

**“Ladies Have the Hardest Time, That Emigrate by Land” (1979)<sup>1</sup>**  
*Julie Roy Jeffrey*

Many years after overland journey to California in 1860 Southern-born Lavinia Porter found the experience as vivid in her mind “as...yesterday’s events.” The trip, she observed, had been difficult, so difficult that it was still “a constant source of wonder to me how we [women] were able to endure it.” That she and so many other women survived the months of hardship suggested to Porter that her sex shared some important characteristics. “An American woman well born and bred,” she wrote, “is endowed with the courage of her brave pioneer ancestors, and no matter what the environment she can adapt herself to all situations, even to the perilous trip across the western half of this great continent, ever ready to wander over paths which women reared in other countries would fear to follow.”

Porter’s choice of courage and adaptability as the traits characterizing American pioneer women suggests that emigration forced women to modify normal behavioral patterns. As she realized, the frontier, which for most women began as soon as they left home and friends, challenged conventional sex roles and accepted roles of behavior. During the five- or six-month ordeal on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, thousands of women challenged domestic stereotypes by assuming male responsibilities and undertaking men’s work. In extreme cases, when husbands became ill or died, women took charge of the whole venture of moving west. Just as women performed men’s work, so too, at least occasionally, did men find themselves doing tasks which society defined as women’s. The lines of differentiation between the sexes, theoretically and often actually so clear in a culturally established setting, blurred. The months on the trail offered women a taste of a West which could disrupt cultural arrangements between the sexes and question sexual ideology. It was an opportunity for women to question, to modify, even to challenge, established stereotypes. Yet few women did so; most did not find it easy to throw off accustomed ways of thinking even when forced into new ways of behaving. Possibly the polarization of sex roles which cast women into the role of the dependent, if superior, sex made it psychologically difficult to create sexual alternatives even when the environment seemed favorable. More likely, the trail experience suggests that women found comfort and personal reinforcement in their own sphere and were reluctant to abandon it altogether, no matter what stresses and tensions existed within it, no matter how far short of its standards women’s conduct was.

It is, of course, difficult to generalize about women’s responses to the trail experience since so few left any evidence of their passage at all. As one emigrant pointed out, “Pioneer women were quite too busy in making history to write it.” The majority of women as well as men lacked the time and perhaps the skills to keep a diary or journal. Those who did keep accounts of their trip probably agreed with Elizabeth Geer, an Indiana woman, who observed, “I could have written a great deal more if I had had the opportunity. Sometimes I would not get the chance to write for two or three days, and then would have to rise in the night when my babe and all hands

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, “‘Ladies Have the Hardest Time, That Emigrate by Land’,” Ch. 2 from *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 25-50.

were asleep, light a candle and write.” Reminiscences written years after the trip supplement travel journals, but these must be used cautiously, since time often cast a rosy glow over events on the trail. Still, we may know more about pioneer women taking the overland routes west than we know about them before or after. Since the long journey was a major event, quite different from the three or four shorter moves many had made to other frontiers, women kept diaries or reminisced about it.

Then, too, men kept diaries about this significant adventure which also reveal information about women during the months of enforced and intimate interaction. For many men and women the trail saga constituted their only contribution to the historical record of the westward movement and, in fact, the only record of their own lives.

Their journals, which focused on the five to six months of travel, first along the valley of the Platte River, then through the South Pass to destinations in California or Oregon, described the most popular but not the only means of reaching the Far West. It was possible, if costly, to sail from East Coast or Gulf ports to Central America, cross by land, and then continue by ship to final destinations in the West, or to go by sea around Cape Horn. During the first year of the gold rush, about 40,000 of the 100,000 fortune seekers chose ships. But the majority always went by land. Between 1841 and 1867, the years of heaviest traffic on the trails, 350,000 took the overland route to California and Oregon; others traveled part of the way by trail. So heavy was the traffic that parts of the trail resembled a highway several miles wide. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, traffic gradually declined, although wagons crossing the South Pass were reported as late as 1895.

During the decades of the eighteen forties, fifties, and sixties, the basic pioneer pattern diverged from the familiar one of moving from one area to the adjoining frontier to emigration to the Far West. Those who could afford to do so crossed half a continent to a destination two thousand miles from starting points like Independence, Missouri. The relative neglect of frontier close at hand was due to a number of factors. The depression of the late thirties and early forties hit the recently settled Mississippi Valley hard. The financial calamity was accompanied by bad weather, floods, and disease. Influenza, plague, chills, malaria, and yellow fever helped make the area uninviting, while propaganda from the West Coast painted the frontier there in rosy colors. California was the land of eternal spring and endless fertility, while Oregon possessed rich soil and peaceful natives. In any case, land directly to the West was still Indian country, closed to settlement, and considered unsuitable for farming. It was not until the seventies that pioneers pushed eagerly out onto the prairies of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, and in the eighties that they moved to the chancy, arid frontier sweeping from the Dakotas and Montana on the north to Texas to the south. Finally, the trek to the Far West was clearly possible as emigrants in the early forties, testing the overland route, proved. In 1843 the first mass migration, helped by the return of good times, set out for Oregon. Each year thereafter saw more emigrants selling out and starting on their way to the coast. In 1847 the Mormons opened their own trail across the prairies. Eventually Salt Lake City would become a resting point for many of the emigrants headed for California.

