

Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement

by Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith

In October of 1860, Pamela Fergus of Little Falls, Minnesota, opened a letter from her husband James, far distant in the gold fields of Pike's Peak, Colorado, and read, "My going away has and will be a great benefit to you by throwing you on your own resources and leaving you to do business for yourself."¹ Her husband's optimistic evaluation of her precarious situation must have engendered at least a bit of skepticism. She was, after all, facing the oncoming winter with few material resources to sustain herself and the four Fergus children and with the affairs of a home, a small farm, and a nearly bankrupt business to manage in James' absence.

Some twenty-three years later, Emma Christie of Blue Earth County, Minnesota, faced a similar situation. Left behind by a husband whose search for a homestead had carried him to Montana Territory, Emma had lost her home and moved her five young sons into an unfinished granary. Upon receipt of a letter implying that David thought he might go still farther west instead of coming home at the appointed time, she wrote: "I can tell you what... I don't feel I shall be willing to live this way very much longer and I hope you will not ask me to."²

The experiences of Pamela Fergus and Emma Christie were not unique. Hundreds of other women in the nineteenth century were left to do business for themselves, whether or not it was to their "great benefit." The temporary separation of the Ferguses and the Christies is representative of a fairly common pattern in the westering movement. Lured first by the promise of gold and later by the hope of debt-free homesteads, thousands of men joined

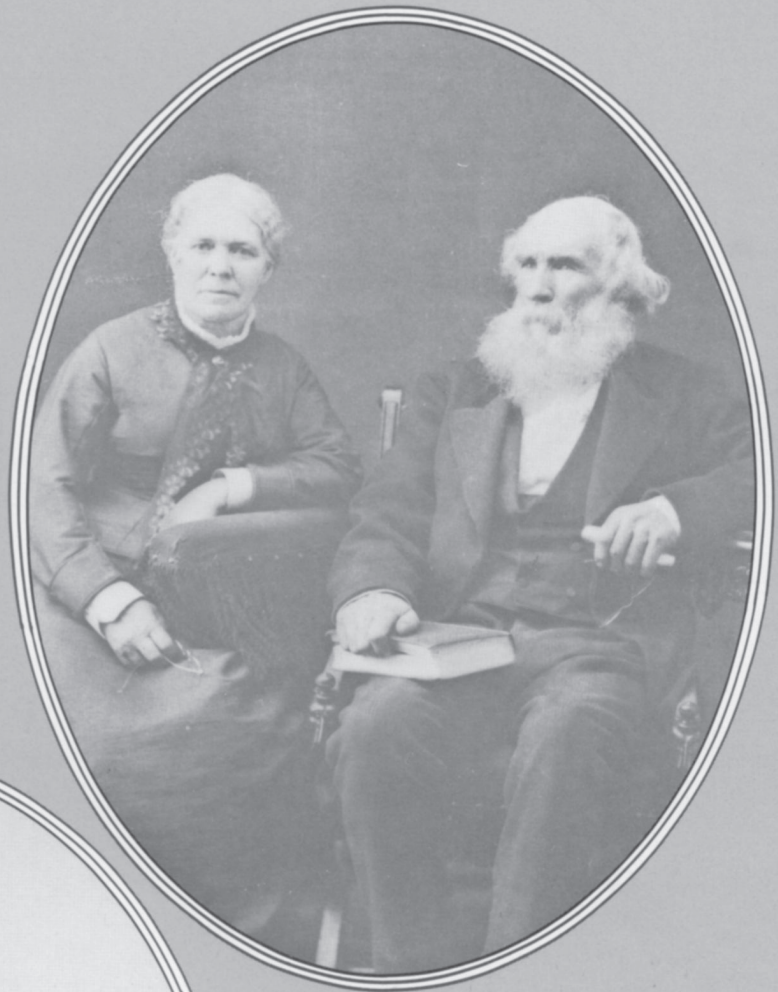
the move westward, many of them leaving behind wives. These "women in waiting" experienced almost instant autonomy, taking on responsibilities not normally assumed by married women of their time. The stories of Pamela Fergus and Emma Christie offer insights into the dynamics of separation experienced by such women and suggest that, at least in some cases, life as a woman in waiting provided useful training for life as a wife on the western frontier.

The experience of those women left behind in their husbands' rush to the frontier is an unwritten chapter in the history of the westward movement. That the stories of these women in waiting has been largely ignored is not surprising. Until new scholarship began to broaden our concept of the American frontier experience, we tended to view that experience in an exclusively masculine framework. The saga of the West was told in terms of the conquest of a land and the triumph over an indigenous people, of the building of homes, towns, and forts, and of the establishment of "law and order," activities generally removed from the feminine sphere.

Only lately have we questioned the validity of this view and the emphasis given to it by Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, Turner first put forth the thesis that the frontier experience had marked the national character of America, that the West had spawned the rugged individualism and the political egalitarianism that characterized the American spirit. The experiences of women and of Indians were not a part of the fabric from which Turner wove his theory. His focus was limited to the experiences of the explorer, trapper, miner, rancher, and farmer—the experiences, by and large, of the white male.

**Pamelia
Dillin
Fergus**

and



M. A. Eckert photograph, MHS photograph Archives

Pamelia and James Fergus, ca. 1880



Courtesy of David B. Christie Family

Emma and David Christie, ca. 1890

**Emma
Stratton
Christie**

Two Women Who Waited

When American mythmakers added a feminine figure to the western scene, they inevitably typecast this pioneer-in-petticoats in one of two roles. As the “gentle tamer,” a lady of some refinement who was resigned to her harsh fate of monotonous drudgery, she labored with determination to impose civilization on the wilderness. Or, as the antithesis of that stereotype, she was the backwoods belle, the soiled dove, the female bandit, a woman of unsavory character, albeit of far more interest than her pure and passive counterpart.

Recent scholarship has served to demythologize our concept of the western woman.³ Studies of women homesteaders, of women on the overland trails, and of women in the frontier environment have shown that their experiences were radically different from those of men, steeped as they were in the everydayness of coping and surviving and not in the adventure of exploring new lands.

While these studies have clarified much about the role of women in the westward movement, they have not dealt directly with the experiences of women in waiting, women whose numbers we are only beginning to recognize and whose unique situation we are only beginning to assess. As early as 1979, Lillian Schlissel called for a study of these temporary role transfers between husbands and wives; but finding documentation of such experiences, she noted, is difficult. As Schlissel concluded after her own research in the diaries of nineteenth century women, “entries concerning the periods when the women ran the households are ambiguous or missing.”⁴ Women diarists tended to write of their loneliness during periods of separation, but not of the everyday activities that would give historians a clue as to their means of survival during that time.

