare because “one of the greatest difficulties is about getting enough to eat.”<sup>74</sup> From her experience, Margaret A. Frink concluded that “there are hundreds and thousands of them on these plains; but the emigration has frightened them...away...so that they are seldom seen.”<sup>75</sup> Men who attempted to hunt buffalo that crossed their path quickly realized they acquired more frustration than meat. “It would be impossible to kill them in sufficient numbers, to sustain a large party, unless many persons should devote their entire attention to the business of hunting.”<sup>76</sup> It was difficult for men to take such substantial amounts of time and energy away from their family or driving the wagon. To counter this inhibiting circumstance, a particular man acted as a game scout. Even with this strategy and a successful hunt, the meat obtained was rarely enough to sustain a decent sized party. Helen Carpenter thought, “Uncle Sam...is an excellent shot and...has had opportunities of getting rabbits, prairie chickens, and antelope. They are always very generous in dividing it if the supply will admit of it, but with a family of eight this occurs only occasionally.”<sup>77</sup> Most traveling parties were not so lucky to have an experienced shot, but even Helen Carpenter’s uncle was only successful at providing the family with smaller more vulnerable game. Despite buffalo being fiercely resistant to shots, men attempted to provide their families with whatever they could, even though the amount of usable food acquired by large gaming attempts was minimal.<sup>78</sup> Men regularly concluded “...as a beautiful herd [of buffalo] came in sight, that they would give chase and secure some fresh meat if possible...Neither were successful in their hunt and we had to abide our time for fresh meat.”<sup>79</sup> Sarah Davis, who was lucky to have fresh meat from a kill, recalled, “the rest of the men killed nothing of consequence.” Compared to the various uses and

---

<sup>73</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 50.

<sup>74</sup> Asa Bowen Smith to Parents, 15 May 1838, in Clifford Merrill Drury, *The Mountains We Have Crossed: Diaries and Letters of the Oregon Mission, 1838* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 145.

<sup>75</sup> Margaret A. Frink, “Adventures of a Party of Gold-seekers,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 2:88.

<sup>76</sup> Hastings, *The Emigrants’ Guide*, 144.

<sup>77</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 120.

<sup>78</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Crawford, *Scenes of Earlier Days*, 15. For additional accounts of men who were unsuccessful while hunting, see Patty Sessions, “A Pioneer Mormon Diary,” Sallie Hester, “The Diary of a Pioneer Girl,” Rachel Taylor, “Overland Trip Across the Plains,” Ellen Hundley, “From Utah to Texas in 1856,” Julia Ann Archibald, “To Pike’s Peak and New Mexico, 1858,” Louisa Cook, “Letters from the Oregon Trail, 1862-1863,” and Harriet A. Loughary, “Travels and Incidents, 1864,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:169, 1:237, 6:168, 7:150, 7:197, 8:33, 8:127.

ample supply of provisions back east, women did not want to be bothered with little game that reminded them of the trail's lack of resources. Stemming from men's difficulty to provide game, women relied on supplies brought from the journey's beginning. The limited supply of necessities caused women's overly cautious attitude toward measuring daily rations; consistent small meals throughout the westward journey were preferred to starving toward the end because of initial overindulgence.<sup>80</sup> While provisions such as flour, meal, sugar, and salt were conducive to preparing basic staples such as bread and biscuits, sometimes women were able to find items to supplement their food. Women scrounged the earth for items readily available in an eastern market. Jane Gould Tourtillott "went in a path through the hazel bushes, saw some hazelnuts laying on the ground...finding them good, gathered two quarts, which were quite a luxury this time of year."<sup>81</sup> The view of hazelnuts as a luxury proves that women believed the trail lacked the abundant ingredients that eastern life offered.

Regardless of the amount of packed culinary resources women had available, wood and water, gathered from the natural surroundings, were scarce and further limited their use of provisions and daily activities. Helen Carpenter experienced, "Noon on the prairie where there was neither wood nor water...precludes the idea of making tea at noon as some of the party wished to do."<sup>82</sup> Contaminated water sources outnumbered pure ones, which caused a lack of drinking water as well as a lack of nutrient rich sources such as healthy fish:

At the edge of the water every now and then would be a dead ox or cow that had gone down the steep bank to quench its thirst and, being too weak to make the return up the steep bank, would fall in the river and drown. About those dead carcasses would be dozens of large fish dead. They had been eating on the putrid flesh of the dead cattle. So that ended the feast of fish.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 70.

