Women Working

(1)

As the days settled into a semblance of routine, it became apparent that women's work had a different rhythm from the men's work. The women began their day before dawn, to start the fires, put on the kettles of water, and begin breakfast. The women and the older children milked the cows. By the time the coffee was boiled, the beans warmed and the bread baked, the men were about, gathering in the herds.[1]

Helen M. Carpenter was a bride on her honeymoon. "Although there is not much to cook," she wrote, "the difficulty and inconvenience in doing it, amounts to a great deal—so by the time one has squatted around the fire and cooked bread and bacon, and made several dozen trips to and from the wagon—washed the dishes . . . and gotten things ready for an early breakfast, some of the others already have their night caps on—at any rate it is time to go to bed. In respect to women's work, the days are all very much the same—except when we stop . . . then there is washing to be done and light bread to make and all kinds of odd jobs. Some women have very little help about the camp, being obliged to get the wood and water . . . make camp fires, unpack at night and pack up in the morning —and if they are Missourians they have the milking to do if they are fortunate enough to have cows. I am lucky in having a Yankee for a husband, so am well waited on."

(2)

Whether the issue was riding astride instead of sidesaddle, or wearing trousers when riding or working, or driving teams of cattle, the frontier continually expanded the work assigned to women. And even women born to farm work resented the awful labor that surrounded breaking new land. There is evidence that farm women sometimes worked grueling hours in order to free their daughters from a similar life. Lucinda Dalton, eldest daughter of a Mormon family that settled in Utah in 1857–58, remembered that her mother worked far into the night in order that she attend school and study. In 1870, Jane Jasper wrote to her daughter, who had been sent to a boarding school: "It is no use for me to be thinking and working my life out for you to have the chance for an Education unless you have the sense to appreciate what is done for your future."[3]

(3)

Deep in the hills of Idaho and Colorado were two other women whose journeys had brought them to the camps where men were digging for gold and for silver. Each determined to get herself a share of that wealth. Mrs. Theodore Schultz was the "first white woman in [the mining camp]." She started a boarding house and "charged $3.00 per meal and on Sunday [I] often got 200 extra [men]. I worked 18 hours a day lots of times. We had little provisions but bushels of gold dust. I had gold dust everywhere in everything. . . . I threw it in the wood box . . . and under beds." Mrs. Fowler ran a boarding house in Pueblo, Colorado. She charged a dollar a meal, and had all the men she could cook for. Space was so much at a premium that men paid for the privilege of sleeping on the ground *outside* the boarding house. For women who provided a semblance of home—a warm meal and a clean bed—there were fortunes to be made in the mining camps.

- Were women confined to one type of labor? If not, list the types of jobs women might ha
- Did women's labor in the west conform to traditional duties of women? Explain.

Infants + Little Ones

Surprisingly little is revealed in the diaries about the care of infants and small children. What is preserved shows that the women used all their ingenuity to combat the discomforts of the journey. "For sores about the mouth a concoction of sage, borax, alum and sugar." But the crying of babies must have been a continual sound in the wagons. Were there not always blisters and mosquito bites, teething and coughs, earaches, diarrhea—all of the "ordinary" ills of childhood?

The omission from the women's diaries of prescriptions for the care of infants and small children is puzzling. In so many other respects these overland diaries were intended as instruction manuals for family members or neighbors and friends who might wish to follow, so that one would expect the women to pass along those experiences concerning the care of children—advice for the maddening problems of traveling for five or six months out of doors with small children and infants. Perhaps the children were part of that private world that women committed to oral exchanges, talking with one another as the wagons rolled mile after mile on those long, hot days. The realm of children would then have been consigned to the oral tradition along with information about menstruation, marriage, and pregnancy and childbirth. So much of the woman's world was omitted from written accounts—even from the diaries. So much of the woman's world in the nineteenth century was hidden by elaborate taboos.

What did women do with infants and small children on the road?

Weather Conditions

The travelers of 1852 and 1853 had particularly wet summers.[2] Beginning in the early spring, the rains poured down on the wagons. The women kept noting that the bedding had no time to dry out and that children were continually suffering from earaches and fevers. Charlotte Stearns Pengra's diary carries this account:

> Our tent was completely drenched and some of our things that were inside, such as bedding folks and so forth you who have never experienced the pleasure of being awakened sundry times during the night by the falling of pearly drops into their faces, can scarcely imagine the exquisite pleasure, such as awaking affords, especially when it brings the consciousness of a hard thunder storm raging without and the certainty that there is nothing but the thickness of cotton cloth to shelter us from the pelting rain.

