

AMERICAN DAUGHTERS:

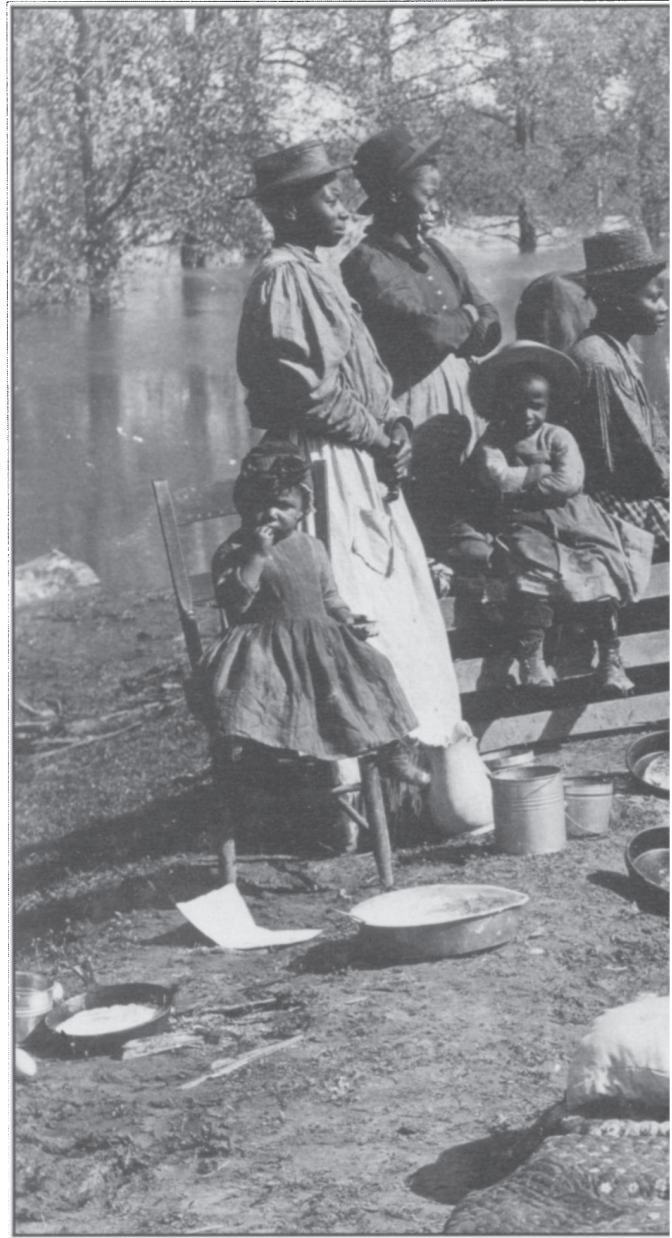
by Glenda Riley

In 1946, a lively, highly informative autobiography of a black frontierswoman effectively challenged the prevalent stereotype that all female settlers were white. Few, if any, observers of the American West had thought that the strong, conquering Saint in the Sunbonnet or the delicate, dewy-eyed Madonna of the Prairie might occasionally be dark-complexioned rather than fair. Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* turned the usual conception of the lily-white western women on its head.¹

Yet, over three decades later, our knowledge of black frontierswomen has increased relatively little. Western black women still suffer from an unfortunate case of near-invisibility in the historical record. The chronicle of the American West continues to be commonly presented as one almost totally dominated by white Americans.²

It is time to look at some of the inclusions and omissions of black frontierswomen by historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century Trans-Mississippi West. And it is time to suggest some of the reasons why black women have been overlooked and what might be learned about them, their lives, and their contributions.

An immediate, but inaccurate, reaction to this objective might be that the necessary source materials do not exist. In fact, census materials contain much information about black women; and black women's diaries, letters, and memoirs are numerous. Many literate black women left written materials behind them. Others, both literate and not, have participated in oral interviews. With a little effort, the interviews can be found in archival collections, oral history projects, and published form. The Montana American Mothers Bicentennial Project of 1975-1976, for example, housed in the Montana Historical Society Archives in Helena, includes a short biography of "Aunt" Tish, a black frontier settler who ran a popular dining room and boardinghouse in Hamilton, Montana, during the early years of the twentieth century.³ In the University of Wyoming's American Heritage Center in Laramie, there is a transcript of an interview with Sudie Rhone, who talks about a black woman's club movement on the Great Plains.⁴ And in the pages of an article describing black people in South Dakota history there is mention of black brothels



that catered to black troops stationed in the area during the 1880s, of black land promoter Mary Elizabeth Blair who was active professionally during the early 1900s, and of a number of other black working and entrepreneurial women during both these periods.⁵

If black women's sources exist, then why have they been largely overlooked? Clearly, they are not

Black Women in the West



Library of Congress

Black refugees on a Mississippi River levee waiting for a riverboat in 1897

easy to find. A researcher must hunt them out and then supplement them with newspapers, statistical data, legal documents, police registers, wills, marriage certificates, bills of sale, property inventories, contracts of emancipation, and a wide variety of other records. But these problems are not unknown to the historian. It is more likely that anti-black sentiment is also responsible for the virtual absence of

black women in western history. Because blacks in general, and black women in particular, have not been highly regarded by most Americans, their documents have not been widely or systematically collected and few investigators have protested the situation or tried to remedy it. Once recognized, however, such attitudes and the resulting dearth of scholarship can be changed.

