

**WOMEN IN ISOLATION:
WOMEN ON THE AMERICAN FRONTIER IN
SELECTED WORKS OF NON-FICTION, FICTION, AND NARRATIVE**

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ABSTRACT

During the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s Americans migrated westward across the continent by the tens of thousands. Inherent in such a movement was the disruption of the travelers' lives. Women particularly suffered. They were often uprooted from a contented life and thrust into one of deprivation, desolation, and isolation. Isolation and loneliness became an integral part of their existence.

Women detailed their experiences on the overland trails in diaries, journals, and letters. This type of non-fiction work provides information regarding the pioneer women who settled on the Great Plains and in the Far West. An emigrant woman's writing included a "rather widespread and complicated motif" (Solomon 143). The woman lives on a huge expanse of prairie far from town; she is both physically and psychologically isolated, living with her husband and being alienated from other women. She has left her family far behind; her husband may be insensitive and unsympathetic, yet she must remain devoted and silent (Solomon 143). A woman faced the uncertainties of the wilderness often alone.

Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, a work of fiction, parallels Cather's life growing up in Nebraska in the late 1800s. The characters in *My Antonia*, early settlers on the Plains, find themselves isolated in many aspects: from their country and its culture, from family, from neighbors, from community, and from a home. The women, often thought to be the moral foundation of the family and, thus, of society, feel the brunt of the isolation; they often must carry on alone.

A Son of the Middle Border and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, two of Hamlin Garland's narrative works—these about his mother—consider the isolation and loneliness of being a farmer's wife on the desolate Iowa and Dakota prairies during the mid- to late 1800s. Garland's mother followed her husband as he moved from one homestead to the other, carving out the wilderness—at the expense of his wife. Harsh living conditions, Garland believed, and the insensitivity of men accounted for the premature death and aging of countless women on the prairies.

This thesis illustrates the conditions of women's lives on the American frontier through non-fiction found in diaries, journals, and letters; fiction in Cather's *My Antonia*; and narrative in Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. SETTLING THE AMERICAN FRONTIER: WOMEN'S DIARIES, JOURNALS, AND LETTERS	13
III. CATHER'S <i>MY ANTONIA</i> : THE PLIGHT OF FRONTIER WOMEN IN FICTION	55
IV. GARLAND'S PERSONAL NARRATIVES: <i>A SON OF THE MIDDLE BORDER AND A DAUGHTER OF THE MIDDLE BORDER</i> ...	73
V. CONCLUSION	96
VI. WORKS CITED	101

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Alone, alone, all, all alone;

Alone on a wide, wide sea!

And never a saint took pity on

My soul in agony.

(Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient
Mariner*)

The settling of the American frontier involved countless men and women—ordinary people. They faced the unknown often in search of adventure, money, and/or land. Frontier conditions tested the resolve of the ablest pioneers. The wilderness, whether a sea of prairie, flat plains, or forested mountains, proved to be a harsh, formidable environment. Settlers, living far apart from one another, had to deal with the elements of nature and, thus, the realities of survival alone. Desolation, isolation, and loneliness became integral parts of the lives of both men and women. The literature of the West records a deep sense of isolation—both physical and psychological—for persons on the frontier, particularly women. Fairbanks and Sundberg believe that for pioneer women loneliness was “undoubtedly the most pervasive ordeal” (49). Women’s diaries, journals, and letters of their overland journeys and homesteading on the frontier provide insight into the isolation they felt. Likewise, fiction depicting life on

the frontier deals with women's aloneness. Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, representative of early Plains settlers in Nebraska, relates the isolation women experienced. Similarly, Hamlin Garland's narrative works, *A Son of the Middle Border* and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, consider his mother's isolation and loneliness, being a farmer's wife on the desolate Iowa and Dakota prairies.

Between 1840 and 1870, some quarter of a million Americans crossed the U.S. continent in a mass migration, one of the greatest in modern times (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 10). They sought relief from depression, war, and oppression. The wilderness of the West was viewed as a land of milk and honey: free land, gold, and adventure. Myres notes that this westward movement was likely the best documented in the country's history. Men and women recorded their experiences in journals, diaries, letters, and memoir (*Ho! for California* 35). A journey of this magnitude—covering about 2,000 miles—proved to be particularly traumatic for women. The decision to join the westward movement was normally the man's (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 28). Most women had little choice but to follow. This venture often devastated women's lives, as they were forced to leave established, comfortable homes and face the alienation of the unknown. Margaret Hereford Wilson in 1850 wrote to her mother: "Dr. Wilson has determined to go to California. I am going with him, as there is no other alternative... Oh, my dear Mother... I thought that I felt bad when I wrote you... from Independence, but it was nothing like this" (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 28).

Preparing for the overland trip was a major undertaking. Property—land, household goods—had to be sold and financial affairs put in order. Women diarists

considered the beginning of the trip as one of their most stressful experiences of the venture (Georgi-Findlay 77). They suffered the sorrow and anxiety inherent in leaving home, family, and friends. Mary Stuart Bailey on her way to California in 1852 wrote of her departure:

Left our hitherto happy home in Sylvania amid the tears and parting kisses of dear friends, many of whom were endeared to me by their kindness shown to me when I was a stranger in a strange land, when sickness and death visited our small family & removed our darling, our only child in a moment, as it were. (Myres, *Ho for California!* 55)

Crossing the plains often proved to be long, difficult, and dangerous. Myres points out that different types of problems confronted overland travelers. During the 1840s, lack of experience in this type of travel plagued the pioneers. Maps were limited and inaccurate; this resulted in the immigrants' becoming misguided or lost. In the following decade, the 1850s, travelers were faced with overcrowding and polluted campgrounds. During the 1860s, the pioneers suffered from the inconveniences and discomforts imposed by the soldiers sent to protect them from the Indians (Myres, *Ho for California!* xii). Regardless of the decade or conditions, women were still expected to perform the domestic tasks: cooking, washing, and gathering weeds or buffalo chips to make the fires. Life on the trail could be monotonous, leaving time for reflection on what had been left behind. Agnes Stewart wrote in her diary: "O I feel so lonesome today sometimes I can govern myself but not always but I schooled in pretty well considering all things" (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 30). Women tried not to reveal their emotions,

and, thus, shield their vulnerabilities (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 30). During the westward journey, the travelers were beset by frightening storms. Harriet Sherrill Ward described a typical storm in her journal: "...thunder is rolling and the thick, dark clouds are gathering about us, and these horrid storms are anything but pleasant when we have nothing but a single canvas for a covering. Oh, how gladly would we pass this stormy night with our dear ones at home!" (DeWitt 52). Storms endangered the pioneers and their animals and destroyed their belongings. Ward further writes that "Cold, and rain pouring down without mercy on our poor horses... The climate is cold and I think unpleasant. I have seen no place yet in our journey thus far where I could possibly make me a home to love, since we left Dubuque" (DeWitt 52). The vastness and desolation of their surroundings underscored women's isolation and vulnerability.

After the Revolutionary War, people began to look to the vast lands west of the Alleghenies and the possibilities they seemed to offer. This growth in the hunger for land compelled the national government to make more territory available for settlement (Sprague 24-25). A farm family wanted the right to "squat" on a piece of land, that is, clear the land, build a house, and purchase the land at the minimum auction price. In so doing, the farmer was performing a national service and benefiting the national economy by cultivating the wilderness. In 1842 the first Preemption Bill was passed; this protected the farmer who improved the new land, or homesteaded it (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 21). Further demands were made for free land, however. In 1862 Congress passed the famous "Homestead Act," offering an immigrant 160 acres of land, free, except for minor fees (Sprague 24-25). These legislative acts and others propelled the desire for land and

supposed riches to the forefront of Americans' minds. Men rushed westward into the unknown to seek fame and fortune—often at the expense of women. One woman on the frontier is said to have described the West as “a heaven for men and dogs, but a hell for women and oxen” (Sprague 106). Given the conditions women faced on the frontier, this was an apt description. “...it was women who actually bore the brunt of the hardships involved in opening the West” (Riley, *Female Frontier* 1). The wilderness was harsh, desolate, vast, and unforgiving.

Many women felt afraid, homesick, and unhappy on the frontier. Amelia Buss moved to Fort Collins in 1866, leaving family and friends behind because she felt it was her duty as a wife to follow her husband. Her diary contained details of her daily housekeeping and complaints of hard work, isolation, and loneliness (Armitage 41):

I have not had a letter in over two weeks till today I got one from A. and one from L. there was good news from home but some how I have felt very low spirited every since and that old homesick feeling comes back to me an other week is gon and O how cold the wind sounds tonight. G. and V. Are a sleep and I am a lone. (Armitage 41)

Although the pioneers established farms, the men often left for long periods of time for various reasons: to conduct a side business, search for gold, hunt game. With their husbands gone, women found themselves operating the farms—by themselves. Sprague notes that “when husbands would be absent for long periods, their wives would suffer greatly from lonesomeness” (46). The isolation only made matters worse. Amelia Buss complained of being left alone:

George went to the mountains yesterday morning to be gon all the week...after he had gon gave vent to my feeling in a flood of tears. It may seem foolish to those that have neighbors and friends around them. I get a long very well through the day but the long evenings and nights are *horrible*. (Armitage 43)

A wife expected her husband to return, but that did not always happen. Likewise, a husband might die, leaving his wife alone. The diary of Elizabeth Smith Geer reveals her ordeal with the death of her husband. Elizabeth stayed “night after night, with my poor, sick husband, all alone and expecting him every day to die” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 55). A few months later she wrote: “We buried my earthly companion. Now I know what none but widows know; that is, how comfortless is that of a widow’s life, especially when left in a strange land, without money or friends, and the care of seven children” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 55). Fairbanks and Sundberg discuss the life of Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve and note the hardships which she endured, living on the Wisconsin prairie in the 1800s (37). Charlotte seems to be representative of many pioneer women:

Charlotte had developed many mental and psychological resources for surviving on the frontier, yet the loneliness and discomfort she described makes us wonder why she and other women left their familiar homes, their families, and friends to settle in new lands which seemed hostile and desolate. (Fairbanks and Sundberg 37)

Life on the frontier proved to be trying mentally and physically for the American immigrants. However, not all pioneers were American born. Thousands came from European countries in the 1800s to settle America's prairies and plains. They had to adapt not only to the harshness and desolation of the environment but also to alienation inherent in dealing with new customs, culture, and language in a strange land. Schlissel notes that "...a family's survival depended not only on the men but upon the labor of women and upon their miraculous capacities to give their families something to hope for in desperate times" (*Far from Home* 198). Yet women had no one to whom they could turn in times of despair. Although homesick and overwhelmed with troubles, they kept everything to themselves unless they could cry out their grieving to another woman. Even that was done so guardedly because women did not want expression of their sorrows to be discovered by their families (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 199).