However, records of day-to-day struggles during those unaccustomed periods of wifely autonomy are often present in letters between husbands and wives, since absent husbands tended to request and receive frequent reports



M. A. Eckert photograph, MHS Photograph Archives

from the home front. Unfortunately, the lack of complete sets of correspondence has hampered research into the dynamics of separation as revealed in such letters. As a rule, families at home tended to keep the letters sent by westering husbands and fathers, while men on the frontier seldom kept the letters their wives sent to them. Traditionally, families have tended to ascribe more value to letters detailing life on the frontier than to those recording day-to-day activities at home, and until recently historians have held with that judgment. Only with the recent increased interest in family history has the scarcity of the female half of correspondence been seen for the great loss that it is.⁵

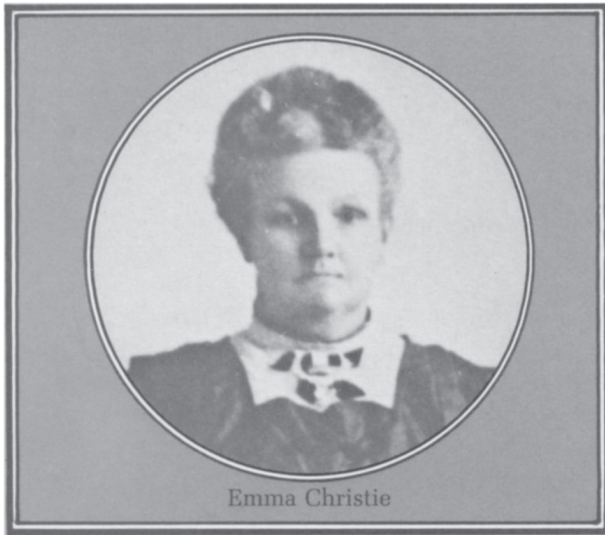
James Fergus, unlike most westering husbands, saved Pamela's letters, and those letters provide valuable insights into the way she and other women in waiting viewed their situation. “We have had a good visit, us widows,” she wrote to James.⁶ The term “widows” recurs in Pamela's references to her frequent visits with other Little Falls women who were left behind by men bound west in search of gold and adventure. The term was appropriate enough, since only the death of a husband would normally have given women of that era such complete autonomy in business and social relationships.

While true widows saw their situation as more or less permanent, the “widows” of Little

1. James Fergus [JF] to Pamela Fergus [PF], October 19, 1860. James Fergus Papers, Mansfield Library Archives, Missoula, Montana. All quotations from Fergus correspondence come from Fergus Papers. All Fergus and Christie quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are true to the originals; punctuation and spelling have not been altered.

2. Emma Christie [EC] to David B. Christie [DC], June 20, 1884. David B. Christie Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. All quotations from Christie correspondence are from Christie Collection.

3. For an overview of recent scholarship, see Sandra L. Myres, “Women in the West,” in *Historians and the American West*, ed. Michael P. Malone (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 369-386. See also John M. Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).



Falls, and others like them, were women in waiting, women whose normal lifestyles had been temporarily suspended during the absence of husbands with whom they would, presumably, be one day reunited. In most cases, the newly assumed autonomy of the women would be relinquished or lost upon reunion with their spouses. In light of this probability, how did the women view the promised reunion? The correspondence left by the Fergus and Christie families provides an overview of the ongoing relationships between two sets of westering husbands and homebound wives and offers insights about the adjustments these women made once they moved west.

There are intriguing similarities as well as notable differences in the experiences of Pamela Fergus and Emma Christie. Both women spent their periods of waiting in Minnesota and both established new homes in Montana, but their periods of waiting were separated in time by twenty years. Pamela Fergus, serving her "widowhood" in the Minnesota of the early 1860s, faced many of the same dangers and discomforts as did her husband on the western frontier. By the early 1880s, however, when Emma Christie began her term as "deputy husband," life in Minnesota offered more of the amenities of civilization. Further, the mail service, a crucial link for husband and wife, was far less reliable in 1860 than it was in 1880. While Pamela often waited futilely for reassuring words or necessary funds, Emma generally received a response to her letters within a week's time. Finally, the difference of that twenty-year

4. Lillian Schlissel, "Dairies of Frontier Women: On Learning to Read the Obscured Patterns," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation*, ed. Mary Kelley (New York: G. K. Hall, 1979).

span allowed Emma the relative luxury of a two-day rail trip west in contrast to Pamela's four-month journey by ox-drawn wagon.

An in-depth reading of the two sets of correspondence reveals many kindred concerns and experiences. We learn of each woman's reaction to her husband's proposal to venture west alone; of her acceptance and discharge of the added responsibilities entailed by his absence; of her interaction with friends and family during the period of separation; of her concern for the education and well-being of her children and for the health and safety of her husband; of her loneliness and despair and her anticipation of reunion; of her preparations for and reactions to her trip west; and, finally, of her subsequent role in the re-establishment of the family in the new environment.

Thus, although their periods of waiting were separated by twenty years and their westward journeys differed in mode and in route, a close study of the correspondence of Pamela Dillin Fergus and Emma Stratton Christie reveals much that was common in their everyday experiences and gives some insights into the dynamics of separation. Such a study also hints at the residual effects which that temporary autonomy had on their later lives and suggests that, for those who survived it, life as a woman in waiting might well have served as a fitting apprenticeship for life as a frontier wife.

Pamela Dillin Fergus

Pamela Dillin, born in 1824 in Pamela Township, Jefferson County, upstate New York, first experienced the excitement and anxieties of overland emigration when as a young woman she moved with her family to Henry County, Illinois. There, in 1845, she married James Fergus, a Scottish immigrant more than ten years her senior who was a partner in the Moline Foundry.⁷

James and Pamela spent the early years of their marriage in Illinois and Minnesota, where he was engrossed in his business ventures and she was devoted to caring for their four children,

5. "This acquisition [of letters and diaries] is fraught, I am increasingly convinced, with special problems for women. For one thing . . . because it is generally assumed that what is worth keeping is what has historical value, and because historical value is measured by discrete events . . . which men are more likely to participate in and to describe, the writings of men are likely to be kept and to find their way to permanent archives." Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), xi.

6. PF to JF, November 1863.

Mary Agnes, Frances Luella, Andrew, and Lillie. By 1860, the family was settled in Little Falls, Minnesota, a town James Fergus had helped to found. Although he owned interests in a foundry and a mill, both the community and the Fergus business concerns struggled economically through the early years, and by 1860 James Fergus was deeply in debt.

It was then that he decided to go west in search of new opportunities. His spirits were high, his optimism apparent, and his motives clear as he dashed off a farewell verse to his family:

Farewell, farewell, my children dear

Tis for your sakes I leave you here.⁸

He left Pamela with detailed written instructions for the conduct of family, farm, and business. She must have welcomed such advice, for like most women of her day she had had no preparation for the task she faced. She felt uncomfortable from the first:

I look forward with a great anxiety to the next eight months then if nothing happens you will be here to look after your affairs that is all that troubles me I can live on very little and alone not trouble a bit if it is necessary but I do hate to see others make sport of your hard earnings.⁹

In part, her discomfort came from the extreme difficulty she found in obeying James's one concrete order concerning the business: that she keep the books away from Tuttle, his former partner. In mid April, she wrote her husband that "Mr. Tuttle came up here the next week after you went away and seemed to be in a rage or angry at someone all the time." His rage took the form of numerous accusations against James Fergus, accusations Pamela insisted "would not make any difference" in her feelings toward her husband.¹⁰

James had likely assumed that frequent letters from him would reassure her during such crises, but he had not counted on the unpredictable mail service. Letters took up to six weeks

en route, and a few months after his departure James lamented, "I cannot give you any advice about any particular thing because it is so long before I get your letters and you get mine."¹¹