<sup>81</sup> Tourtillott, "Touring From Mitchell, Iowa, to California, 1862," 219.

<sup>82</sup> Carpenter, "A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857," 97.

<sup>83</sup> Rau, *Surviving The Oregon Trail*, 151. For additional accounts of water contamination and scarcity, see Betsey Bayley, "Across the Plains in 1854," Patty Sessions, "A Pioneer Mormon Diary," Sallie Hester, "The Diary of a Pioneer Girl," Louisiana Strentzel, "A Letter from California, 1849," Lucena Parsons, "An Overland Honeymoon," Susan Amelia Cranston, "An Ohio Lady Crosses the Plains," Mariett Foster Cummings, "A Trip Across the Continent," Lucy Rutledge Cooke, "Letters on the Way to California," Abigail Jane Scott, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon," Polly Coon, "Journal of a Journey Over the Rocky Mountains," Martha S. Read, "A History of our Journey," Amelia Stewart Knight, "Iowa to the Columbia River," Mary Burrell, "Council Bluffs to California, 1854," Elizabeth Austin, "Vermillion Wagon Train Diaries, 1854," Ellen Hundley, "From Utah to Texas in 1856,"

Many women felt they could never escape the constant struggles to provide meals for their family or limitations the frontier landscape posed on fulfillment of such duties. There were exceptions to this scarcity situation, particularly during the later years of Overland travel when wealthy families attempted to increase their social status through western opportunities. Harriet T. Clark and her husband had “seven or eight wagons and two or three hundred head of cattle, about 100 head of horses” and chickens “to furnish us with eggs all the way.”<sup>84</sup> Harriet T. Clark’s wealth and ability to purchase quality items provided an abundance of resources, which made her journey favorable. Due to her lack of struggle compared to the common westering females, her perception of the Overland Trail was one of a “pleasure trip and a perfect delight.”<sup>85</sup> However, when not so adequately outfitted, the negative effects of resource scarcity affected female perception of native encounters on the Overland Trail.

At the beginning of their westward migration, women like Harriet Noble “had the greatest terror of Indians.”<sup>86</sup> Having no prior experience with natives and provided only with knowledge from exaggerated stories, Catherine Haun “had a nervous attack was really so timid that I saw that the canvas of our wagon was snugly together; all strings and fastenings securely tied...for I just couldn’t go to sleep knowing that some bold, prying savage eye might look in at me during the night.”<sup>87</sup> Catherine Haun’s reacted to native presence with fear and apprehension, similar to that of Amelia Stuart Knight. “I was very much frightened...and lied awake all night – I expected every minite we would all be killed, however we all found our scalps on in the morning.”<sup>88</sup> Both women expected the worst from native presence and felt completely

---

and Harriet A. Loughary, “‘Travels and Incidents,’ 1864,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:35, 1:168, 1:240, 1:255, 2:266, 3:101, 4:135, 4:246, 5:59, 5:188, 198, 5:227, 6:59, 61, 6:248, 7:117, 7:140, 8:150.

<sup>84</sup> Harriet T. Clark, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 104.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Harriet Noble, “Emigration from New York to Michigan,” in *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (1972; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 226.

<sup>87</sup> Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” 176.

<sup>88</sup> Amelia Stewart Knight, “Iowa to the Columbia River,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 6:58. For additional accounts of women who feared Indians, see Tabitha Brown, “A Brimfield Heroine,” Margaret A. Frink, “Adventures of a Party of Gold-seekers,” Lucena Parsons, “An Overland Honeymoon,” Harriet Talcott Buckingham, “Crossing the Plains in 1851,” Amelia Hadley, “Journal of Travails to Oregon,” Elizabeth Wood, “Journal of a Trip to Oregon,” Abigail Jane Scott, “Journal of a Trip to Oregon,” Cecelia Adams, “Twin Sisters on the Oregon Trail,” Amelia Stewart Knight, “Iowa to the Columbia River,” Ellen Hundley, “From Utah to Texas in

