

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS OF ELDORADO

The Fisk Family of Helena, Montana, 1867-1902

Helena, Montana, like so many other mining towns along the Rocky Mountain cordillera represented a kind of Eldorado for its settlers whether they came prospecting for gold or intended to profit from supplying the miners. In both cases, mining camp dwellers anticipated "bettering their condition in life"—to use a popular nineteenth-century phrase. The settlement of these Eldorados, however, was not solely a process wherein the camp citizens raised cities out of the wilderness; the frontier also worked its changes upon its inhabitants. For Helena's Elizabeth Chester Fisk, and for other Eldorado women who were married and of the middling sort, the frontier proved to be a transforming experience. In a number of ways, both the nature of the community and its special demographic circumstances affected women and brought them to new perceptions of themselves.

First, the frontier eroded women's informal networks—structures that underpinned nineteenth-century women's lives—and cast women back into the home and domesticity. Second, the peculiar demography of the frontier, especially the disproportionate number of men to women, created a scarcity of domestic help that increased the burdens of managing a household for middling women. Third, the isolation of these mining towns necessitated that these women's husbands be absent for long periods; during these times women were left to manage on their own. And fourth, the frontier environment undermined the social institutions in which nineteenth-



Grace and Elizabeth Fisk in October 1898.

century women normally anchored their power and countenanced community activities that were frankly antithetical to women's traditional familial concerns. Elizabeth Chester Fisk was one of countless women who experienced these frontier changes.

A particularly reliable witness, Elizabeth Fisk very nearly corresponded to what might be termed the statistically average, middle-class woman living in Helena between 1867 and 1900. In 1870, if the census enumerator had been inclined to generalize about Helena's female population, he would have described a typical example as twenty-two years old, married, "keeping house," born in the Northeast, and living in a nuclear-family household composed of four persons—husband, wife, child, and either a boarder or a servant. This average woman's husband would have been approximately

by Paula Petrik

nine years her senior.¹ In that census year, Elizabeth Fisk, a native of Connecticut, was twenty-four and her husband, Robert Emmett Fisk, a former New Yorker and the editor of the *Helena Herald*, was eight years older than she. As editor of one of the town's newspapers, Robert Fisk occupied a secure middle position, neither in the same social or economic class as Helena's capitalists nor among the city's mechanics and artisans.² The Fisk household on Rodney Street consisted of Elizabeth and Robert, their young daughter, Grace, and May Bromley, Elizabeth's present boarder and future sister-in-law.³

Spanning over three decades, Elizabeth Fisk's correspondence breathes life into an otherwise bland demographic description and illuminates the relationship between women's lives and the frontier. Because Elizabeth Fisk had a daughter, it is also possible to gauge the effect of the frontier on two generations of women.

BORN IN FEBRUARY of 1846 in Vernon, Connecticut, to Azubah and Isaac Chester, a Congregational minister, Elizabeth grew up in an atmosphere of New England piety and gentility. Except for the Chesters' ardent abolitionism, the family was generally conservative, and supported the Union's cause during the Civil War. As part of her contribution to this effort, Elizabeth, like many other northern women, helped manufacture blankets for the Union Army. In one of these bundles of blankets, she pinned a patriotic and encouraging note. Captain Robert Fisk, who received Elizabeth's blanket and note, was so taken with the sentiments expressed in her message that he commenced a correspondence with Elizabeth and continued it for the remainder of his military service. After the war ended, Robert determined to thank his correspondent and benefactor in person and traveled to Connecticut to meet her.⁴ Well-pleased with each other, Robert and Elizabeth decided to marry after she finished teaching in the spring of 1867. Elizabeth's matrimonial decision betokened greater changes in her life than leaving the classroom; her husband planned to settle on the western frontier.

One of six brothers, Robert Fisk came from an equally genteel, upstate New York family. The elder Fisk brothers had early appreciated the promise of the

West and had established themselves in St. Paul with an eye to leading expeditions across the Dakota plains into Montana. In the early 1860s, James Liberty Fisk had done precisely that and had persuaded the Fisk brothers to stake their fortunes on a small but rich gold camp in the Prickly Pear Valley, now grown into the town of Helena. With the demise of the town's first journal, the *Montana Radiator*, the community lacked a newspaper, and the Fisks stepped in, buying the defunct paper's presses and inventory. Because Robert had had experience as a journalist in Indiana, the brothers Fisk pressed him into service as editor and general manager of the undertaking. In the winter of 1867, Robert traveled east to solicit advertising, to purchase printing supplies, and to claim his bride. That spring Elizabeth and Robert married and by the end of May they were aboard the steamer *Little Rock* headed up the Missouri River to Fort Benton and Helena, Montana Territory.⁵

Elizabeth's transition from New England to the trans-Mississippi frontier was much swifter and less arduous than the same journey was for the immigrants on the overland trail. None of the physical strain or the conflicts between husbands and wives that had characterized the immigrants bound for Oregon and California touched the river-route travellers.⁶ Passage by steamboat into the Rocky Mountains was normally a fairly relaxed and comfortable experience. When Elizabeth arrived in Fort Benton in late July 1867, both her household and ideological baggage arrived intact. Her allegiance to the "cult of true womanhood"—the nineteenth-century prescription that directed women to be pure, submissive, and self-sacrificing—remained unshaken, and it had been safely transported to the mining frontier.

Once in Helena, Elizabeth immediately entered into the life and work of the household she and Robert shared with his elder brother, James, and his family. Like many nineteenth-century women, Elizabeth conceived her role as more than a housekeeper for an individual home. For Elizabeth, the task of housekeeping extended to the community and beyond. "My first impressions of Helena," she wrote to her sister, Fannie,

have been generally confirmed. I like the place much; it is not like home, but there is a wide field for usefulness here, and entering upon the work earnestly and prayerfully we need never

1. Derived from statistical analysis of the *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870*. It should be noted, however, that this statistical paradigm holds only for 1870. As the age structure of the community shifts, Elizabeth Chester Fisk becomes a representative of her age cohort.

2. Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973), pp. 289-292.

3. *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870*.

4. *Helena Independent*, April 22, 1927.

5. Guide to the Fisk Family Papers, Fisk Family Papers, Montana Historical Society (MHS); Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, May 8, 1867; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to the Fisk Family, May 17, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

6. John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University, 1979), Chapters 3-5.

7. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, July 31, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

be lonely or disheartened. There is room here for every one to win a name and an influence that shall be widespread and shall ever be for good on all those around.⁷

Similarly, Elizabeth agreed with traditional nineteenth-century definitions of the proper roles of men and women. On the one hand, Elizabeth applauded restrained, lady-like behavior, but on the other hand, she abhorred its excess—"ladyism."⁸ She was also impatient with and accordingly critical of overblown masculinity. Elizabeth conceived of gender roles as characterized by restraint, purpose, usefulness, and suitability as a marriage partner. Like most women of her century, Elizabeth held that women were more naturally moral and more amenable to marriage than men. Women's better nature she set against male corruptness and sensuality.⁹

Ideologically undamaged as she was, Elizabeth immediately encountered problems that forced her to make certain alterations in her thinking. The first involved her living arrangements. Initially, Robert and Elizabeth joined Robert's brother and his family. Sharing a household with her indifferent sister-in-law and fractious niece did not suit Elizabeth, and the necessity for the Robert Fisks to acquire their own home became a *leitmotif* in Elizabeth's letters.¹⁰ Besides undermining Elizabeth's sense of domestic purpose and usefulness, May Fisk's social diffidence obstructed Elizabeth's entree into Helena's society. Had her sister-in-law not been occupied, she would have provided Elizabeth with an introduction into the town's social circles. Putting aside nineteenth-century etiquette, Elizabeth began venturing out on her own in September 1867, card case in hand, to make friends.¹¹ To her pleasure, Lizzie succeeded and entered Helena's miniature world of female networks.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY, informal female networks functioned in a variety of ways. They were instrumental in establishing cultural institutions and assisted women in their attempts to regulate society. Additionally, the bonds between women acted as a means by which women shared information on a number of topics ranging from health and child care to fashion. These female friendships consoled women in their times of trouble, defined norms for the group, and relieved the tedium, loneliness, and drudgery of women's domestic work. In the nineteenth century, women derived more of their emotional sustenance from each other than from the men in their lives.¹²

Having already confronted the problems of housing on the frontier, Elizabeth faced the ambiguity of making friendships there. In Helena there were few women, and those few were markedly different from women she had known in the East. In religious, ethnic, and class terms, Helena's female population was heterogeneous.¹³ In the process of making friends, Lizzie came into contact with Jews, Catholics, non-believers, and women who were uneducated or socially unrefined. To alleviate her isolation and to re-enter the female world, which was central to a nineteenth-century woman's well-being, Lizzie had to learn a measure of tolerance. Her friendships cut across the social boundaries so dear to the nineteenth century.¹⁴ In Mrs. Ashley, no paragon of the domestic order Elizabeth respected, she found much to admire. And, although Mrs. Scribner was a devout Catholic, Elizabeth thought highly of her. Anti-semitism had no place in Elizabeth's world; Helena's Jewish merchants had been generous to her and to Dr. Bullard, her friend.¹⁵

Yet even as the frontier broadened Elizabeth's experience of other women, the transiency of its population undermined her efforts to form stable, sustaining relationships with women. In May of 1868 Elizabeth noted that "... every day parties are leaving ... still, as the boats bring us greater numbers than they carry away, we do not despair or complain."¹⁶ Nonetheless, this constant turnover began to blunt Elizabeth's attempts to form friendships. Her two friends, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Norris, moved away. Speaking of Mrs. Smith, Elizabeth wrote, "When I think how much I shall lose in losing her kind friendship and society, I am almost determined never to make a warm friend, a mere passing acquaintance will do..."¹⁷ In consequence of these experiences, Elizabeth pondered a solution:

... I often ask myself what shall be my course of conduct, how shall I live in such a communi-

8. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, June 1, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

9. *Ibid.*; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, April 27, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

10. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 8, 22, 1867, October 1867, November 6, 1867; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, October 15, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

11. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, September 2, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

12. Women's networks and their importance and function have been discussed by several historians: Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women, The Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1840-1880*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), Chapter IV; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood, Women's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* 2nd edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), pp. 334-358.

13. Derived from statistical analysis of the *U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870*.

14. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, November 6, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

15. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 22, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

16. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, May 17, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

17. *Ibid.*



Robert E. Fisk

ty. *The temptation is often great to make my home, when I shall gain it, my world, to seek no other companionship outside its little circle. . . . Nothing is permanent. One's best friends leave them in a day and pleasant acquaintances prove mere gossips. I have only one lady friend that I could depend on should misfortune or sorrow should come. . . . One needs to learn to stand alone, to find within one's self the highest delight.*¹⁸ (Italics mine)

In this Elizabeth alluded to both the fragility of frontier female networks and the necessity of learning to live apart from a web of relationships. A condition shared by Elizabeth and her peers—frequent and long periods apart from their husbands—reinforced her need “to learn to stand alone.”

Owing to Helena's geographic isolation, many of Helena's wives, and especially those married to businessmen, found themselves alone for months at a time. The nature of their husbands' businesses demanded that these entrepreneurs leave the city periodically to negotiate credit or to buy merchandise.¹⁹ For Elizabeth the winter of 1868 was one of those periods of separation. Shortly after Christmas, Robert determined that it was necessary for the survival of the *Herald* that he return east to solicit advertising and to purchase printing supplies.²⁰ The first five months of 1868 marked a crucial point in Elizabeth's frontier career.