The Great Plains became home to many immigrants. Settlers in Nebraska were both American and European, as Willa Cather depicts in *My Antonia*. Cather's work parallels her life on the Nebraska frontier in the 1800s. In 1883 Charles and Virginia Cather brought their four children from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, located in Webster County in the south central part of the state; Willa was about ten years old (Cherny 31). The Nebraska landscape was a sharp contrast to that of Virginia; the land was new and raw. Cather felt as if she had been "thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron" (Rosowski, *Willa Cather* 81). "The land stretched out before her empty of the familiar mountains and trees, and she felt an overwhelming loneliness" (Rosowski, *Willa Cather* 81-82). Webster County lies toward the eastern side of the

Great Plains and is characterized by relatively flat terrain, sloping eastward from the base of the Rocky Mountains toward the Missouri River. Throughout the plains flow broad, shallow rivers which are sluggish most of the year. The Republican River is such a waterway and runs just south of Red Cloud. When the first Europeans arrived in the Republican valley, they found only a few trees and shrubs growing near the rivers and tall prairie grass covering the rolling plains (Cherny 31). Cather wrote in *My Antonia*:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields....There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made....I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction....I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it....Between the earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. (Cather 3-4)

Often oppressed in the Old World countries, many immigrants saw America and its vast undeveloped expanse as the land of opportunity. They expected to find freedom: personal, religious, and economic. Western America was thought of as the Garden of the World:

Wilderness was a temporary condition, 'thro' which we are passing to the Promised land,' wrote one New England colonist, and his words were repeated by succeeding generations of pioneers. Wilderness could be conquered and civilization reestablished. (Myres, *Westering* 14)

Writers and politicians lauded the West as a paradise. This garden land, all could see, was fated to be, according to one proud Westerner in 1838, “the power center of America, as America will be of the whole world” (Myres, *Westering* 14). Even decades later, Americans continued to perpetuate the belief that the garden image was the ultimate destiny of the Western part of the country (Myres, *Westering* 14).

Even though life on the Western frontier proved to be a paradox—Frederick Jackson Turner referred to it as the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (Myres, *Westering* 12)—thousands of Europeans poured into the country (Myres, *Westering* 12). Cherny indicates that by the 1870s and 1880s six groups accounted for four-fifths of the European immigrants on the Great Plains: Germans, Swedes, Irish, Czechs, English, and Danes. Ethnic settlements existed throughout the farming regions of eastern and south central Nebraska. Germans dominated the northeastern counties; Danes and Swedes, central Nebraska; and Bohemians, the southeast (32-33). Immigrants, Czechs and German Russians, play important roles in Cather’s *My Antonia*. Antonia Shimerda, the heroine in *My Antonia*, is a Czech immigrant. Jim Burden, on his way to meet his grandparents in Black Hawk, Nebraska, is told by the train’s conductor about Antonia and her family: “...he told us that in the immigrant car ahead there was a family from ‘across the water’ whose destination was the same as ours. ‘They can’t any of them speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is ‘We go Black Hawk, Nebraska’” (Cather 2). Many immigrants attempted to adapt to the American culture but found it difficult because of differences in language, religion, and custom (Cherny 33).

Life for the immigrant pioneers proved to be rigorous. Everything had to be done at once: building shelter, planting crops, fencing pastures for livestock. The closest neighbor often lived several miles away, and many settlers felt a sharp sense of isolation. Those who, like the Shimerdas, could speak little or no English felt even more isolated (Cherny 32). Cather noted in *My Antonia* that as the Shimerdas settled in, "...those first months the Shimerdas never went to town....in Black Hawk they would somehow be mysteriously separated from their money" (Cather 22). In a pre-arranged business deal, the Shimerdas had bought their property from a fellow countryman, Peter Krajiek, who was untrustworthy and took advantage of their living in a strange land with no knowledge of the language. "They hated Krajiek, but they clung to him because he was the only human being with whom they could talk or from whom they could get information" (Cather 23). On this Nebraska farm the Shimerdas were isolated from everything they knew. They could not return to their home country; they had no choice but to stay and fight for survival. The women found this struggle to be a particular hardship in what Randall terms "one of the loneliest regions of the world" (273).

The northern plains of North and South Dakota rivaled Nebraska for its hostile environment and desolation—no less pleasing to the lives of frontier women. "No wonder women were lonely, so lonely that some sickened and died or went mad. This loneliness, ostensibly attributed to their distance from family and friends..." (Hampsten 39). Garland Hamlin in his narrative *A Daughter of the Middle Border* considers the effects homesteading on the Dakota prairies had on his mother. In moving her from the Dakotas to Wisconsin where the Garland family had originally homesteaded, Garland

comments, “That I had rescued her from a premature grave on the barren Dakota plain was certain...” (Garland, *Daughter* vii). In describing the images of the frontier woman, Myres believes that a typical wife could be considered “Overworked and overbirthed, she lived through a long succession of dreary days of toil and loneliness until, at last, driven to or past the edge of sanity, she resigned herself to a hard life and early death”

(*Westering* 1). Myres notes Hamlin Garland’s description of his mother:

Her life had been always on the border—she knew nothing of civilization’s splendor of song and story. All her toilsome, monotonous days rushed through my mind with a roar, like a file of gray birds in the night—how little—how tragically small her joys, and how black her sorrows, her toil, her tedium. (*Westering* 1)

The Garden of the World image applied to the northern plains states as well as those surrounding the Dakotas. Initial settlers preferred the forested areas where they had resources to build homes; the trees offered not only physical but psychological shelter. The prairies were avoided for settlement, as they seemed unfamiliar and too open. Slowly, though, the aversion to the openness changed—the settlers accepted shelterless, timberless farm homes. The 1840s considered the open prairies hospitable, healthy, and agriculturally sound. Pioneers wrote radiant reports of this new territory and urged friends and relatives to join them (Myres, *Westering* 21-23). One young Pennsylvania girl wrote, “We had heard so much of the beautiful prairies of Iowa. We could see for miles and all my longings of the vast open spaces were satisfied” (Myres, *Westering* 23-24). However, Hamlin Garland felt that the myth of the American West as the Garden of

the World did not apply to the raw Iowa and Dakota plains, as he and his family had experienced them. The image of the independent farmer living in healthy, rustic surroundings and being the happiest man in the world fell short of that depicted. Pizer quotes Garland, who in traveling through Iowa in 1887 to visit Ordway, South Dakota, where he had lived for many years as a youth, wrote of an Iowa farmer:

has more to irritate him than any other sort of man on earth. The calves, pigs, and horses are as perverse as ugly dispositions can make them. The farmer wears dirty and sticky clothing, goes without bathing, is parched by the wind and burned by the sun. He is a pack-horse who never lays down his load. No beauty, no music comes into his life. He lives apart from his fellows and all the little courtesies and amenities of life are unknown to him. (Pizer 35-36)

The reality of the farmer's life, seen from the angle of one familiar with it, is what Garland recorded and included in his middle-border work (Pizer 34-37).

The settling of the American frontier was one of the best documented in the country's history. These records depicted the lives of ordinary people. For those attempting to claim the wilderness, life could be harsh, desolate, and lonely. The literature of the West reveals the physical and psychological isolation of the pioneers—particularly the women pioneers. This study will examine the conditions of women's lives on the American frontier through non-fiction found in diaries, journals, and letters; fiction in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*; and narrative in Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*.

CHAPTER II

SETTLING THE AMERICAN FRONTIER:
WOMEN'S DIARIES, JOURNALS, AND LETTERS

“Perhaps no concept, no theme in American history has had a greater impact on the popular imagination than the idea of the West” (Myres, *Westering* 12). Since the first Europeans arrived on the shores of the New World, the land beyond their settlements intrigued them. Even though the British government attempted to confine the colonists to the area east of the Appalachians, hunters, traders, and speculators had pushed much farther, seeking new opportunities and areas for expansion and settlement. By the end of the American Revolution, people were ready to further explore and settle the lands between the Appalachians and the Mississippi River (Myres, *Westering* 12).

Americans directed their attention to the seemingly boundless land west of the Alleghanies and the possibilities it appeared to promise. Interest shifted from navigation on the high seas to the frontier (Sprague 23). Sprague notes an English traveler's comment regarding the American hunger for land: “The possession of land is the aim of all action, generally speaking, and the cure for all social evils among men of the United States” (24). The land west of the Alleghanies consisted of prairies, plains, and mountains. Sprague describes the frontier in terms of “timber-prairie” and “plains-mountain,” the latter being the immense area between the ninety-eighth meridian and the Pacific Ocean. Sparse vegetation, high evaporation, incessant winds, and frequent dry years characterized this section of America, often thought to be uninhabitable.

Geographers and map makers before 1850 called this region of the country the "Great American Desert" (23). Transportation seemed unfeasible for all areas except those near water; market prices for many commodities widely fluctuated; and pessimists publicized the dangers of attack and havoc of disease. Many believed that the West offered "only a resort for the misfits of society, and for the individualists who demanded virtual isolation" (Sprague 88). Sprague notes that a comment by Faux expressed a common belief: "The west is fit only for the poor men, who are the only proper pioneers. I do not think the land will improve in value, but that much money will be wasted on improvements" (Sprague 88). Needless to say, many of the first families venturing beyond the Alleghanies believed they were leaving civilization behind (Sprague 88).

Most of those who first ventured forth to the West were men. Fur traders in 1812 returning east to the "States" brought reports of the western land. Traders told of a barren land which was largely unavailable for settlement. This dampened enthusiasm for overland emigration for a quarter of a century. However, by 1830 fur traders demonstrated that provision wagons could traverse the overland trail; thus, family emigration became possible (Faragher 5-6).

The overland route across the North American continent traced its way through great river valleys leading to and from the natural highway over the Rockies at South Pass. From its mouth on the Missouri near Omaha, Nebraska, the Platte River cuts a broad valley corridor west across the Nebraska plains and well into the high country of Wyoming. Feeder streams lead right into the opening of South Pass. Western slope rivers

provide routes from the continental divide to the northern or southern range of the Pacific mountains. (Faragher 5)

By the early 1840s emigration to the West began in earnest, initiating one of the greatest mass migrations in modern times (Faragher 35). Reports from the West gave people reason to believe land in this wilderness could be settled and developed. California was said to be a paradise where the sun always shone and fruit grew wild. Trappers in the Oregon Territory told of an endless supply of furs, rivers full of fish, and rich land for farming. Americans envisioned free land and were irresistibly drawn to it (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 19). With increased demand for western land, the national government made more territory available for settlement. Through treaties with foreign nations, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase with France and ending with the Gadsden Purchase with Mexico in 1853, America's land holdings grew. In addition, a long series of Indian cessions, beginning in 1783 and ending in 1889 with the Unassigned Lands of Oklahoma, provided new territory for America (Sprague 24).