Most of those who passed over the trail were young and often traveled with their immediate families or relatives. With the exception of the emigration of 1841 and the years during the height of the gold rush (1849-51), families rather than single people dominated the

trail. In the forties, for example, approximately 50 percent of the emigrants were adult men, the other half women and children. After the excitement about California gold died down, the family pattern reappeared. Geographically, emigrants tended to come from rural and small-town backgrounds in the Midwest and upper South, although some hailed from the urban East or the newer cities of the Midwest. Many had moved several times before, however, often as children. The 1850 census of the Oregon Territory, revealing a cross-section of those who had emigrated, showed that almost half the adult men came originally from the East Coast, with only 11 percent born West of the Mississippi; most of the “native” Missourians were children of parents born elsewhere. The general composition of emigration, then, suggested a movement of families, many of whom had roots in the East.

Economically, emigrants were neither very rich nor very poor. Though family situation’s differed, all emigrants had to be financially solid enough to raise the substantial amount of cash necessary for the trip. Guidebooks estimated that emigration for four would come to over \$600, although the sale of wagons and cattle at the trip’s end might reduce final costs to \$220. (A trip around the Horn was estimated at \$600 per person.) Even those pushing out onto adjacent frontier land in the seventies and eighties required capital. Thousands began farming on the plains with *less* than \$500, but the risks of doing so were high. Obviously emigration was not an option for the poor.

Women diarists, few when compared to the total number of women going west, seem representative of the mainstream overland migration. Most had lived most recently on Midwestern farms or in small towns there, though a few came directly from the East. Despite earlier moves to frontier settings (from Vermont to Indiana to Iowa to Oregon, for example), they were middle class in attitude and well acquainted with ideas of woman’s sphere. It is, of course, true that there were other kinds of women on the trail, less obviously acculturated. Lavinia Porter, a Southern emigrant, described the rough and uncouth pioneers from Texas, Arkansas, and southwestern Missouri, the men blasphemers, the women “fitting mates for the men.” She was not the only one to be disgusted with these emigrants, who, leaving little in the way of written records, cannot defend themselves. The trail experience may have differed by class or regional background, though how significant these differences were is impossible to determine. What we do know is what literate women thought and felt on the weary road west.

Their thoughts and emotions in the months preceding departure are, however, usually hidden. Most often their diaries start with the journey’s beginning. Yet most must have suspected the arduous nature of the trip from their reading of guides and newspaper accounts. Folk music reinforced the theme of hardship. “The ladies have the hardest time, that emigrate by land, / For when they cook with buffalo wood, they often burn a hand; / And then they jaw their husbands round, get mad and spill the tea, / And wish the Lord, they’d be taken down with a turn of the di-a-ree.”

Since emigration meant months of hard living, one wonders what motivated women to go west at all. Were they just dragged unwillingly by their men or did they participate in the decision? If they contributed to the decision, what were their reasons for doing so? Though the sources are meager, they do suggest some answers to these questions.

The major impulse behind emigrating appears to have been economic. To one Ohio woman, “going to the far west seemed like the entrance to a new world, one of freedom,

happiness and prosperity”, while a Southern woman candidly admitted the “imprudent financial speculations” and embarrassments which led to her family’s decision. The West was a land of promise, though whether the promise was one of land, gold, or professional opportunity partly depended on the destination. An important secondary factor involved health and climate. “We were bound to search for a healthier and milder clime than Illinois,” one emigrant woman explained, “to spend the remainder of our days...I do not in the least regret leaving the sickness and cold, sand piles and lakes...behind and am looking forward for the time to arrive when we may all get settled safely at the place of our destination.” Other women focused specifically on their own health and their hopes for its improvement.

Men were, of course, expected to “make decisions,” especially about economic matters, and the evidence suggests a pattern in which men brought up the subject of emigrating. Some women were taken by surprise, for, as one said, “the thought of becoming a pioneer’s wife had never entered my mind.” But this did not mean that women were passive spectators. Their style was to respond, to influence, even to argue. Certainly, there were enough women participating effectively in the decision-making process to pass into Western folklore. A popular folk song, variously entitled the “Wisconsin Emigrant,” the “Kentucky Song” or the “California Emigrant,” suggests the extent of female influence. In it, a farmer suffering hard times at home decides to go west. His wife, reluctant to emigrate, unwilling to accept his initial decision, offers one reason after another to change his mind. All fails until she points out, “Remember, that land of delight / Is surrounded by Indians who murder by night. / Your house they will plunder and burn to the ground, / While your wife and your children lie murdered around.” Her appeal succeeds, and her husband gives up his scheme, confessing, “I never had thought of your dying before...you, my dear wife, are more precious than all.” Other evidence corroborates female power to affect decision-making. Since the trip’s success usually hinged on the participation of all family members, a wife’s stubbornness could block her husband’s plans. “All my father could do,” wrote one woman, “was to read every item of California news he could get and talk...for my mother would not be persuaded to undertake such a journey.” Interestingly enough, this reluctant pioneer changed her mind only when her daughters and their husbands decided to emigrate for reasons of health. Even so, she insisted that their home be kept “unencumbered to return to in case we should not like California.” The frequency with which marriage and emigration coincided suggests another facet of power. Whatever ideology had to say about the necessity of female submission, women felt free to disrupt male emigration projects and, because of the cooperative nature of pioneering or their single state, had bargaining powers. Of course, opposition to male schemes did not necessarily constitute a departure from female norms. Women, blessed with superior insight, had been told to direct and to influence their less sensitive husbands. The line between obstinacy and duty might well become blurred.

Others who shuddered at the idea of undertaking a “long and perilous journey” did not openly oppose their husbands. Their timid behavior reflected the standard interpretations of woman’s nature at the same time that it highlighted an attempt to live up to the expected norms. For many women apparently forced themselves to acquiesce to the “dictates of duty.” “My dear mother” did not oppose my father, wrote one daughter. “She tried to put down her fears for the perilous undertaking.” Striving to act as a good wife, Abbey Fulkerath began her journal with these telling words: “Agreeable to the wish of my husband I left all my relatives...although it

proved a hard task to leave them but still harder to leave my children buried in Milton graveyard but such is our lot on earth we are divided.” There is no hint of resistance to her husband’s plans.