overwhelmed due to the minimal precautionary measures they were able to take. However, women's reliance on the availability of resources was so great that when the western landscape failed to provide such elements, they developed a different view of native presence from their original outlook and that of men.<sup>89</sup> Helen Carpenter's family encountered a group of peaceful Indians but "Uncle Sam kept charging us to keep on our guard as 'nobody knows what they may be up to'...they came with moccasins to trade for something to eat."<sup>90</sup> Although women were reluctant to sacrifice food provisions, clothing materials were essential for protection against harsh trail elements. Helen Carpenter understood the value of food but also knew time to mend or make clothing was rare. From Helen's perspective, they could acquire necessary resources from natives at minimal effort to balance the supply of provisions along the journey. Therefore, while Uncle Sam's advice of caution is considered, Helen's focus is on trade. Men, as protectors of the family, stock, and train unity, focused on their family's safety particularly from native attack.<sup>91</sup> Uncle Sam was persistent about being wary of natives and was disinterested in what any unfamiliar outsider had to offer. Uncle Sam's attitude toward the native encounter was nearly universal; men viewed the Overland Trail journey as a constant threat and an exhausting one to constantly defend against.

Charles Howard Crawford believed the "Sohones or Snake Indians" were "one of the worst tribes that ever lived on the American continent for low cunning, meanness, and treachery...."<sup>92</sup> Although Charles Howard Crawford did not personally experience the ruthlessness of the Sohones, stories circulated throughout wagon trains that reaffirmed negative generalizations:

---

1856," Harriet Booth Griswold, "From Ashtabula to Petaluma in 1859," Harriet A. Loughary, "'Travels and Incidents,' 1864," and Mary Ringo, "The 1864 Journal," in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:52, 2:77, 79-81, 84, 2:277, 3:45, 3:89, 3:175, 5:55, 88, 5:274, 6:40, 58, 60, 7:145, 7:233, 8:150, 8:215.

<sup>89</sup> Glenda Riley, "Frontierswomen's Changing Views of Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 20. <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>90</sup> Carpenter, "A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857," 116. For additional accounts of women who traded with Indians for resources, see Susan Amelia Cranston, "An Ohio Lady Crosses the Plains," Elizabeth Wood, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon," Abigail Jane Scott, "Journal of a Trip to Oregon," Polly Coon, "Journal of a Journey Over the Rocky Mountains," and Elizabeth Austin, "Vermillion Wagon Train Diaries, 1854," in *Covered Wagon Women*, 3:124, 3:174, 170, 5:124, 5:187, 195, 7:124; Rebecca Ketcham, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 102-3; Lydia Allen Rudd, "'Notes By the Wayside En Route to Oregon, 1852,'" and Knight, "Diary of Mrs. Amelia Stewart Knight," in *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 192, 213.

<sup>91</sup> Myres, *Ho for California!*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> Crawford, *Scenes of Earlier Days*, 30.

...The savage yell was heard, striking terror to every heart...for out of the entire company only two boys were left as survivors of the scene that day...To fully accomplish their brutal work they burned the wagons, and then used iron rods to burn their victims into insensibility.<sup>93</sup>

These extreme accounts of men who failed to protect their families intensified the threat Indians posed to male Overlanders. Additionally, horse thievery was an exhausting daily challenge to ward against:

The men at the fort warned us to look out for thieving Indians...they came we supposed about midnight when the guards were being changed and took three horses and made their escape with them while no one knew they were gone until the next morning.<sup>94</sup>

Frequent failure to fulfill the protectorate role increased the disparity between male and female perception of Indian encounters. Women, while cautious in most respects, saw the Overland Trail as a barren landscape where risks were necessary for daily survival. While the availability of resources varied, their use and application influenced women's adherence to social behavioral standards established in their previous lives.

Social standards in congruence with traditional gender-specific behavior guided an individual's actions and opinions of the frontier throughout the westward journey. Women performed the tasks necessary to carry out their roles but were fiercely committed to doing so with accepted behavior. Helen Carpenter noted "...various chip gatherers can be seen...It would be amusing if it were not dire necessity which drives them to it. Hale made gather this evening and reported to mother...."<sup>95</sup> Helen did not forwardly express disgust for the gather and use of buffalo chips, dried pieces of buffalo dung, but clearly cannot imagine doing so within voluntary circumstances. Mention of Hale's employment by Helen's mother is evidence of her mother's attempt to retain her dignity while completing necessary tasks. Such tasks influenced women's view of the Overland Trail as a degrading and embarrassing place because such behavior back

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>95</sup> Carpenter, "A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857," 119. Hale is Helen's younger brother for whom it was acceptable to take part in such activities.