Immigrants demanded cheap, even free land. In 1796 the smallest unit of government land which could be sold was 640 acres at about \$2.00 per acre; by 1820, the minimum unit had been reduced to 80 acres and the minimum price to \$1.25 an acre (Sprague 24). Schlissel notes that in 1837 a major depression enveloped the country: banks closed, people looked for other places to make a living. By 1839 wages fell 30 to 50 percent. The western lands promised a better way of life. Also, many farmers were beginning to feel crowded. One farmer decided neighbors were settling too close to him—some twelve miles away—and the western land would provide him and his family

more elbow room. The demand for land continued. The first Preemptive Bill was passed in 1842. This bill protected the farmer who had made improvements to the land. It also supported the farmer who wanted to “squat” on a piece of land: build a house and clear the land. Then after the region had been surveyed, the farmer could purchase his land at minimum auction price without being outbid by the speculator. The farmer who homesteaded in this manner was thought to be improving the land which benefited the national economy by cultivating the wilderness. By the spring of 1843 a major westward emigration was under way (19-20). The land rush continued, as did the demand for free land. Two decades later in 1862 Congress passed the famous “Homestead Act” which offered the emigrant 160 acres of free land, except for minimal entry fees. Finally, after two generations, the demands of those opening the frontier had been met—free land and actual settlers (Sprague 24-25).

The combination of legislative acts and intriguing reports from the wilderness continued to whet the appetites of thousands for adventure, land, and riches. Men found such reports irresistible. With their families in tow, they headed for paradise. Once reaching the “promise land,” however, the pioneers realized that fulfillment of the promise would require backbreaking work. “The initial tasks at hand included breaking the land, planting crops, building dwellings, and producing domestic goods. With all of these chores demanding immediate attention, there was little time either to rest from the trip they had just completed or to prepare themselves for the new life they were about to begin” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 29).

As the news of gold strikes filtered east, miners joined farmers on the trail west—the Gold Rush of the early 1850s had begun (Faragher 35). Whether farmers, miners, or adventurers, the lure of the West enticed tens of thousands. Even though the West became known as the land of opportunity, it was also an “unsettled area fraught with dangers, a place

‘Where none inhabited

But hellish fiends, and brutish men

That devils worshiped’ (Myres, *Westering Women* 13)

The West proved to be a hostile environment. “When settlers came into a newly opened frontier area, they had to meet the wilderness on its own terms; they were told they ‘must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish.’ ...people ‘had to forsake all the niceties of society and return to primitive conditions’” (Myres, *Westering Women* 14). The wilderness could be harsh, unforgiving, and desolate. Into this unknown land pushed countless men and women.

Unique to this emigration were the records of the trip; men and women wrote about their experiences in diaries, journals, letters, and memoir. Men characteristically wrote of conflict, competition, and hunting and women of family and relations. Often little difference could be seen between a man’s and woman’s description of the trek: the marvels of the landscape or the strenuousness of travel. However, men and women also recorded diverse views of their experience: women did not always perceive the adventure as ending in success (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 14). “There were often

shadows in their minds, areas of dark reservation and opposition” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 14).

Women seemed to be particularly reluctant to leave civilization behind and face the unknown alone—without their established family and friends. Faragher feels that “The loss of a sense of home... was perhaps the hardest loss to bear, the thing that drove women closest to desperation” (170). Abby E. Fulkerath wrote of her leaving: “Agreeable to the wish of my husband, I left all my relatives in Ohio... & started on this long &... perilous journey... it proved a hard task to leave them but still harder to leave my children buried in... graveyards” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 28). Riley suggests it was “difficult for the pioneers to leave their cherished possessions behind... it must have been emotionally wrenching for them to part with their families, friends, and neighbors” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 18). Agnes Stewart felt she had been wrested from her friend:

O Martha my heart yearns for thee my only friend... O my friend thou art dear to me yet my heart turns to thee I will never forget thee... the earliest friend... I know I can never enjoy the blessed privilege of communing with thee yet look for the loss of one I will never see on earth... I cannot bear it. (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 28)

Whenever the decision to leave was made, virtually nothing stood in the way of the departure. A family member’s illness, an aging parent, or a wife’s pregnancy would not be reason enough to keep the family at home. Mrs. M.S. Hockensmith wrote: “I had never been in good health and there were diverse opinions as to whether I would improve or fail under the stress of the trip” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 30). Once men felt the

pull of Oregon fever or gold fever, “they were bound to tie their lives and the lives of their family to the kite strings of history before it blew away and left them behind. Nothing would keep them from setting forth on the journey” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 30).

The decision to emigrate was most often the man’s; and he had the law behind him. Faragher notes that Congress placed the midwestern and western frontiers under the protection of English common law regarding marriage:

Through the common law the conventional roles of husband and wife were legally enshrined: a husband was obligated to provide a residence and household for his family, and to supply his wife with the means of feeding and clothing herself and her children; a wife was legally obligated to be her husband’s helpmeet, to perform household and domestic duties freely and willingly without compensation. Both partners to the marriage contract had the exclusive legal right to the society, companionship, and conjugal affections of their spouse; there was a mutual obligation to love, to care for, and to labor faithfully to advance the interests of one’s spouse. (160-61)

Arabella Fulton, a pioneer woman considering marriage in 1864, exemplifies a woman’s expectations:

I wanted to share his trials, sorrows, and disappointments; I wanted to help build up a home filled with joy and love; to share his privations and

successes; to be a comforter in sorrow, and 'an helpmeet' withal. (Fulton 108)

Faragher further emphasizes that legal marriage gave the husband exceptional power over the life and concerns of his wife. The law sanctioned female subordination:

Since wives had no legal identity they could make no independent legal arrangements or contracts; they could neither sue nor be sued; they could not make an independent will; any contractual obligations undertaken before their marriages became the responsibility of husbands to fulfill. Wives forfeited to their husbands control and management of any and all real property they might have held before their marriage; husbands retained the rights to that property until their deaths...the property previously owned by wives could...be placed in trust for the children and kept out of women's hands. Husbands gained outright ownership of all the prenuptial personal property and chattels of their wives....Husbands owned their wives' labor power....since husbands and wives were legally one person, men could under no circumstances be charged with stealing from their wives.

Husbands were recognized by law as the heads of their families; to them was delegated the obligation to control and discipline their wives. Hence husbands were permitted to physically punish their spouses within 'reasonable limits,' which by common law meant wives could be beaten as long as the instrument was no bigger around than the man's thumb. Wives

were deprived of redress in the courts for injuries received at their husbands' hands. Husbands could legally confine their wives at home, refuse them visitors, even forcibly separate them from their parents. (162)

Sprague, in describing pioneer wives who were subject to isolation and cruelty, relates an incident:

Ab Gaines happened to be passing a farmstead when he noticed in the yard the pioneer owner holding his wife by the hair and unmercifully beating her. Gaines rushed to the scene of the violence, and was about to attack the husband, but his wife seized an axe and hurled it into the back of her would-be rescuer. (49)

A patriarchal society supported the man's prerogative to travel west. He often did so, leaving his wife and children behind. Many married men left their families alone, hoping to return financially secure to move their families west once they became established (Peavy, *Women in Waiting* 3). Peavy describes a common situation: Pamela Fergus had been left in Little Falls, Minnesota, by her husband, James, who had joined the gold rush to Colorado. He wrote: "My going away has [been] and will be a great benefit to you, by throwing you on your own resources and learning you to do business for yourself" (*Women in Waiting* 3). Pamela likely considered this little comfort. She was facing the winter with few resources to maintain herself and her four children and was expected to run the farm and James' nearly bankrupt business (*Women in Waiting* 3).

Peavy further suggests, "...while Odysseus made a choice to leave home and informed Penelope of his intention, she would have been obliged to ask his permission

for any such undertaking of her own” (*Women in Waiting* 7). A wife lacked not only the autonomy to set out on a major adventure but also the authority to keep her husband from leaving her, even though she objected to his venture or needed him at home. Women left alone by wandering husbands had limited, if any, knowledge of business dealings; furthermore, the patriarchal society frowned upon women’s conducting public business (*Women in Waiting* 4-7).

Pamelia Fergus considered herself and other females in similar situations as “widows.” Only widows would have been given such autonomy in conducting personal and business affairs. However, these women found themselves in limbo: husbands designated them as surrogate heads of the family, but their role and status in the home would not be determined until the return or death of their husbands. Peavy refers to these women as “women in waiting” (*Women in Waiting* 4).

A wife always expected to accept her new duties however stressful they might be; defying her husband could imperil her marriage and, thus, her future and that of her children. Although vulnerable in this circumstance, a woman rarely voiced her resentment. She normally remained alone and silent—and endured. On occasion, however, the silence did give way to a response (*Women in Waiting* 8-9). Elizabeth Cress astounded by her husband’s sudden leaving wrote her parents: “My old man has left me & gon to California and took my wagon and left me and my children in a bad situation” (Peavy, *Women in Waiting* 8). Highly unusual was Augusta Shipman’s boldness in writing to her husband, Clark: “What are you there for anyway?” (Peavy, *Women in Waiting* 8).

For those wives who accompanied their husbands into the wilderness, preparations for the journey could be extensive. Arrangements for the trip were normally made in January, February, and March. Women sought to care for the family and became involved in spinning, weaving, sewing, making soap, preparing appropriate and adequate food, and making wagon covers and tents. Men spent time raising cash: selling farm property, equipment, livestock, household effects. These activities, then, enabled them to put together the outfit—wagons, oxen, provisions, possibly cattle or sheep to drive on the trail—which would carry them across the western expanse (Faragher 66-71).

Building the wagon and equipping it required time and money. The wagon had to be specially built of seasoned hardwood to withstand the extremes of temperature and moisture; it was also built to be amphibious. The wagon cover was a double thickness of canvas to be made as rainproof as possible. Carried under the wagon was spare running gear—wagon tongues, spokes, axles, and wheels; repair would be necessary during the trip. The builder also included equipment such as grease buckets, water barrels, and rope. A wagon constructed for the overland journey could carry up to 2,500 pounds and required a team of four to six yoke of oxen. The wagon and oxen were the greatest single expense of the trip and could cost four hundred dollars (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 22-23).

Food and other provisions for the journey would cost between five hundred and one thousand dollars with additional expense for those starting east of the Missouri River. The 1845 *Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California* recommended the following food supply for each emigrant: 200 pounds of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 10 pounds of

coffee, 20 pounds of sugar, and 10 pounds of salt. Other supplies included chipped beef, rice, tea, dried beans, dried fruit, baking soda, vinegar, pickles, mustard, and tallow. The basic kitchen utensils were a kettle, fry pan, coffee pot, tin plates, cups, knives, and forks (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 23).

The travelers generally set out in early April in anticipation of a six- to eight-month trip. Riley describes the departure as a heart-rending scene: "In the murky early morning light, people gathered around the migrants to help them load their wagons, to serve them breakfast, to grasp their hands one last time, and to wish them luck in the new country" (*Frontierswomen* 18). Friends who rode beside the departing wagons for a few miles often escorted those leaving; then the travelers were left on their own. "Waving one last farewell to their friends and to the life they had known, the would-be pioneers finally confronted the rigors of the trail which would lead them to a promising, if unknown, future" (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 19).