But not all women were reluctant emigrants. Those who thought emigration “a romantic wedding trip,” or who thought like Lydia Rudd—who wrote in her journal one May day in 1852, “With good courage and not one sigh of regret I mounted my pony”—were positive about the move west. Their support for emigration reveals that, despite an ideology assigning men the responsibility for making economic decisions, women also participated in decision-making and shared men’s opportunism. “We had nothing to lose, and we might gain a fortune,” one woman wrote, hardly sounding the disinterested female. The dream of easy circumstances often attracted women as strongly as it did men, even leading one woman to conceal her pregnancy and to suppress her fears about her health so that she could go west that year.

Lying at the heart of women’s interest in the economics of emigration were contradictions in the concept of domesticity. Women, unsullied by material interests, were supposed to find fulfillment at home. Yet, their ability to do so depended in some measure upon their husband’s economic success. Though ideology might proclaim that home was home, no matter how humble, most women knew better. Women wanted to live in easy circumstances in their own homes. All this took money. “Disinterested” women, therefore, were necessarily interested in economic questions, and in emigration if it seemed to offer a way of acquiring the resources needed for comfortable domesticity.

The vision of family life so central to domestic ideals also encouraged a positive female response to emigration. Mary Jane Hayden’s explanation of the family decision to emigrate is revealing. When she learned her husband was contemplating a journey to California alone, Mary Jane told him she had resolved to go, too. “We were married,” she said, “to *live together*...and I am willing to go with you...and under these circumstances *you have no right* to go where I cannot, and if you do, you need never return for I shall look upon you as dead.” By insisting upon accompanying their husbands, women like Hayden showed how firmly they believed in the family and how determined they were that their husbands accept familial responsibilities. Letting a man go west alone, unless it were only to prepare a homesite, was a risky venture at best, even if the rationale was that of improving family finances. Women’s magazines condemned gold fever because it unhinged men, making them feel “free as a bird” as they flew from “many a cheerful fireside...many a happy home.” This “fearful curse” destroyed families and, in the end, the gold seekers themselves. Abandoning wives, children, and home meant “no fond arms wherein to rest...[a] cold brow as life fled!” So it was hardly surprising women willingly accompanied their husbands. “Where he could go I could,” remarked one Missouri woman, while another pointed out, “It is the females that can improve your condition and make a home, and them alone.”

Since the family provided meaning for women’s lives and the basis for self-esteem, women might well wish to cooperate with emigration plans. How many were enthusiastic, how many reluctant is unclear, since sources so rarely discuss the pre-trip scene. But those that do show a range of responses and suggest the need to avoid characterizing all women as reluctant emigrants. Of course, other factors also led to positive attitudes. The adventure and romance of emigration was appealing for some; a few mentioned their affection for their husbands. “I was

very fond of my husband,” recalled one, “and was nearly brokenhearted at the thought of the separation.”

Missionary wives were a decidedly eager group of pioneers. To them the West was the means of realizing a religious vocation. This pattern of female commitment to religious work in the West became evident in the 1830’s, when the first women participated in the short-lived attempt to convert Oregon’s Indians. Early conversion experiences persuaded numerous single women that they must devote their lives to Christ. Since missionary societies generally frowned upon sending single women out into the mission field, however, they were relegated to teaching and good works at home unless they could find husbands. More often than one might expect, men who needed wives as assistant missionaries turned up; hasty proposals and marriages resulted. Although women might view such a marriage as part of a divine plan, the appearance of potential husbands was not entirely due to chance or God. Women like Almira David did pray “earnestly for some person who it appeared I was dependent on for going,” but a network of friends and acquaintances often helped prayers come true. An Ithaca minister’s letter to the mission board reveals the process of matchmaking at work. “A word in reference to their engagement and marriage,” the pastor wrote. “‘Tis true their acquaintance had been very short—of but two or three weeks...But Mr. Gray came well recommended to the Rev. Samuel Parker, thro’ whom he became acquainted with Miss Dix.” Nor were the women themselves unresourceful. One young woman, who at twenty-six was considered an old maid, albeit one with a missionary enthusiasm, attended the General Conference of Congregationalists in Bangor, Maine. There she met a young man sharing her devotion to missionary work who, in turn, wondered whether “possibly his prayers were being answered in the person of this lady.” After corresponding, the two married and set out for Oregon in 1856. Since Eastern missionary societies sent over 2,600 men to the West by mid-century, the number of enthusiastic wives was substantial.

In an April entry of his 1853 trail journal, Henry Allyn observed, “Miss Martha Wood wishes to go with us and we conclude to take her.” Allyn’s entry noted an unusual event on the trail, the single woman moving west without the protection of family or friends. Their motives are usually hidden. There are tantalizing references such as the one in the Bradley diary to “four lewd females” on the trail and occasional comments about young women moving west to join bachelor brothers. But certainly, whether they hoped to support themselves, find husbands, or just have adventures in the West, these women decided for themselves.