BEREFT OF ROBERT and with her role in the household ill-defined, Elizabeth experienced personal freedom. Immediately, she set about finding some useful occupation for herself and took up tutoring.²¹ In a month's time her little school had grown, and she added an additional source of income—dressmaking. “I prefer,” she wrote, “to work for money rather than sew for Mrs. Fisk. There is no necessity for my doing either. I only followed my inclination in the matter.”²² While Elizabeth's work provided a pleasant alternative to loneliness, her attitude toward her employment reflected a growing realization of her own autonomy and capabilities. “I am,” wrote Elizabeth soon after her husband's departure, “at liberty to go out whenever and wherever I wish, and I have the time to manufacture all sorts of pretty things.”²³ Although reluctant to do so in her first months in Helena, Lizzie now took advantage of the opportunities the mining town's prosperity afforded its citizens. Money could buy sufficient domestic service to free women from domestic drudgery, and Robert had thoughtfully provided her with a Chinese manservant.

Released from the bonds of her domestic responsibilities, Elizabeth went out. She went for late-night walks and attended the theater by herself.²⁴ Part of this new freedom extended to her relationships with men in the community, and Elizabeth tested these social boundaries with her brother-in-law, Van Fisk, and with an attractive bachelor, Dr. Bullard. The time she spent with the good doctor became a matter of public concern, and Lizzie confessed in a letter to her husband: “They tell me I'm flirting with the Dr. Do you fear to trust me, Rob?”²⁵ A month later, commenting on a ride to a nearby mining camp with Dr. Bullard, she revealed something of the ambiguity of her position: “Was there any harm in doing so? This town is so different from my old home that I need one to advise me often. I have often depended on my mother's judgment in matters of this kind.”²⁶

Besides experimenting with the social definitions of her female role, Elizabeth also tried the intellectual ones. With her gentlemen callers, she felt free to discuss a variety of scientific and philosophical topics and, with Mr. Stuart, she discussed the business side of publishing a newspaper.²⁷ Within a month of

18. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, May 24, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

19. Harriet P. Sanders, *Diaries, 1868, 1888*, Wilbur F. Sanders Collection, MHS. Both the *Helena Herald* and the *Helena Independent* note the arrival and departure of various Helena entrepreneurs on a regular basis. While some of these journeys were short trips to nearby towns, many of them, especially in the early period, were longer and to more distant places.

20. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, December 28, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

21. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, January 19, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

Robert's departure, Elizabeth had developed a sense of herself apart from her husband and marriage:

I did not think it possible when Rob left me that I could be so happy without him, and especially in this place. I do not call it home. But I have learned, if I knew it not before, that one can be happy independent of externals. I sometimes wonder at the self-contained life I lead. I am dependent on no one for my comfort and serenity of mind, although my friends are kind and serve me in every possible way.²⁸

FOR SOME WOMEN, the freedom to come and go as they pleased, the ubiquity of male companionship, and Helena's booming prosperity resulted in something more than tame flirtations. In February of 1868, Elizabeth observed: "Divorces are fashionable here, and it is a common remark that a man in the mountains cannot keep his wife."²⁹ In Elizabeth's harmless dalliances, she had skated close to the dangers besetting frontier marriages and revealed the opportunities—both legitimate and illegitimate—available to frontier women. Unfortunately for Elizabeth circumstances involving the Fisk paper and the legion Fisk family members cut short Elizabeth's new-found independence, and Robert was recalled from the East to take command of the situation.³⁰

Now that help was on the way, Elizabeth reflected upon her experiences. In doing so, she revealed the central tension that would vex her for the remainder of her years in Helena. On the one hand, she viewed her winter interlude as a reaffirmation of the "cult of true womanhood." Elizabeth wrote that she had gained some measure of personal strength,

... and I trust laid the foundations of a glorious, would I might a *perfect* womanhood. I never yet fully realized what and how much it is to be a true-whole-souled woman. Such capacities for doing, being, and suffering, such striving for the

22. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, January 24, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

23. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Robert Emmett Fisk, January 8, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

24. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 15, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

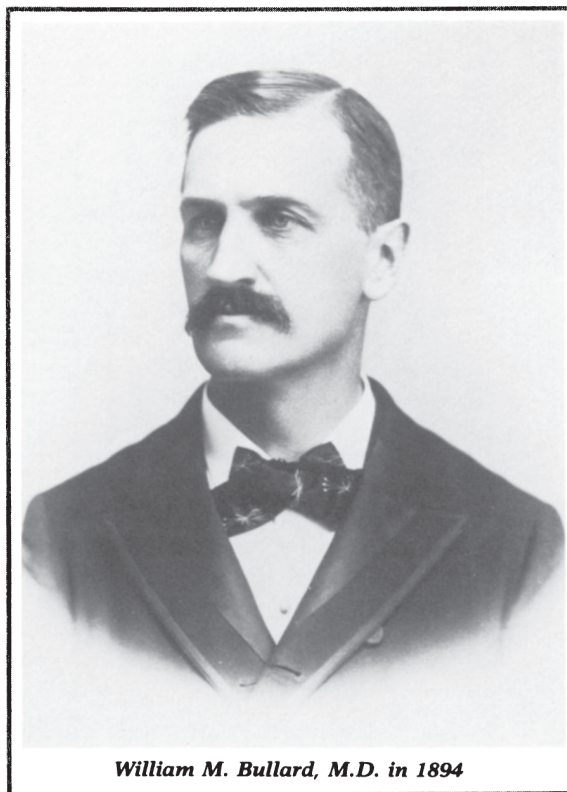
25. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Robert Emmett Fisk, January 12, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

26. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Robert Emmett Fisk, February 1, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

27. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, January 26, February 22, 1868; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 29, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

28. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, January 25, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

29. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 1, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS; Paula Petrik, "Occasions of Unhappy Differences: Divorce on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Lewis and Clark County, Montana, 1865-1900," unpublished paper.



