

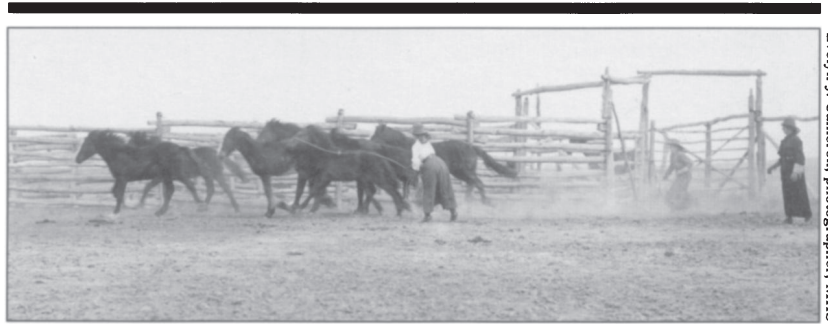
Twenty Years of Western Women's History

by John Mack Faragher

When I began graduate work in history during the early 1970s, the general understanding of women in the American West could have been summed up in three stereotypes—Molly, Miss Kitty, and Ma. Molly, the Eastern schoolmarm come West in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* to find "a man who was a man." Miss Kitty, the enterprising but fallen saloon keeper of television's *Gunsmoke*. And Laura Ingalls Wilder's Ma, the supportive and enduring farm wife of *The Little House* books.

These stereotypes not only shaped hundreds of western tales, novels, and movies, but what passed for history as well. Their titles sometimes suggested their perspectives. In *The Gentle Tamers* (1958), for twenty years the basic text on women in the West, Dee Brown updated the Victorian notion of pioneer women as the civilizers of a rough-and-tumble frontier. Duncan Aikman's *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats* (1927) propounded the thesis that western women removed from "the emotional safety of a fairly even sex ratio," enjoyed some rather "peculiar prerogatives" that stimulated them "to almost virile forms of expression." William Forrest Sprague's more blandly titled *Women and the West* (1940) portrayed the lives of farm and ranch women as ones of toil and isolation, but concluded that their sacrifices had resulted in the development of the feminine trait of "adaptability," essential to the strong growth of the American people. These were among the more interesting of the few studies available when I first began to

1. Dee Brown, *The Gentle Tamers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958); Duncan Aikman, *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats* (1927; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); William Forrest Sprague, *Women and the West, A Short Social History* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1940).



Evelyn J. Cameron, photographer, MHS

The Buckley sisters cut horses in an eastern Montana corral at the turn of the century.

consider the history of women in the American West some twenty years ago.¹

Ah, for those days when it was relatively easy to cover the field. Now, scores of new books are published annually, and each volume of the *Western Historical Quarterly* lists half a hundred articles and dissertations, and I have been forced to abandon my graduate school notion of keeping up with the literature. But the compensation, the vitality of current historical writing on western women, one of the best two or three things about western history today, more than makes up for that loss.

The first wave of western women's history was dominated by the need to better understand the actual lives of American pioneer women. I well remember the excitement of pouring over old census reports and discovering that there were actually great numbers of women west of the Mississippi during the nineteenth century, and realizing, with the help of others, that the family was

2. One of the earliest collections was Christiane Fischer's *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900* (New York: Archon Books, 1977). Lillian Schlissel's *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982) has enjoyed enormous popularity, but for the overland migration nothing now surpasses Kenneth L. Holmes's *Covered Wagon Women: Diaries &*

the essential social institution in the pioneering process. I also recall the warnings of senior scholars that "however interesting" the history of women in the West might be, "the documents" just weren't there, and it simply couldn't be written. I had the good fortune to work under the direction of more capacious mentors. It turned out, of course, that the documents are there, in surprising abundance, and thanks to the efforts of historians such as Christiane Fischer Dichamp, Lillian Schlissel, Kenneth L. Holmes, Ruth B. Moynihan, and Susan Armitage, among others, many of them are now available in print.²

But historians must bring pointed questions to the documents. One does not search, one re-searches the past. The essence of historical thinking is rethinking, raising new questions, and, in this sense, all history is contemporary. Dee Brown's perspective was as surely shaped by the cultural conservatism of the times in which he wrote as

Letters from the Western Trails, 1840-1890, (Glendale: A. H. Clark Co., 1983), with eight volumes published out of a projected eleven. An excellent recent collection of original sources is Ruth Barner Moynihan, Susan H. Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp, eds., *So Much To Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.)