A short two months after James's departure, Pamela faced a major decision concerning whether or not to pay assessments due on his business property, and the absence of his advice intensified her worry: "I really wish I could see you tonight. . . . I feel very uneasy or afraid I have done wrong." Months later, when James finally responded to the letter detailing her actions, he expressed disappointment but was kind and reassuring: "Although you have done different probably from what I would in paying the assessments, you have done the best you could and I think have managed first rate."¹²

"Do the best you can" appeared in letter after letter, an indication of James's unwillingness to blame Pamela for her imperfect actions in the unfamiliar world of business. But James had left Pamela with more than a business to run. She also had responsibility for the farm and for the care of the four Fergus children, aged thirteen to three at the time of James's departure. She had to choose which animals to fatten and slaughter or sell, which land to plant, and when to harvest. Sometimes she shared her worries with James: "We have to bring all our water from the barn well, this one is dry I think filled up if it was possible I would have it dug deeper." At other times, she shielded him from her concerns. In finally sharing one long-hidden worry over collection of a debt, she confessed: "I have thought sometimes that I would not say anything about it to you for it would trouble you then I would think I had ought to."¹³

Her mother, Mahalah Dillin, arrived a few months after James's departure and ended up staying nearly a year, although she repeatedly threatened to go home to Illinois because "war and Indians disturb her much."¹⁴ Pamela was glad to have company, because she had decided to send the two oldest children, Mary Agnes and Frances Luella, to board with friends back in

7. James Fergus (1813-1902) would later figure prominently in Montana ranching and politics. He was influential in the development of territorial government, serving in the Territorial House of Representatives, in the Constitutional Convention of 1884, and on the Territorial Council. In 1885, Fergus County was named for him in recognition of his status and service. For a comprehensive biography of Fergus, see Robert M. Horne, "James Fergus: Frontier Businessman, Miner, Rancher, Free Thinker" (Ph.D. diss. University of Montana, Missoula, 1971).

8. "The Pike's Peaker's Farewell to His Wife and Children," March 1860, Fergus Papers.

9. PF to JF, April 31, 1860.

10. PF to JF, April 19, 1860.

11. JF to PF, November 23, 1860. As the unpredictable nature of the mails became apparent, a curious custom developed. In the Fergus correspondence, one frequently finds whole passages repeated in successive letters, probably insurance against the possibility of theft or loss.

12. PF to JF, May 8, 1860; JF to PF, October 10, 1860.

13. PF to JF, June 14, April 5, 1863.

14. PF to JF, April 31, 1860.

15. PF to JF, June 10, 1860.

16. PF to JF, September 3, 1860.



Pamelia Fergus, ca. 1885

Moline for the school year. As she explained to James:

Our little children must get all the learning that is possible. We have school about six weeks here then we will probably have no more until winter.¹⁵

Deciding to send her daughters away was difficult, for as she wrote, “sometimes I think I cannot spare them and shall be so lonesome.”¹⁶ But in the end her belief in the importance of a good education for her daughters overcame her need to keep the girls at her side. Ten-year-old Andrew and three-year-old Lillie remained at home, with Andrew helping out on the farm and attending the few sessions offered by the local school.

James missed his children, and his letters home were laced with family feeling as he described the beauty of the mountains and added, “If it were not for the high price of provisions, the want of schools, and the absence of proper society I would like to have the children here with me in the mountains to enjoy the scenery.” He needed to share the beauty of Montana with those waiting at home. “I will enclose some leaves of other flowers, if I can,” he wrote, “but rather expect they will all be ground and powder before they get there.”¹⁷

Lillie particularly appreciated the flowers he sent, and her reaction to James’s letters, as well as Pamela’s comments on her everyday antics

17. JF to PF, July 14, 1860.

18. PF to JF, May 8, 1860, October 9, 1862.

brightened many a letter from home. Pamela described how “Lillie was singing one day Papa gone to Pikes Peak . . .” and told James that his little girl had named her doll “Papa.” Lillie’s childish scribbles on a later letter seem further invitation to smile at the universal antics of childhood, until one reads Pamela’s translation of the message the child has scrawled to her father: “Mrs. Seers baby is dead and they took it out to the graveyard and put it into the ground.” For Pamela and her children, life on the home front was fraught with worries.¹⁸

More than matters at home weighed on Pamela’s mind. She fretted about her husband’s health, reminding him that “a young man might endure such hardships but when a man gets to be of your age such climbing and rambling is to hard.”¹⁹ His letters hardly reassured her:

I did not know but we might be murdered by the ute in the valleys, eaten by the grisly bears on the mountain slopes, dashed to peises by a misstep on a treacherous rock over a precipice, or buried among the eternal snows on the summits, neither of which however befel us, as we got back last evening as sound as we left, although wet and weary.²⁰

James’s dramatic account occasioned an immediate response from Pamela: “don’t undertake any more such perloous trips among wild beasts and Indians.”²¹ When James wrote to say he was “half clad and half fed,” Pamela upbraided him with “don’t be so eager to save every dime for us.”²² Knowing of his sparse rations, Pamela felt guilty about sitting down to a good meal and wrote, “we have set down to the table of vegistables and other good things we . . . wondered what you got for your dinner.”²³

Food for the family at home was apparently not a major problem. Pamela’s letters describe the harvesting of corn, potatoes, and garden produce and the killing of “our faten hogs” and an old cow, despite the troubles she had had with a hired man she described as “the poorest fellow to set himself to work that I ever saw.” Even though food was abundant, cash was not. James had needed most of what little money they had had on hand for his trip west, and although he

19. PF to JF, August 18, 1860.

20. JF to PF, July 22, 1860.

21. PF to JF, August 18, 1860.

22. PF to JF, April 7, 1861.

23. PF to JF, August 25, 1860.

had planned to send money home, it was slow in coming. Pamela coped by turning her own work to profit. She wrote him in July 1860, "so you see if I had not of sold butter I would of done without a great many things." Under her prudent management their meager resources held out as the planned eight-months' stay in the Pike's Peak area stretched into a year and a half.²⁴

Other Little Falls families were not so fortunate, and many lost farms and homes while husbands were off in the gold fields. Unscrupulous men took advantage of women inexperienced in running farms and businesses, and Pamela reported that "Hall is working at his old trade cheating the widows."²⁵ Pamela seems to have been the central figure among the "widows," probably because James was the most faithful correspondent among the displaced husbands and his letters frequently brought news of their activities. Mrs. Bosworth, Mrs. Russell, Mrs. Stone, Mrs. Rockwell, Mrs. Ault, and Mrs. Smith, among others, gathered at Pamela's doorstep to share any news from the absent men, and Pamela wrote to James that it seemed "strange I get so many letters and the rest don't get any."²⁶

Passages describing these women are among the most interesting in the Fergus correspondence and attest to the support the "widows" afforded one another.

Mrs. Ault is here she had been here and we have had a good visit us widows in general we was at Mrs Sturgis yesterday and we talked of our widowhood and looked now and then to see if some Indians face was not pressed against the window. I should hate to live where Mrs. Sturgis lives. . . .²⁷

All too often, the visiting women brought news of inadequate supplies of food, impatient creditors, and sick children. Pamela always reacted sympathetically. As she wrote James, "when I see them I think we are well off."²⁸ This was especially true in the case of Mrs. Smith. Doctor Smith hardly ever wrote, never sent money, was rumored to have spent the winter gambling in St. Joseph, Missouri, and was said

24. PF to JF, October 23, July 4, 1860.

25. PF to JF, February 11, 1861.

26. PF to JF, September 8, 1860.

27. PF to JF, November 1863. The Ferguses were both inconsistent in their spelling of names; for instance, "Ault" and "Alt" are used interchangeably.