Traveling an overland trail could be tedious, grueling, difficult, and dangerous. Many travelers relied upon guidebooks to provide direction for the journey west. Schlissel notes some of the most common guides: *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California*, Lansford Warren Hastings (1845); *Route Across the Rocky Mountains, with a Description of Oregon and California*, Overton Johnson and William H. Winter (1846); *Horn's Overland Guide*, Hosea B. Horn (1852); and *Overland Route to California*, Andrew Child (1852) (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 73). During the 1840's most travelers felt that the overland trail guides provided well-defined routes. However, as Myres points out, "The early immigrants were often misguided and some even got lost. There

was little literature to aid them, and what they had was often inaccurate” (*Ho for California!* xii). In 1841 one party of thirty-five men, five women, and ten children left Missouri May 12 bound for California. “One man told them he had seen a map showing a great lake with two rivers running out of it clear to the Pacific Ocean. All they need do was find the lake and follow the rivers to the sea, and there lay California. No one had a compass. They just turned their teams west and followed the Platte River” (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 31). The group covered twelve hundred miles and by mid-July reached the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains, where seven men decided to return to Missouri. Others in the party traveled north to Oregon. The remainder of the party headed for California even though they had no guide and limited information about the route; they were left to “smell” their way to California. After a catastrophic three months of wandering and starvation, they finally arrived in the San Joaquin Valley; Nancy Kelsey carried her one-year-old child in her arms (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 32). Even by 1846 the overland trails remained precarious; 1846 was the year of the ill-fated Reed-Donner party.

During the 1850s emigrants traveling west encountered difficulties related to disease rather than to lack of guides or inaccurate maps (Myres, *Ho for California!* xii). The discovery of gold in California in 1848 produced visions of riches and wealth untold. Men and their families rushed to the West via the Overland Trail. Before 1848 five thousand emigrants had crossed on the Trail; 1849 saw thirty thousand; 1850, fifty-five thousand; and 1852, fifty thousand (Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries* 24, 58). Many were unprepared for the rigors of the wilderness. The winter of 1850 was particularly severe.

Many gold-seekers lived in tumbledown shacks, and others lived in tents and blankets. Many wrote home about the cold, the wet, the sickness, the lonesomeness, and the bad luck. From 1849 to 1854, cholera swept the country (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 59). "It was in the infant cities of the West, with no adequate water supply, primitive sanitation, and crowded with a transient population, that the disease was most severe" (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 59). Cholera plagued the Overland Trail. Jane D. Kellogg in June of 1852 wrote: "There was an epidemic of cholera all along the Platte River.... All along the road up the Platte River was a grave yard; most any time of day you could see people burying their dead." On reaching Oregon, she found: "One family I can't forget; the mother was sick, had to be helped up the bank of [the Cascade River] and her little child was dead and laid out on the bank" (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 59).

Other problems facing those traveling the Overland Trail during the 1850s were overcrowding (grass became difficult to find for the livestock) and pollution (Myres, *Ho for California!* xii). Some complained of too many people. Mary Bailey wrote, "Too many here already & have been." Margaret Frink wrote, "none of the population had been left behind" (Myres, *Ho for California!* 39). Finding grass and water for the animals was a problem. In May 1853, Harriet Sherrill Ward recorded in her journal: "To night we have encamped near the river, our grass not good..." (DeWitt 53). About a month later she wrote: "We now are entering our craggy pathway over the Rocky Mountains. Our roads as bad as any one would wish to travel over.... At eve were much troubled to find water and grass..." (DeWitt 80).

Myres indicates that during the 1860s, travelers going West had less to fear from the fierceness of terrain and climate than from the inconvenience and stress brought about by the soldiers who were assigned to protect them (*Ho for California!* xii).

Emigrants often encountered violent weather, disease, illness, accidents, and loss of supplies. Even with these obstacles facing them, Faragher observes that men considered the trip West a fulfillment of male dreams of comradery, action, and achievement (136) and became a test of competition, strength, and manliness (178). A childhood verse exemplifies men's dreams:

Rise up my dearest dear
 And present to me your hand,
 And we'll march you in succession
 To some far and distant land,
 To some far and distant land,
 To some far and distant land,
 And we'll march you in succession
 To some far off distant land.
 There the boys will plow and hoe,
 And the girls will spin and sew;
 We'll travel through the cane-break,
 And shoot the buffalo. (Faragher 136)

Men were part of a cultural life that supported and encouraged outward forms of sociability; therefore, they adapted easily to life on the trail (136). Myres notes the words of a favorite trail song:

Farewell's a word that breaks my heart

And fills my soul with woe

But the fertile fields of Oregon

Encourage me to go. (*Westering Women* 101)

Conversely, women viewed the westward journey differently. The drudgery of their work remained basically the same—only more difficult and frustrating (Faragher 136). They still had to care for the family; often this “family” became an extended one to include the single men traveling with the wagon train (Faragher 178). Cooking was a major and on-going activity for women. Food was cooked in a kettle suspended over an outdoor campfire on a pole laid across two forked sticks (Peavy, *Pioneer Women*). Bad weather days did nothing to enhance the chore of cooking. Women's day began before dawn to start the fires, put on kettles of water, and begin breakfast. If a cow had been brought along, it had to be milked. By the time the coffee was hot, the beans warmed, and the bread baked, the men had gathered in the herds and were ready for breakfast (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 78). Helen M. Carpenter in her diary described mealtime:

Although there is not much to cook, 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. (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 78)

Women gathered fuel for the fires. During the first week or two on the trail, wood could be quite easily found. However, once the trees were left behind, fuel could be scarce. Women used prairie grass, slough grass or hay which they twisted into coils (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 30-31). Harriet Sherrill Ward wrote, "...we have seen nothing but boundless prairie on all sides. Tonight we have nothing but weed and grass to make our fire" (DeWitt 36-37). As the emigrants moved farther west, the supply of grass disappeared, and women were forced to rely upon buffalo dung or chips for fuel. They gathered the chips in sacks as they walked along the wagon to have enough for the evening and breakfast fires. The chips produced a hot, virtually odorless fire. Once the wagons left the buffalo, fuel in the form of sagebrush or mesquite on the southwestern trails could be used (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 31).

Women's work on the trail was relatively routine. In addition to cooking out of doors and gathering fuel, women drove oxen and washed clothes on river banks. Helen M. Carpenter wrote: "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" (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 78).

Faragher maintains women continued to nurture because of, rather than in spite of, their not wanting to leave home initially (178). The social life which women structured showed deep regret in their being unable to maintain meaningful, profound attachments with other women (Faragher 136, 178). "Women, whose cultural needs were

traditionally met in closer quarters, with an intensity that could survive periods of isolation, found the superficial relations of the trail inadequate; for them, the trip was a lonely experience” (Faragher 136-37). Finding other women with whom to converse was often impossible: “July 18, 1853, a group of packers passed by, ‘no women but twenty men in the camp’; July 19, ‘twenty one men, well armed, but no ladies’” (Faragher 137). Any contact with other women often proved to be brief, as men generally felt little need to change their pace to match that of strangers. Margaret Frink, who traveled with male Gold Rushers, wrote, “I visited a lady today at a train which had halted not far from ours, an unusual incident on this journey” (Faragher 137).

Charlotte Stearns Pengra began her trip in 1853 with her husband and children and anticipated having the company of her sister and two sisters-in-law. Because of various mishaps she made most of the trek as a lone female: At one point during the journey, having been waylaid and unsuccessful in re-establishing contact with her relatives, she wrote, “I feel lonely and almost disheartened.” “Feel very tired and lonely—our folks not having come up” (Faragher 140-41). In a further attempt to reconcile with other members of the family, her husband moved the wagon to a ferry:

All was hurry and bustle this morning till about noon preparing to start for the river, washing the waggon and packing, cooking, ironing...I felt that indeed I have left all my friends save my husband and his brother to journey over the dreaded Plains, without one female acquaintance for a companion,—of course I wept and grieved about it but to no purpose....
(Faragher 141)

For the most part, women on the trail attempted to keep a cheerful appearance, concealing their emotions. Confiding to her diary, though, as women often did, Agnes Stewart lamented being torn from her friend: “O Martha, what I would give to see you now....I miss you more than I can find words to express I do not wish to forget you but your memory is painful to me I will see you again I will if I am ever able I will go back” (Schlissel, *Women's Diaries* 30). Faragher notes that women repressed and hid “disquiet, anxiety, melancholy, and anger” from those closest to them (176-77). Lavinia Porter wrote of her ordeal to endure during her overland trip and her attempt to be a “courageous and valiant frontierswoman.” One of her entries indicates her emotions:

As the days wore on the irksome monotony of the journey began to pall upon me, and I spent many unhappy hours which I tried to conceal within my own breast, sometimes confiding to my journal my woes and disappointments, but managed to keep up a cheerful exterior before my husband and brother. (Faragher 175)

Lavinia's cheerful façade would unravel, however:

I would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I thought I had gone beyond hearing distance, I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way like a child to sobs and tears, wishing myself back home with my friends and chiding myself for consenting to take this wild goose chase. (Faragher 175)

Sprague notes unfamiliar and formidable plains-mountain surroundings continually reminded the pioneer woman that she was far from home and vulnerable (105). Mrs. Frizzell, traveling to California in 1852, made the following entry in her journal as she and her husband were about to enter the dangerous mountain trails:

We are about fifteen ms. [miles] from South Pass, *we are hardly half way*. I felt tired and weary. O the luxury of a house, a house! I felt what some one expressed, who traveled this long and tedious journey, that, "it tires the soul." I would have given all my interest in California, to have been seated around my own fireside, surrounded by friend & relation. That this journey is tiresome, no one will doubt, that it is perilous, the deaths of many will testify, and the heart has a thousand misgivings, & the mind is tortured with anxiety, & often as I passed the freshly made graves, I have glanced at the side boards of the waggon, not knowing how soon it might serve as the coffin for some one of us; but thanks for the kind Providence we were favored more than some others. (Sprague 105-06)

Harriet Sherrill Ward contemplated territory she had seen as she had journeyed across the Overland Trail and thought of what she had left as she neared the Humboldt River: "I almost tire of the wildness and strangeness of the works of nature" (DeWitt 112). Harriett felt that the mountains had a "wild, romantic appearance...how different this is from my own green mountain home!" (DeWitt 112). She further thought, "I believe it was never intended that this strange land should ever be the home of the white man. Even for the poor Indian it cannot be a pleasant home" (DeWitt 111); "...there is

something so dreary and desolate in the thought of living where the same view presents itself on all sides” (DeWitt 36).

