

Gender and Western History

Is Anybody Home on the Range?

by Virginia Scharff

Historians who study women in the American West have set about mapping female experience by asking certain kinds of questions: Where are the women? What are they doing? Is it different from what men are doing? Which women?

Women's historians have made western history different by simply asking such questions because they have discovered women in places in the past where they were not expected to be. They also have recognized, and now insist on, the diversity of western women, and they have made women visible on the West's historical landscape. Take the army, that quintessentially masculine institution. From studying the lives of western women, we now know that when the United States cavalry crossed the plains, many soldiers' wives and children went along, as did hundreds of laundresses and cooks and prostitutes.¹ That knowledge makes the army look less like a column of men and more like a traveling village, more like the bands of Plains Indians who inhabited the same territory.

But even as we develop a historical geography of women and men in the region, there is much below the surface we have begun to chart as well. Like geologists who could see volcanoes and faults but not explain them adequately until they began to imagine the crashings and subductions of tectonic plates, historians may be on the brink of new ways of thinking about male and female identities, and such ideas could help in discovering much more about the history of the region as a whole. Realizing the potential of women's history for western

*I would like to thank Betsy Jameson for her careful reading of this article and her helpful suggestions.



Christian Barthelme, photographer; MHS Photograph Archives

Family life followed the military frontier as much as any other. Here, the Tackelberry and Jones families pause for a portrait at Ft. Keogh about 1880.

history not only means describing women's pasts, but also inquiring into some things that had appeared self-evident, including the tendency to base our thoughts and actions upon seemingly obvious differences between masculinity and femininity.

However much it has grown, western women's history remains a rather insular, frustratingly marginal subfield of western history because many historians remain unconvinced there is more than one sex to study. Gender matters for subjects quite beyond a narrowly defined "women's history" because conceptions of masculinity and femininity shape

1. Sandra L. Myres, ed., *Cavalry Wife: The Diary of Eveline M. Alexander, 1866-1867* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1977); Sandra L. Myres, "Army Women's Narratives as Documents of Social History: Some Examples from the Western Frontier, 1840-1900," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 65 (April 1990), 175-98; Darlis A. Miller, "Foragers, Army Women and Prostitutes," in Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, eds., *New Mexico Women: Intercultural*

thought and action in unlikely and subtle ways. In years to come, historians of the trans-Mississippi region might explore the many ways in which *gender*—a system of beliefs and actions based on perceived distinctions between masculinity and femininity—has structured not only the lives of individuals and the historical past itself, but also our accounts of that past. Historians will soon demonstrate the need to see the past as gendered, as well as the importance of a self-conscious understanding of how contemporary views of maleness and femaleness lead us to interpret history as we do.

Perspectives (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 141-68; Cheryl J. Foote, *Women of the New Mexico Frontier, 1846-1912* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1990); Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

2. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 55.

Devotees of Frederick Jackson Turner and some new western historians, for example, share a view of western history as a struggle to establish title to *land*. Patricia Nelson Limerick puts it nicely: "If Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate."² Both the idea of individual ownership of land and the things people have done to establish uncontested legal title to it have had immense historical importance, not least in the trans-Mississippi region. From the moment Thomas Jefferson unbuttoned his beliefs about the Constitution and consummated the deal for the Louisiana Purchase, a rich and culturally diverse piece of the planet became a tract of property to be secured for the United States government and transferred into private hands. Turner's vaunted frontier, his western line of settlement, was not an edge beyond which people had not "settled"—ask the Pueblos, or maybe the inhabitants of Santa Fe. Rather, the domain of Turnerian Man was in no small sense a verge beyond which developers had not tread.

Land ownership has indeed been important, but other ideas and the behaviors they prompt have been important, too. That we see only land—surveyable tracts up for grabs—when we look at this region owes not a little to the fact that we have seen the West through the eyes of Euro-American men, capitalists both realized and expectant. It seems to me that the unruly bundle of past events we term "western history" represents much more than an adversarial real estate deal. In reducing western history to a fight over land rights, we are acting under the influence of a worldview

3. See, for example, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

4. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

5. Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1896-1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987), 25-58.

pervaded by European (especially English) concepts of male property rights, rooted in fee simple landholding.

A number of historians have noted the ways in which English and Anglo-American conventions regarding the dispensation of property diverged from Hispanic, Native American, and Asian systems of material use and ownership rights.³ Literary critic Annette Kolodny has argued that even within Anglo culture, men and women had different attitudes toward land.⁴ Some Anglo women, of course, gleefully participated in the real estate game, as we know from Paula Petrik's inquiry into the wheelings and dealings of Montana's prostitutes.⁵ But even as we acknowledge the allure of financial power over land for women as well as for men, we can agree with Kolodny that women's relation to land as property differed from men's.

The American legal heritage derived from English common law held that a major distinction between most adult women and most adult men inhered in their capacity to own property. According to the doctrine of coverture, treated in greatest detail

in Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries* (1765), women gave up their right to hold free and clear title to land or anything else when they married. They became civilly dead. Property ownership and femininity were, until the second half of the nineteenth century, mutually exclusive categories. (Indeed the speculative ventures pursued by certain Helena prostitutes may be seen as one more way in which they burst the bonds of femininity.) Property and masculinity were, in the eyes of Anglo-Americans, intertwined. So were property and race, especially among a people who deemed racial identity sufficient cause to declare some individuals ineligible to own even themselves. Property ownership was obviously equally essential in creating class distinctions.