Velina Williams wrote, tersely: "Tis a perfect mud-hole, beds and children completely soaked." Lucy Rutledge Cooke noted: "All clothes had to remain wet. Even babies." Women and small children slept under the wagons when the rains were heavy, but there was simply no accommodation that insulated one from the weather.

What happened to people and their camps when it rained?

Religion

Although a goodly portion of wagon parties started out their journeys with scrupulous adherence to Sabbath observance, the demands of the road soon made such rituals impractical. Stopping for Sunday rest made the travelers feel vulnerable to Indian attacks, and as the season advanced into midsummer and early autumn, the chance of being caught in the mountains by early snows made any delay even more risky. Sundays soon were marked simply by a reading from the Bible during lunchtime stops before the emigrants moved on, honoring the inexorable timetable that brooked no interruption—not even for God.

How was religion maintained during travels?

Cooking

Although cooking was not new to women, cooking in the *open* was. Lodisa Frizzell wrote: "it goes agin the grane." The women soon discovered that cooking over a campfire was far different from cooking on a stove. Two forked sticks were driven into the ground, a pole laid across and a heavy kettle swung upon it. Pots fell into the fire and families soon became accustomed to food that was burned. There were no tables, and all preparation was on the ground. As Frizzell noted: "All our work here requires stooping. Not having tables, chairs or anything it is very hard on the back."

Cooking in the rain was especially taxing. The weeds and buffalo chips were wet and would not burn. "There is nothing to eat but crackers and raw bacon." In heavy rain, the women might dig a hole in the ground, jam in a hollow ramrod to serve as an air shaft, and then fill the hole with small rocks and bake the bread on these. The food had the pungent smell of ashes or sagebrush or buffalo chips and smoke. James Clyman told of one wife who "having kneeded her dough, she watched and nursed the fire and held an *umbrella* over the fire and her skillet with the greatest composure for near 2 hours and baked enough bread to give us a very plentiful supper!"

By midsummer, fourteen hundred miles behind them and another thousand still ahead, the emigrants found the journey was taking its toll. Women were walking alongside of the wagons to lighten the loads, or walking behind the wagons, in choking clouds of dust, to gather the weeds and buffalo chips needed to start their fires. If the routine work of the Trail were any indication of what life held in store for women on the frontier of the new territories, it is small wonder many had grown suspicious of the promises of a bright tomorrow.

The usual fare for breakfast on the Trail was bread or pancakes, fried meat, beans, and tea or coffee. Pancakes were made with flour, water, and baking soda, and cooked in a large frying pan or baking kettle. If bread were baked, it was placed in a skillet or Dutch oven with an iron lid. The ingenuity of the overland women was enormous, but sometimes even that ingenuity could be defeated, as when one traveler noted that mosquitoes got into the dough and turned it black.

Nevertheless, the emigrant women displayed an astonishing versatility. Lucy Cooke rolled out her pie dough on the wagon seat beside her while they were traveling. Cecelia Adams wrote that on one Sunday in June, she had "cooked beans and meat, stewed apples and baked suckeyes [pancakes] . . . besides making Dutch cheese, and took everything out of the wagon to air." Jane D. Kellogg, who was on her honeymoon, recalled that "our provisions consisted of hard sea biscuit; crackers; bacon, beans, rice, dried fruit, teas, coffee and sugar." Charlotte Stearns Pengra was explicit about her chores, recording meal by meal what she had prepared. April 29, 1853: "I hung out what things were wet in the waggon, made griddle cakes, stewed berries and made tea for supper. After that was over made two loaves of bread stewed a pan of apples prepared potatoes and meat for breakfast, and mended a pair of pants for Wm. pretty tired." May 8: "baked this morning and stewed apples this afternoon commenced washing . . . got my white clothes ready to suds. . . . I feel very tired and lonely." By May 14, Charlotte was thinking she had become derelict in her duties: "gathered up the dishes, and packed them *dirty* for the first time since I started." On May 18, with a burst of determination, Pengra "washed a very large washing, unpacked dried and packed clothing—made a pair of calico cases for pillows and cooked two meals—done brave, I think. Those who come this journey should have their pillows covered with dark calico and sheets colored, white is not suitable."

After the evening meal, the women's work began again, the unpacking of the bedding and the tents, the preparing of the next day's food, sewing torn spots in the canvas, collecting berries if there was still enough light. After dinner, the beds had to be made up, the wagons cleaned out and aired to prevent mildew.