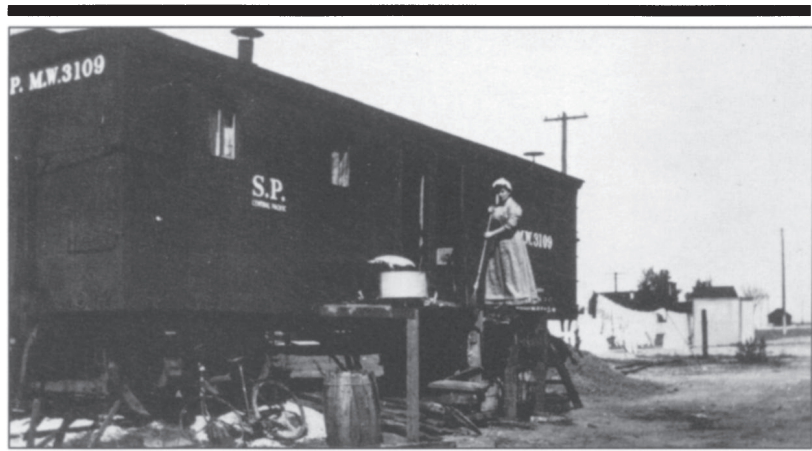
Duncan Aikman's was by the pop-Freudianism of the 1920s; and William Forrest Sprague's effort to find a silver lining in the history of western women was affected by the clouds of the Great Depression. Similarly, the first wave of western women's history was shaped by the time we call "the Sixties."

I happily acknowledge that my own contribution to the first wave, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (1979), bears the feminist stamp of the era. The study was conceived amid my suspicions that the "back-to-the-land" movement of California friends in the late 1960s contained reactionary implications for women. It developed amid the political and intellectual struggles of the resurgent women's movement of the 1970s, and I cannot reread it today without fondly recalling heated late night debates over some theoretical piece from a movement journal like *Radical America*. After the book was published, criticism from a number of established western historians also marked it as a product of its times. One critic dismissed it in the *American Historical Review* as yet another "Marxist-feminist" tract, and another reviewer, in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, suggested that I must be a man with a guilty conscience.

Such politics, broadly speaking, played an important role in much of the initial feminist revision of western history. This first wave swept away the notion that the West was a uniquely masculine world. It is a lesson now incorporated into even the most traditional of western history texts. Secondly, it raised a big question: whether pioneering was a positive

3. See Susan H. Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice J. Monk, eds., *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 369-86; and Roger L. Nichols, ed., *American Frontier and Western Issues: A Historiographical Review* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 179-98.

4. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (May 1980), 173-213.



Arizona Historical Society Library, Tucson

Mobility found many expressions in the West, as it did for Mrs. Robert Kealy of Cochise, Arizona, and her boxcar home.

or a negative experience for women and, by implication, for men. Such a question struck at one of the central shibboleths not only of western history but of American culture itself and provoked a good deal of controversy. It also encouraged some reasoned discussion and, I believe, provided a stimulus for a great many new and important studies of women in the West.

The stereotypes have thus given way to an amazingly diverse history. We have studies not only of marriage but of divorce and domestic violence, not only of farm wives but of women homesteaders and ranchers; studies of "pretty waiter girls" and mail-order brides, of women who were leaders in local and regional politics and in the national populist and suffrage movements.³ If there is a weakness in this outpouring of scholarship, in my view it is the insufficient attention paid to the

relations between women and men. And if these studies seem to bring us no closer to answering the big question about women and the western movement definitively, it is because the problem is essentially one of interpretation, not evidence. There will never be an objective or definitive answer, only the most recent word in an ongoing argument.

In 1980 Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller published their call for multicultural studies of western women, marking the beginning of a new phase of development.⁴ Certainly applicable to all of American history, this challenge was especially pertinent to western historians, for the historic West was a veritable cultural kaleidoscope, populated not only by indigenous Indian peoples and Indians forced to relocate west of the Mississippi, not only by English-speaking Americans and African Americans, French-

5. See Elizabeth Jameson, "Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13 (Summer 1988), 761-91.

6. Marc Bloch, "A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies," in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers by Marc Bloch* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 75.

7. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, eds., *New Mexico Women: Intercultural Perspectives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly*, 33 (Winter 1981), 537-57.

8. Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

9. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Jacqueline Peterson, "Women Dreaming: The Religiopsychology of Indian-White Marriages and the Rise of a Metis Culture," in Schlissel, Ruiz, and Monk, eds., *Western Women*, 49-68; Susan L. Johnson, "Sharing Bed and Board: Cohabitation and Cultural Difference in Central Arizona Mining Towns, 1863-1873," in Armitage and Jameson, eds., *The Women's West*, 77-91; Deena J. Gonzalez, "The Spanish-Mexican Women of Sante Fe: Patterns of Their Resistance and Accommodation, 1820-1880" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1985); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

speaking Canadians, and Spanish-speaking Mexicans, but by a wide variety of immigrants from Europe and Asia, as well as a rainbow of combinations. In 1890 the state with the highest proportion of foreign-born in the nation was North Dakota, and the West was home to a higher proportion of immigrants than any other region. This nation is the product of a multifarious history, and no region more so than the West.