Concerned historians who have attempted to begin exploring the lives of black women in the West have demonstrated that writing their history is both possible and desirable. In 1977, for example, Sue Armitage, Theresa Banfield, and Sarah Jacobus published a study of black women's communities in Colorado. Arguing that Colorado was the "most promising destination for blacks" during the late nineteenth century, the authors pointed out that Colorado's black population began to increase after 1880, largely as a result of an influx of disillusioned Exodusters from Kansas. By 1910, blacks in Colorado numbered 11,453, most located in ghettos within white towns and cities. Black women not only lived and worked there, but they also pursued reform within their communities through a sizable and active black women's club movement. These women also struggled with discrimination. The six oral history interviews with Colorado black women that comprise the bulk of the study whet the reader's desire for more information.⁶

A few years later, historian Lawrence B. de Graaf made an admirable attempt to unscramble census data regarding black women in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast states between 1850 and 1920. He found that black women in these western areas bore fewer children and were of a higher median age than their counterparts in the South and tended to live in urban rather than rural areas. Like black women in Colorado, these women also noted the difficulties created for them by pervasive racial prejudice manifested in segregation policies, denial of their civil rights, exclusion from land purchases, and attempts to harass black settlers or drive them away entirely. As a consequence, black women workers often had to work at low-paid and extremely exhausting domestic and agricultural tasks. While de Graaf offered some answers, he also raised many questions that have received little follow-up by other in-

vestigators. De Graaf's conclusion that "black women would long remain an invisible segment of western society whose lives and accomplishments would remain known only within the confines of their race" is unfortunately still largely accurate.⁷

In a 1981 study of frontierswomen in Iowa, I also concluded that the re-creation of the history of black westering women would be a difficult and long process. Although frontier Iowa was generally antislavery in philosophy, its white citizens harbored noticeable prejudice against blacks. During the early settlement years, for example, Iowa did not countenance slavery and claimed to enforce fugitive slave laws, yet newspaper advertisements for runaway black indentured servants suggest that slavery existed under other guises. Prejudice also flared when blacks received jobs. Even in Grinnell, a liberal abolitionist town, a violent mob protested the arrival of four black male workers in 1860.⁸

More recently, historian Sandra L. Myres attempted to include black women in her study of westering women. She mentioned a few notable black women and the community efforts of black clubwomen and also explored the prejudicial attitudes of the time that helped make black women "an almost invisible part of the mythology of westering women." She explained that although blacks were "part of the westward migration rather than a native people encountered on the frontier, they were most often regarded, like Indians and Mexicans, as an alien influence." She noted that following the Texas Revolution the government of the new republic passed legislation to enslave or expel free blacks in Texas. Myres added that in 1851 Indiana prohibited blacks from entering the state as did Illinois in 1853 and that colonization societies dedicated to sending blacks to Africa dotted the Midwest. She concluded that all over the West black westering women endured discriminatory treatment and isolation.⁹

All of these studies suggest that prejudice and discriminatory treatment of black frontierswomen

1. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (1946; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986).

2. Examples of historians who have attempted to reconstruct western black history but have included little or no material on black women are Jean I. Castles, "The West: Crucible of the Negro," *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 19 (Winter 1969): 83-85; William L. Katz, *The Black West* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971); Kenneth W. Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971); Lawrence D. Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971); W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976). Richard White, "Race Relations in the American West," *American Quarterly* 38 (Bibliography 1986): 397-416, has very little on blacks and nothing on black women. A recent and refreshing collection of original essays and photographs of western blacks that reflects the existence of women throughout is Maguerite Mitchell Marshall et al., *An Account of Afro-Americans in Southeast Kansas, 1884-1984* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1986). For a discussion of the historiography of black women, see Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 63-82. Regarding racism, sexism, and black women, see Diann Holland Painter, "The Black Woman in American Society," *Current History* 70 (May 1976): 224-227, 234.

3. Tish Nevins, American Mothers Bicentennial Project, 1975-1976, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena [MHSa].

4. Sudie Rhone, interview, November 8, 1979, University of Wyoming Heritage Center, Laramie [WAHC]. Another useful collection is the Black Oral History Interviews, Holland Library, Washington State University, Pullman.

5. Sara J. Bernson and Robert J. Eggers, "Black People in South Dakota History," *South Dakota History* 7 (Summer 1977): 247, 251-252. See also Quintard Taylor, "Blacks in the West: An Overview," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 1 (March 1977): 4-10. Suggestions for locating black women's sources can be found in Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 237-242.

6. Sue Armitage, Theresa Banfield, and Sarah Jacobus, "Black Women and Their Communities in Colorado," *Frontiers* 2 (1977): 45-51.

7. Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 289, 291, 296-297, 313. For an analysis of black women in the Far West before the Civil War, see Michael S. Conroy, "Blacks in the Pacific West, 1850-1860: A View from the Census," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 28 (Summer 1985): 90-121.



Era Bell Thompson, third in center row, in a Driscoll, North Dakota, school in 1917

North Dakota Heritage Center, Bismarck

are of long duration. They support a harsh assertion posited some years ago by black historian William L. Katz. In assessing anti-black attitudes in such western regions as Iowa, he observed that "the black laws moved westward with the pioneers' wagons." He declared that statements made during the 1844 Iowa constitutional convention were clear examples of blatant racism. According to Katz, Iowans who argued that "we should never consent to open the doors of our beautiful state" to black settlers, that blacks "not being a party to the government, has no right to partake of its privileges," and that "there are strong reasons to induce the belief that the two races could not exist in the same government upon an equality without discord and violence" could lay no claim to the enlightenment and liberation that was widely assumed to characterize the West. Katz concluded: "The intrepid pioneers who crossed the western plains carried the virus of racism with them."¹⁰

8. Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 88-91. The mob violence in Grinnell was described by Sarah Parker, Letter to "Dear Mother," March 10, 1860, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. For a discussion of contradictory attitudes toward blacks, see Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967).

9. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women: The Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 85-86.

10. Katz, *The Black West*, 54, 50, 284. For a contrasting view of attitudes toward blacks in west Texas, see George R. Woolfolk, "Turner's Safety-Valve and Free Negro Westward Migration," *Journal of Negro History* 50 (July 1965): 185-197. For discussions of blacks

Not all western settlers deserve Katz's harsh indictment. Thousands of whites aided blacks fleeing to freedom via the Underground Railroad, brought free blacks home with them after the Civil War, welcomed blacks as settlers, and worked for black civil rights.¹¹ Such evidence as a county manumission record showing that her master freed Mommia Travers at Fort Vancouver in 1851 or the Iowa court case involving a freed black woman married to a white man indicate that black frontierswomen occasionally drew positive sentiments and actions.¹²

An additional factor that is often cited for historians' neglect of black frontierswomen is the relative scarcity of blacks in the western population. But this raises questions. Is the smallness of a group sufficient reason to dismiss it from the annals of history? Is a group's size always proportional to its importance and contributions? And is it true that black frontierswomen were indeed

in Iowa, see Leola M. Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1969); Paul W. Black, "Lynchings in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 10 (April 1912): 151-254; Louis Pelzer, "The Negro and Slavery in Early Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 2 (October 1904): 471-484; Morton M. Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972); Joel H. Silbey, "Proslavery Sentiment in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 55 (October 1957): 289-318; Jacob Van Eck, "Underground Railroad in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 2 (May 1921): 129-193.

11. Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 94-99.

12. Fred Lockley, "Some Documentary Records of Slavery in Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 17 (June 1916): 108; John E. Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society, 1915), 34-35.

Race and Sex in Seven Plains States, 1870-1910

	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910
<i>Kansas</i>					
Total black	17,108	43,107	49,710	52,003	54,030
Black female	8,452	20,955	24,462	25,461	26,066
<i>Montana</i>					
Total black	183	346	1,490	1,523	1,834
Black female	51	155	437	611	776
<i>Nebraska</i>					
Total black	789	2,385	8,913	6,269	7,689
Black female	338	1,089	3,670	3,368	3,430
<i>North Dakota</i>					
Total black	94	401	373	286	617
Black female	49	176	154	113	236
<i>Oklahoma</i>					
Total black	—*	—	2,973	18,831	137,612
Black female	—	—	1,360	9,322	65,675
<i>South Dakota</i>					
Total black	—	—	541	465	817
Black female	—	—	178	193	349
<i>Wyoming</i>					
Total black	183	298	922	940	2,235
Black female	45	138	270	309	691

Source: A major problem with census data regarding black women in the West stems from the inconsistency of methods used to define groups of people from census year to census year. Blacks were often counted as a group without regard to gender; were lumped with other "persons of color," including Asians and American Indians; or were not counted at all. The census figures given here were prepared by research assistant Rebecca L. Wheeler who extracted them from U.S. Census Bureau, *Ninth Census* [1870], Volume I: *Population and Social Statistics* (1872), 606, 608; *Compendium of the Tenth Census* [1880], *Revised Edition, Part I* (1885), 3, 556; *Abstract of the Eleventh Census* [1890], *Second Edition* (1896), 40, 47; *Abstract of the Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Volume I: *Population: General Report and Analysis* (1913), 141, 258.

*Indicates no statistics available.

scarce? Although the answer to all three queries would appear to be no, only the last can be clearly proven. Census figures indicate that the number of black women in western states, particularly after the Civil War, was not miniscule. Thousands of them not only lived in most western states, but their ranks also increased over the years. Census data for seven selected Plains states during the fifty years following the Civil War document the absolute numbers, relative proportions, and increase of black women.

Federal census figures concerning black women can be supplemented by county records that often include both population figures and personal information. A county registry of free blacks in frontier Missouri between 1836 and 1861 listed approximately ten women and twenty men, but the records unfortunately gave little additional information about them. Another Missouri county,

however, not only counted free blacks but noted age, gender, occupations, and places of origin. In 1850, sixteen free blacks lived in this county of over one thousand families. Five of the blacks were female, two of them cooks and three without paid occupations. In that same year in McLean County, Illinois, the population totaled 1,594, of whom 777 were white females, 777 were white males, 17 were black females, and 23 were black males. Among the black females were cooks, servants, and a twenty-year-old schoolteacher born in Kentucky.¹³

Compiling census figures, particularly on the county level, is a time-consuming and exhausting means of gathering information about black women in the West, but such data are a rich source of information. Given the dearth of material regarding black women and the frequent omission of them in western history, which is partially a result of

13. Howard County, Missouri, Registry for Free Negroes, 1836-1861, and Cooper County, Missouri, United States Census, 1850, Volume I, manuscript census unpaginated, both in the Joint Collection of the University of Missouri Western History Society of Missouri Manuscripts, Columbia [Miss. Coll.]; McLean County, United States Census, 1850, McLean County Historical Society, Bloomington, Illinois, manuscript census unpaginated.

14. For studies regarding blacks that draw on census data, see Daniel M. Johnson and Rex R. Campbell, *Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981); Elmer R. Rusco, "Good Times Coming?" *Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975); Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

15. Castles, "The West," 83; David Vassar Taylor, "The Blacks," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 73; Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 159.

16. Eliza Byer Price, "Recollections of My Father, Samuel Dyer, 1905," Miss. Coll. For a discussion of the westward migration of southern slaveholders, see James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slave Holders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 73-95.

17. Myres, *Westering Women*, 119; Adrienne Christopher, "The Story of Daniel Yoacham, Westport Pioneer Innkeeper," n.d., Delia Richerson McDaniel, diary, 1841, and James A. Ward, "Autobiography," n.d., Miss. Coll.

18. *Burlington Tri-Weekly Telegraph* (Iowa), August 27, 1850.

this lack, census records are a resource well worth mining.¹⁴

Another factor that has contributed to widespread nearsightedness regarding black frontierswomen is the tendency to overlook female participation in historical movements. Black women and black men came to western regions very early in the settlement period. As early as June 24, 1794, a marriage between blacks, Jean and Jeanne Bonga, was recorded in Mickilmacknac Parish, later part of Minnesota. Many blacks entered the area with fur-trading expeditions, exploring forays, and the military. Beginning in 1820, officers and their families stationed at Fort Snelling in what is now Minnesota brought their slaves, both male and female, with them. By that time, there were already an estimated two thousand to three thousand blacks, both slave and free, in the upper Louisiana country.¹⁵

During the early nineteenth century, settlers from southern states also brought slaves into western regions. In 1822, a party of settlers traveling from Virginia to Missouri included four white men and their four black valets as well as "Mammy," a black woman servant ensconced in the cook and supply wagon. This family spent its first years in a log cabin with "Mammy" helping out inside while the white and black men broke the prairie sod outside.¹⁶ Many other frontier families similarly relied on slave or free black women for help in raising children, doing domestic chores, and running inns and other family businesses.¹⁷

Even western states that loudly proclaimed themselves to be antislavery had their share of trappers, traders, soldiers, miners, and settlers who brought black slaves with them. The Iowa census of 1840 listed ten female and six male slaves even though the state had outlawed slavery. Although no slaves appeared in the Iowa census after that year, slaveholders circumvented the law. Some held blacks as indentured servants. As late as 1850, an advertisement in Iowa's *Burlington Tri-Weekly Telegraph* asked for the return of such a servant. Described as black, thirteen or fourteen years old, and with five years left to serve of her indenture, the girl was said to have been "decoyed" away by some "meddling person." Her owner claimed that "it would be an act of charity to her could she be restored to him."¹⁸