- What did women cook on the trails?
- What made cooking particularly challenging?
- How many steps were needed to prepare a meal?

What were many women's greatest fears on the Trails?
How did they cope with their fears?

(1) A dozen or so years after the westward emigration began, the Trail had undergone significant changes. There were trading posts and stagecoach stations, and travel no longer meant empty horizons and utter loneliness. Travel time was shortened by almost a month. By 1856, Salt Lake City was a well-established, efficient community where emigrants could find everything from bathhouses and barber shops to law courts. Telegraph poles were strung the entire length of the route by 1861, and messages could be sped from coast to coast in seconds.

On the other hand, the Indians were a new threat. By the middle of the decade, two hundred thousand emigrants had come across the continent, and in their wake cholera, smallpox, and measles decimated the tribes. Buffalo herds began to move from their habitat, and Indians grew restive about the security of their tribal ways and tribal lands.

The emigrants' fear of the Indians was equaled only by their ignorance of the Indians' ways. They seldom knew, for example, that it was common custom among many tribes to offer strangers a token of hospitality, and Indians often expected such tokens from those who were traveling through their lands. Emigrants almost always wrote of the Indians who came up "begging" to their wagons, and they found the habit "disgusting."

Sometimes the emigrants' ignorance and fear of the Indians was the more dangerous because it was accompanied by a show of arrogance. Helen H. Clark noted of the party she traveled with that when they reached Pawnee-Sioux territory: "There was a white man who boasted that he would kill the first Indian he saw, he soon had opportunity of fulfilling his boast as they saw a squaw & he shot her as he would a wild animal & the

Dangers + Concerns on the Trail!

(2) Sometimes the Trail proved too strenuous for men as well as for women. Nancy Hunt and her husband had decided to settle in California, hoping a milder climate would restore his failing health, but exposure of the road weakened him with every mile. "He was very sick through Nevada. . . . He was a soft kind of man, with little grit or vim in him." By August, the cool winds of the Sierra Nevada and the burning sun of the days had taken their toll. "We laid his body away in the best manner we possible could. . . . But there was no grass for the cattle. We must push on." Like many another woman, Nancy was widowed by the journey. She and her two small sons moved into her parents' wagon, and when they reached the mining camps near Sacramento, she hired herself out to work by the day. "Women were scarce in California." She sold her wagon for "two fifty-dollar California slugs," and was soon earning fifty and then seventy-five dollars a month. A year after her husband's death, Nancy was married again. "I was dressed in white, with embroidered pink flowers." She was twenty-four years old. She would have five more sons. Life surged on for the emigrants. The New Country was a land for survivors.

Indians came on and demanded the fellow to be given up and they had to do it and the Indians skinned him alive." Indian attacks, the nightmare of the travelers, began to occur sporadically.

For many of the women, the fear alone could be excruciating. Maggie Hall remembered:

> The boys would go fishing, go hunting. When it was discovered the mothers let up a wail, knew that Indians would kill them, so the Pa's would get out guns and off they would go to find [the] boys. Tried to kick the boys to camp. First chance, those boys would go off again. But those night alarms, when someone would cry "Indians." The guard came running in who had seen the Indians hide behind a bush or heard an arrow, etc. Then in a moment men were loading guns, women crying. A call for volunteers would go out and [they] would circle around. . . . But that scare in the night. . . . It made the women nervous and sick.

Nancy Hunt told of the uncertainty that gripped the emigrants. "We always treated the Indians well and with respect, and they never molested us at any time." But on one particular night, the Indians formed lines on both sides of the emigrants' camp, and in the light of fires "they set up their terrible war-hoop and kept it up until late into the night. . . . Greatly frightened; we made ready for an attack. But . . . they did not molest us at all, except as we suffered in our minds from fright." More experienced travelers would have known the Indians would not attack by the light of the fires, and more experienced travelers might have told the emigrants whether or not the song was really a "war-hoop." Nancy wrote: "At night we placed our weapons of defense by the sides of our beds in our tents. I claimed the ax for mine, and always saw that it was close to me, but I never had occasion to use it on an Indian." Poor Nancy, sleeping every night with an ax-handle by her side to protect herself, her sick husband, and her two small sons. What prolonged terror it must have been. How the howl of a coyote or a wolf must have pierced her sleep.