The motives of one group of single women—teachers—for going west are clearer. Like female missionaries, these women saw themselves as part of a national effort to save the West for Protestantism and civilization. Catherine Beecher’s educational campaign, initiated in 1845 with her book *The Duty of American Women to Their Country*, helped to organize hundreds of these women to go west to teach. A group, formed at the Mt. Vernon Congregational Church in Boston in 1846, defined its goal as sending “competent female teachers, of unquestioned piety, belonging to the Congregational Churches in New England,” to the West. Although sectarian aims were apparent, the group also recognized that it could provide “a merciful provision for hundreds of well-educated Christian young women, whose sex forbids their adventuring as their brothers do, and yet who, if such a Society will encourage them, and send them forth, may go cheerfully and understandingly right to the best spot for them in all that wide region.” Acting as

an agency for single teachers, the group sent 109 women west before merging in 1854 with the Board of National Popular Education, founded by Beecher in 1847. The board not only acted as an agency but also gave prospective teachers some job training. Although the religious mission was strong, the organization was nonsectarian. By 1858 it had sent over a hundred women across the Mississippi who, in turn, often found jobs for friends. The organization's work was publicized through magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* and served as an informal stimulus for other women to leave home for a Western schoolroom.

The records of the Board of National Popular Education contain revealing applications from prospective teachers. Of course, no application was entirely candid; applicants provided the kind of information the board wanted to read. Candidates had to describe conversion experiences, for example, and to place their goals within a religious framework. So Augusta Allan told the board, "I humbly trust that I have sought, and experienced this change [conversion], and that my motives in going West, are a desire to benefit others, and to be benefited myself." Like Allan, most women said they wanted to be useful in a region they described as religiously and culturally destitute. But the women gave a variety of other reasons for wishing to go west which reveal not only their own situation but their expectations. Many of them were already teaching, and thought the frontier might provide more opportunity and even more money. They frankly acknowledged their financial needs. "Being dependent upon my own exertions," wrote Betsey Brownell, "I feel it necessary also to look at the subject, in another light, which I think is not inconsistent with the spirit of doing good." These applications reveal how industrialization was affecting single women in the East. No longer economically essential within their families, unmarried women found themselves in a hazardous world offering them few means of support beyond factory work, domestic service, and teaching. Teaching was the most respectable and offered means for independence; teaching in the West might be an improvement.

Women also spoke of their desire for a better climate and hinted at health problems. Some told the board of a long-time interest in emigration, for the lure of adventure could play a part for women just as it did for men. As one candidate explained, she was interested in the welfare of others, but she was also driven by the "love of adventure and desire to be acquainted with the manners and customs of the inhabitants of more distant parts." Taken together, these applications indicate that these unmarried working women had a variety of positive reasons for undertaking the journey west, ranging from the need to support themselves to the desire to see the world.

What evidence there is on women's motivation and involvement in planning the trip west, then, suggests the danger of viewing women solely as reluctant pioneers. This did not mean that they would not experience a sense of loss at leaving family and friends behind. Both sexes did. But it warns against describing women as passive victims of men's choices rather than as active participants in the process of emigration.

No matter how the decision to go west was reached, no matter how great or small a part women played in it, leave-taking was a traumatic experience. Weeks of activity preceded the day of departure and for some concealed the reality of leaving itself. Women were busy sewing, making dresses, sunbonnets, tents, wagon covers, and seeing their friends. As women attended to these female chores, men disposed of the homestead, either selling or renting it, and acquired the stock, wagons, and supplies the guides said were necessary. Finally, the moment came for

farewells. Leave-taking occurred at home, or friends and relatives accompanied the emigrants for a day's journey. The occasion was usually a solemn and sad one as both the emigrants and the stay-at-homes contemplated the implications of the departure. "On the evening before [starting], the whole family, including my mother, were gathered together in the parlor, looking as if we were all going to our graves the next morning," one woman wrote. "There we sat in such gloom, that I could not endure it any longer, and I arose and announced that we would retire for the night, and that we would not start tomorrow morning, not until everybody could feel more cheerful."

Some diaries poignantly describe the tears shed by men and women alike as they set out. Others have terse, yet equally revealing, entries, like the one written by Amelia Knight, "STARTED FROM HOME." The very brevity conveys the emotion of the scene. Men and women both experienced a sense of loss. For the women, however, though emigration symbolized a means of realizing the domestic sphere, it also ripped away some of its supporting framework. True, the immediate and sometimes not so immediate family might remain intact when groups of relations and friends traveled west together. And equally true was the fact that women were socialized to expect the experience of losing family and friends when they married and moved away from mother, sisters, and friends. But this did not make it any easier to leave the current home with its familiar objects and rituals, with its groups of female companions and relatives who had contributed so much to one another's emotional life. And this move, unlike earlier moves to nearby frontiers, would separate friends by vast distances. It represented what well might be a permanent break. No wonder a deep sense of loss pervades the records. In her journal, Lodisa Frizzell asked herself, "Who is there that does not recollect their first night when started on a long journey, the wellknown voices of our friends still ring in our ears, the parting kiss feels still warm upon our lips, and that last separating word *Farewell!* sinks deeply into the heart. It may be the last we ever hear from some or all of them, and to those who start...there can be no more solemn scene of parting only at death." That women so often compared leave-taking to death was at once a realistic assessment that it was "not at all probable that we ever will meet again on this side of the dark river," as well as a symbolic recognition that the emotional void was like death itself. As for what lay ahead, it was "so far away and vague, that it seemed very unreal" to many of the women at the outset of the journey. What was real was what was behind.

Women's diaries, more than men's, tended to focus on the friends at home. An early entry in Anne Booth's journal suggests many others. "Nothing can atone for the loss of society of friends." The trip was hard enough, women wrote, without having "our hearts torn by the loss of dear ones." Although their marriage might be an affectionate one, a husband did not usually compensate for the loss of female friends. Men, too, of course, missed old companions, but Ashael Munger's reaction to his wife's grief typifies the male point of view. "This day has been rather long and lonesome to E," he wrote. "She thought much of home—friends—prospects—& present condition. I tried to have her get above these things." Men did not dwell on absent friends in their journals; women did. Perhaps the long hours women spent sitting in wagons while men herded cattle, forded rivers, and drove wagons encouraged them to reminisce about absent friends.