28. PF to JF, September 8, 1860.

to have taken another wife. Yet his wife continued to believe he would soon return for her and the children. Mrs. Smith's stubborn belief in the doctor's return made her unwilling to move out of a house she could no longer afford. According to Pamela, even when the sheriff came to evict her, she "stood in the doore with a woman wepon the broom stick and told him not to come in." Her children came to her aid, as "Ike had the hatchet Henriettmore had an iron poker and little Will run at him struck him told him he was a bad man."²⁹ When she compared her own lot with that of Mrs. Smith's and some of the other "widows," she decided,

in reality we had not ought to complain other husbands go away and leave their families destitute and not even write once in three or four months that is worse than my trouble we have a plenty at present and a good warm house and plenty of wood.³⁰

She had plenty of work as well, and one of James's well-intentioned letters of advice provoked a rare show of indignation. "You advise me not to be making up foolish things now [that] I've leisure," she wrote, adding, "I do not seem to have much leisure yet." We do not know her response to another comment from James: "You improve very much in letter writing. This is the best [letter] you ever wrote me and contained the most interesting news be a little more particular about your spelling and putting in all the words." Such a message seems heartless, at best, directed as it was to a woman who was working to carry on his duties as well as her own and who still found time to write him frequent letters.³¹

Often her letters centered on James's homecoming: "You must come home . . . and make a home for us in Illinois or Iowa and we can never spare you to [go] back there again." When his letters promised that "I came here to make money and as I have told you before I am bound to do it," she reminded him that money was not everything, adding, "I don't see why we cannot live on the crumes as well as eanybody." Repeatedly she maintained that all she wanted was to "enjoy you and our little children riches I do not want . . . enough to be comfortable is all I ask."³²

She was forthright in her overall evaluation

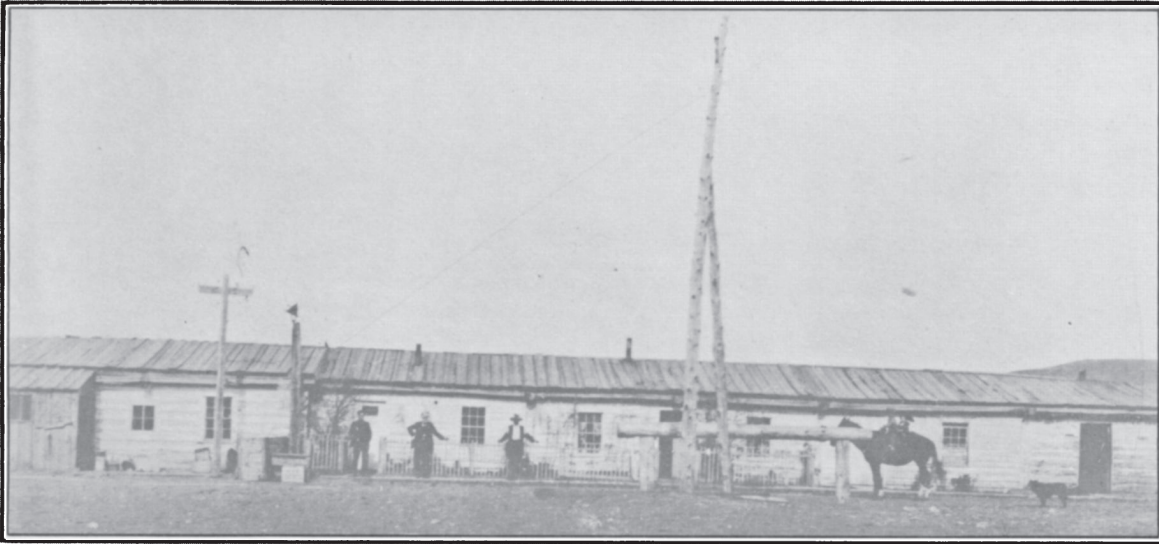
29. PF to JF, November 22, 1860.

30. PF to JF, December 28, 1860.

31. PF to JF, August 28, 1860; JF to PF, May 6, 1861.

32. PF to JF, March 2, 1861; JF to PF, May 6, 1861; PF to JF, May 20, March 27, 1861.

33. PF to JF, November 22, 1860, May 20, 1861.



James Fergus ranch house on Armells Creek, twenty-five miles from Lewistown

of James's gold-digging adventure, writing, "I tell you I am sorry you went . . . but you done what you thout for the best." She warned him in the autumn of 1860, "you must not make any calculations to stay longer than next fall," and then urged him the next spring not to "leave anything to go back to."³³ When faced with one line that brought despair to many a woman in waiting, an overture concerning trying his luck farther west, she responded with a note of finality: "I would not like to go to California to make a home."³⁴

She hardly welcomed suggestions that he might venture farther afield and delay his homecoming even longer. Her loneliness was often acute, especially during times of stress, as she wrote, "neeles to say [I] droped now and then a tear. I know it is babyish but I cannot help it and just as often as I sit down to drop a few lines to you [the tears] . . . will come right along."³⁵ Toward the end of James's Pike's Peak sojourn she wrote,

it is hard for us to enjoy anything if I do half forget myself in glee or joy suden as thought it is chect by some thing seems to say where is he then the thought of all your hardships and why need I try for comfort.³⁶

In August, James wrote, "Keep up your spirits, amuse yourself as well as you can I will be home sometimes this fall and see to things."³⁷

He did return late in 1861, only to leave again in June of 1862 with the Fisk expedition, bound

this time for the gold fields of Idaho Territory. Although he planned to be back by late fall, he stayed on, working for the next two years in the new mining settlements of Bannack and Virginia City. As before, he made every attempt to help Pamela shoulder the load he left behind.

As he had in 1860, James wrote an involved memorandum, outlining how she was to handle business, farm, and family concerns, right down to whom she might get to clean the chimney, sell her flour, and deliver her wood. He advised her to sell off town lots, watches, sleds, even the compass—anything to lighten the load the oxen would carry west.³⁸ This time James Fergus had every intention of finding a home for his family, coming back for them, and leaving behind him forever the problems of Little Falls, Minnesota. And Pamela was left to resign herself to accept reunion on those terms.

As the period of separation lengthened, family finances grew increasingly tight, and James wrote that "to know that my family is at home alone without money, causes me a good deal of anxiety." By August of 1863, Pamela, no doubt recalling Mrs. Smith's fate, was fretting over losing the house to unpaid taxes, noting, "it is allready a wonder that some wone has not bid it off." From time to time there were other worries. Sioux uprisings in Minnesota in 1862 and 1863 made James fearful for his family's safety. Basing his action on the knowledge that the worst would be over by the time he could get there, he did not return home.