Mary Stuart Bailey on her way to California in 1852 also endured the monotony of travel across unfamiliar territory; this gave way to her thoughts of home:

It is wintery, cold & somewhat inclined to rain, not pleasant. Rather a dreary Independence Day. We speak of our friends at home. We think they are thinking of us. ‘Home Sweet Home.’ I dare not think of it while so far away from the hundreds of dear friends so dear to me from whom I have been a long, long time separated. They now find very easy access & grateful admission into my heart. It is sad to think that everyday takes me farther from them. (Myres, *Ho for California!* 69)

Women were sharply reminded of the security and comfort they had left behind and the helplessness they felt when they were beset by storms as they traveled through the lone wilderness. Harriet Sherrill Ward wrote of one storm: “Commenced raining very hard in the night and this morn has every appearance of a long storm. Here we are cooped up in our wagon, the rain pouring down in torrents, our horses not very well, and a dreary prospect ahead” (DeWitt 29). Pamela Fergus described the aftermath of a severe midnight storm: “I will assure you we had eight cotton stufed comforteres wet through and not a dry rag to put on except those in our trunks every thing was wet in the wagon through a thick blanket and cover” (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 33). Amelia Stewart Knight told of a fierce storm: “a dreadful storm of rain and hail...and very sharp lightning” which killed two oxen. “The wind was so high I thought it would tear the

wagons to pieces. Nothing but the stoutest covers could stand it.” The rain “beat into the wagons so that everything was wet in less than 2 hours and water was a foot deep all over our camp grounds....all had to crowd into the wagons and sleep in wet beds with their wet clothes on, without supper” (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 33). Mary Elizabeth Warner, who traveled across the continent in 1853, wrote of her journey: “They talk about the times that tried men’s souls but this was the time [that tried] both men and women’s souls” (Faragher 4).

After a five-month trip across the continent, Hollie Hester wrote in her diary that their party of thirteen wagons, originally numbering fifty, had reached its final destination. Apprehensive of what was to come she continued, “Strangers in a strange land—what will the future be?” (Holmes 243). Hampsten notes, “Many of the early settlers arrived in the west with nothing but an old wagon, a worn out yoke of oxen, a brave wife, and a family of helpless children” (42). In beginning anew, work responsibilities held to the traditional: men in the fields, women in the home. However, in this domain the frontier harbored more shocks for women than men. Men had to deal with a harsh work environment, but it existed. Women quickly discovered that the family home was either nonexistent or deplorably inadequate. Furthermore, women soon realized that the fields had first claim on investments of time and money while the home had to wait. Thus, women were workers without workplaces (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 29). “For women, the Plains frontier did not offer great opportunities and numerous activities. Rather than changing women’s established routines and concerns, it simply made women’s pursuits and lives more difficult” (Riley, *Female Frontier* 101).

Many scholars, according to Riley, conclude that this situation created tremendous disorientation, anxiety, isolation, helplessness, and stress—both psychologically and physically—for the pioneer woman. Her work was essential to the family's survival; yet she was powerless to create or improve her inadequately equipped workplace because she lacked strength, resources, and technical skill. In addition, the pioneer woman had to contend with nineteenth-century expectations: domesticity as a woman's highest calling—an occupation to which she could not satisfactorily devote her time without a workplace (*Frontierswomen* 29).

“The isolation of women was a universal problem of plains settlement...” (Hampsten 178). The wilderness could be harsh, desolate, and strange. Rosa Kately wrote of her first look at the new land: “Well here I am at Anamoose. Arrived here about midnight. There is a Dakota wind this morning. Everything is dry and dusty here. I saw the first ‘alkali surface’ yesterday, it began in the Red River Valley and extends westward” (Hampsten 45). The mountain wilderness proved to be isolated also. Harriet Sherrill Ward described her new home as being, “...isolated from the whole world and completely hemmed in by the snowclad mountains of California” (DeWitt 171). Hampsten observes that women's fear of expanses such as those found in the northern plains made it difficult for women to think of going far from their house. “No wonder women were lonely, so lonely that some sickened and died or went mad” (39). Women felt lonely because of the great distance from family and friends; loneliness may have been increased, as their manner of building their dwelling places seemed a fortification against the outdoors. They might extend their living area to a chair beyond the outside

door with a floor beneath and screens on three sides or block the view of the expanse with a low wall or a hedge (39). Women often feared the elements outside: fire, flood, cold, drought, disease, death (40).

Hampsten describes an embroidered work hanging in a museum in Minto, North Dakota. In the center of this eighteen-inch cloth, surrounded by flowers, are the words: "ALL ALONE." An eight-year-old created the piece, likely to make it known that she had done this herself. Hempsten contends that the child has produced an image that matches the pioneering women's solitude, no matter who else was there. "'All alone' was where they had to start again to reestablish ties that would restore them to themselves, with little help from those elements attributable to region (land, work, business, and government) that gave identities to men" (47). Women's families provided them with some comfort; what they sorely missed, however, was the companionship of other women. An early North Dakota settler, one of three women in the area, simply said, "Naturally I was very lonely for women friends" (Riley, *Female Frontier* 99). Some women, however, did not take the absence of female companionship as a given:

These solitary women, longing to catch a glimpse of one of their own sex, swept their eyes over the boundless prairie and thought of the old home in the East. They stared and stared across space with nothing to halt their gaze over the monotonous expanse...Hollow-eyed, tired, and discouraged...Some begged their husbands to hitch up the team, turn the wagon tongue eastward, and leave the accursed plains... (Myres, *Westering Women* 2)

Armitage points out that women sharply felt their isolation from other women and from a shared female value system. A female subculture did not exist on the frontier. Women were no longer a part of a tight community with all the traditional attendant female supports. Frontier individualism was forced on women; they had to be more self-reliant and less communal than ever before (44). Sanora Babbs recounts the isolation her mother experienced while farming in eastern Colorado:

Coffee meant something more to her than a hot drink. Now and then in the afternoon she sat for awhile in a fresh apron, slowly drinking warmed-over breakfast coffee, her face passive, her gaze rapt in faraway memories or in dreams of escape. She did not mind the hard work, only the terrible loneliness. In that solitary rite she reached backward or forward to friends, perhaps, or simply retired within herself to renew her forces.

(Armitage 44)

Many women would agree with one North Dakota settler of the 1880s: "The need for companionship was felt, as soon as one got a glimpse of the prairie" (Riley, *Female Frontier* 100). Women often wrote of their strong feelings regarding the necessity of having the help of other women at the time of great trauma: birth, illness, death. Nannie Alderson, a Montana ranch wife of the 1880s, was urged to call a doctor when she was sick. She replied, "I don't want a doctor. I want a woman!" (Riley, *Female Frontier* 100).

Fear of the unknown often haunted women and seemed never to leave their sides:

Mrs. Merry lived for years in a floorless log hut, cooking daily for a dozen or more hungry woodchoppers, never leaving the place or seeing another woman for months at a time; leading a lonely grueling existence, deathly afraid of the Indians, who came begging so often. (Hampsten 41)

Faragher points out that the isolation of women in their homes was a social fact introduced by the division of labor but was intensified by the settlement patterns of the Midwest. Exemplary was the Sangamon River farming country of Illinois in 1840: about eight people per square mile. A home rather than being built near another was isolated on its separate farm. Travel between the settlements was calculated in hours; a walking visit to the neighbors could take a complete morning or afternoon. This residential isolation sharply limited the social opportunities for women. Men's labor allowed them to lay aside the fieldwork for the day and ride or walk to visit the neighbors or the local country store. This same privilege, however, was generally not extended to women because their domestic responsibilities remained relatively constant, especially with the care of children, limiting their time away from home (112). "The single most important distinction between the social and cultural worlds of men and women was the isolation and immobility of wives compared to husbands" (112).

The sex-role division of labor, then, provided an ideology of separate spheres for men and women: men's was the public sphere; women's, the home (Armitage 44). In fulfillment of the public sphere duties, men often left home for long periods of time to conduct business, work in the mines, or hunt game. Women's home sphere duties demanded that they stay at home to do chores and care for the children and manage the

homesteads—by themselves. The man's absence meant that the family was left unguarded with only the hope of his safe return. With the uncertainties of the wilderness, life for the pioneer woman could be agonizing (Stratton 79). A mother of several children in bed after childbirth in a cold room holds an umbrella over her head and waits for her husband, who is helping the neighbors thresh, to come home:

Mother lay in bed with an umbrella over her head to keep the rain from leaking into her face. A baby girl had arrived at our house to claim her share of the already crowded space.

The night was cold, dark, and rainy and everything contributed to add to the loneliness of North Dakota prairies at that time. The neighbors were far away and it took time to travel by oxen. At that time our team of horses was the only team near by. We could hear the coyotes howling so we were tense with fear, when we heard voices at the crossroads, at the corner as we called it. Mother lay very still and we children were fearful to add any further discomfort to her pitiful plight. The talking became louder, the wind blew the rain against the pane, the wolves howled, and we were practically alone. We whispered "Indians."...Everything sounded like Indians; although they had never molested us, we feared them intensely.

We older ones sat quietly each of us with a weapon in our hands when to our surprise in walked father. He had ridden home with a neighbor, and

he was enjoying a friendly chat before coming into the house. (Hampsten 41)

Julia Gage married James Carpenter in 1882. Shortly thereafter she reluctantly left New York to follow her husband to North Dakota, where he had a homestead claim. The writing in her diary indicates that she never adapted to life on the plains; she felt she lived in a foreign country. “This is *awful country*, and I want to live East” she wrote in her diary in early January, 1884, during a week when the temperature had been 48 degrees below zero at noon (Hampsten 187). Julia’s alienation became particularly acute with James’ absences. Between April 7 and 16, 1884, she wrote:

Frank did *not* come. I stayed in the house *all alone* over night....Frank went to Fargo to see about his ‘Sue Claim.’ I stayed alone all day and over night.... Alone all day and night again. *Dreadfully, dreadfully* forlorn. Can’t stand being alone so much....Frank came home this morning....Frank and I took tea with Dave and Ina and stayed overnight. Frank gone to Gardner, 25 miles, expected to be home tomorrow but it has rained all day and I fear the roads are impassable. I have been alone all day and must be here alone all night. (I am *frantically* lonely. Can hardly endure it.) (Hampsten 187)

Sprague emphasizes the loneliness that women felt when left alone by their husbands. In the early 1800s one pioneer wife was at home with only her children; her husband had been away for two months in search of new and more desirable lands. She said that she had seen no one other than those of her own household for eighteen months.

In another instance, the wife in a frontier cabin was so lonesome that she begged the visitors to stay a while and talk with her. She told them that her husband was away on hunting expeditions most of the time, and she was overcome with “lone” (46-47). Being alone and homesick was an ailment familiar to frontier doctors. A western physician’s wife, after describing the problems typical for this particular malady, declared that her husband would rather treat “a dozen cases of fever than one of homesickness” (56).