Most women, however, did try to "get above these things." As they catalogued each sign of the passing of civilization, women coped with their sense of desolation by reproducing aspects

of the world they had left behind. Thus, women arranged their wagons, writing in their journals of the little conveniences they had fixed, the pockets in the wagon's green cloth lining which held "looking-glasses, combs, brushes, and so on," the rag carpet to keep the floor of the tent snug at night, the bedding, sleeping, and dressing arrangements. As one woman explained, she was busy making "our home" comfortable so that there would be little time "for that dreaded disease, 'home-sickness.'" Another hoped to maintain some continuity by dressing as neatly on the trip as she might at home, in a blue traveling dress with white collar and cuffs rather than homespun, linsey-woolsey or calico.

These attempts to reproduce the rudiments of a home setting and to perpetuate a sense of the familiar, though they might appear trivial, were not. Publicists of domesticity had encouraged women to believe that the physical arrangements of their homes exerted a powerful influence over their families. The makeshifts of the journey were an unconscious way of asserting female power and reassuring women of their sexual identity. And, of course, the objects symbolized an entire way of life temporarily in abeyance. When her husband grumbled about the quantity of her baggage, Lucy Cooke revealed how vital her knickknacks were. Fearing that she would have to discard some of her luggage, she confessed, "I had a cry about it...as I seemed to have parted with near everything I valued."

Although Cooke's husband promised to stop complaining about belongings which provided so much comfort for her, other women would find it difficult to maintain symbolic ties with home life and the female world. The woman who started out in a traveling dress with clean collar and cuffs soon found she had to abandon it for clothes she originally had refused to wear. Indeed, changes in clothing hinted at the social disruption the frontier could cause women. By 1852, some women on the trail were wearing the bloomer costume, finding the "short skirt and pantletts" a "very appropriate dress for a trip like this." Although bloomers were practical, the costume, espoused by feminists as dress for liberated women, carried a radical sexual and political message and was, in the words of one magazine, "ridiculous and indecent." So one woman who had brought bloomers with her found she lacked the "courage" to wear them and vowed, "I would never wear them as long as my other two dresses last." Women bickered over the pros and cons of the costume. Supporters accused women in dresses of being vain and preoccupied with appearance, while they, in turn, replied that bloomers led to male gossip. Said one opponent, "She had never found her dress to be the least inconvenient...she could walk as much in her long dress as she *wanted to, or was proper for a woman* among so many men."

At the beginning of the trip, however, there were only hints of a disruption of "propriety" as both sexes attempted to maintain the comforting division of labor based on the concept of distinct sexual spheres. Generally men drove the wagons, repaired them, hunted, ferried the cattle and wagons across rivers, and stood guard at night, while women were responsible for the children, meals, and family washing.

"Felt very tired indeed—went to bed early," wrote Ellen Tompkins Adams in a typical journal entry. The refrain of constant fatigue occurs over and over again in women's diaries. On the trail women's work was difficult and exhausting. Maternal duties were taxing. Some women were in the last stages of pregnancy on the trip, although few of them mentioned it in their journals. Apparently pregnancy was a subject discussed among friends but not on paper (even in letters to female relatives, women approached the subject indirectly by talking about making

baby clothes) until the baby had been safely delivered. Once the baby was born there was little time to regain strength. A day or so of rest before the trip resumed was about the most any new mother could expect. Some recovered quickly and resumed their chores, but for others childbirth proved a nightmare. “Her sufferings were so great,” wrote one woman of her sister, “that she does not remember anything for quite a space along there. It all seems like a jumble of jolting wagon, crying baby, dust, sagebrush and the never ceasing pain.”

Child care was complicated by traveling. Although older children often walked and herded loose cattle, mothers had to supervise their small children in the wagon all day. It must have been almost impossible to keep children good-tempered in cramped quarters; accidents were an ever-present possibility. Diaries refer to children falling out of wagons, under wagons, miraculously escaping harm, breaking limbs or even being killed in accidents. Their more careful older brothers and sisters caused concern by wandering or riding off or lagging behind and disappearing. Children of all ages came down with fevers, diarrhea, even cholera, and became fretful in a lurching, hot, and uncomfortable wagon. It is not surprising that journals often mentioned children as frightened, weeping, or disagreeable, but that mothers characterized their children in this way did not mean that they were necessarily unfeeling or that they did not accept conventional sentimentalized views of children. Hovering behind many of their comments lay the very real fear of a loved child’s death, of leaving a “little body in that strange country for the Indians to dig up or wild beasts to devour.” Part of women’s exhaustion was psychological.

Preparing meals was also a challenge. Morning and evening cooking took place over campfires or camp stoves in all weather. “Unpleasant as it is, I have been cooking beans and stewing fruit and baking bread,” noted one woman on a blowy, rainy day. Clothes were reduced to tatters “from coming into frequent contact with the camp fire,” and occasionally serious accidents occurred. “Her dress caught fire from the stove,” Mary Fisher observed, “and before it could be extinguished it was nearly burned off her.” This she considered *almost* a bad accident.

Despite these trying conditions, women were satisfied when they carried out their traditional tasks successfully. As one woman observed, she suspected the other women “engaged in helping to cook supper...all enjoyed it heartily, as I did.” In some trains, men had been hired to do the cooking. But rather than enjoying their freedom, privileged women in those trains often reported that they wished to take over the cooking, either because “the boys keep everything so dirty” or “because we liked it.” When women did the cooking, one explained, the meals were more regular, less wasteful, and tasty. She could also have added that when women cooked it was more like home.