The focus on property ownership in land as the reigning theme in western history makes sense to the extent that we share the particular view of the Victorians, for whom individual property ownership was a symbol of real white manhood and who saw women's experiences as subordinate to men's. But there is more to western history. To



Al Lucke Collection, MHS Photograph Archives

A homestead family enjoys a picnic on Beaver Creek in north central Montana in 1912.



Solomon D. Butcher Coll., Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln

Conceptions of property and dreams of private ownership fueled sod-house homesteading in Nebraska in 1887 and elsewhere.

understand the experiences of those who were exempted or who dissented from real estate entitlement, whether by race, class, gender, or culture, do we not need other categories, other ways of entering their worldview?

What would happen if we were free to imagine the West in any terms we liked? What if we told the western story as an ongoing series of encounters among groups of people who shaped their actions not only according to varying conceptions of property but also to notions of home, family, freedom, and dignity? Take ideas like home and family as serious forces in the shaping of history and historians would need to come to terms with inherited Euro-American ideas about gender.

In the eyes of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans, whose world view still affects our vision of the West, home and family belonged to woman's domain. This is not necessarily so, however, in all cultures or at all places or at all times. Indeed, there is nothing inherently feminine or middle class or Euro-American about

these concepts. All people have some notion of dwelling place and of kin, and the conflicts among different groups about such notions have immense significance for intercultural relations. We might describe the history of the trans-Mississippi West as a continuing struggle among individuals and groups to define, establish, or defend, or avoid, escape, or reconstitute their homes and families as they saw fit. Cultural and material categories of the western experience—landownership and kinship, to name two important ones—are not necessarily incompatible. In fact, it makes sense to see them as overlapping and interacting over time if we are to construct a more complete history.⁶

Take, for example, the General Allotment Act, a landmark piece of legislation, also known as the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. When Congress passed the Dawes Act, it did so in the name of a utopian social vision and at the urging of self-interested land speculators. Self-styled friends of the Indian believed that by breaking up tribally held

reservations into individual parcels and assigning an allotment of 160 acres to each Indian who wished to be counted, they would accomplish the transformation of Native Americans into farmers—Real Americans. Of course, many Indians already grew things, so the Euro-American notion of “farming” was itself culturebound, infused with the concept of land as real estate. Land speculators knew that in the process of allotting the reservations, much of the land would be left open for the taking.

For many Native Americans, the Anglo transformation of country into fee simple property was as much an assault on their ways of seeing kin relations and social identity as it was an attempt to seize a particular piece of ground. Individual ownership was intended to transform Indians who lived under varied kin systems into male-headed, monogamous nuclear families. One way in which federal administrators pursued that end was to give Native Americans new, patrilineal names on the allotment rolls.⁷ Imagine the confusion and anguish Indians felt as the government and Anglo settlers not only shattered their way of living on the land, but also ignored or attacked what Indians

6. Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

7. See Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian* (1916; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 182-85.

8. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Ruth B. Moynihan, Susan H. Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp, eds., *So Much to Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). See also Julie Roy Jeffrey, “Narcissa Whitman: The Significance of a Missionary's Life,” pages 2-15 in this issue.

9. On the relation between social experience and self-presentation see Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

understood as family.

As historians begin to examine their assumptions about gender, they also will have to rethink women's history. Consider the literature on nineteenth-century Anglo women's writings. Those who have studied these documents have often emphasized the centrality of the notion of home—as shelter, as permanence, as a family refuge—to women's sense of themselves.⁸ Yet the records also reveal that Anglo women, like their men, experienced more transience than permanence. In examining the contradiction between their repeated uprootings and their desire for stability, we see how these literate, Victorian-era women attempted to protect notions of their own femininity against the unpredictability of their lives. They used gender to secure order in a frighteningly changeable world.⁹

The experience of these Anglo women shows that, within a single ethnic group, the masculine search for secure property and the feminine quest for domestic security could and frequently did clash. When their cattle fell victim to blizzards or disease, when their mining claims went bust, when eastern church boards closed missionary schools, or army superiors ordered a transfer, Euro-American men went to their women hoping to convince them that *next time* they would settle down and make a home. All too often, they failed to keep their promises. But masculinity and mobility are not necessarily identical. The tension between desire to make a home and hold a family together, and the necessity of moving on, has haunted denizens of the West in varied ways throughout the region's history. These dilemmas are crosscut by gender and race, and undergirded by issues of economic options and class. Home and kin,

10. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (May 1980), 173-213; Elizabeth Jameson, "Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13 (Summer 1988), 761-91.

property and land, these factors arrange themselves as quite diverse troubling choices for very different groups of westerners, from Indians forced off their ancestral ground to today's suburban families who relocate every couple of years at the behest of corporate managers.

The major challenge of western history today then is to reinvent itself as multicultural, that is, as a story which not only includes something about non-Anglos, but which sees the human story of the region's past in the least culture-bound, broadest, most encompassing terms.¹⁰ Accepting racial differences as a significant theme in western history is essential, but it will not meet the challenge. If we want to develop

new tools to make western history less constrained by the cultural identities of its historians, we must grow conscious of the ways in which gender has structured our vision of western history. Maybe we should begin with a question filmmaker Bobbi Birleffi asked a few years ago when making a documentary about mining boomtowns in Wyoming: Is anybody home on the range?

VIRGINIA SCHARFF is assistant professor of history in the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and author of Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age (1991). She is working on a history of the 1960s hippie counterculture.



T. Harmon Parkhurst, photographer, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe

A Navajo woman dressed colorfully in plaids and silver in 1935 underscores the West's rich cultural diversity.