Throughout the pre-Civil War years vestiges of slavery continued in Iowa. Female indentures served as cooks, nursemaids, and domestic servants.¹⁹ Despite the antislavery movement and the activities of the Underground Railroad, proslavery sentiment ran strong, especially among the many migrants from southern states who had

moved into southern Iowa seeking land.²⁰ The proslavery sentiment in these districts made them less amenable to the entry of free blacks than some expected or hoped, contrary to the egalitarian reputation of the frontier regions. But even antislavery Iowans were afraid of cheap black labor and the difficulties they believed would result from living and working with blacks. These whites supported the passage of black exclusion laws, denied blacks civil liberties in the state, regulated their behavior with "black laws," required a certificate of freedom from any free black entering Iowa, and often forced free blacks to post monetary bonds of \$500 to ensure their "good behavior."²¹

In neighboring free Minnesota, both slave and free blacks, including women, entered the region during the decades preceding the Civil War. Abolitionist sentiment, however, seemed to be more rife there than in Iowa, perhaps partly because of a smaller proportion of blacks in Minnesota's population. The residence at various army posts of a slave woman named Rachael during 1831-1834 led to her successful suit for freedom in 1835. The two-year stint of Dred and Harriet Scott at Fort Snelling in 1836-1838 eventually resulted in the Dred Scott Case of 1857. By 1849, the first territorial census recorded forty free blacks, thirty of whom lived in St. Paul. But during the 1840s and 1850s, both free blacks and fugitive slaves continued to enter Minnesota. This migration alarmed those who feared cheap black labor and "inundation" by blacks. Yet, in 1860, when Eliza Winston accompanied her master on a vacation to Minnesota, she was able to enlist the aid of local abolitionists in seeking her freedom.²²

Although black women evidently lived and left their marks in Iowa and Minnesota, little is said of them in the complex and sometimes voluminous historical accounts of these regions and of the black people living in them. Beyond the occasional mention of a female fugitive slave, a woman involved in a marriage or court case, or a free black woman employed as a domestic helper, washwoman, or day laborer, there is no systematic discussion of the roles and contributions of black women to the early development of these western regions.

The history of the Exodusters, a massive black migration to Kansas, Oklahoma, and other areas after the Civil War, is another example of historians slighting female participation in a ma-

19. Ruth A. Gallaher, "Slavery in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 28 (May 1947): 158-160.

20. Silbey, "Proslavery Sentiment in Iowa," 189-191; Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 14.

21. Pelzer, "The Negro and Slavery in Early Iowa," 471; Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa*, 34-35; William M. Donnel, *Pioneers of Marion County* (Des Moines: Republican Steam Printing House, 1872), 70-75.

22. Taylor, "The Blacks," in Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 73-74.

jour movement. Even though the census figures clearly demonstrate the presence of relatively large numbers of black women and a constant increase in the size of the black female population in Kansas and Oklahoma, black women generally appear only incidentally in historical accounts of the Exoduster movement.

The flight of the Exodusters, or black refugees, from southern states to Midwest and Plains states during the later decades of the nineteenth century is well-documented by both white and black historians. During these years, thousands of southern blacks traveled up the Missouri River and along other routes in an attempt to escape the evils of sharecropping, tenant farming, and anti-black sentiment. Seeking a better life in the "promised land," they sought employment in the cities or on farms, worked as cowhands, homesteaded, or created both rural and urban all-black communities. In the Midwest, Pulaski County, Illinois, contained a sizable black population by 1900. Plains colonies included Nicodemus, Kansas, established in 1877, Langston, Oklahoma, in 1891, and Dearfield, Colorado, in 1910.²³

The story of the part played by black women in this migration to the Plains has not been researched and recorded even though diary entries, letters, and memoirs of both white and black women indicate that many Exodusters were female. Anne E. Bingham, for instance, recalled that she and her husband hired a family of six black Exodusters, two adults and four children, to help on their Kansas farm in 1880. Bingham remarked that the two adult Exodusters were reliable and diligent workers. She was particularly pleased to have the woman's services as washwoman. "She would carry a pail of water on her head with one hand to steady it," Bingham remembered, "and something in the other hand, and carry the clothes basket that way, too." Bingham was very sorry when the Exoduster family "got lonesome and finally went to town."²⁴

The memories of several female Exodusters also offer enough information about black women to make the reader eager to learn more about them and their lives in the "promised land." According to Exoduster Williana Hickman, at the end of an

23. See Shirley J. Carlson, "Black Migration to Pulaski County, Illinois, 1860-1900," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society* 80 (Spring 1987): 37-46; Roy Garvin, "Benjamin, or 'Pap,' Singleton and His Followers," *Journal of Negro History* 33 (January 1948): 7-23; Glen Schwendemann, "Wyandotte and the First 'Exodusters' on the Missouri," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 26 (Autumn 1960): 233-249; "The 'Exodusters' on the Missouri," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1963): 25-40; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 108-117; Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879-1880* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); George H. Wayne, "Negro Migration and Colonization in Colorado, 1870-1930," *Journal of the West* 15 (January 1976): 102-120; Mozell C. Hill, "The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement," *Journal of Negro History* 31 (July 1946): 254-268;



Sarah Irvin, wife of the first black policeman in Helena, Montana

M. F. Kelly, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives

exhausting railway journey from Kentucky to Kansas in 1878, her husband had pointed to "various smokes [*sic*] coming out of the ground and said, 'That is Nicodemus.'" Black families were living in dugouts almost at ground level, Hickman remembered. She reacted to the scene much as many of her white counterparts did: "The scenery to me was not at all inviting, and I began to cry." According to another newspaper story about early settlers in Nicodemus, a black woman who also arrived in 1878 began teaching a class of forty-five children in her new dugout home.²⁵

Arvarh E. Strickland, "Toward the Promised Land: The Exodus to Kansas and Afterward," *Missouri Historical Review* 69 (July 1975): 376-412; Harold M. Rose, "The All-Negro Town: Its Evolution and Function," *Geographic Review* 55 (July 1965): 362-381; Nudie E. Williams, "Black Newspapers and the Exodusters of 1879," *Kansas History* 8 (Winter 1985-1986): 217-225.