In numerous other ways women sought to continue their familiar round of activities during the early and relatively easy months of travel through the Platte River Valley. The journals noted the times when they cared for the sick and the dying of their own company and when they visited other trains in their efforts to help out. As at home, they sustained one another in the familiar rituals of birth and death. “Late in the afternoon a group of women stood watching Mrs. Wilson’s little babe as it breathed its last,” wrote one woman describing an important moment of emotional support. And women made efforts to maintain the remnants of their female network on a daily rather than just an emergency basis. They reached out to construct new support groups for the journey. “During the day,” Catherine Haun, an emigrant from Iowa, explained, “we womenfolk visited from wagon to wagon or congenial friends spent an hour walking, ever

westward, and talking over our home life back in 'the states'; telling of the loved ones left behind; voicing our hopes for the future...and even whispering a little friendly gossip of emigrant life." As women exchanged recipes, as they knitted and crocheted, they were keeping themselves "in the practice of female occupations and diversions." The journals indicate the feelings of satisfaction women felt when they visited, cooked together, or went swimming, and their frustration when "the plain fact of the matter is, *we have no time for sociability.*"

But as the trip wore on, and the rolling prairies receded and gave way to harsh deserts and mountains, it became clear that women would be unable to keep the world they valued intact. Knickknacks, treasured belongings were cast aside in an effort to lighten the wagons and quicken the pace so that provisions and animals would survive until the journey's end. Female friendships were broken off as companies separated. When friends parted, women wept. "We had become so attached to each other having travelled so far together, and being dependent on each other in times of danger and accidents," explained one woman, while another, facing separation from her sister because of their husbands' "first class row," confessed that her sister "did not feel that she would ever be happy again." Troubling, too, was the prospect of being without the comforting company of other women. Ellen Adams, who nursed a sick woman in her train, finally had to leave the invalid and her husband behind at an army barracks. "I felt very badly to come away as there are no women at the Fort," she reported, evidently thinking the presence of soldiers and husband hardly compensated for the loss of female companionship.

Ultimately even standard chores became unfamiliar and unfeminine. Cooking not only reduced women's clothes to rags and tatters but also forced women to take on jobs at which a lady would blush. As cooks, women found meal preparation often included gathering fuel. Since firewood was scarce on the trail, buffalo dung, called "chips," served for cooking. Some women saw the dung as the practical solution to the fuel problem. Others found gathering the chips demeaning and indelicate. "This caused many ladies to act very cross and many were the rude phrases uttered, far more humiliating to refined ears than any mention of the material used for fuel could have been," observed one of the pragmatists from Missouri. Some of the women wore gloves to avoid touching the dung, although eventually "most of them...discarded their gloves," and accepted unpleasant reality. Using the chips to cook food was another problem. "Mother thought at first she could not do that," recalled one daughter, and though, as always, her mother compromised, "she was never reconciled to that kind of fire, and never liked to think of those experiences afterwards."

Familiar patterns disintegrated under the trip's strain, and even the comforting sense of the flow of time vanished. Most striking was the disappearance of the Sabbath, which had become by mid-century a symbol of women's religious and moral authority. Initially many women had hoped to use the day for worship and rest. Parties lucky enough to have both a preacher and leaders who considered layovers no threat to the train's pace observed the Sabbath. But often the need to find water and food for the cattle, the need to make mileage, made traveling on the Sabbath necessary, especially as the months passed. Women had to agree, but confided in their journals that they were unhappy with the situation. Traveling "does not seem pleasant," on the Sabbath, wrote one, while another felt that the waters of the river her company had forded "seemed to reproach us."

Even when the caravan broke the journey to observe a day of rest, women found they had few moments for meditation or relaxation. “I was obliged to do many things I was very loth to do on the Sabbath,” Esther Hanna revealed in her diary. Pennsylvania had been different. Baking, washing, mending, sewing all continued, Sabbath or no, while men had a break from their activities. Men, one sympathetic woman explained, needed “physical rest, so they lolled around in the tents and on their blankets spread on the grass, or under the wagons out of the sunshine, seeming to realize that the ‘Sabbath was made for men’ ...[Yet] women, who had only been anxious spectators of their arduous work [during the week], and not being weary in body, could not fully appreciate physical rest.” Whether men deserved the rest or not, “Does not seem like Sunday at all today—have been obliged to work nearly all day’ was a constant refrain tired women echoed. The truth was, one sadly reflected, it was just impossible to have a real Sabbath on the trail. “And today is Sunday again. O what Sundays. There is nothing that seems like the Sabbath.”

As civilization receded, some of the ways in which thought about themselves changed. Domesticity suggested true women were feminine and attractive. However unlikely the attainment of this ideal, it shaped women’s views of themselves and served as a normative goal. But it was a losing battle to be concerned about appearances on the frontier, and most women stopped thinking in these terms altogether. “As the days lengthened into weeks, our self-respect suffered somewhat in the matter of clothes,” wrote one, who described her skirt as “a piece of wide fringe hanging from belt to hem.” Another explained, “We were so worn out that we were not particular how we were dressed but presented a mixture of fashions.” Only after the trip was nearly over did Luzena Wilson suddenly realize how thoroughly she had forgotten the female norms she had observed in Missouri. As her party drew near to its destination, a man dressed in a clean white shirt came out to meet the travelers. The sight of someone in respectable clothes jolted Wilson and, as she recalled, “revived in me the languishing spark of womanly vanity.” Realizing how she looked in her ragged sunbonnet, tattered skirts, “worn off in rags above my ankles,” her face sunburnt, her hands “brown and hard,” and, of course, gloveless, she shrank modestly away from the man’s observation. By the end of the journey, Lavinia Porter agreed, “I doubt whether any of us could have been recognized.”