William M. Bullard, M.D. in 1894

good and the pure, not only or chiefly for ourselves, but for those we love.³¹

While Elizabeth acknowledged the nineteenth-century role of self-sacrifice and selflessness, she had also experienced its alternative. A few weeks before her husband's return, she had:

come to the determination to be independent of any and every one, to seek my own enjoyment where I can best find it, independent of all who would *selfishly* seek to oppose my plans. This listening to and heeding the advice of *all* my friends has caused me much vexation and sorrow during all the winter, and independence is the only comfortable plan.³²

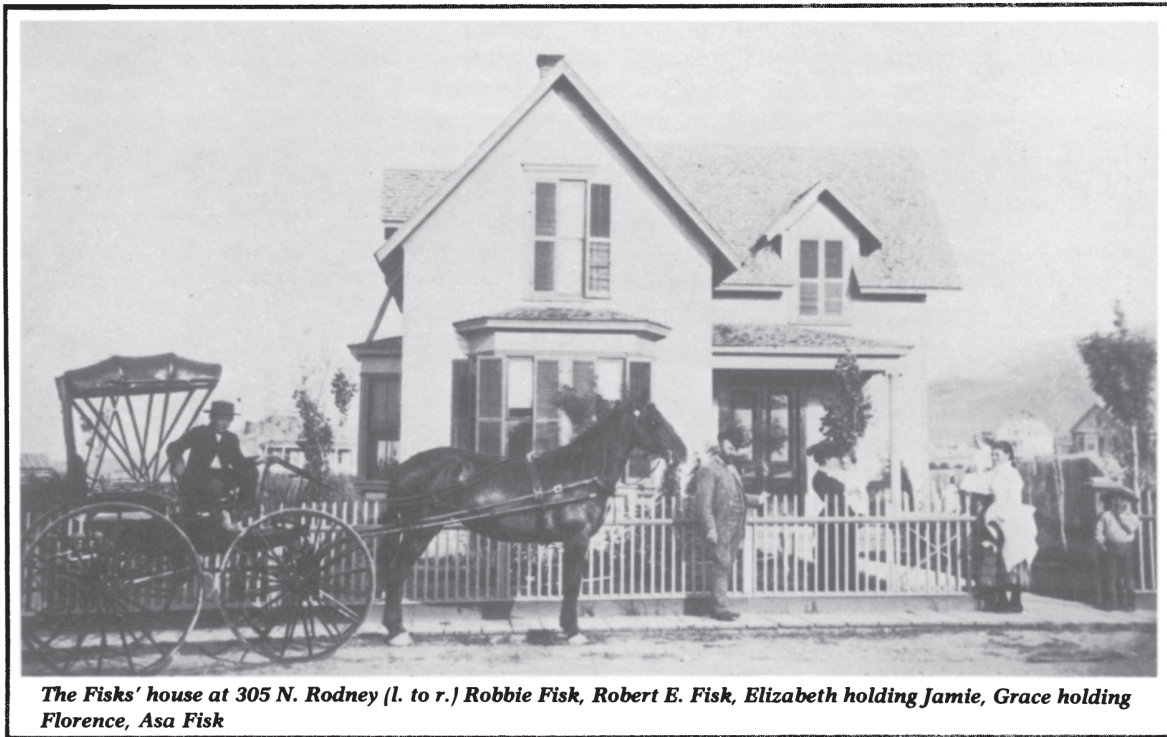
Despite Elizabeth's flirtation with independence and in the face of her disappointment with women friends, she quickly determined her new course of action. Referring to Robert's brief trip to Fort Benton, just after his return from the East, Elizabeth wrote, "... having given up all my friends for him, I cannot well lose him also, even for a day."³³ Elizabeth was about to begin a long detour into the home, but before she closed the door on Rodney Street she still main-

30. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, March 22, 1868; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, March 29, 1868, March 10, 1868, April 5, April 15, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

31. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, April 4, 1868.

32. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, April 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

33. *Ibid.*



The Fisks' house at 305 N. Rodney (l. to r.) Robbie Fisk, Robert E. Fisk, Elizabeth holding Jamie, Grace holding Florence, Asa Fisk

tained contact with the community through the church.

Because she was a Protestant and because there was no Congregational church, Elizabeth presented her letter of good standing to the Methodist minister and shortly afterward started a Sabbath school for young boys. But as the months passed, Elizabeth gradually became disenchanted with the poor church attendance and with the even more wretched sermons.³⁴ The quality of preaching notwithstanding, Elizabeth joined the Methodist women's organization and served as its secretary.³⁵ Unfortunately, her involvement proved disheartening.³⁶ The congregation, attempting to maintain its footing on the frontier, made concessions to mining town realities and sanctioned gaming and dancing. The congregation's stand on these two issues, and the poor preaching, frustrated Elizabeth's effective participation.

Not only did the frontier undermine the traditional sources of women's influence, but it also created an environment inimical to Elizabeth's sense of community spirit and morality. At the same time the church alienated Elizabeth, she became increasingly

estranged from the community. The result: Elizabeth made a conscious decision to forsake any involvement in either the church or community and busied herself exclusively with her new home.³⁷ But even in her self-imposed isolation, Elizabeth did not entirely forget the lessons of the past winter. When her mother asked what would become of Elizabeth should she be deprived of her natural protector, Elizabeth replied: "... I have come to the conclusion that I am abundantly able to take care of myself. Every kind of labor, with head or hand, is well remunerated."³⁸ She could do a variety of things: open a school, take in boarders, or open a wash house. Elizabeth observed that the last option would be the most lucrative—the Chinese would do most of the work.³⁹ More important, wrote Elizabeth, "... I have no little ones to prevent my labors of either kind and I might add, do not intend to have until we can better afford it."⁴⁰ In the fall of 1868, however, two events occurred which pushed Elizabeth further into a domestic existence.