24. Anne E. Bingham, "Sixteen Years on a Kansas Farm, 1870-1886," *Kansas State Historical Society Collections* 15 (1919-1920): 520-521.

25. Quoted in Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1968): 14, 26. For a discussion of contemporary media images that usually represented Exodusters as male, see George R. Lamplugh, "The Image of the Negro in Popular Magazine Fiction, 1875-1900," *Journal of Negro History* 57 (April 1972): 177-189.

Black women among homesteaders who settled throughout Nebraska, Dakota Territory, and other Plains states have yet to be studied. In North Dakota, for example, a group of black male and female homesteaders attempted to establish a farm community near Alexander in the southwestern part of the state in about 1910. Numbering only ten families at its peak, Alexander was not a success. Within a decade of the town's founding, all of its residents had dispersed to nearby towns and cities. More successful were the homesteading families of Ava Day in Nebraska and Era Bell Thompson in North Dakota. Day and Thompson both grew up on the Plains, far from the South their parents had known. But the difference that relocation made to women's lives in these and other cases like them remains unexamined. Further, we do not know whether black women homesteaded on their own as did so many white women during the 1890s and early 1900s. Nor have black women's contributions to the overall homesteading experience been noted.²⁶

Although historians have not intentionally omitted black women in western history in order to imply that these women led puerile lives, that is often the result. The material reviewed here offers tantalizing glimpses of a fascinating but largely unexplored group of western settlers. It suggests that there is a great deal of available information and there are tremendous insights to be gained about black frontierswomen. But how should we proceed?

A place to begin might well be black frontierswomen's domestic lives, a highly revealing area in the study of any group of women. Black women's writings point to great similarity between black and white women's daily lives in the West. Home and family was the focus of black women's lives, just as it was for white women, and they went about the care of both in similar ways. Hannah Anderson Ropes's comments in letters to her mother in Massachusetts after she had settled in Kansas in 1855 are almost identical to those of white women settlers. She described details of housing, food preparation, clothing, children, and other domestic matters, and like her white

counterparts she wrote about her desire to establish a "proper" home in the new land. To achieve that "proper" home, Ropes hung "Bay State Shawls" brought from Massachusetts on the cabin walls like tapestries and proudly displayed the "choice China" that she carried to Kansas tucked away between sheets and pillows. "How we begin to look forward," she exclaimed in one letter, "to a condition of civilized housekeeping!"²⁷

Other black women's writings are also difficult to distinguish from white women's sources about home and family. From the pioneer years in Minnesota comes the example of black settler Emily O. G. Grey who joined a growing black community in St. Anthony in 1857. Like many white women, Grey set up housekeeping in a converted barn and created cupboards and bureaus from packing boxes covered with calico.²⁸ Three decades later in neighboring St. Paul, Amanda Jennie Lee Bell married a barber and established a home. Her experiences in housekeeping, raising her family, and assisting with her husband's business also closely paralleled those of white women living in other pioneer western towns. And in North Dakota during the early 1900s, women in the family of Helen Johnson Downing followed traditional work patterns for girls and women, relied on books to ease their isolation, and used means to offset hard times as white women settlers did.²⁹

Black frontierswomen's employment is another rich area for investigation. Their work experiences, however, diverged widely from white women's, especially in rates and terms of employment. A higher percentage of black women than white women worked outside of their homes. While white female workers ranged between 12 to 25 per cent of all teenage and adult white women, black female workers composed as high as 40 to 50 per cent of all teenage and adult black women. Black women's relatively high employment level was largely due to economic necessity. Although both whites and blacks believed that women should work within the home, black women actually remained in the home far less than white women did. The realities of scarce and low-paid jobs for black men typically made employment a requirement for black women who had to contribute to family income. Black women not only had higher rates of employment than white women

26. William C. Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983), 14; Ava Day, two letters to "Nebraska Historical Society," March 28, May 23, 1964, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln [NHS]; "A Colored Man's Experience on a Nebraska Homestead," *Omaha World Herald*, February 11, 1899; Kathie Ryckman Anderson, "Era Bell Thompson," *North Dakota History* 49 (Fall 1982): 11-18; Era Bell Thompson, interview, September 16, 1975, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Oral History Project, Bismarck [NDOH]. See also Minnie Miller Brown, "Black Women in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 50 (January 1976): 202-212; Bernson and Eggers, "Black People in South Dakota History," 245-253.

27. Hannah Anderson Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas, By a Lady* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 55-56, 60-67, 92-94, 151-152. See also John A. Andrew, "Betsey Stockton: Stranger in a Strange Land," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 52 (Summer 1974): 157-166; Dorothy Bass Spann, *Black Pioneers: A History of a Pioneer Family in Colorado Springs* (Colorado Springs: Little London Press, 1978); Myres, *Westering Women*, 86.

28. Patricia C. Harpole, ed., "The Black Community in Territorial St. Anthony: A Memoir," *Minnesota History* 49 (Summer 1984): 42-55.

29. Eva Neal, Family Papers, 1881-1963, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul [Minn. H.S.]; Helen Johnson Downing, interview, September 16, 1976, NDOH. See also Taylor, "The Blacks," in Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota*, 73-91.

did, but racial prejudice also kept them from holding all but the more menial jobs. Despite their own reservations or ambitions to the contrary, poor wages, exhausting conditions, demeaning status, and heavy labor that these jobs usually entailed, black women took the positions most readily available to them.³⁰

Most commonly, black women worked as domestics in western areas, although after the Civil War white western women, especially native-born women, began leaving domestic service for retail, sales, and clerical work as well as the professions. Employment as cooks, washwomen, dressmakers, nursemaids, and maids seemed to many white employers logical and appropriate derivations of the roles black women had fulfilled as slaves. Often called by such names as “Nigger Ellen,” black servants received minimal wages sometimes supplemented by leftover scraps of food or cast-off clothing.³¹ Black female servants were frequently described by their white employers as loyal, willing, and competent, while white—especially non-American-born—women often evoked their employers’ enmity. Anna Ramsey of St. Paul wrote to her daughter that Martha, her black maid, performed many duties well, from housecleaning to packing the family’s clothes for trips. Referring to her servant as “beloved” Martha, Ramsey regretted that old age necessitated Martha’s retirement. On the other hand, a Bloomington, Illinois, woman did not think much of her black maid’s abilities as a housekeeper but was delighted that her mother had sent the servant along with her as a companion on her journey to the West as a young bride.³²