(3) Katherine Dunlap was older and she marked the dangers more carefully. "A little girl was jostled out of a wagon run over and killed." Perhaps because she traveled with a small child of her own, she noticed a pine board at the head of a grave with the inscription: "Two children, killed by a stampede." And on July 16, she came upon the grave of an infant. "Oh, what a lonely, dark and desolate place to bury a sweet infant—We read the following inscription on the headboard of the death-sleeping infant: 'Morlena Elizabeth Martess, died Aug. 9th, 1863, born July 7th, 1862. Friends nor physician could save her from the grave." The gravestone carried a plea to all emigrants who might pass to repair the grave, and Katherine noted in her diary: "It *was repaired* and a pen of logs built around it."

omen together on the roads

Women continued to perceive themselves as existing primarily in the presence of other women. Most readers who have examined these diaries at length have found themselves wondering whether the writer were married at all, whether the odd initial that appears occasionally on a page represents a member of the wagon train or the diarist's husband. Women's daily routine—the baking, the washing, the cooking, the caring for the children, looking for herbs and berries and roots, visiting the sick—all of these were performed with women who traveled in the company. Within a loosely formed, makeshift "women's sphere," even the depressing necessity of having to do men's chores could be absorbed as long as women could make a social fabric of their lives on the Trail.

why did women stick together?

Optimism

Catherine and Charles Bell had married in South Norwalk, Connecticut, before they had migrated to Iowa and then joined the overlanders headed for California. Catherine was carrying her first child; the baby was born in August on the banks of the Humboldt River. Considering Catherine's advanced pregnancy, her account of the journey is spirited. "It is very muddy and you had better believe it. . . . I had to get out and spat around in the mud to cook out of doors. But I soon got used to it and then it was only fun for me." They traveled with seventeen wagons, fifty men, eight women, and twenty children. Catherine's party made the crossing with no threat of Indian interference: "I didn't feel afraid of them. I could lay down in the wagon nights and sleep as well as I could in a house." The journey's reward was her newborn son. From California she wrote home: "On the bed lies a little black headed fellow nestling about trying to make me put away my writing and take him up. . . . Charles & myself are both very healthy. I am as fat as a bear."

why did this woman have such a positive outlook? was this common or rare?

Attire

Frontier women resisted any form of dress that would accommodate their daily life and work. No change that might seem to bring women closer to the dress of men or of Indian women was tolerated. The word "squaw" appears occasionally in diaries, always as an epithet of utmost disgust. Whereas men sometimes conveyed their sense of social dislocation by complaining they were working like "niggers," women who were resentful of the labor forced upon them by the frontier, expressed their bitterness in the judgment that they saw themselves reduced to the status of "squaws."

In their steadfast clinging to ribbons and bows, to starched white aprons and petticoats, the women suggest that the frontier, in a profound manner, threatened their sense of social role and sexual identity. The dress of the Indian woman was, after all, both chaste and practical. The fervor with which it was rejected suggests something of the anxiety of emigrant women lest the frontier upset the careful balances that had been worked out between husbands and wives in rural communities.

Precisely because work roles were blurred on the frontier, and because women were often called upon to do chores recognized as men's work, dress became a primary mode of asserting the delineation of the sexes. Dress was emblematic of the intention of women to restore the domestic sphere as soon as possible thereby limiting women's work to the house. Starching white aprons on the frontier must have required extraordinary discipline, but those starched aprons betokened delimited work roles that frontier women would not lightly forego.[4]

What did women wear? Did appearances matter in the west? Explain.

Women still women?

The work of the road was physically wearing, but worse was the feeling among some women that the journey was a backsliding into conditions that would have been intolerable at home. Each day on the Trail seemed to turn women more into hired hands than Christian housewives.

Miriam Davis, who settled in Kansas with her husband and children in 1855, wrote: "I have cooked so much out in the sun and smoke that I hardly know who I am and when I look into the little looking glass I ask, 'Can this be me?' Put a blanket over my head and I would pass well for an Osage squaw." One of the women traveling with Davis had been stricken with rheumatism by exposure to the weather. She could not even care for her own child. "I picked a lovely bouquet of prairie flowers and carried it to her but she couldn't take it into her hand." Driven by the exquisite punishment of the Trail, women tried to hold together fragments of their accustomed life. They tried to maintain a circle of female care and companionship. But for many, the overland journey seemed an assault on feminine propriety, a hurtful experience to be endured. The open country left many women feeling unprotected and vulnerable.

– a very mean term for a Native American