Another fracas at the *Herald*, which briefly split Helena into two warring camps, resulted in Elizabeth's social ostracism. If Elizabeth had chosen isolation before, she now found it forced upon her

34. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, December 15, 1867, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

35. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, June 21, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

36. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, July 5, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

37. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, June 21, 1868; July 13, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

38. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 30, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, September 21, 27, 1868, October 25, 1868; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, November 29, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

from without.⁴¹ Concomitant with this episode and despite Elizabeth's recent vow to postpone childbearing until a financially auspicious time, she found herself pregnant. On May 21, 1869, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter, whom she named Grace Chester. By the end of November of 1869, Elizabeth had come to accept the vagaries of the various Fisk personalities and had made her family her primary circle. What had begun as a temporary decision to isolate herself had been transformed into a firm resolution. The birth of her child only served to rationalize further her separation from the community, the church, and the company of other women. Elizabeth summed up her situation when she wrote to her sister:

On the whole, I am pleased with the state of things and feel sufficiently independent of all outsiders to put up with the inevitable. *We are numerous enough a family to form a community by ourselves.*⁴² (Italics mine)

Elizabeth's response to Helena's frontier society was withdrawal into the family and the conceptualization of women's role in an even narrower fashion. She had commenced in earnest her long circuit into domesticity.

THE DECADE OF THE 1870s marked Elizabeth's increasing involvement with the minutiae of domesticity and child care to the exclusion of all else. The advent of three additional children intensified her child rearing responsibilities. By 1877, Elizabeth oversaw four children under the age of eight. And the lack of household help further aggravated the restrictions of the domestic circle. Nineteenth-century women normally anticipated employing one or more domestics to assist them in the tasks of household drudgery, but in this hope Elizabeth met only disappointment. In one six-month period, she saw fourteen servants come and go from Rodney Street.⁴³ Her last pregnancy had highlighted the vague unease she had begun to sense. Referring to her last confinement, Elizabeth vented her frustration:

I did not want any more children, and there have been times in the last few months when I have felt *utterly unreconciled* to the state of affairs, and even now I sometimes think I *cannot* care for any more little ones.⁴⁴

Concomitant with Elizabeth's impatience with her position, she began to adopt a quasi-adversary position with respect to men.⁴⁵ This was best illustrated in

42. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, November 14, 1868, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

43. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, May 20, 1873, August 10, 1873, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

44. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 28, 1877, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

her tart comments regarding the famous Beecher-Tilton adultery trial. "I believe," wrote Elizabeth, "that no one exercises the least charity toward women, and let her err *even in thought* while all are ready to invent excuses for the 'Lords of Creation.'"⁴⁶ Elizabeth had departed from her earlier view of women's unrelieved self-sacrifice and service. What she had conceived of previously as separate-but-equal duties had been translated into a vague sense of the inequity of the social relations between the sexes. But Elizabeth's criticism, as reflected in her attitude toward politics and woman suffrage, remained ill-defined.

Having forsaken what she conceived as her public responsibilities, Elizabeth expressed impatience with women who espoused a political position, especially that of women's rights. When Mrs. Ashley, the territorial governor's wife, came to dinner, Elizabeth observed, "Everything passed off nicely except that Mrs. Ashley *would* introduce her favorite topic of women's rights and argify on the subject until everyone was weary."⁴⁷ Yet, there was the sense that Lizzie was vaguely disturbed by her own abdication, and she noted with relief when Mrs. Ashley moderated her support of women's rights.

While Elizabeth willingly participated in local government, she still viewed state and national politics as potentially damaging to women's moral superiority.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Elizabeth allowed herself to become a legislative spectator in 1876. In company with some acquaintances, she visited the State House. "It was a novel experience," she noted, "but we came home congratulating ourselves that female suffrage had never been extended to Montana and that nothing compelled us to undergo forty days of law-making."⁴⁹ More important than politics to Elizabeth was her growing realization of the disparity between what her children learned at home and what they learned elsewhere.

To insulate her sons and daughters from Helena's secular and pernicious influence, Elizabeth determined to make her home a bastion of Christian values and conduct.⁵⁰ But combating the town's worldliness demanded constant vigilance and the perpetual supervision of her children. Her husband, too, encouraged

45. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 8, 1874, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

46. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 2, 1874, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

47. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Frances Chester, November 21, 1869, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

48. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, March 15, 1876, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

49. *Ibid.*; Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 14, 1876, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

50. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 28, 1878, November 19, 1879, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

Elizabeth's unrelieved attendance upon the young Fisks. Robert's expectations especially exasperated Elizabeth when he deserted his familial obligations for recreational excursions. As a result, Elizabeth felt stifled. "I think some days," she wrote, "that I will either go crazy or run away."⁵¹ Neither did Elizabeth embrace madness nor did she run away, but she did increase her activities outside the home and set aside time for herself.⁵²

By 1880 Elizabeth's dissatisfaction with her situation reached a critical point. She felt, by this time, taken for granted and desired time apart from Rodney Street. Elizabeth proposed that she and Robert take a trip to White Sulphur Springs, a local mineral spa. Robert demurred, saying she should wait until the entire family could make the trip. That, replied Elizabeth, was not the idea and pointed out that she had not been away from the children for *eight* years. Despite Robert's domestic wheedling, Elizabeth departed for a two week vacation to White Sulphur Springs.⁵³

Elizabeth's sojourn prompted further forays outside the home, and she increased her community activities and took up painting. Her displeasure at men's ability to come and go at will crystallized into frank resentment. "It does not seem right," she opined, "for them to have all the pleasure while we mothers stay home and take care of the children."⁵⁴ For the remainder of 1881, Elizabeth pleased herself. Once again, Elizabeth's independence was shortlived. In 1882, she found herself an unwilling mother-to-be and, reflecting on her condition and surveying the past fifteen years, she wrote bitterly:

If I felt really well and like myself, I could say many lovely and pleasant things of these fifteen years of my life.