"Westering women" is obviously an inadequate concept for migrations that took place at all points of the compass. The 1980s have been a seedtime for histories of women of western ethnicity, and while only a few books have been published as yet, much work has appeared in dissertations and articles.⁵

A "multicultural" approach, however, requires more than simply a multitude of different studies. I am reminded of a comment made by French historian Marc Bloch in a wise essay on comparative history written over sixty years ago but still representing some of the most cogent thinking on the subject. Dozens of histories of comparable subjects are being written, he complained, "but hardly ever are they asking the same questions." What historians most need, he suggested, is "a common scientific language in the highest sense—a collection of symbols and a system of classification."⁶

Explicitly comparative work of the type Bloch encouraged remains rare, not only in western women's history, but in western history itself. A notable exception is *New Mexico Women* (1986), a volume of studies on Indian, Hispanic, and American women in which Jensen and Miller offer a model for organizing such work by locality. I have suggested elsewhere that historians reconstruct the lives of both women and men "from the inside-out," by examining relations of reproduction and work within the family, the structures of domestic

authority, and the relationship of both sexes to the public world. Such categories of analysis would allow for comparative study.⁷ To lend comparability to their separate studies, historians of women in the West, that most diverse of American regions, need to consider such research strategies more explicitly.

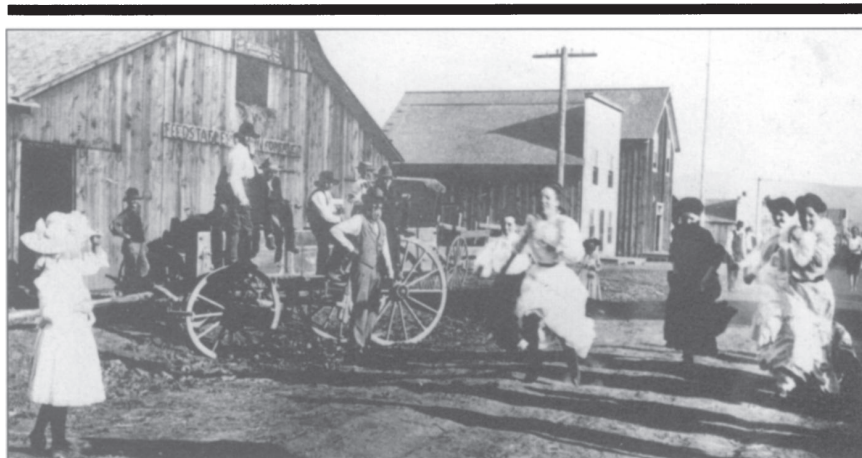
This remains a major challenge. Another is to consider, from the perspective of women, the convergence of these many peoples. A great deal of ink has been spilled in some rather sterile debates over the use and meaning of the term "frontier." I applaud Sarah Deutsch's simple formulation that a frontier is "what happens when two [or more] cultures meet." Part of what happens is a struggle for land and resources, for power and dominance, and for survival and autonomy. In her history of Anglo-Hispanic relations in the Southwest from 1880 to 1940, Deutsch places the histories of women from both sides of the frontier at the center of the larger narrative of the frontier.⁸

In another study, Peggy Pascoe examines some of the contradictions in the relationship of western women reformers to unmarried mothers, polygamous Mormon wives, Chinese prostitutes, and women of the Omaha Indian reservation. Studies like Pascoe's and Deutsch's of

women across ethnic boundaries, are my choices for the most provocative new work on western women. Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown write of Indian women of the Canadian fur trade, Jacqueline Peterson of mixed-ancestry Metis women of the Great Lakes and northern plains, Susan Johnson and Deena Gonzalez on interethnic sexual relations and marriages of the Southwest.⁹

Rosalinda Mendez Gonzalez argues forcefully that the experiences of women from different backgrounds must be embedded in the history of the European colonization of North America.¹⁰ Conflict was inherent in that history, but so was a process of consort and assimilation. Much of what is most distinctive about the West, and America for that matter, is the mixed, the "miscegenated" nature of our culture. It is becoming ever clearer how important women were to the process of cultural change at the very heart of what the frontier was all about. *M*

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Men take to the sidelines as women of Sweet, Idaho, skirts billowing, race past on the Fourth of July in early 1900s.

10. Rosalinda Mendez Gonzalez, "Distinctions in Western Women's Experience: Ethnicity, Class, and Social Change," in Armitage and Jameson, eds., *The Women's West*, 237-51.