In other cases, black women earned local reputations as skilled workers when they carried their domestic talents out of the home and into the public arena. In Sioux City, Iowa, two black cooks during the 1860s vied with each other for the acclaim of their patrons. A woman cook referred to as “Black Ann” not only received the kudos of passengers on Mississippi steamboats, but she also earned enough money to buy her own freedom and that of her children. And in St. Paul, Minnesota, during the years following the Civil War customers praised the skills of a family of black women seamstresses.³³

30. De Graaf, “Race, Sex, and Region,” 296; Katharine T. Corbett and Mary E. Seematter, “Black St. Louis at the Turn of the Century,” *Gateway Heritage* 71 (Summer 1986): 44. For a discussion of blacks’ expectations of women, see James Oliver Horton, “Freedom’s Yoke: Gender Conventions Among Antebellum Blacks,” *Feminist Studies* 12 (Spring 1986): 51-76.

31. Painter, *Exodusters*, 153; W. Sherman Savage, “The Negro in the Westward Movement,” *Journal of Negro History* 25 (October 1940): 532-533; David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 82-85, 289-290.

32. Anna Ramsey, letter to “My Darling Children,” March 31, 1876, “My Dear Daughter,” February 2, December 8, 1876, Alexander Ramsey Family Papers, Minn. H.S.; *Bloomington Bulletin* (Illinois), January 26, 1899.

Despite the huge odds against black women progressing very far beyond employment as domestics, a considerable number parlayed their energy and abilities into such relatively high status positions as hotel or boardinghouse keepers and restaurant managers or owners. The most famous black boardinghouse keeper was Mary Ellen “Mammy” Pleasant, a California pioneer who was also known for her charitable acts of assistance to needy blacks.³⁴ Other black women became entrepreneurs in a variety of businesses, including millinery shops, hairdressing establishments, and food stores. The most eminent of them was Sarah Breedlove Walker, better known as “Madame” Walker. She developed “The Walker Method” of straightening black women’s hair in St. Louis in 1905 and moved to Colorado in 1906.³⁵ Many women were real estate brokers, including Biddy Mason of Los Angeles, Clara Brown of Denver, and Mary Elizabeth Blair of Sully County, North Dakota. Most prominent of the group, Biddy Mason not only amassed considerable wealth, but she also spent huge amounts of time and money helping the less fortunate. Because of her charitable work she was called “Grandmother” Mason.³⁶

A surprising number of black women became successful in a variety of professions. Young black women showed an interest in and talent for education, in spite of state and local attempts to prohibit them from attending school and laws that limited them to often poorly funded segregated schools. Ironically, because black women often lived in towns and cities, they gradually gained access to better educational facilities than those available to white rural women, which fostered a high rate of school attendance and graduation among black girls in the West. In addition, black families sometimes chose to educate daughters instead of sons to protect the girls from employment exploitation.³⁷ A number of these educated black women entered teaching, probably the profession most accessible to them because of the establish-

33. Phillip T. Drotning, *A Guide to Negro History in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 67; Georgiana Packard, “Leaves from the Life of a Kansas Pioneer, 1914,” Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; Mattie V. Rhodes, Family Papers, 1968, Minn. H.S.

34. “Mary Ellen Pleasant,” in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, 3 vols., ed. Edward T. James and Janet W. James (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971), 3: 75-76; Bernson and Eggers, “Black People in South Dakota History,” 250; D. Cheryl Collins, “Women at Work in Manhattan, Kansas, 1890-1910,” *Journal of the West* 21 (April 1982): 33-40; Nevins, “Montana American Mothers,” MHS; “Washwomen, Maumas, Exodusters, Jubileers,” in *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dorothy Sterling (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 355-394; Sylvia Lea Sallquist, “The Image of the Hired Girl in Literature: The Great Plains, 1860 to World War I,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1984): 168.

35. “Sarah Breedlove Walker,” in James, *Notable American Women*, 3: 533-534. For some other cases of black women entrepreneurs, see William L. Lang, “The Nearly Forgotten Blacks of Last Chance Gulch, 1900-1912,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 70 (April 1979): 54-55.



Sadie Mondie, prisoner number 711, Cherokee, Kansas, June 19, 1903

Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka

ment of an increasing number of black schools around the turn of the century. As teachers in segregated schools or as founders of their own black schools, black female educators usually outnumbered black male educators in most western regions.³⁸

Other achievement-oriented black women struggled to become nurses, doctors, journalists, and editors, but they succeeded in far fewer numbers than black women who became teachers. Charlotta Spears Bass of Los Angeles particularly distinguished herself as a black woman editor. In 1912, she became editor of *The California Eagle* (published from 1879 to 1966), the oldest black newspaper on the West Coast. Through its pages

she waged a fierce crusade for over forty years against racial segregation and discrimination against blacks. In 1952, she became the first black woman to run for the vice-presidency of the United States.³⁹

Prostitution was the one "profession" left wide open to and, in fact, often urged on black women. Both economic necessity and negative images of black women pushed them toward criminal occupations, a pressure that they frequently resisted.⁴⁰ Thompson recalled being told by a white man in Mandan, North Dakota, that all black women were prostitutes.⁴¹ Yet, neither observers nor census takers noted large numbers of black prostitutes in the West. Occasionally, black

36. Donna Mungen, *Life and Times of Biddy Mason: From Slavery to Wealthy California Laundress* (n.p., 1976); Kathleen Bruyn, "Aunt" Clara Brown: *Story of a Black Pioneer* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1970); Bernson and Eggers, "Black People in South Dakota History," 251.

37. Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 168-181; E. Wilburn Bock, "Farmer's Daughter Effect: The Case of the Negro Female Professors," *Phylon* 30 (Spring 1969): 17-26. For the "sex loophole" that helped black daughters get education, see Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 69-70.