34. PF to JF, August 28, 1860.

35. PF to JF, April 31, 1860.

36. PF to JF, June 9, 1861.

37. JF to PF, August 25, 1861.

After the 1862 uprising, Pamela wrote to reassure him that they were safe, though her cows and “nearly every lady’s cows” had gone dry because the Indians were still active in the area and “if it was the least dusk we dust not be out [to milk].”³⁹

Early in 1863, news from her family in Illinois absorbed Pamela. Her sister Mary had died, leaving eight children. Swept by a sense of isolation and helplessness, Pamela wrote to James, “if you can spare me the money [to go home to Illinois] I want to get one of Mary’s little children.” Eventually she gave up this idea and, in the face of deteriorating finances, settled down to face several crises closer to home: the drought of 1863 had begun, the well had run dry, the river was low, and the hay, potatoes, and corn were doing poorly. She had health problems as well—a painful and chronic breast abscess and recurrent toothaches, which prompted her to observe, “people have to suffer when they get strayed out of civilization.” Knowing she was soon to stray even further, she wrote James, “I think I shall have all [my teeth] pulled before I start [west].”⁴⁰

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that from time to time during their separation, Pamela was depressed and melancholy, sometimes over major problems, sometimes over less monumental ones.

I have had a great deal of trouble had a good cry last night I went down to the eight lots last night and there [Hamilton’s] little pigs had been in and rooted and spoilt a great many of my potatoes and cabbage that I had worked so hard among when he was idling in the barroom and other places. . . .⁴¹

At such times, she felt the hopelessness of her situation, writing, “I should feel first rate tending to my little duties but if I feel satisfied with them the thought will come what does it all amount to.”⁴² James frequently upbraided her for her weakness, and she tried to keep such feelings to herself. After one such upbraiding, however, she wrote to defend her reactions, calling them “only natural.” But within a few weeks she apologized for having troubled him, writing, “you speak of my saying I am lonely I do not mean to complain or whine or plague you for I am aware you have all you can bear.”⁴³

38. JF to PF, June 22, 1862.

39. JF to PF, September 25, 1862; PF to JF, August 30, 1863, December 18, 1862.

40. PF to JF, May 3, June 14, June 16, September 22, 1863.

Still, when she was overwhelmed with loneliness or frustration, those feelings did find their way into her letters to him. In the fall of 1863, she wrote:

I have been very good and sad for some time I hardly know the reason unless it is because I have got no money yet and we need it now the weather is quite cold and it will cost a little to get warm shoes and stockings.⁴⁴

In the midst of such feelings, she continued to manage business affairs by selling off excess items and collecting overdue notes, always with an eye toward preparing the family to join James in Montana.

Faring better and better, James sent home a series of letters late in 1863, detailing the various means by which the family might make the move west and asking her forthrightly, “now then I have told you something about the country, the prospects, the Indians . . . are you willing to come and if so, how.” Although she had confessed, “o how we fear the Indians,” she agreed with James’s final recommendation that he should stay at work and she and the children should come out by ox-drawn wagons with O. J. Rockwell, one of his mining partners. Rockwell, husband of one of the Little Falls “widows,” was bound home on a visit and was to arrive there soon after the first of the year.⁴⁵

As the time for departure drew near, Pamela received surprising news. Her eldest daughter, Mary Agnes, wished to marry and to have her new husband, Robert Hamilton, join the family on the trip to Montana. Skeptical as to the wisdom of the marriage, Pamela was unwilling to give consent on her own. Longing for James’s advice, she wrote him the news, adding, “if you was here of cours I should leave it to you, but I have no one to consult and it would not be policy to speak of it I do not know exactly how you will regard it.”⁴⁶ Even as she wrote, she knew that the decision was hers and hers alone, for there was no time to wait for James’s reply; Rockwell’s arrival was imminent.

41. PF to JF, July 8, 1861.

42. PF to JF, July 8, 1861.

43. PF to JF, March 16, April 7, 1861.

44. PF to JF, September 22, 1863.

45. JF to PF, December 13, 1863; PF to JF, September 22, 1863.

46. PF to JF, January 30, 1864. Pamela’s worries were justified. In 1866, when marital problems between Agnes and Robert surfaced, James Fergus reminded Pamela that he never had agreed to the match, opposing it because “I never knew two persons less fit to live together in my life.” Horne, “James Fergus,” 179.

Pamelia turned all her energies toward preparing for the move west, selling land and goods, renting lots in order to have money for taxes, bringing an unsuccessful suit against a debtor, and bargaining with a Mrs. Fletcher for a yoke of oxen in lieu of the \$100 in cash the woman owed her.⁴⁷ In all her dealings she attempted to follow a lengthy, detailed list that James had sent to her the previous fall. She must have taken some comfort in his added comment: "Don't fret yourself about anything do your best and let the rest go."⁴⁸

There was certainly much to fret about as they left Little Falls and spent time in Moline, Illinois, while Rockwell went to Chicago to gather supplies. The wedding was still pending, and in late March of 1864, with no word as yet from James, seventeen-year-old Mary Agnes was married at Grandmother Dillin's. While laying over in Moline, Pamelia visited friends. She wrote of lovely fruit trees and a beautiful house "hung with maps and pictures and good books." Although these luxuries tempted her, she was eager to have the trip west behind her, writing, "I will be glad when we get started and glad when we get to the end of it."⁴⁹

In April they were on their way, and all Pamelia's forebodings seemed to come true as she wrote, "I wish we had never started I had a great notion to go back when I got to Grenell [Grinnell, Iowa] now I wish I had it seems impossible to get there." Her letters described a life in which they were on the trail by five-thirty or six o'clock each morning, slept at night with their guns at their sides in a tent made of ducking, were frightened and annoyed by the antics of Torn Sely, their drunken driver, and watched day and night for the arrival of the dreaded bands of Indians. "Camp life has no charm for me," she assured her husband, although she admitted that "the children think it fun they want to eat all the time."⁵⁰

As the weeks on the trail passed, all of her despair came pouring forth:

My Dear Husband we are yet alive but better dead. . . . you [were] foolish to send for us by a man [Rockwell] you know so well he does not regard the truth [but] use[s] your money just as he pleases [with] no regard for your family. . . . next time I cross

47. PF to JF, March 8, 1864.

48. JF to PF, November 21, 1863.

49. PF to JF, March 26, March 8, 1864.

50. PF to JF, April 23, 1864.

the plains it will be with my husband or on my own hook this is the awfless mess I ever was in. . . .⁵¹

By mid June her spirits had lifted somewhat, and she wrote, "last night I dreamed I saw [you] coming I had been straining my eyes a great while but before you got to me or I was positive it was you I awoke alas it was but a dream."⁵² For Pamelia Fergus, it was a dream soon realized. She arrived in Virginia City, in the newly created Montana Territory, in August of 1864, her overland emigration completed and a new life begun.