east would have been unacceptable. Similar dignity emphasizing social standards guided male behavior. Both genders avoided the need for buffalo chips as fuel altogether when the situation provided for such opportunity. “In order to get any fire wood we take our horses, and ride across the Stream...and go a mile to the river and cut some dead Willow bushes and bring to Camp. This is getting fire under difficulties; but better than none.”<sup>96</sup> Winfield Scott Ebey did not consider starting a fire with buffalo chips and would have done without a fire if the wood had been unattainable. More often however, men’s actions did not so closely resemble female social influences. Men often found women’s reactions and the way in which they carried out tasks amusing:

...we had to use buffalo chips...It was amusing to see the different expressions of countenance when this announcement was made. Ladies who had been reared in luxury and were generally noted for their good nature and mild manners, fairly stamped the earth and almost gritted their teeth together, declaring they never could and never would cook with it.<sup>97</sup>

Men’s amusement toward the application of buffalo chips stemmed from their freedom from female social standards and acceptable behavior restrictions. The Overland Trail was consequently favorable toward men applying their role as masculine protector to the westward journey with considerable ease. Men saw the adaptations people made to their Overland Trail surroundings in a different light than women. “It is an excellent thing we are so formed that we can adapt ourselves to the surrounding circumstances.”<sup>98</sup> From the ease of Charles Howard Crawford’s tone, he clearly found adaptation a fluid process everyone was easily capable of, however, female Overland Trail experience and attitude strongly suggests otherwise. Crawford observed an exceptional outburst contrary to most women’s public display of emotions. Lavinia Honeyman Porter

...would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I thought I had gone beyond

---

<sup>96</sup> Ebey, *The 1854 Oregon Trail Diary of Winfield Scott Ebey*, 69.

<sup>97</sup> Crawford, *Scenes of Earlier Days*, 9.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

hearing distance, I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way like a child sobs and tears, wishing myself back home with my friends and chiding myself for consenting to this wild goose chase.<sup>99</sup>

She clearly disapproves of transporting her life westward, but regardless of her personal opinion on the situation, nineteenth-century female social standards influenced Lavinia to be publically positive regardless of the circumstances.

Women's concern for public appearance included physical traits as well. Back east, women felt their appearance was a direct reflection of their family. If people saw a woman as presentable, clean, and beautiful, then they thought the same about her family. Thus, women were adamant about maintaining a beautiful physical appearance. Miriam Davis stated she "...cooked so much out in the sun and smoke that I hardly know who I am when I look into the little looking glass."<sup>100</sup> Social standards for beauty and femininity influenced women to perceive the trail as a harmful place to their fair complexion and a challenging force to their appearance. Determined to counter the Overland Trail's complexion destroying forces and maintain a proper feminine appearance, many mothers insisted for themselves and daughters to take reasonable cautions:

While traveling, mother was particular about Louvina and me wearing sunbonnets and long mitts in order to protect our complexions, hair and hands. Much of the time I should like to have gone without that long bonnet poking out over my face, but mother pointed out to me some girls who did not wear bonnets and as I did not want to look as they did, I stuck to my bonnet finally growing used to it.<sup>101</sup>

Protecting one's skin was a constant reminder to women as to how detrimental the Overland Trail was to their being. Although women took protective measures such as wearing bonnets, they viewed the Overland Trail as a damaging place to their appearance as socially acceptable women.

To uphold her appearance as a domestic woman working within the traditional sphere, Catherine Haun was "never without an apron and a three-cornered kerchief...I presented a

---

<sup>99</sup> Lavinia Honeyman Porter, quoted in Faragher and Stansell, "Women and Their Families," 251.

<sup>100</sup> Miriam Davis, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 83.

<sup>101</sup> Adrietta Hixon, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 84.