“Getting tough, I can tell you,” Mary Warner noted in her diary, after describing driving one of the wagons. If some familiar norms were forgotten, new ones were useful. For it was just as well if women got tough. As the trip progressed, women continued to be responsible for washing, cooking, and caring for children. But under the strain of travel, of parties splitting and hired hands quitting, women also took on jobs once clearly defined as male. They pitched tents, loaded and unloaded wagons, drove them, yoked the cattle. Some even drove stray cattle on horseback, and one surprised man noted “a couple of ladies” galloping full speed ahead after the beasts. Another disapprovingly noted that ladies even rode astride, “the greatest curiosity I have seen yet.” Women whose husbands became sick or died on the trail, of course, assumed all the responsibilities for the family’s survival and welfare, unless they were lucky enough to fall under the protection of another man. For many travelers, the line dividing the actual activities of men and women blurred and, in some cases, disappeared.

As women did men’s work, men did women’s. Single men shifted for themselves, but even married men sometimes helped with the washing and, when their wives were sick or out of

humor, did the cooking. Some women suggested that helpfulness was a regional characteristic. As one wrote in her journal, she was lucky to have a Yankee for a husband, "so am well waited on." But another pioneering wife, from the South, felt that male courtesy and sharing was rare. "Men on the plains...were not so accommodating nor so ready to serve or wait upon women as they were in more civilized communities." If men helped with female work from time to time, this did not mean they did it regularly. Most of the disintegration of work roles affected women. A man assuming female responsibilities was doing a favor. A woman doing a male job was doing what was necessary.

Because of the many unavoidable difficulties of the journey and the exhausting grind of steady work, most women automatically cooperated with shifting requirements. There seemed to be no alternative. But some women welcomed the expansion of the female sphere. Rebecca Ketcham, a single woman from New York traveling west with friends, reported her riding adventures with glee. Others wrote that they enjoyed driving wagons and were proud of their ability to handle animals. They noted incidents which they felt revealed courage and skill. Some went so far as to adopt the symbol of masculinity, the gun: "I keep close to my gun and dog," commented one woman from Illinois.

But even when women seemed to enjoy their new responsibilities, few speculated on the significance of their actions or capitalized on their increased importance within the family. For most women found the trip neither exhilarating nor liberating. Far from welcoming the expansion of the female sphere, a few specifically found fault with it. "There were occasional angry debates while various burdens were being adjusted," noted one diarist. "Warner says I am cross for the first time," wrote a young wife. "Well none of the women think it their duty to help the cook, and he is cross if he doesn't get help, and of course he gets tired also." Women complained to their journals and to each other more about their fatigue, the monotony of the daily routine, the dirt and dust, than they did about their unaccustomed duties, but the point was the same. "This gy[p]sy life is anything but agreeable." "It is impossible to keep anything clean, and it is with difficulty that you do what...you have to do." The meaning of this catalogue of grievances is captured in a typical passage in the journal of a woman who had already moved once from Ohio to Iowa. "Oh dear," she confessed, "I do so want to get there it is now almost four months since we have slept in a house. If I could only be set down at home with all the folks I think there would be some talking as well as resting." Women hoped not to expand their domestic sphere but to recapture it.

Women's cultural values were also revealed when they came into contact with Mormons and Indians during the trip. Unable to see Mormons as the persecuted defenders of religious freedom or Indians as either noble savages or the victims of white civilization, women perceived both as threats to domestic culture. Only when the Indian or Mormon seemed to conform to their own standards did the women have anything positive to say. Thus, they admired Salt Lake City, a stopping-off point for California emigrants, for its beautiful plan, its cozy, snug homes, its prosperous and bustling air. Observant women approved of Indian mothers who made children's bonnets, or who dressed neatly and presented a "clean and wholesome...appearance," and even Indian men who seemed to be noble warriors and "well behaved."

But more often than not, women saw the similarities between their own culture and Mormon or Indian culture as superficial. Underneath it all, Margaret Hecox reflected, Indians

were “just Indians.” “I doubt if the savage instinct can ever be eradicated from the wildman’s breast.” Disgustedly, women recorded that Indians were thieves and beggars, little recognizing how their own civilization had contributed to the disintegration of Indian society. Indians were habitually described as filthy, lazy, dishonest, and harsh to women. As for the Mormons, the female writers found the men “very hard looking” and the women ugly. In the eyes of the overland emigrant woman, the two groups represented the collapse of civilized life and a negation of familial values.

Underlying the observations ran a fear of sex uncontrolled by all the conventions of nineteenth-century society. Women constantly commented on and obviously closely observed the nakedness of Indian men, who were “guiltless of clothing...very many...in the state of our first parents before they committed their first sin.” Indians’ sexuality was clearly suggested by many popular captivity accounts with their female victims who recollected savages whipping their “almost naked” bodies. Readers could easily imagine what other foul acts Indians perpetrated upon the “almost naked” female form. The actions of men seemed to reinforce the idea that they lusted after white women’s bodies. A number of women recounted episodes in which Indian men tried to trade ponies for white women. The women’s response was one of stark fear. Some described hiding in wagons to avoid the savage’s flattery. Others became the butt of their husband’s sense of humor. One revealed that her husband pretended to strike a bargain with an Indian, his wife for two ponies. The Indian, little realizing the joke, generously offered three, “then he took hold of my shawl to make me understand to get out. About this time I got frightened and really was so hysterical, began to cry.”