But just now it is a good deal of a burden to live at all and while I know all the "lovely and pleasant things" have been, are still with me, I do not fully appreciate them or feel prepared to say much in their praise.⁵⁵

On April 24, 1882, Elizabeth gave birth prematurely to twins, her second daughter and fourth son. If Elizabeth had despaired of the cares of motherhood before, her depression now became all the greater. But at long last, her parents made their long-postponed trip west,

51. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 6, 1879, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

52. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, July 14, 1879, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

53. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, July 27, 1880, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

54. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, July 7, 12, 1880, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

55. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, March 28, 1882, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

56. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 14, 1883, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

and their visit acted as a tonic for Elizabeth. Their assistance with the babies and the household chores helped Elizabeth regain her health and her enthusiasm. Once more she turned her thoughts to matters outside her domestic circle. "My responsibility, my accountability," she wrote, "are great in my own household. How far my duty extends outside I have not decided."⁵⁶ For the next two decades, Elizabeth would define the limits of her duty outside her family.

The first indication of which direction she would take occurred a few days before the end of 1883. In her years in Helena, Elizabeth's stand on temperance was a personal one, confined to her home and to church temperance activities for children. She determined to carry her private conviction into the public sphere and attended a reception given under the auspices of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.⁵⁷

AMONG ELIZABETH'S myriad community organization memberships—Poor Committee, Home for Working Women, Women's Helena for the Capital Club, Women's Relief Corps—her association with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) proved the most important to Elizabeth's ideological development. On the local level, the Helena chapter mobilized women's influence in the home by sponsoring a number of colloquia centered on women's work in the Bible.⁵⁸ Generally well-received, these gatherings were not quite so successful in persuading Helena's womenfolk to sign the pledge.⁵⁹ Undaunted, the local WCTU and Elizabeth became more overtly political. In addition to circulating petitions for a local option liquor law, WCTU members collected signatures for raising the female age of consent.⁶⁰ In the latter instance Elizabeth assumed the role of lobbyist and pressed her cause with the territorial legislators. In 1887 she testified before a legislative committee in support of stricter rape statutes. Never forthcoming in sexual matters, Elizabeth overcame her repugnance in the interests of this women's cause. "I cannot tell you," she commented, "how hard it was to go before this committee of whom one was a *cranky bachelor* and talk about these things."⁶¹

57. Elizabeth Fisk's benevolent and community activities were numerous, and her reportage of such activities consumed much of her correspondence and time. For examples see: Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 11, April 24, May 8, 1887, March 11, December 18, 1888, May 28, June 23, 1889, Fisk Family Papers. See also: Miscellany, Helena Women's Helena for the Capital Club Collection, MHS.

58. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, November 14, December 12, 1886, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

59. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 20, 1886, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

60. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, January 9, 1887, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

61. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 23, 1887, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.



Grace Fisk in about 1899

Elizabeth's temperance work was not limited to local affairs. Beginning in 1886 and for several succeeding years, she attended the territorial WCTU conventions. In the report of the Helena Union for 1886, the chapter reported that the female membership had used their ballot to elect temperance advocates to the school board. Among other resolutions passed at this and other conventions was one supporting the enfranchisement of women, and Elizabeth, along with other Montana WCTU members, unanimously endorsed the woman suffrage proposition.⁶² Elizabeth had traveled a long way from the days when she had criticized Mrs. Ashley for her women's rights position.

Under the temperance banner, Elizabeth had moved from informal political activity to formal political activism, from a single issue to a broad-based program of women's social reform, and from a political spectator to political activist. Yet, Elizabeth, whose politics grew out of her experience of motherhood, remained essentially conservative and drew the line at women in politics as candidates. When she heard Ella Knowles, the female Populist candidate, speak in

1892, she pronounced the occasion "simply disgusting."⁶³

As Elizabeth's political outlook shifted so did her views of child rearing. As her eldest child, Grace, approached adolescence, Elizabeth noted the differences between herself and her daughter. Of Grace she observed:

She is a fine scholar and spurs the rest on, and as the "big boys" all admire her and listen to what she says, she has a good influence over them. I often wonder at her, she is so fearless and independent and says most unmerciful things to the careless and lazy ones.⁶⁴

While Elizabeth still attempted to carry out her mother's uncompromising child-rearing precepts, she remarked that Grace's boldness forced her to make concessions. She, moreover, admitted that frontier society forced some accommodation, else a girl felt "badly used."⁶⁵ Elizabeth brushed aside her mother's fears by pointing out that Grace was "more mature than many girls. . . and has been thrown so often on her own resources in the last two years that she has become very womanly and self-reliant."⁶⁶

In her description of Grace, Elizabeth betrayed yet another shift in perception. Although she had toyed with autonomy in her first years in Helena, Elizabeth identified womanhood with self-sacrifice and with service to others. As Grace neared adulthood, Elizabeth saw it in terms of self-reliance, a quality she wished for her daughter. To that end, Elizabeth insisted that Grace enter college at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Grace, however, spurned the opportunity for advanced scholarship and chose to remain in Helena among her friends.⁶⁷ Although Grace disappointed her mother in this, she showed signs of increasing independence and ability. Along with some friends, she explored the possibilities of homesteading but was frustrated because she was still a minor.⁶⁸ She turned instead to painting and sold several of her works.⁶⁹ Elizabeth preferred that her daughter learn to set type, a useful skill. In fact, Elizabeth believed that in addition to domestic skills every young woman should acquire some useful trade.⁷⁰ On the subject of female moral education Elizabeth remained silent. In this area she reserved her energies for her sons. ". . . [A] boy or young man," she wrote, "is constantly exposed

62. Minutes of the Montana Women's Christian Temperance Union, 1886. See also: Minutes of Montana Women's Christian Temperance Union, 1887, 1888, 1890, Montana Women's Christian Temperance Union Collection, MHS.

63. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, November 8, 1892, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

64. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, May 17, 1881, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

65. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, January 24, 1886, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, January 15, 1888, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

68. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, November 27, 1887, April 11, 1888, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

69. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, February 20, April 11, 1888, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

70. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 21, 1888, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

to many temptations in a town like this, and without Christian principles one is never safe."⁷¹

In 1890 Grace commemorated her majority by having herself listed separately in the city directory as an artist.⁷² The act, which was more gesture than anything because Grace's craft did not support her, demonstrated her desire to identify herself separately with some gainful employment. In June of that same year, Robert and Elizabeth, in a mood of self-congratulation, presented Grace with a piano, rewarding her postponement of marriage.⁷³ The gift was premature. In August Grace announced her intention of marrying Hardy Bryan, a bookkeeper at the Broadwater Hotel.⁷⁴

ELIZABETH WAS DISMAYED by Grace's choice but did not take the announcement seriously. After all, Mr. Bryan was only one of an endless parade of young men who had courted Grace. Elizabeth had hoped Grace would emulate Agnes McLean, a friend of Grace's who had made a home and career for herself before she chose a husband.⁷⁵ But Grace determined to do otherwise and succeeded in obtaining her father's conditional consent. Robert Fisk passed the final responsibility to Elizabeth; he would give his consent if she would give hers. Elizabeth adamantly refused, and the Fisk clan divided over the issue.⁷⁶

Shortly Elizabeth found herself in the minority and in the role of familial monster. She was profoundly hurt. Although Elizabeth had some hint that women harbored wickedness, she was disconcerted to find it in her own daughter.⁷⁷ She had endeavored to protect her sons from the town's corrupt influences, counting on her daughter's innate moral sense as adequate protection for her. To win adherents to her suit, Grace roundly condemned her mother's present and past maternal conduct.⁷⁸

In the process of answering her own mother's queries, Elizabeth articulated her position and illustrated the obsolescence of "whole-souled-womanhood." Wrote Elizabeth:

I do not feel that I have ever neglected home or home duties for any outside work or pleasure. I

cannot live wholly within that narrow circle nor do I think it any woman's duty to do so. There have been many years of my married life when the children were small that I could not get away from them and then I stayed at home. *But I think every mother should have hours of rest and relaxation, of freedom from care, and she must find it outside the home.* She has more strength and patience, is better fitted to care for her little ones, if she can sometimes get away from them . . . In the light of recent events I am sure it is a mistake to deny oneself for the children.⁷⁹ (Italics mine)

In consequence, Elizabeth resolved to be less amenable to others' wishes and to acquire those household conveniences she had delayed. Elizabeth stood her ground, but Grace proceeded with her plans and married Hardy Bryan on October 1, 1890.⁸⁰ Elizabeth, also, made good on her decision. In short order, she had plumbing installed and, in successive years, had the Rodney Street house equipped with central heating and electricity.⁸¹

Elizabeth's censure of Grace exceeded the normal boundaries of disapproval; Grace was no longer welcome in her parents' home. Although Elizabeth relented somewhat after the birth of her first grandson, she remained unreconciled to the situation. She noted but kept her counsel when Grace fell in with the "latest insane fashion" of dispensing with a petticoat.⁸² The gulf between mother and daughter remained unbridgeable until 1897 when Grace's marriage once again provided the cynosure for the generations of Fisks.

Bowing to financial necessity, Hardy Bryan made his way to New York City in 1897. He expected Grace and his son to join him once he was settled. Apparently, neither New York nor Bryan appealed to Grace. She simply refused, moved back to her parents' home, and took a job as a telegraph editor with the *Herald*. There she joined her mother who had been employed as a proofreader since 1896. The following year, Grace petitioned the court for a divorce, charging her husband with failure to support her during the preceding year and suing for custody of their son.⁸³

Among the twenty-six divorce actions filed in 1898, *Bryan v. Bryan* was notable in that Hardy Bryan contested his wife's suit and brought a cross-bill against her, alleging desertion and misconduct.⁸⁴ Unlike

71. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, April 25, 1892, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

72. *Helena City Directory, 1890* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1890).

73. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, June 1, 1890, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

74. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, August 24, 1890, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

75. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, September 7, 1890, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 21, 1888, August 11, 1889, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

78. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, September 23, 1890, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

79. *Ibid.*

80. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, November 2, 1890, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

81. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, September 23, 1890, September 24, 1891, September 25, 1892, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

modern dissolutions in which the occasion of "unhappy differences" constitutes cause for divorce, nineteenth-century Montana law took pains to establish blame when the parties disagreed. In a contested proceeding a jury heard testimony and by a three-fourths vote determined the guilty party.

In September of 1898, Hardy Bryan returned to Helena to appear in court and to see his son. Grace had apparently arrived at her mother's estimation of Bryan. Not only would she not speak to Bryan herself, but she also refused Bryan permission to see his son. In the face of a threat from outside the family, the Fisks closed ranks behind Grace and conspired against Bryan with legal flim-flam. Nonetheless, the jury heard the case in October of 1898.⁸⁵

Bryan's lawyer's arguments rested on a strict interpretation of the law concerning the duties of wives to husbands, namely, that a man's abode became his wife's and that she was legally constrained to accompany him. Grace's attorney stressed that a husband's choice of home must be a reasonable one and acceptable to his spouse. Each counsel's instructions to the jury reflected his bias. The judge, however, was at liberty to deny or sustain the lawyers' recommendations, and, in this instance, the bench chose to emphasize the liberal interpretation of a married woman's duty. Grace Fisk Bryan eked out a favorable verdict by a vote of eight to four.⁸⁶

Both Grace and her mother found themselves in the same place in 1898-1899—the *Helena Herald*. Elizabeth discontinued full-time employment at the turn of the century but continued intermittently as a proof-reader thereafter. Grace remained at the paper either as an editor or as a reporter until 1902.⁸⁷ In that year, following disputes between the corporation and the Fisk family, the Fisks disposed of their interests in the *Herald* and, except for one son, migrated *en masse* to Berkeley, California.⁸⁸

Elizabeth finally got her wish—a house with a decent furnace and a community of suitable moral temper. Shed of Hardy Bryan, Grace remarried and