comfortable, neat appearance.”<sup>102</sup> Prolonging this favorable facade was difficult. As the westward journey progressed, women’s muddy, torn, and infrequently washed clothing reflected their strenuous and physically demanding tasks. The traditional clothing style of floor length dresses, high tight collars, and heavy amounts of fabric became a nuisance in trail life but continued for as long as possible due to its connection to gender-specific standards.<sup>103</sup> Women felt that any clothing, which made them seem more fitting to the trail, threatened the image of it being a temporary place and lifestyle. Even though Rebecca Ketcham’s dress was “dirty and...torn nearly if not quite twenty times,”<sup>104</sup> she refused to change into a more practical garb, such as bloomers, and was determined to appear as easterly domestic as possible. “Bloomers were made with short skirts and pants reaching to the shoe tops.”<sup>105</sup> While they enabled Jane Kellogg “to walk through the sagebrush,”<sup>106</sup> the majority of female Overlanders could not afford such special occasion fashion. More importantly, many women disapproved of such liberating fashions. Public reactions to bloomers further exemplify nineteenth-century social standards’ rejection of such inappropriate fashion, no matter how temporary. Helen H. Clark recalled a clerk’s persistent stare at her bloomers as if he had never known women had feet.<sup>107</sup> It was socially unacceptable for a woman to show her legs; therefore, women consistently wore long skirts throughout the westward journey. If nothing else, these long skirts aided in maintenance of modesty, a crucial social factor more so than the cleanliness of clothing. Long skirts were a privacy barrier in times when women needed to relieve themselves. Two women faced away from a third with skirts surrounding her for visibility protection.<sup>108</sup> Social expectations for modest women influenced female perception of the Overland Trail as a disgraceful place inauspicious to upholding the privacy upon which many females depended to carry out specific tasks. Furthermore, the Overland Trail was rarely conducive to upholding the Sabbath, hindering public display of women’s piety.

---

<sup>102</sup> Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” 168.

<sup>103</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 106.

<sup>104</sup> Rebecca Ketcham, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 101.

<sup>105</sup> Jane Kellogg, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 105.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 128.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Sunday had become a day for women to practice their religious devotion and confirm their nature as moral and devout beings by suspending all earthly work to concentrate on scripture and prayer. However, this practice was not conducive to trail Sundays where religious practice came second to drying out cargo. Consequently, women perceived trail duties on Sunday as irritating and blasphemous.<sup>109</sup> Mary Stuart Bailey was determined to remain true to Sabbath observance, “I have not washed yet nor do I intend to on the Sabbath.”<sup>110</sup> Initially women insisted on performing traditional Sabbath practices. Yet as the westward journey progressed, many women such as Catherine Haun had to accept reality of, if not abandonment, modification to traditional Sabbath observation. “If we had a devotional service the minister stood in the center of the corral while we all kept on with our work. There was no disrespect intended but there was little time for leisure or that the weary pilgrim could call his own.”<sup>111</sup> As the reality of trail life became apparent, many women along with Catherine Haun did not completely discard Sabbath observance but made a reasonable excuse to justify the practice’s alteration. However, women still felt uneasy and reverted back to proper Sabbath observance whenever able. Sabbath practices relied upon halting westward travel. Therefore, women could only observe the Sabbath if their husbands decided to allow for such activity in the journey’s schedule. This aspect of trail Sabbath further proved male dominance within family structure, the organization of which was the ultimate structure that guided gender-specific roles and Overland Trail perception.

Traditional family structure, centered on male authority, greatly influenced female Overland Trail perception and the manner in which people accomplished their gender-specific

---

<sup>109</sup> Faragher and Stansell, “Women and Their Families,” 257.

<sup>110</sup> Bailey, “Wife of Dr. Fred Bailey from Ohio to California,” 56.

<sup>111</sup> Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” 173. For additional accounts of women who had to accept altered Sabbath practices, see Keturah Belknap, “The Commentaries of Keturah Belknap,” Margaret A. Frink, “Adventures of a Party of Gold-seekers,” Amelia Hadley, “Journal of Travails to Oregon,” Lucia Loraine Williams, “Letter to Mother,” Eugenia Zieber, “Journal of Our Journey to Oregon,” Sarah Pratt, “The Diary Notes of Sarah Pratt,” Lucy Rutledge Cooke, “Letters on the Way to California,” Abigail Jane Scott, “Journal of a Trip to Oregon,” Rachel Taylor, “Overland Trip Across the Plains,” Mary Burrell, “Council Bluffs to California, 1854,” Sarah Sutton, “The Travel Diary in 1854,” Ellen Hundley, “From Utah to Texas in 1856,” Harriet Booth Griswold, “From Ashtabula to Petaluma in 1859,” Martha Missouri Moore, “The Trip to California, 1860,” Louisa Cook, “Letters from the Oregon Trail, 1862-1863,” Harriet A. Loughary, “Travels and Incidents, 1864,” and Mary Ringo, “The 1864 Journal,” in *Covered Wagon Women*, 1:221, 2:89, 97, 3:62, 3:156, 3:191-92, 4:186, 4:218, 236, 5:40, 61, 6:155, 6:230, 7:32, 7:150, 7:223, 7:266, 8:31, 8:124, 150, 155, 8:223.