38. See Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1919), 123, 173-178; "California Colored Women Trail Blazers," in *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, ed. Hallie Qu. Brown (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Publishing Company, 1926), 241-242; Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977), 184; Corbett and Seematter, "Black St. Louis," 48. For black women practicing nursing see Day, letters, NHS; Elizabeth

Cochran, "Hatchets and Hoopskirts: Women in Kansas History," *Midwest Quarterly* 2 (April 1961): 235; "Black Women in Colorado: Two Early Portraits," *Frontiers* 7 (1984): 21. For a black woman physician, see Armitage, Banfield, and Jacobus, "Black Women and Their Communities," 46; Susan H. Armitage, "Reluctant Pioneers," in *Women and Western American Literature*, ed. Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski (Troy, New York: Whitston Publishing Company, 1982), 47.

39. See Era Bell Thompson, interview, September 16, 1975, NDOH; James de T. Abajian, comp., *Blacks in Selected Newspapers, Censuses and Other Sources: An Index to Names and Subjects*, 3 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), 1: 221-222, 649, 716; "Charlotta Spears Bass," *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1980), 61-63; Gerald R. Gill, "'Win or Lose—We Win': The 1952 Vice-Presidential Campaign of Charlotta Bass," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1978), 109-118.



Mrs. S. Boggs, a black woman settler in Minnesota, photographed with her husband in about 1850

Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul

brothels did coexist with sizable populations of black cowhands or black soldiers, but other black women in the area commonly scorned and reviled black prostitutes and madams.⁴²

Another crucial topic to be examined in the history of black frontierswomen is the effect of racism. It is a subject and circumstance that most clearly differentiated them from their white counterparts. During her high school and college days in Mandan, North Dakota, Era Bell Thompson frequently became the victim of prejudicial treatment that threatened to seriously impair or end her education. Eventually, she fled to Chicago in hopes of “blending in” with the black population there. Similarly, Dr. Ruth Flowers, the first black woman to graduate from the University of Colorado in 1924, spent her teenage years working as a dishwasher in a restaurant, resisting persistent racism that barred her from even enjoying an ice cream cone or a movie, and studying until

40. For a fascinating study of black women convicts, see Anne M. Butler, “Still in Chains: Black Women in Western Prisons, 1865-1910” (paper presented before the Western History Association, Los Angeles, October 1987). The author thanks Anne Butler for sharing this research.

41. Thompson, interview, September 16, 1975, NDOH. For an analysis of the development of black women’s sexual image, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 150-151.

42. Bernson and Eggers, “Black People in South Dakota History,” 247; Kenneth W. Porter, “Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry,” *Labor History* 10 (1969): 327; Erwin N. Thompson, “The Negro Soldier

early morning hours to get an education she hoped would free her from such trials.⁴³

The prejudice and discrimination encountered by black females in the West point to the largest single variable affecting the lives of black western women: race and racism shaped their experiences in an incredible number of ways. Yet we know little about the development of racism in the West. Ava Day, whose family settled in the Overton area of Cherry County, Nebraska, in 1885, claimed that she met with very little prejudice during her childhood in the Nebraska Sandhills where her family raised cattle, brood mares, and mules. She recalled that her grandfather was white and her grandmother black. As Day explained, “Color never made a difference to Grandpa. You were a person and a man and a lady.” She added that the family’s neighbors felt much the same about the race issue, for they were friendly and helpful: “. . . everybody asked did you need anything from

and His Officers,” in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, ed. John M. Carroll (New York: Liveright, 1971), 182; Lang, “The Nearly Forgotten Blacks of Last Chance Gulch,” 55. Nevins, “Montana American Mothers,” MNSA, is an example of a black woman who detested a madam, Mammy Smith, reportedly the only other black in Hamilton, Montana. For black women’s views of the myth of the “bad” black woman, see Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 164-172.

43. Thompson, interview, September 16, 1976, NDOH; Armitage, “Reluctant Pioneers,” 47-48; Armitage, Banfield, and Jacobus, “Black Women and Their Communities,” 46.

44. Day, letters, NHS. See also Downing, interview, September 16, 1976, NDOH.



Jubilee Singers of Tennessee, organized in 1870, who toured western areas raising funds for black causes

State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City

town—and brought it back by your house or left it at your gate.”⁴⁴

Era Bell Thompson also had some pleasant memories of white neighbors during her very early years in North Dakota. She claimed that when her family moved to the plains shortly before World War I they met with little discrimination. As she commented years later: “I was very lucky to have grown up in North Dakota where families were busy fighting climate and soil for a livelihood and there was little awareness of race.” She recalled that neighbors befriended her family, especially a Norwegian family who brought supplies to the Thompsons at critical times. Thompson believed that North Dakota’s high percentage of ethnic residents encouraged settlers to look on each other as equals, a situation that apparently changed as settlement increased, judging from the educational and career limitations placed on Thompson by racist attitudes and policies later in her life.⁴⁵

45. Anderson, “Era Bell Thompson,” 11-12.

46. Ropes, *Six Months in Kansas*, 150-151, 208.

47. Sudie Rhone, interview, November 8, 1979, WAHC.

Other black frontierswomen had different memories of prevailing attitudes toward blacks. During the 1850s, Hannah Ropes of Kansas made occasional mention in her letters of discriminatory treatment by her neighbors. Contrary to Ava Day’s experience, Ropes found that the rigors of early settlement did not seem to obviate a person’s race.⁴⁶ And an urban black woman, Sudie Rhone of Cheyenne, Wyoming, contradicted Thompson’s view of race relations during the pre-World War I era. She noted that the black women’s Searchlight Club, founded in 1904, was the only service group for black women at that time, adding that while black women could have joined white women’s clubs, they seldom chose to do so. She believed that widespread prejudice and nonacceptance of blacks by whites kept the two groups of women segregated in this and many other activities.⁴⁷

Rhone’s observations about western women’s service clubs pinpoint not only the racial prejudice that divided white women from black, but also lead to another subject for investigation: the ac-

tivities and attitudes of black women reformers and civic activists. How widespread was the phenomenon of black women reformers and clubwomen? Did they typically attack the same social ills as did white women reformers, or did they attempt to solve race-related problems of black people? And did they ever join with white women or work within groups of black women? So little material exists on black women reformers in the West that it is impossible to give definite answers to any of these questions except the first one. Numerous black women throughout the West did become reformers and community activists. One Colorado woman stated that in black western communities where men worked long hours or were away seeking work, black women served as the "backbone of the church, the backbone of the family, they were the backbone of the social life, everything."⁴⁸ Other black women also wrote or spoke of the huge amounts of time and energy that they and their friends devoted to community improvement projects.⁴⁹ And records of black organizations, such as the Pilgrim Baptist Church of St. Paul founded in 1866 and the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs organized in 1900, reveal the number and diversity of black women's charitable organizations that existed from an early stage in the settlement of the West.⁵⁰