A frontier woman’s isolation may have been intensified by the dwelling in which she lived. One woman commented, “When we got to the new purchase, the land of milk and honey, we were disappointed and homesick, but we were there and had to make the best of it” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 30). For many the covered wagon which had carried them overland became their new home. One settler of the 1850s commented on the commonness of these early shelters: “There was not a shed, or fence, or even a hitching post on the prairie, all horses being tied to wagons, in many of which people were still living” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 31). Some pioneers moved into shelters which had been abandoned. The Willis family lived in a crude structure that was “utterly desolate” and “gave ample evidence of having been used as a stable, rather than a human dwelling place” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 32). Mary Willis Lyon recalled that she understood why her mother, “remembering the pretty little white house back in Ohio, sat down and wept” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 32).

Families often built shelters of whatever materials were available. If timber were accessible, a rough-hewn log cabin might be erected; this structure generally turned out to be little more than a shack. These “cabins” were thrown together very quickly. One

family built its shelter in a day. It had “a frame of two by fours at top and bottom, with boards running perpendicularly nailed to them, a roof sloping one way, a door, and two windows.” After seeing this rudely constructed shack, a neighbor considered it a “lean-to without anything to lean to” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 32). However, trees did not grow in many regions; therefore, pioneers built shelters from a readily accessible material—sod. They lived in sod huts, called “soddies.” Historian Everett Dick described the sod hut as an “unpromising, ugly hole in the ground” which warned of “utter loneliness and drab prospects” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 40). Abbie Mott Benedict considered life in a sod hut “desolate” and “windswept” but quite warm during the severe Iowa winter (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 40).

Benedict described how the sod house was built:

...wood was brought from twelve miles away to build the frame of the fourteen-by twenty-foot hut. A heavy post with a fork at the top was set at each end to provide support for the ridgepole. Additional posts were set along the sides and at the corners as wall supports, leaving space for only one door and two windows. Then a prairie sod breaking plow was used to turn and cut the previously untouched sod around the hut. The resulting strips of sod were cut into lengths of two and one-half feet which were then laid up around the wall supports like large brick. The roof was thatched with slough grass covered with a layer of sod. (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 40)

Riley indicates, however, that most pioneers built their sod houses over a hole dug into the prairie or the side of a hill: "One such structure started with a three-foot-deep hole which measured sixteen by thirty feet. Rafters were raised from its banks to a twelve-foot-high ridgepole, then were covered by squares of sod" (40). A floor of rough boards and a chimney made from turf completed the house. Another soddie was described as a "large, roomy cave in the hillside" which was "warmly banked up, and inclosed in front, and was as comfortable as the most costly a place when the wild winter winds whistled across the prairie" (40). Soddies proved to be relatively warm and inexpensive; one settler claimed he built a sod house for about \$2.78 in 1870. However, the soddies had few other advantages. They lacked aesthetics, provided little space or privacy, and were difficult to keep clean (40-41). The roof of a sod hut often leaked, turning the floors to mud if water poured in from above (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 51).

Although sod huts offered few amenities, tar-paper shacks offered fewer. These structures did, however, meet the government's requirement that homesteaders live on their claims in dwellings at least ten feet by twelve feet in size. The shacks were built of wide boards covered with black tar paper. Edith Ammons, homesteading in South Dakota, believed that a home had been constructed on an abandoned claim she had taken over. The "home" was a tar-paper shack. She described it as a "none too substantial packing-box tossed haphazardly on the prairie which crept in at its very door." The shack looked "as though the first wind would pick it up and send it flying through the air" (Peavy, *Pioneer Women* 51). Peavy notes that since these shacks were not firmly

anchored, they often blew away or tipped over, leaving the occupants to the mercy of the elements (51).

Many pioneer women left the “States” hoping to establish a home on the frontier. However, they often had little choice about the location of the new homestead (Riley, *Female Frontier* 47). Elizabeth Sayre followed her husband, a miner, from one business deal to another and hated the rootlessness of her life. The “half savage mining camp” proved to be almost more than she could endure. “How I wish I had a home,” Elizabeth wrote in her diary. She longed for a home—a place where she could stay, one that would be hers (Armitage 42). The uncertainty of a miner’s work affected their wives. Mabel Barbee wrote of her mother, “waiting, always waiting.” In the meantime she endured:

...the bare, ugly camp, so alien to her nature; the wide gap between her dream of a home and the drab reality of the house of Golden Avenue, her never-ending loneliness. (Armitage 42)

Men acknowledged what mining meant for women: “It’s a man’s life and his wife often shares it only on sufferance” (Armitage 42).

Many women faced the trauma of constant relocations on the frontier and yearned for a permanent home. Riley relates the experiences of two women, Sarah Carr Lacey and Abbie Mott Benedict:

Sarah Carr Lacey, married in 1858, spent her first two years of married life and bore her first two children in her sister-in-law’s home. In 1860, Sarah, her husband, and their children migrated to Iowa where they made a home first on the trail then in an empty corn crib. Within the year, they

moved into a log cabin that had one room and a loft, where a third child was born in 1861. During the Civil War her husband served in the Union army and she lived in the cabin, supporting her three children with the produce of the nine cows she purchased. By 1869, the Laceys were on the trail again, this time to northwestern Iowa. Here they shared a makeshift shack with another family while they cleared land and built a home. (39)

Abbie moved twenty-one times during her first twenty years of marriage. She made a home in sod huts, log cabins, and frame houses; her family finally settled down on one farm for nine years, “the longest time we ever lived in any one place, up to that time.” This farm became a financial burden, prompting a move to another farm where they remained permanently (39).

However traumatic a pioneer woman’s situation, she was often expected to maintain a cheerful appearance and maintain effectiveness by herself. One young bride, seeing her husband looking “completely downcast” because the addition to their rude cabin had not been completed upon their arrival, disguised her own distress with a smile because she “would not for the world have showed other than a cheerful face on Elias’ account” (Riley, *Frontierswomen* 55). Stratton notes that Allena A. Clark had her own methods of coping with a lonely day or a sudden emergency. Her daughter Esther wrote of her mother’s experience:

...the unbroken prairies stretched for miles outside, and the wistful-faced sheep were always near at hand. Often mother used to go out and lie down among them, for company, when she was alone for the day.

When the spring freshets came, the sheep were on the wrong side of the river, and it was my mother who manned one of the three wagons that went back and forth across the rising waters until the last sheep was safely on the home side. She had told me of the terror that possessed her during those hours, with the water coming up steadily to the wagon bed. To this day, there is a superstitious dread of water in the heart of every one of our family. (80)

In further relating her mother's experiences in carving out the wilderness, Esther wrote, "...it took more to live twenty-four hours at a time, month in and month out, on the lonely...prairie, without giving up to the loneliness" (80). That loneliness, often borne with dignity and silence, could be unexpectedly expressed, however. Mary Furguson Darrah remembered when "Mr. Hilton, a pioneer, told his wife that he was going to Little River for wood. She asked to go with him...She hadn't seen a tree for two years, and when they arrived at Little River she put her arms around a tree and hugged it until she was hysterical" (Stratton 80).

Pioneer women left alone felt particularly vulnerable with the threat of fire and illness. Prairie fires were a constant torment to families on isolated homesteads. From late summer through autumn the tall grass covering the prairie became a tinderbox, dry and brown from the summer heat. It took only a spark from an untended campfire or a bolt of lightning to set the prairie on fire (Stratton 81-82). Agnes Berry wrote:

In those days of endless sweep of prairies, when the tall grass became dry and premature drying from drought or early frost, it was a signal for close

vigilance in watching the horizon all around for prairie fire. A light against the sky told of a prairie fire in that direction and great anxiety was felt if the wind happened to be in your direction. (Stratton 82)

To protect against the fires, homesteaders plowed wide furrows around their property. Although this provided some defense, wind could easily carry the flames across the fire guard and threaten homes and fields. Families always had to be on guard and ready to battle any prairie fire. Lillian Smith remembered the many nights fighting fires which threatened her family's property: "Many a time my mother stayed up all night watching the red glare of the prairie fires in more than one direction, in fear and trembling that they might come swooping down upon us asleep in our little log cabin" (Stratton 82).

"Nightfall, blanketing the prairie in a dense, boundless blackness, brought an even keener sense of solitude to the pioneer home" (Stratton 80). S.N. Hoisington recalled the experience of one woman living in isolation:

A man by the name of Johnson had filed on a claim just west of us, and had built a sod house. He and his wife lived there two years, when he went to Salina to secure work. He was gone two or three months, and wrote home once or twice, but his wife grew very homesick for her folks in the east, and would come over to our house to visit mother.

Mother tried to cheer her up, but she continued to worry until she got bed fast with the fever. At night she was frightened because the wolves would scratch on the door, on the sod and on the windows, so my mother and I started to sit up nights with her....The odor from the sick woman

seemed to attract the wolves, and they grew bolder and bolder....I shot one through the window and I found him lying dead in the morning....Finally the woman died and mother laid her out....After that the wolves were more determined than ever to get in....We fought these wolves five nights in succession...

When Mr. Johnson arrived home and found his wife dead and his house badly torn down by wolves he fainted away....After the funeral he sold out and moved away. (Stratton 81)

When a husband left his family to conduct business, hunt, or search for gold, he left the family relatively defenseless. A husband was expected to return and barring any mishap did so. Rachael Malik's husband John Biles joined a surveying expedition and would be gone for four months. That left Rachael and her young son alone, homesteading in Northwest territory. Rachael complained that she was alone, a "grass widow": "It haint as much fun as I thought it would be all though I haint the onley one about here. There is more than one that there husbands has gone on the expedition....I guess you are tired a hearing about grass widows" (Schlissel, *Far From Home* 34). If a man were accidentally killed while away or became ill and died, his wife had little choice but to manage as best she (and often her children) could. Elizabeth Dixon Smith wrote of her husband's death after they had arrived in the Willamette Valley in Oregon Territory:

...my husband was taken sick before we got to any settlement and never was able to walk afterwards he died at Portland on the Willamett river after an illness of two months I will not attempt to describe my troubles

since I saw you suffice it to say that I was left a widow with the care of seven children in a foreign land with out one solitary friend as one might say in the land of the living...I lived a widow one year and four months my three boys started for the gold mines and it was doubtful to me wether I ever saw them again perhaps you will think strange that I let such young boys go...well after the boys was gone...I lived in a remote place where my strength was of little use to me I could get nothing to do and you know I could not live without work... (Holmes 149)

Schlissel details Abigail Malik's life carving out the wilderness in the Northwest territory and the misfortunes she experienced. George and Abigail left Illinois with their six children (three boys and three girls) to settle in the West. They arrived in the Northwest with two boys and three girls. Within a year another son, who joined the California gold rush, died and never returned home. In 1854, six years after their arrival in the "new country," George died, leaving Abigail with the care of two daughters and an errant son Shindel. Shindel, apparently uninterested in farming, would not go to school, help with the chores, or plow the fields (Schlissel, *Family* 82-83). Abigail expressed her concern: "As for Shindel I do not know wot he will Make. I am Afraid not Mutch....He is so wild" (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 31). After George's death, Abigail wrote, "After your Father died Everything was Left on My hands and Shin would go off to town and Stay away when I would have anything to do...." (Schlissel, *Family* 84) Abigail tried to hire others to cut wood and plant, but most of the time she did the work alone: "this

winter I had to go and Chop Wood My Self. When the snow was three feat deep for I could not get a Man to do it” (Schlissel, *Family* 84).