Although her years in waiting had been long and difficult ones, Pamelia considered herself a lucky woman. She was painfully aware that for many of the other Little Falls "widows"—and likely for hundreds like them from other towns and villages—their stories had no such happy endings. In 1875, more than a decade after the Fergus family had been reunited, Pamelia learned of the death of John Ault, husband of one of the Little Falls "widows." In her last letter to Pamelia some two years earlier, Mrs. Ault had observed that she had "not received a dollar" from her husband since he had left home, yet in a letter to a Minnesota business associate, James Fergus later noted that Ault had "made a great deal of money" and "ought to have had his wife here and been well off but he has lived fast, been always in debt, [and] spent his money in eating, drinking and with women." Fergus summed up Ault's behavior in an assessment that was likely accurate for many other such husbands: "he thought a great deal of his wife, but with him it was out of sight and out of mind."⁵³

The experiences of Mrs. Ault, Mrs. Smith, and other "widows" suggest that Pamelia Fergus was right in considering herself fortunate, even though her responsibilities at home had been heavy and her period of waiting long. She had been sustained by her own dreams of happiness and prosperity in the West, yet over

51. PF to JF, May 18, 1864.

52. PF to JF, June 17, 1864.

53. One of the Little Falls "widows," the unfortunate Mrs. Smith, had successfully evaded eviction in the fall of 1860, but her troubles were far from over. All through 1861, she sold her household goods in order to have money enough to live on, holding always to the belief that her husband would keep his word and return for the family. Although there was a brief flurry of activity in the fall of that year as Mrs. Smith gathered what goods and money she had left and prepared to set off on her own, she apparently decided against such a move; and in her last mention of the case in November 1863, Pamelia wrote that "Mrs. Smith is eager to go west." Whether or not she ever made it there is unknown. PF to JF, April 14, May 6, June 9, September 6, September 8, 1861, November 1863; JF to William Butler, March 20, 1875, Fergus Papers.

the years she saw the dreams of others shattered as often as they were realized. Nonetheless, the dreams continued to be dreamt. When the gold fields played out, another wave of adventurers made their way west—this time in search of homesteads more often than gold—and a new breed of “widows” was spawned. The wives these men left behind became the women in waiting of the 1880s, and among them was Emma Stratton Christie.

Emma Stratton Christie

Emma Stratton was a native of frontier America, born into a farming family in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1854. As a child she moved with her family to Blue Earth County, Minnesota. There, at age sixteen, she married David Christie, a twenty-two-year-old Scotsman whose family had also moved to Blue Earth County from Watertown.⁵⁴ David suffered a serious asthma attack just before the wedding ceremony, and the shadow of his ill health was to hang over them for the rest of their married life. Their first twelve years were spent on a small farm near David's father's place, and Emma's responsibilities were those of farm wife and mother to four young sons. In early 1883, discouraged by his poor health and precarious finances, David began to talk of leaving Minnesota to look for better farmland and a more hospitable climate. The Christies were a close-knit clan, and family letters indicate widespread discussion among family members about David's intention to leave Blue Earth County. There were numerous suggestions as to where he should try his luck, but by April of 1883 he had made his choice and had informed his brother Sandy, “I think Montana will be a good country for me to go to.”⁵⁵

Unlike Pamela Fergus, who saw her husband's first trip to the gold fields as a temporary separation undertaken to provide money needed to improve their situation at home, Emma Christie saw David's trip in 1863 as a brief reconnaissance of the country that would eventually become their home. In mid May of 1883, Emma and the boys bid David farewell, confident that he would be home by early September. He boarded a Northern Pacific train and headed west on the recently completed line. Family legend has it that his asthma was by then so bad

that when he arrived in Miles City, Montana Territory, his two traveling companions had to carry him off the train. Yet, by the time he and his friends had driven a wagon across the plains and into the mountains near Bozeman, he had recovered.⁵⁶

Emma welcomed news of the healing powers of the mountain air and looked forward to letters that recounted her husband's first impressions of their new home. Unlike the Ferguses, the Christies found mail service reliable and relatively prompt: Emma often received letters from Montana within four days of David's posting them. Their correspondence was regular and steady, and the life of the Christie family was largely orchestrated by David from his distant and oft-changing command post.

He wrote that attractive land was still available in the more mountainous areas but that he was in no position to stake his claim. Furthermore, though his wages as a ranch hand were sufficient for his personal needs, they left him no extra money to send home to help defray the debts he had left in Blue Earth County. Emma must have found such news discouraging, for her letters show that she lived in fear of creditors calling in notes or seizing their house before David could return. Although not a comfortable situation, it was a familiar one, for she had lived most of her married life under the shadow of heavy debts. The farm produced most of the food they needed, and, like Pamela Fergus, Emma managed to earn some cash: “We milk two cows so I make a little more butter than we need so I have a little to sell.” But that limited income barely kept the family going and was not enough to reduce their debts. Emma was determined not to sign any more of the hated “notes”: “As to our running [further] in det we have not nor wot not if we had to do with out grocers.”⁵⁷

Emma kept David informed about their crops and those of their neighbors, and she kept him posted on family affairs. Yet, neither her letters nor David's specifically mentioned that she was carrying their fifth child. As her due date approached, David wrote that he had not yet

54. David B. Christie (1848-1920) was to figure prominently in the settlement and development of Bridger Canyon in southwestern Montana. Many of the Christie descendants—David and Emma had nine children in all—still live in the Bozeman area.

55. DC to Alexander Christie, April 8, 1883. David's older brother Alexander “Sandy” Christie, was a prime influence in his life. He was a surveyor for the United States government, and most of his letters were postmarked Washington, D.C. A bachelor, he took special interest in the affairs of Emma and the children, frequently providing Emma with both emotional and financial support during David's long absences.

56. Interview with Ina Christie Denton and Lawrence G. Christie, grandchildren of David B. Christie, by Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, Bozeman, Montana, August 1983.

57. EC to Alexander Christie, June 4, 1883.

managed to earn enough money for train fare home. Although still containing no mention of Emma's pregnancy, his letters during late October showed his mounting concern for her welfare: "I am afraid you are sick or you would have written. . . . Now Dear you don't know how anxious I am to hear from you and to know how you are."⁵⁸

By the time Emma received that letter, she had already given birth. The night little Willie was born, David was camped up Brackett Creek Divide in the Bridger Mountains, writing a letter to his brother containing news that must have been disheartening to a woman who had come to believe that the healthful climate of Montana held the key to their happiness:

I have been walowing in snow crossing the Divide 2½ feet deep could not make more than about 4 miles in a day and then camp out in it. I feel just about played out and thoroughly disgusted with this damned desolate country. No I will never settle in this cursed country where they only have about 3 months of pleasant weather.⁵⁹

By early November, David had left the snowy mountains and returned home to greet his new son and to spend the winter months with his family. But his health problems flared. Within days of his homecoming, he wrote to his brother Sandy, "the asthma has attacked me immediately and I am hardly able to get a breath. . . . it came onto me just as soon as I got here. . . . I can't live in this country. . . ."⁶⁰ With Emma's blessing he was back in Montana by mid May.

At home, Emma added meeting the needs of little Willie to her already substantial list of responsibilities. As had been the case during David's first absence, the Christie and Stratton families were nearby, and Emma could always turn to them in time of crisis. When creditors threatened or when farm or business matters seemed too confusing, she often as not consulted her brother Fred or wrote to ask David or Sandy for advice. She seems never to have made a business decision entirely on her own, even though David was often negligent in tending to affairs promptly.⁶¹

In contrast, there is every indication that she moved with considerable self-assurance when handling affairs of the family, keeping a fairly independent household, despite the proximity of her own sister, David's sister Sarah, and her

58. DC to EC, October 25, 1883.

59. DC to Alexander Christie, October 25, 1883.



Emma and David Christie. ca. 1870

Courtesy David B. Christie Family

mother and mother-in-law. Unlike Pamela, Emma was not surrounded by other women in waiting but relied on family members for female companionship. The women within that network seem to have offered each other help with such chores as cooking, sewing, and house cleaning, and Emma's letters carry news of these activities: "Mother [Mrs. James Christie] came down and i cot her a dress for her i made it to day and two aprons. . . . she wants me to com up and clean and white wash before Sandy coms i shall try and do it if i can."⁶²

Emma held that sewing session in her new home—an unfinished granary owned by her brother Fred. Apparently, her fears over the possible loss of their home had been well founded, and she and David had moved in with his father James after creditors had seized their house. In May of 1884, David had written to tell Sandy of this change in circumstance:

Fred is building a new granary 14 x 20 and Emma and the family are going to live in

60. DC to Alexander Christie, November 7, 1883.

61. Even when David neglected tending to some business matter as promptly as he should have, Emma was still disinclined to take matters into her own hands, preferring to ask Sandy to prod him into tending to the neglected matter: "that note was dew the 24 at the bank. . . . David has not ritten to the Stevens and he promet to rite. . . . David is very carless about riting." EC to Alexander Christie, September 30, 1883.