Whether black women reformers attacked "black" problems and worked only with black women is not quite clear. Charlotta Pyles, a free black living with her family in Keokuk, Iowa, was a reformer. She and other family members joined together in a fundraising effort to buy their relatives out of slavery. During the 1850s, Pyles launched a speaking tour in the East to raise funds and converted her Keokuk home into a station on the Underground Railroad. To advance her cause, she joined with white abolitionists and helped many fugitive slaves escaped to Canada.⁵¹

Unlike Pyles, numerous reform-minded black women chose or were forced by racial prejudice to cooperate only with other black women in reform

activities.⁵² Many of these joined the rapidly proliferating ladies' aid groups, charity associations, and missionary societies often associated with black churches. Black women reformers Emily Grey of St. Anthony and Amanda Bell of St. Paul, for example, attacked problems that particularly plagued black people, including inadequate health care, poverty, and substandard education.⁵³

The General Federation of Women's Clubs' long-standing policy of accepting black women's organizations only as segregated locals pressured black women all over the United States to maintain their own service groups. Black clubwomen formed a parallel organization, the National Association of Colored Women in 1896, and by 1915 it had fifty thousand members in twenty-eight state federations and over a thousand individual clubs. Should an investigator take the time to explore them, the records of these clubs might yield an abundance of information about black clubwomen in the West, such as Josephine Leavall Allensworth of California who helped organize the Women's Improvement Club that provided a public reading room and built playgrounds for children.⁵⁴

There are many other topics in the history of black women in the West that are rife with unanswered questions. Little is known, for example, about western black women's participation in the woman suffrage movement. Because many black women in the South and the East organized their own suffrage groups, it is reasonable to believe that western black women did so as well. Because woman suffrage first became a reality in western territories and states, it might be significant to know if race was a positive or negative influence or any influence at all in this development. Black women's roles in temperance reform, the Grange, Populism, and in army forts are other subjects that need investigation. The black woman's relationship to American Indians and the physical environment of the West is virtually unexplored.

Historian Sue Armitage cautions that it is also necessary to consider regional differences in the lives and experiences of black women. In an unpublished paper and a bibliography of sources on

48. Armitage, Banfield, and Jacobus, "Black Women and Their Communities," 46.

49. Willard Gatewood, "Kate D. Chapman Reports on 'The Yankton Colored People,' 1889," *South Dakota History* 7 (Winter 1976): 28-35; Spann, *Black Pioneers*; Nellie Bush, interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 14, 53, Oklahoma State Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

50. "A Brief Resume of History," Pilgrim Baptist Church, ca. 1977, Minn. H.S. See also Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* (Chicago: National Association of Colored Women, 1933); Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900-1930," *Kansas History* 9 (Spring 1986): 19-30; Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (April 1974): 158-167.

51. Mrs. Laurence C. Jones, "The Desire for Freedom," *Palimpsest* 7 (May 1927): 153-163.

52. Rhone, interview, November 8, 1979, WAHC.

53. Harpole, "The Black Community," 44; Neal, Family Papers, Minn. H.S.; Rhone, interview, November 8, 1979, WAHC.

54. Savage, *Blacks in the West*, 187-188. See also Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 83-93; Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 437-478.

55. Susan H. Armitage and Deborah G. Wilbert, "Black Women in the Pacific Northwest: A Survey and Research Prospectus"; Armitage, "Black Women in the Pacific Northwest." The author thanks Sue Armitage for sharing this research. Particularly useful sources on black women in the Pacific Northwest are Quintard Taylor, "The Emergence of Black Communities in the Pacific Northwest, 1864-1910," *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Fall 1979): 346-351; Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (Portland, Oregon: Georgian Press, 1980); Esther Mumford, *Seattle's Black Victorians, 1852-1901* (Seattle: Ananse Press, 1980). In addition, Melissa Hield and Martha Boethel's *The Women's West Teaching Guide: The Multicultural History of Women in the Nineteenth Century American West* is available from the Women's Studies Program at Washington State University, Pullman.

56. Anna Ramsey to "My Dear Daughter," June 27, 1875, Alexander Ramsey Family Papers, Minn. H.S.; Susan D. Vanarsdale, diary, 1847, Miss. Coll. It would also be useful to include Asian and Hispanic women.




Zubick, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives

First convention of the Montana Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, Butte, Montana

black women in the Pacific Northwest written with Deborah G. Wilbert, she too raises the issues of domesticity, employment, racism, reform, and other germane topics but notes that the experience of a black frontierswoman in Kansas might vary greatly from that of a woman in Oregon. The point regarding regionalism is a highly significant one; era, class, and urban or rural residence are other important variables to be included in any study of black women in the West.⁵⁵

Perhaps the ultimate question to be raised here is why the history of black women on the American frontier should be recovered. One obvious answer is that only by analyzing the history of all types of western women can their history and the history of the West itself ever be understood. Comparisons between black and white women will yield valuable insights about each group and about the larger group of women of which they were a major part. Moreover,

despite racial prejudice, there were many ties between black and white women on the frontier. Anna Ramsey not only employed a black servant but also found herself strongly drawn to the enthusiasm and verve of the Tennessee Jubilee Singers who performed in the St. Paul Opera House to raise funds for black education. In the South, some women owned slaves while others, like Susan Vanarsdale, felt great sympathy for a female fugitive slave.⁵⁶ Black women, on the other hand, had to confront and interact with white women in almost every area of their lives, including employment, education, and social life. How, then, can the history of one group be written without the other?

Probably more crucial, however, is the issue of justice in restoring their historical heritage to black women in America. As Era Bell Thompson argued so well in *American Daughter*, black women were an integral part of the western and American traditions. It both impairs their sense of identity and unbalances the historical record to continue to overlook the role of black women in the development of the American West. 

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