Attempting to make a home in the wilderness was often very difficult for women. Riley points out that women’s diaries and letters record their discontent, loneliness, and homesickness. Some told of depression and sick headaches; others collapsed physically and psychologically. Some went insane (71). One historian concluded that “women were generally reluctant to go West, that their life there, whether on an isolated farm or in a frontier community, was one of unending toil and unnatural labor, that suicides and insanity were common...” (Myres, *Westering Women* 2). Schlissel further describes Abigail Malik’s difficulties in raising her family alone. Jane, Abigail’s nineteen-year-old daughter, had “crazy spells” which Abigail could not explain:

She distrois All that Comes Before Her When She Has Her Crasy Spells
on her And Wantes to kill A Derest Friendes And her Little Babe. And...I
have Had to Tak her Babe And Not let Her See it for two And thre dayes
At A Time And tie her down on the Bed and it took Three of us to do it At
that. So you May think I Have Had a hard time of it with her. (October
18, 1859) (*Far from Home* 75).

Jane’s madness came upon the household with overwhelming force. If Abigail had seen earlier signs of Jane’s unusual behavior, her observances had gone unrecorded. Six months earlier, though, Abigail had written:

I Am Tierd of Being here And Having So Mutch Trouble About Every
Thing About this Land. And Loosing so Meny of My Familey has put Me

Almost Besid My Self. Some Times I Think I Sirtently Will get Insane.

(March 11, 1859) (*Far from Home* 76)

American pioneers attempting to tame the wilderness often found their mental and physical capabilities tested in the extreme. The same held true for those pioneers from Northern and Central Europe. Sprague indicates that as late as 1820, the number of European immigrants arriving in America was insignificant: 1820-1822 saw 24,426. By 1847, the number had increased substantially; between 1847 and 1849, total immigration was recorded at 766,484. Three factors account for this phenomenal increase: crop failures, such as that Irish potato famine; increasing dissatisfaction with political conditions; and the unfavorable economic outlook caused by the Industrial Revolution or tariff policies. Most of the Europeans who sought to establish homes in America prior to 1870 came from a rural environment and hoped to farm or ranch. This goal was particularly true of the German and Scandinavian arrivals, as many had sufficient means to undertake farming operations (28).

Many of the Russian immigrants (often Germans from Russia) settled in North Dakota; the plains resembled their native land (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 183). Schlissel described the lives of two families, who emigrated from Russia to avoid being drafted into the Czar's army, and the isolation and hardship they faced. Ludwig Neher and his brother-in-law, Fred Martin, with their families decided to leave Russia for America and settle in North Dakota. Fred would be leaving a relatively prosperous community where his wife's family was well-to-do. Sophia, Fred's wife, was very reluctant to leave. Fred felt that "although emigrating meant going into the unknown, it also would mean greater

security for my boys and a way of avoiding their conscription into the Russian army, reason enough to take the venture even against my wife's opposition" (183). With seven children and little cash, Fred made the decision to leave. Ludwig Neher, who served in the Russo-Japanese War, wanted no further experience with the Russian military and decided to emigrate. He had little money and his wife Christina had just given birth to their first child. The men planned the trip; their wives apparently had little input (177-84).

The trip took several weeks; the families experienced appalling conditions of travel. Their discomfort was exacerbated by having "...small children and infants, no knowledge of the language, geography, or customs of the country they were traveling toward, no experience beyond the agricultural villages they grew up in, and little money" (184). They arrived in North Dakota in late summer—too late to plant a crop before winter, and found that the best land had already been taken. The established German emigrants looked at them with pity and scorn and offered little help; thus, the Martin and Neher families found themselves isolated from a common community. "They were short of cash, could not speak or read English, knew next to nothing about weather, soil, and agricultural conditions in the northern plains, and possessed few skills necessary for farming" (191). The two families spent the first winter in a boxcar. Christina was again pregnant, and the Martin's two-year-old child had become seriously ill. Packed together in the boxcar, they had no privacy—only hunger and irritability. They considered their "home" as a coyote hole (191-200).

Each family did establish a claim. Ludwig had no skills to homestead a farm. Christina had grown up in a prosperous agricultural area; and although she knew how to bake bread and thresh grain, she was unprepared for the isolation, poverty, and hardships of living on the North Dakota plains. The children were often plagued with disease and accident. Although lonesome and homesick, they could not go back. Women and children worked like animals. Fear of failure to survive often predominated. "...the man in the family held all the rights, often making things hard on women folk....Females were for that, young or old, they were slaves, of inferior rating, and were subject to any kind of treatment due to a man being insecure about what life held in store for him and his family" (210). The Martins eventually had nine children and the Nehers eight. Caring for large families under dire circumstances such as Christina and Sophie faced could age women before their time. These women were isolated; they could only follow their husbands (206-19).

"Perhaps no mass movement in history has been better recorded than the great migration of Americans across the continent during the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. Beginning with the first explorations of the Louisiana Territory, gaining momentum with the opening of Oregon, swelling into a rush with the California gold discoveries, thousands of Americans followed the major routes westward" (Myres, *Westering Women* 98) and recorded their experiences in diaries, journals, letters, and memoir. Although most of the early adventurers were men, women too became a part of the movement to settle the vast western wilderness. Women, however, seemed to exhibit more reluctance than men in leaving civilization behind and facing the unknown. Leaving, for women,

could be mentally and emotionally traumatic. However, it was a wife's duty—legal or moral—to follow her husband. In the event that a husband left his wife behind and ventured westward, she was obligated to maintain and support the family—alone.

Traveling an overland trail could be grueling, difficult, and dangerous. Women expressed sensitivity to the constant work, fear of disease and storms, and lonesomeness—lack of female companionship and yearning for that which had been left behind. In reaching her destination, the pioneer woman found little relief from what she had experienced on the trail; in fact, the stress often intensified. Settling in meant establishing a place to live and building a farm or adapting to a mining life. Living in an isolated area meant that a woman had to face being alone whether her husband were present or away. Women felt particularly vulnerable when dealing with prairie fires and illness.

A frontier woman's life could become even more complicated if her husband died, leaving her to manage the family and the farm by herself. In the stress of attempting to survive in the wilderness, a woman could experience insanity. The movement to tame the west and fulfill a dream extended even to Europe. Many European women were also reluctant to leave an established home and venture to a foreign land. Their life in a new land could be as isolated and lonely as that of their American counterparts. The record of their experiences forms the basis of their letters, diaries, and journals; and these ordinary literary collections reflect their extraordinary courage, resourcefulness, resilience, and resolve. The voices of the women on the prairie can still be heard echoing from the pages of their travel and settlement reflections.

CHAPTER III

CATHER'S *MY ANTONIA*:

THE PLIGHT OF FRONTIER WOMEN IN FICTION

"Frontiers are volatile environments in which men do not control the natural world and are subject to chance encounters" (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 233).

Catastrophes are commonplace: a sudden blizzard that pushes in after a lulling warm day in Nebraska, accidents, illness, flash fires. What is achieved one day is lost the next. "A frontier may toss us about with little care, and family is little or no security against its capricious impulse" (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 233). Frontiers can provide wonder or heartbreak, loneliness, and desperation (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 234). The families—American and foreign born—in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* experience the capriciousness of the frontier in settling the Nebraska plains. The women seem to be particularly sensitive to the vastness of the untamed wilderness and the attendant desolation and isolation.

Willa Cather's Nebraska setting is reflective of her life on the Nebraska frontier in the late 1800s. Rosowski notes that in 1895 Cather wrote, "Geography is a terribly fatal thing, sometimes" ("Willa Cather" 81); this statement represents Cather's idea which is evident in her Nebraska fiction (Rosowski, "Willa Cather" 81). Willa Cather knew the Nebraska frontier firsthand; in 1883 her parents and their children left Virginia and immigrated to Nebraska and settled on a farm near Red Cloud. Willa was about ten (Cherny 31). Initially the family lived on the Divide, the high plain between the Big Blue

and Republican Rivers in northern Webster County (Murphy 87). She found the endless expanse of the flat plains a startling contrast to the wooded hills of Virginia. Murphy notes the influence this change had upon Cather, who described the country:

...was mostly wild pasture and as naked as the back of your hand....So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had griped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. (87)

In *My Antonia* Cather observed, "The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska" (2). In noting the treeless plains, she further comments:

As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running. (Cather 9)

In writing *My Antonia* Willa Cather endeavored to represent the people and the region of the Nebraska Divide (Laird 249). Laird considered three points in discussing Cather's work:

...first, Cather's passionate concern to record the experiences of frontier women in their struggle against resistances social or gender-based as well as geographical, those imposed by the 'place' or standing assigned to women in frontier society as well by the conditions of material life, the

rigors of an often hostile environment; second, her cultivation of a troubling double-mindedness about that environment, about the Nebraska country, at once a landscape of desire, nourishing and productive, and a vast, impersonal space, daunting, alien, unable to be grasped or taken in at any sort of conscious level; and third, her awareness of the limits of narrative, of the gap between the actuality of things, the lived event, and its subsequent narration.... (Laird 243)

Laird reaffirms that Cather's work redescribes an important phase of the American experience. In a 1925 interview Laird indicates that Cather said:

I must have the American speech around me, touching the springs of memory. America works on my mind like light on a photographic plate. I seem to be the sort of person who really is a reporter in fiction. I can only write about what I have seen and felt and been close to. I must write things as they are. (249)

Cather found the foreign speech and customs of the Old World immigrants living on the Divide fascinating and gained an empathy for these immigrants (Murphy 87), all of which formed the basis for *My Antonia*. *My Antonia* opens in the 1870s, in the period after the Civil War and during or immediately after the Franco-Prussian War (Olson 59). The European immigrants carry the culture and the conflicts of the Old World with them to the Nebraska frontier (Olson 60). As a memoir, the story is built on Jim Burden/Cather's memory of a place and time and of a person, Antonia Shimerda, Bohemian, who comes to exemplify the force of memory translated into the history of a

region. Antonia personifies the American phenomenon of westward migration and settlement (Bair 100). Since Antonia Shimerda, the heroine of *My Antonia*, lives a life which parallels that of the real-life Antonie Sadilkova, Murphy believes that Cather drew from Sadilkova's life to portray that of Shimerda:

Cather's connection was through Antonie Sadilkova, daughter of Antonie and Frantisek Sadilek. They had arrived in 1880, three years prior to the Cathers. Mildred Bennett states that Antonie, twelve when she came to Nebraska, spent most of her time breaking sod, planting, and harvesting. At some time she moved to Red Cloud where she worked as a hired girl. Probably in 1891, she moved with a railroader to Colorado. Pregnant and abandoned, she returned to the family farm to bear her first child alone. Four years later she married Jan Pavelka, and together they established their own farm and a family of ten children. (Murphy 88)

As did Cather's Shimerdas, many Old World families hoping to find a better life or attempting to escape tyranny and oppression looked to western America to find personal, religious, and economic freedom. The American wilderness was thought to have the potential to be the Garden of the World, providing limitless opportunities (Myres, *Westering* 14). Myres quotes writer Eliza Farnham, who commented on the uniqueness of the West: "...preferred over all other portions of the earth. Its magnitude, its fertility, the kindness of its climate, and the variety and excellence of its productions are unrivaled in our country, if not on the globe" (Myres, *Westering* 14). Many

immigrants dreamed of only opportunity and disregarded the undesirable in conquering the wilderness: the harshness, the danger, the desolation and isolation.