If the intentions of Indians seemed clear to these diarists, so too were the polygamous practices of the Mormons. Women writers assumed polygamy exploited women sexually without giving them anything in return. “These demons marry some girls at ten years of age,” wrote one horrified observer who emphasized that the demons often took on “a mother and her daughters and marry them all.” To get “only one third or perhaps one twentieth share of a man” was hardly worth the hard work Mormon men expected of their wives. Indeed, Mormon wives were “all...a poor heart broken and deluded lot and are made slaves to the will of these hellish beings who call themselves men...They have not so much liberty as common slaves in the south.” The fear of sexual license and the conviction that women in the other culture were men’s slaves suggests the confidence these women had in their own values and social place as well as their fear of change.

These confrontations with an alien world and the hardships of travel which increased so dramatically during the second part of the trip caused women, at times, to feel fearful and bitter. Under stress, some women turned against their husbands and blamed them for the whole unhappy undertaking. “I felt as though myself and little ones were at the mercy of a madman,” Mary Powers reflected, while Margaret Hecox, who had retreated into the family’s wagon with her children as the rest of the party watched an Indian war dance, agreed. “I wondered what had possessed my husband, anyway, that he should have thought of bringing us away out through this God-forsaken country. I feared that we all were to be scalped or taken prisoners before morning.” After a moving description of her younger brother’s sickness and death, Ada Millington tersely observed, “Ma thinks if we had been ‘at home he needn’t have died.’”

Despite her bitter thoughts, it apparently did not occur to Margaret Hecox to confront her husband. Nor did Mary Powers, who noted in her reminiscences, “I said nothing.” The ways in

which women handled their frustrations most often testifies to their attempts to live up to norms of female behavior, at least in front of their men. Lavinia Porter confessed she often cried, wished herself at home, and then returned to chores with an air of assumed cheerfulness. For others, keeping journals must have served as a legitimate release of tension and as a place for cataloguing grievances. "This journey is tiresome...it is perilous, the deaths of many testify, and the heart has a thousand misgivings, and the mind is tortured with anxiety," explained one weary woman in her journal. Women also expressed their grievances to one another. "Husband is scolding and hurrying all hands (and the cook), and Almira says she wished she was at home, and I say ditto." And occasionally all the women gathered together to share their feelings. "The female portion of our little train are almost discouraged," observed one writer. "We sat by moonlight and discussed matters till near 11 o'clock."

On August 3, 1854, Mary Burrell wrote, "Worse than all, stuck my nose in where I had no business." Though she did not reveal what she had done, the entry suggests that though women most often seem to have tried to keep their place, they did not always succeed. Nor were men more successful. Both sexes indulged in disagreeable and petty behavior. "All out of humor" noted one woman, while another revealed she had hardly expected "to see so much selfishness and bad temper." "Being jolly when you are so tired yourself is no picknick," observed one woman still well enough socialized to feel it was her duty to cheer the "tired and cross" men. Men admitted in their journals to "heavy hearts," quarrels, complaints, and described shockingly inappropriate masculine behavior. John Minto told of coming across a father of four, "lying on his back upon a rock, taking the rain in his face, seemingly given up all thought of manly struggle." The cry of Indians sent some of the men of another train scurrying to hide in the wagons, courage fast forgotten. Vignettes of inept husbands unable to control their wives' behavior suggested how hollow were the claims of some to male authority.

It is not surprising that given the difficulties of the journey social restraints occasionally broke down and frustrations, usually controlled, exploded. As tension built up in one party, the observant Rebecca Ketcham noted how the behavior of all her fellow travelers changed. "It does seem as though we might have everything pleasant, but is all the other way. Mr. Gray [the captain] scolds when he is around, and when he is away the rest scold and find fault with him." As time passed, Rebecca detailed how the women finally stopped complaining to each other, abandoned all sense of woman's place, and "talked pretty plain [to Mr. Gray] me more so than ever. I don't know how he liked it, but I cannot help it." Other examples of what could be called female insubordination crop up in the diaries: women refusing to cook, women refusing to camp at the assigned spot, a few trying to bring the trip to an end altogether. One set flames to the family wagon; another beat her husband with a horsewhip. These were the extreme, but subtle resistance was, no doubt, more common and also less likely to be recorded. Lavinia Porter, who disapproved of her husband's barrel of whiskey, described what she did. Sure that complaints or reasoning would fall on deaf ears, she resorted to indirection, certainly a part of the female style. "I patiently bided my time, and one day when no one was around," she proudly recounted later, "I quietly loosened...the barrel and by nightfall there was nothing left."

A 250-pound woman berated and abused her husband, "charging him with bringing his wife and children out into the God-forsaken country to starve and die"; she was, however, the exception and Lavinia Porter probably more typical. But neither open insubordination nor

indirect resistance apparently resulted in any clear rethinking of the female role or of the relations between the sexes. Rather, women struck out blindly, angry at the tedium of the trip and the prolonged disruption of their female world. They were, perhaps, too tired to do otherwise. And as the journey neared its end, there seemed less and less need to rethink as women's thoughts turned more and more to the future and the reestablishment of their world, now so sharply contrasted with life on the trail. What had initially been vague now loomed close. "I am very weary of this journey, weary of myself and all around me," wrote one woman in late August. "I long for the quiet of home where I can be at peace once more."

The journals and reminiscences show the rich variety of responses women pioneers had to the overland experience. They noted the cheerful and lively moments as well as those of suffering and death. Many testified to the new and strong ties they had formed with one another, a good beginning for a new life. "I feel that the good friends we have made on the journey more than make up for the hardship," noted one woman. The trip had been a mixed experience. But now it was time to start anew. At the end of her journey, one woman wrote this artless poem which captures so much of the response of women to emigration.

Day after day  
We wend our way; Through sage and sand,  
In hope to find,  
To please our mind,  
A home in a happy land.