Elizabeth, Grace and Florence Fisk with Stanley Fisk Bryan in about 1899

settled near her parents. Six years later, in 1908, Robert Emmett Fisk died. Elizabeth out-lived him by nearly twenty years, dying on April 22, 1927, at the age of eighty-two.⁸⁹

IN *ANGLE OF REPOSE*, his novel of the mining frontier, Wallace Stegner observed of his fictional heroine, "... every drop, indistinguishable from every other, left a little deposit of sensation, experience, feeling. In thirty or forty years the accumulated deposits would turn my cultivated, lady-like, lively, talkative, talented, innocently snobbish grandmother into a western woman in spite of herself."⁹⁰ Stegner might well have been describing Elizabeth Chester Fisk's transformation. Elizabeth herself more mundanely said, "Truly, this is a world of change."⁹¹ Just as Elizabeth's urban frontier had altered over three decades, so had she undergone a metamorphosis in the process of adapting to frontier society.

Elizabeth Chester Fisk's biography does not depict the events of a feminist epiphany; it is rather the story

82. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, October 9, 1892, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

83. *Helena City Directory, 1896* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1896); *Helena City Directory, 1897* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1897); Civil Case No. 4365, New Series, Office of the Clerk of Court, Lewis and Clark County, Old Courthouse (hereafter OCH).

84. Petrik, "Occasions of Unhappy Differences: Divorce on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier," unpublished paper.

85. Civil Case No. 4365, OCH.

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Helena City Directory, 1898* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1898); *Helena City Directory, 1899* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1899); *Helena City Directory, 1900* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1900); *Helena City Directory, 1901* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1901); *Helena City Directory, 1902* (Helena: R. L. Polk and Company, 1902); Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Robert Emmett Fisk, August 19, 1900, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

88. *Helena Herald*, December 27, 1902.

89. *Helena Independent*, December 28, 1908, April 22, 1927.

90. Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Fawcett-Crist, 1971), p. 90.

91. Elizabeth Chester Fisk to Azubah Clarke Chester, December 4, 1892, Fisk Family Papers, MHS.

of woman's gradual conversion to the cause of woman suffrage conditioned by the special circumstances of the mining frontier. Initially, Elizabeth successfully transported the "cult of true womanhood" from New England to Montana. She arrived in Montana fully prepared to replicate Connecticut in a mountain setting and attempted to accomplish this through familiar avenues of female influence: women's networks and the church.

Her efforts to enter and to make use of female networks failed not so much because she lacked initiative or energy but because the memberships of Helena's groups were constantly dissolving and reforming. As a result, Elizabeth consciously decided, before the birth of her first child dictated it, to retreat into the group which remained the most stable and congenial in her changing world—the family. Likewise, her attempts to influence the community via the church were inhibited as that institution attempted to compromise with Helena's worldliness. In the end Elizabeth effectively walked into her kitchen and slammed the door, her domestic capitulation assured by the lack of household help.

Before Elizabeth retired into her home, the frontier environment had fostered circumstances that created an ideology in competition with the "cult of true womanhood." In her first winter alone and succeeding periods apart from her husband, Elizabeth perceived the glimmering of an autonomous existence and a definition of herself and her capabilities beyond her marital role. In addition, the venal nature of frontier society gave special meaning and substance to the idea of "civic housekeeper." As her children matured, the concept became critically important to her and brought her to the point of political spectator. All these were not the hallmarks of a suffragist; they were, however, signs of Elizabeth's re-evaluation of nineteenth-century womanhood.


Between 1883 and 1900 Elizabeth's ideas about women's nature and proper role became less ambiguous and conflicting. When a family crisis forced her to articulate her definition of suitable motherly conduct, she answered that woman's involvement beyond the home and time for herself were necessary components of sane motherhood and of domestic well-being. Bereft of steady domestic help and often of her husband's company, Elizabeth had more than enough time to meditate upon unrelieved domesticity and to examine motherhood critically. The results were a dim, half-formed sense of the inequity between the sexes, and a frank, personal discontent. Both her need for time apart from her children and a sense of duty inherited from her century sent Elizabeth into benevolent work.

Her involvement with charitable work quickly

shaded into reform activity with the WCTU. As a member, Elizabeth found herself drawn into woman suffrage and other specifically women's issues. This transition also marked her progress from informal participation in local political process to formal involvement as lobbyist, witness, and petitioner. Elizabeth's benevolent work and her experiences with her own daughter and with a class of Helena's womenfolk redefined for her women's nature and women's relationship to work.

What had begun for Elizabeth a formless concept of work providing a desirable discipline and a pleasant alternative to loneliness had turned into a necessity for all young women. A useful trade, in Elizabeth's mind, underpinned self-reliance and womanliness. With respect to women's nature, Elizabeth questioned the nineteenth-century notions of women's duty, purity, and self-sacrifice.

The place Elizabeth arrived at after thirty years on the mining frontier was the place from which her daughter started out. Elizabeth had lived out her adulthood in Helena; Grace had grown up there. Mother and daughter Fisk in crisis highlighted the changes that had overtaken Elizabeth and illuminated the differences between the generations. For Elizabeth "whole-souled-womanhood" had become an ideological relic; for Grace the ideals embodied in the concept simply had never had substance. Her self-reliance and independence cut across all her social relationships, even those of her family and marriage.

This difference between the generations was probably best illustrated in Elizabeth's and Grace's attitudes towards their husbands and marriages. Where Elizabeth endured and rationalized, Grace refused. In an era when divorce was uncommon, Grace contrived the dissolution of her own marriage. Implicit in her action was a rejection of woman's dependency upon her husband and an equal, self-confident commitment to personal and economic autonomy. When the opportunity arose in the year of separation from her husband, Grace went to work and found herself physically, if not ideologically, beside her mother. The generations of Eldorado mothers and daughters had converged. 

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Elizabeth Chester Fisk as she looked in 1904