62. EC to DC, June 18, 1884.

it this summer the noise of the children is to much for father.⁶³

When the onset of the grain harvest in August threatened this new home, David wrote Emma: "I see you are in trouble about what to do . . . of course Fred will want his Granary before I can get home and you will have to move somewhere." In a previous letter he had suggested she rent a house in Mankato so that the boys could start school. But as time grew short, he dismissed the problem of his father's inability to cope with the little boys and suggested, "if you do have to move why just move up to Fathers until I get home." He promised that wherever she went, she would not have to stay there long after he got home: "I think that I can do something with that granary to make it so that we can live in it this winter." With the exact plans for her move still unsettled, he closed with a line reminiscent of James Fergus: "Now darling do the best you can in this matter."⁶⁴

In large part, doing the best she could meant making a good home for the boys and keeping their father informed of their health and growth: "we are all well bot Don he has got a bad cold. . . . Willie has got won tooth he goes like a weed little G[eorge] wants to see pa so much he is talking about you so much." David was hungry for such news, writing in June of 1884, "Now Dear have you had the childrens pictures taken yet get them taken and yours and send them to me now mind Dear I want you to send me your picture."⁶⁵

Emma was concerned about the effect the move west would have on the children, writing, "I am very much oposed to go whare our children can't go to school."⁶⁶ David's news from Montana Territory was hardly encouraging:

I don't know what to do about settling down here it is such a wilderness to bring a family to only a stock range . . . there is no schools or any society only the roughest sort. . . . what people that have familys here are a poor lot and don't care whether they know anything or not the children learn more Deviltry than anything else. . . .⁶⁷

63. DC to Alexander Christie, May 2, 1884.

64. DC to EC, August 19, August 1, August 11, 1884.

65. EC to DC, June 18, 1884; DC to EC, June 12, 1884.

66. EC to DC, June 20, 1884.

67. DC to EC, June 18, 1884. This letter, written while David was working on a ranch in Madison County, reflects his views of conditions in that relatively remote area. His comments on schools and society may also have been colored by his continuing ambivalence about where to settle his family in the West.

And he found few women in the territory he would term suitable companions for Emma: "The women here are enough to make one sick married women will drink beer play cards and ride round with other men. . . . who could associate with such people. . . ."⁶⁸

Worried that there might well be no women at all living near the homestead he had in mind, he wrote to ask, "Dear could you stand it to live here where you would have no neighbors." Emma hastened to reply, "don't say anything about neighbors for we don't have any here you know that I can get along without them if any one can if you can bea with me." Clearly, it was David's company she most desired, and she wrote,

Dear you don't know how lonsome I am i hope that we will get settled so that you can bea with us i hope that i Shall get sum good news from you what we are going to do and then i would have sum hopes of not always to live here without you.

As with Pamela Fergus, Emma cared more about reunion with her husband than about financial gain, and she assured David that she would be happy "if we only had a place of ourn and you was with us."⁶⁹

Like Pamela, Emma also showed more concern for her husband's health and safety than for her own, writing, "Darling I am wored all the time about you I am so afraid that there will something hapen to you what should we do if you Should bea taken away."⁷⁰ And like James Fergus, David Christie wrote letters that gave cause for worry. After losing his hat while crossing a swollen stream in a wagon, he explained that he "made a Dive for it but only knocked it further away and I had all I wanted to do to hang on myself."⁷¹ She scolded him for "plunging into the water when it was so deap and you all alone and no wone with you" and urged him, "bea more carfle of your self."⁷² Torn by thoughts of David's having no one to cook and clean for him, Emma wrote: "Now I wish that I could bea with you Dear to take care of you I know that you kned things don for you I know that your cloths need washing and mending."⁷³ From the relative comfort of her granary home,

68. DC to EC, June 18, 1884.

69. DC to EC, June 12, 1884; EC to DC, June 20, June 18, June 20, 1884.

70. EC to DC, July 9, 1884.

71. DC to EC, June 12, 1884.

72. EC to DC, June 20, 1884.

73. EC to DC, July 9, 1884.

she wrote to be sure he had made himself a proper bed from the straw ticking she had sent out with him. His teasing reply gives some indication of a warmth not evident in the letters James Fergus wrote to Pamela: "no Dear I have not filled my straw tick yet—but I am going to soon so you guessed right that time but we have lots of bedding under us two big Buffalo Robes under us."⁷⁴

David's letters are often love letters. Even when writing about business matters, he frequently uses terms of endearment. Recalling a shopping trip they had made together, he wrote: "did you get that hat Dear you were looking at that day Now Darling fix up and go and have your picture taken and send to me for I want to see you so bad Now do pet like a good girl for I am so lonesome away of here alone."⁷⁵

Emma's loneliness often bordered on despair. Suspended as she was between her old world and the promised new one, she found her faith slipping: "I some times give up all hopes of seeing the time that we [are] ever settled. . . ." A single, poignant sentence suggests the extent of her despair: "if it was not for the children i some times feel so that i should rather bea sunk in a well than to live this way. . . ." In June of 1884, just when her spirits were lowest, she received the "not unexped newes" of David's "beaing unsettled what to do" about moving the family to Montana. Having decided that land farther west sounded more promising, he had written that he might set out for the Pacific Coast rather than stay in Montana or come home to Minnesota. Emma replied in an uncharacteristically stern tone:

I can tell you what yoo if you don't settle your mind on what you are going to do yoo can bea runing about all the rest of your days and never bea settled. . . . it is getting about time there was something settled upon as to the way that we are living most any way would bea plesant if we only had a place of ourn and you was with us. . . . i don't think you know what a unplesant life that i hafto live to live this way. . . . i dont feal that i shall be willing to live this way very much longer and I hope that you will not ask me to.⁷⁶

Although signed "your ever loving wife Emma," the letter eventually had its impact on the man who could not make up his mind where

to settle. In early August, he wrote the hoped-for words: "Dear I have made up my mind that I will not go west this Fall. . . ." The next day's letter contained an even more heartening promise: "I will never leave you alone again Dear."⁷⁷

He did go home in early September of 1884, only to leave again in August of 1885, eight days after the birth of their first daughter. But this time Emma knew that her period of waiting was finally drawing to a close, for in the final weeks of his last trip west David had settled his doubts about Montana and had chosen a quarter section of land in Bridger Canyon, a beautiful, fertile area about ten miles northeast of Bozeman. His quarter section was "Gov't [land] with plenty of good range for stock, good watter and lots of heavy timber near by," and he promised, "I shall build a house about 16 x 20 inside with a good high chamber in it and then build a kitchen on to it perhaps next summer."⁷⁸ Best of all, good neighbors came with the land. The Profitts, he had written, "are such nice people on of the finest familys I have seen in the Teritory. . . . Proffitts folks will be good neighbors Mrs. Proffit is a good Christian woman they were kind to me."⁷⁹