roles. Despite situational circumstances, women were subservient to and respectful of male requests. Jules Ami Sandoz was a frontiersman who violently opposed non-traditional women and felt that “women who won’t obey their husbands are worthless.”<sup>112</sup> Whatever male expectations existed of women, there was a constant female concern for how fulfillment of certain duties affected their image. Women’s femininity was fragile and dependent on distinct division of gender roles. To protect their femininity, women merely “helped” their husbands when required to perform male oriented tasks.<sup>113</sup> Overland train structure was particularly important to upholding male dominance and female assistance. Overlanders viewed the wagon as a temporary household in which men remained the primary authoritative figure. Within a wagon train, heads of households were delegated positions of “general, colonel, captain, lieutenant, and sergeant.”<sup>114</sup> Throughout the journey, women constantly adjusted their opinions and actions according to freedoms allowed by male leaders. The result of A.O. and Helen Carpenter’s “attempt to drive ahead of the two baggage wagons as no one rides in them,”<sup>115</sup> proves Helen’s dependency, as a woman, on family structure to exert daily roles. Without this supportive structure, women felt vulnerable in a threatening place. Hence, when “given to understand that we can travel behind the baggage wagon or leave the party,”<sup>116</sup> the small inconvenience of their position becomes trivial and Helen remains with her family train. Female subordination to male authority is most obvious through the driving of individual wagons.

Driving a wagon was as a task through which an individual took charge and decided the journey’s course. Therefore, men were the primary drivers of Overland wagons while women either rode beside their husbands or walked alongside the wagon. Women rarely drove the wagon unless their husband became ill calling for their “help” to continue the journey. Charlotte Stearns Pengra’s husband, Bynon, became extremely ill during their journey. Consequently, Charlotte “took my turn and drove until I was quite outdone.”<sup>117</sup> She made particular mention of taking her turn at this task, implying she did not take on the task as her own and was only

---

<sup>112</sup> Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), 95.

<sup>113</sup> Cynthia Culver Prescott, *Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>114</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Carpenter, “A Journal Across the Plains in An Ox Cart, 1857,” 112.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Charlotte Stearns Pengra, quoted in Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 98.

temporarily assisting her husband. However, some women were exceptions to this subservient female position. A few women made the journey without a husband. Widow Margaret Caldwell wanted to better her children's future by having land they could call their own and cultivate.<sup>118</sup> Even though it was more difficult without a male figure, she did not let the unfortunate death of her husband prevent her from obtaining her goal. Some tenacious women were independent leaders of Overland trains. However, these female leaders contradicted female femininity and caused other women anxiety due to potential association with such a disgraceful female character.<sup>119</sup> Few women traveled outside a traditional family structure due to strong influences social standards had placed on women to always be dependant and supportive of socially higher male beings. Therefore, from the very beginning, social standards that defined the previous lives of westward migrants influenced males and females to perceive the Overland Trail as reinforcing or threatening to gender definitions.

Thousands of men, women, and children journeyed through the Overland Trail to establish a new life in western territory. This adventure to a new life meant new beginnings and opportunities for many families who were struggling back east. Their previous lives continued to impact their journey and experiences within the process of starting life anew. In contrast to Frederick Jackson Turner's argument, this process retained as many aspects of Overlanders' previous lives as the circumstances allowed. Roles and social standards of masculinity and femininity, which they carried with them from their eastern lives, influenced and defined gender-specific perceptions of the Overland Trail. Therefore, men and women held very different perceptions of the Overland Trail and interacted with their surroundings differently. Women's view of the Overland Trail as a volatile, capricious, barren, and morally demeaning place stemmed from their life's work done within the sphere of domesticity, their dependency on resources to carry out such work, and the way in which social standards allowed them to express themselves and appear in public. As protector and provider of the family, men perceived the westward journey as a threat to its members but an unavoidable challenge to a new life. These

---

<sup>118</sup> Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women," 25. For additional accounts of single women traveling, see Rebecca Ketcham and Elizabeth Wood, quoted in Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, 99; Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women," 25-26.

<sup>119</sup> Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women," 26.

different gender views of the Overland Trail derived from unique male and female socialization. Society taught women to care about the home and family while it taught men to be concerned with their control over outside influences.<sup>120</sup> As the personal accounts of Overland Trail travelers demonstrate, gender-specific roles defined the frontier and the values placed on the land depended upon the influence from the individual's previous life.

---

<sup>120</sup> Armitage, "A Stereoptical Vision," 382.