In late September 1885, David sent the first in a series of letters home, giving Emma explicit instructions about settling their affairs in Minnesota and preparing herself, the children, and the household goods for the trip to Montana:

sell the cow to Merrill if he wants her but if you can get more from any body else why take it of course get the cash for everything you sell if you can for we will need it. . . . Keep your knives forks and spoons you can wrap them up in some of the clothing but the dishes you had best sell they are so heavy and they are just as cheap here take the bell of the cow before you sell her and get that one from McDowell and Bring them and the Straps along Bring the 2 augers my hand saw and the rip saw if father will let you have it. . . . when the hog gets fatt sell her. . . .⁸⁰

The plans called for Emma to travel from Mankato to Bozeman by train, and David sent more detailed instructions:

you had better buy 2 of the largest trunks you can find something cheap to pack

74. DC to EC, June 29, 1884.

75. DC to EC, June 29, 1884.

76. EC to DC, June 20, 1884.

77. DC to EC, August 1, August 2, 1884.

78. DC to EC, September 16, 1885.

79. DC to EC, August 19, 1884.

80. DC to EC, September 23, 1885.

cloths and bedding in. . . . you will be allowed 150 pounds of Baggage for each ticket. . . . had best weight the trunks on freds scales and fill them just to weigh it and no more for if they over weigh they charge 7 cents per pound. . . . you can't get Emigrant ticket[s] to Bozeman I tried that you could get on to Oregon and then get off at Bozeman but that wont do. . . . and you must not come second class because you would be put into the smoking carr with a lot of rough men so you must come on first class ticket if it does cost a little more it is the proper way.⁸¹

David asked his sister Sarah to accompany Emma and the children as far as St. Paul to help her with the five boys and eleven-week-old Eliza. He urged Emma, "Keep up good heart Dear, we will son have a good home of our own."⁸² On October 12, 1885, Emma and the children bade Sarah farewell at the depot in St. Paul, and two days later David met their train in Bozeman, ready to introduce them to their new life in Montana.

Two Women Who Waited

Once Emma Christie, Pamela Fergus, and other women in waiting joined their husbands in the West, what roles did they assume? Did they resume their earlier status as helpmates, or did they continue to use at least some of the skills they had developed as heads of households? The ingenuity and independence they learned as women in waiting would surely have been useful traits for frontier wives. But the extent to which such women utilized their new skills once they rejoined their husbands depended, in part, on such variables as the personalities of the women and their husbands, the extent to which the women had been encouraged to make their own decisions during their periods of waiting, and the circumstances in which they found themselves once they arrived in the West.

A comparison of the later lives of Emma Christie and Pamela Fergus yields striking evidence of the influence these variables had on the women after their periods of waiting were over. On the one hand, once Emma Christie

81. DC to EC, September 23, 1885.

82. DC to EC, September 23, 1885.

83. Once the Christie family was reunited, David and Emma were never again separated for any significant length of time until his death in July of 1920. Emma Stratton Christie died less than a year later on March 16, 1921.

joined her husband she showed little or no interest in continuing her role as head of household. During her period of waiting, she had been surrounded by men willing to give her advice on farm and business matters and had shown no inclination to question or reject that advice. Only when driven to the brink of despair did she finally take the stand that helped bring her waiting to an end. She had made it clear in her letters that reunion with David was her greatest need; and once the family was reunited, she seems to have been content to remain at the new homestead, bearing still more children, running household affairs, and taking part in community activities.

Despite Emma's resumption of old roles, however, interviews with surviving Christie descendants indicate that she was never again the totally acquiescent wife she had been when David made his first trip west. Rather, she retained her hard-won ability to express her needs and assert her rights. Once they took up life together in Montana, she was able to keep David at home, even though he never completely gave up his dreams of going farther west.⁸³ As a woman in waiting, she had made a small but significant step toward self-assertion, finally calling her husband to task with "I don't feel I shall be willing to live this way very much longer. . . ."⁸⁴ Even so, there is little to indicate that Emma would have agreed in any way with James Fergus's assertion that a wife's period of waiting could be of "great benefit" to her.

On the other hand, Pamela Fergus might ultimately have been moved to agree with her husband's judgment. Left in charge of family, farm, and business, she had been allowed and encouraged to run things almost entirely on her own. By the time the move west was imminent, she had learned enough to bargain with creditors, trade real estate properties, and devise ways for payment of absentee taxes. In addition, she had become a leader among her fellow "widows," encouraging them in their struggles for survival.

By the time of her reunion with her husband, Pamela had spent nearly four years acting on

84. EC to DC, June 20, 1884.

85. PF to JF, April 1865.

86. Horne, "James Fergus," 116, 179. Pamela and James Fergus made one more move. In 1881, the family settled at Armells in the Judith Basin, where they developed one of the largest ranching operations in the territory. From that time until her death from cancer on October 6, 1887, Pamela Fergus continued to assist her husband in all his affairs, at times managing the ranch in his absence. James Fergus died on June 25, 1902.



At the Christie place in Bridger Canyon. ca. 1903: (left to right) Emma Stratton Christie, Bessie McCauley, Will Christie, Eliza Christie, Mrs. Pierce, Mr. Pierce, Jim Christie, David Christie; (sitting on the ground) Emma Christie, Francis McCauley

Courtesy David B. Christie Family

his behalf. She had acquired managerial skills, and James was not above asking her to use them again. Nor is there any indication that she was reluctant to do so. In the spring of 1865, a scant six months after Pamela's arrival in Virginia City, James once again left her and the children behind, moving on to Last Chance Gulch to test his luck in a new gold strike. This time Pamela supplemented limited family funds by taking in boarders.⁸⁵ By early 1866, the Ferguses were settled in the Prickly Pear Valley, where they would farm and ranch for the next fourteen years. While James involved himself in cattle dealings and ranching activities, Pamela assumed responsibilities for the daily operations of a stage station the family owned on the Fort Benton-Helena Road.⁸⁶ Thus, Pamela resumed her customary role as James's wife, but she also assumed roles for which her period of "widowhood" had prepared her. Even in her later years, she did not hesitate to travel away from home alone or to maintain the ranch while James was absent on some piece of business or was serving in the territorial legislature in Helena. She never completely relinquished the

independence gained during the years she served as surrogate head of household, nor does it seem that James expected her to do so.

Clearly, the later life of Pamela Fergus and, to a lesser extent, that of Emma Christie, reflected an increase in self-reliance and in independence of speech and action. Although the coping of these two women in waiting took its physical and emotional toll, James Fergus was, in part, correct: the period of waiting was of "great benefit." By giving their wives almost instant autonomy, by throwing them on their own resources and leaving them to do business for themselves, adventuring husbands forced them to acquire self-reliance, resilience, and independence, virtues that would be essential for their survival in the primitive and sparsely populated West. Although not every woman in waiting was reunited with her husband, preliminary research into the experiences of Pamela Fergus and Emma Christie seems to indicate that, for those who did survive their ordeal, the coping of the "widows" served as a fitting apprenticeship for the roles they were eventually to play in the settling of the West.

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