With an image of the Great Plains as a garden, European immigrants streamed into America. Cherny notes that Cather's work depicts the ethnic diversity among the settlers of the Great Plains during the 1870s and 1880s. By 1890 only twenty-nine percent of Nebraska's population had been born there. Forty-three percent had foreign heritage. Six groups made up more than four-fifths of the state's foreign people: Germans, 37.6%; Swedes, 12.1%; Irish, 10.8%; Czechs (Bohemians), 7.8%; English, 6.6%; Danes, 5.7% (32). Because most European immigrants to America had marked differences in language, religion, and custom, they often sought out others from their home country or region. These associations, then, enabled them to practice their own language, religion, and customs, easing many of the barriers which they encountered in immigrating to a strange land. Ethnic settlements existed throughout the farming regions of eastern and south central Nebraska. Germans dominated the northeastern counties; Danes and Swedes, central Nebraska; and Bohemians (in whom Cather had a special interest), the southeast. Wilber, the largest Czech settlement in Nebraska, is about ninety miles east of Red Cloud or Black Hawk in *My Antonia* (Cherny 33). Antonia Shimerda's son, Rudolph, described Wilber: "It was a Bohunk crowd, for sure. We did n't hear a word of English on the street..." (Cather 255).

In the late 1800s, most Nebraskans, whether foreign born or native, lived in rural areas and made their living from the soil. However, immigrants were more likely than old-stock Americans to be farmers. Webster County in 1890 had only three incorporated

towns within its almost six hundred square miles: Red Cloud with a population of 1,839; Blue Hill, 796; Guide Rock, 336. These small Nebraska towns existed primarily to sell products to the area farmers and provide them with a place to market crops (Cherny 34-35). Murphy in discussing the Czech peasant, about whom Cather writes in *My Antonia*, emphasizes that the love of the land was fundamental to the nature of the Czechs:

Slavic peasants were *emotionally* attached to the soil, and perceived ‘a mystical connection between them[selves] and the Mother Earth with whom they labored.’ Furthermore, Slavs were great lovers of nature who enjoyed life in the open spaces. This mystical connection at least in part predates Christianity, when nature and its forces were the basis of religion. Nineteenth-century peasant mysticism was woven into the Slavic relationship with nature....Love of country, or the land, long preceded love of nation, but both were part of their psyche when Czechs arrived on the Great Plains. (96)

Cather captures Czech nature in *My Antonia* “in reverence toward the land, in sustenance, love, and transcendence” (Murphy 96). Antonia lives in a kind of middle land between the earth and the heavens. “In the ‘new’ world on the Great Plains, the horizontal expansiveness was overwhelming” (Murphy 96). Cather described the world into which the immigrants entered:

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made....I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s

jurisdiction...But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it...Between the earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. (Cather 3-4)

The intense love of the land likely sustained the Czech immigrants. They faced isolation and hardship in a desolate and unknown land. In *My Antonia*, Cather indicates that the Shimerda family, who has just entered America and is traveling by train to Black Hawk, Nebraska, can speak no English. The conductor indicates that only Antonia can speak a few words, “We go Black Hawk, Nebraska” (Cather 2). When the train reaches Black Hawk, Cather describes the arrival: “We stumbled down from the train to a wooden siding, where men were running about with lanterns. I could n’t see any town, or even distant lights; we were surrounded by utter darkness” (Cather 2). The Shimerdas could be seen in the “red glow from the fire-box” of the engine:

...a group of people stood huddled together on the platform, encumbered by bundles and boxes. The woman wore a fringed shawl tied over the head, and she carried a little tin trunk in her arms, hugging it as if it were a baby. There was an old man, tall and stooped. Two half-grown boys and a girl stood holding oil-cloth bundles, and a little girl clung to her mother’s skirts. (Cather 2-3)

A short time later, the immigrants are seen leaving the station: “He led us to a hitching-bar where two farm wagons were tied, and I saw the foreign family crowding into one of them...The immigrants rumbled off into the empty darkness...” (Cather 3).

Daylight brings a new perspective on Nebraska:

Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I....I felt the motion of the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of buffalo were galloping, galloping... (Cather 9-10)

Nebraska's untamed wilderness is evident in a neighbor's description of the Shimerdas' new land: The immigrants "had come to live on a wild place where there was no garden or chickenhouse, and very little broken land" (Cather 13). The family had bought the homestead from Peter Krajiek, a fellow-Bohemian, and unknowingly paid him more than it was worth. A relative of Mrs. Shimerda's, who was also a cousin of Krajiek's, had been instrumental in arranging the sale of the homestead prior to the family's coming to America. The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family to settle in that part of the county; and Krajiek, being their only interpreter, could tell them what he chose (Cather 13-14). "They could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known" (Cather 14). One son was old enough and strong enough to work the land; but the father, who was old and frail, knew nothing about farming. The father's occupation in the old country had been that of a weaver, and he was skilled in working with tapestries and upholstery materials (Cather 14). "He had brought his fiddle with him, which would n't be of much use here, though he used to pick up money by it at home" (Cather 14).

Krajiek gained a reputation for taking advantage of the Shimerdas. Krajiek's "cave," where the Shimerdas would live was "...no better than a badger hole, no proper

dugout at all. And I hear he's made them pay twenty dollars for his old cookstove that ain't worth ten....he's sold 'em his oxen and his two bony old horses for the price of good work-teams" (Cather 14). The farm which the Shimerdas purchased must have been an initial disappointment for them. Cather describes the homestead:

The land was growing rougher; I was told that we were approaching Squaw Creek, which cut up the west half of the Shimerdas' place and made the land of little value for farming. Soon we could see the broken, grassy clay cliffs which indicated the windings of the stream...

As we approached the Shimerdas' dwelling, I could still see nothing but rough red hillocks, and draws with shelving banks and long roots hanging out where the earth had crumbled away. Presently, against one of those banks, I saw a sort of shed, thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere. Near it tilted a shattered windmill-frame, that had no wheel. We drove up to this skeleton to tie our horses, and then I saw a door and window sunk deep in the drawbank. The door stood open, and a woman and a girl of fourteen ran out and looked up at us hopefully...

...Immediately she pointed to the bank out of which she had emerged and said, 'House no good, house no good!' (Cather 14-15)

Isolated by language and custom in a foreign land and having no one they could trust, the Shimerdas attempt some communication with neighbors. Jim Burden's grandparents initially visit the Shimerdas; the visit ends with Mr. Shimerda's begging that Antonia be taught English: "Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Antonia!" (Cather 19). In this

same visit, Jim's grandparents bring food to welcome the Shimerdas. The food is gratefully accepted as it is discovered that the "family had been living on corncakes and sorghum molasses for three days" (Cather 16). Later, Antonia learns about cooking and housekeeping by very closely watching Jim's grandmother:

We were willing to believe that Mrs. Shimerda was a good housewife in her own country, but she managed poorly under new conditions: the conditions were bad enough, certainly!

I remember how horrified we were at the sour, ashy-gray bread she gave her family to eat. She mixed her dough, we discovered, in an old tin peck-measure that Krajiek had used about the barn. When she took the paste out to bake it, she left smears of dough sticking to the sides of the measure, put the measure on the shelf behind the stove, and let this residue ferment. The next time she made bread, she scraped this sour stuff down into the fresh dough to serve as yeast. (Cather 22)

During the first months the Shimerdas live in America, they never go to Black Hawk, the closest town. Krajiek encourages their isolation, convincing them "they would somehow be mysteriously separated from their money" (Cather 22). They neither trust Krajiek nor like him, but he is the only person with whom they can communicate:

He slept with the old man and the two boys in the dugout barn, along with the oxen. They kept him in their hole and fed him for the same reason that the prairie dogs and the brown owls housed the rattlesnakes—because they did not know how to get rid of him. (Cather 23)

In spite of Krajiek, Antonia learns to speak English with Jim's help. Even though Antonia may have felt some easing of isolation, she and her family have yet to experience a Nebraska winter. Sternsheim notes that Nebraska is not always inviting and friendly to people. "In winter, the entire country freezes solid. It is barren of all forms of life. Snow is everywhere, and it often drifts up and around the houses; an act which necessitates tunneling out. Winter in Nebraska isn't cruel or mean, but it is hard and bitter" (116). Families could be cut off from town or neighbors for months; they must be prepared to manage on their own. "The Shimerda family does not have the resourcefulness necessary to survive intact through the winter" (Sternsheim 116). In December Jake reported that Ambrosch Shimerda has been out in the countryside hunting for food. Unable to find rabbits, he has killed three prairie dogs which he considers edible. Alarmed with this report, Jim's grandmother fears that the Shimerdas are starving and prepares food to take to them (Cather 52-53).

The Shimerdas are destitute. As Jake, Jim, and his grandparents approach the homestead, they see Antonia pumping water, wearing only a cotton dress. When she hears the wagon, she grabs her bucket of water and runs for the hole in the bank. As they near the door, they begin to understand the plight of the family:

Mrs. Shimerda opened the door before we knocked and seized grandmother's hand. She did not say 'How do!'" as usual, but at once began to cry, talking very fast in her own language, pointing to her feet which were tied up in rags, and looking about accusingly at every one.

The old man was sitting on a stump behind the stove, crouching over as if he were trying to hide from them....Antonia was washing pans and dishes in a dark corner....The air in the cave was stifling, and it was very dark, too. A lighted lantern, hung over the stove, threw out a feeble yellow glimmer.

Mrs. Shimerda snatched off the covers of two barrels behind the door, and made us look into them. In one there were some potatoes that had been frozen and were rotting, in the other was a little pile of flour. Grandmother murmured something in embarrassment, but the Bohemian woman laughed scornfully, a kind of whinny-laugh, and catching up an empty coffee-pot from the shelf, shook it at us with a look positively vindictive.

...Jake arrived with the hamper, as if in direct answer to Mrs. Shimerda's reproaches. Then the poor woman broke down. She dropped on the floor beside her crazy son, hid her face on her knees, and sat crying bitterly....I had never seen her crushed like this before. (Cather 53-54)

The Burdens find that the Shimerdas have no food and the girls sleep in a little cave in the rear wall, "a round hole, not much bigger than an oil barrel, scooped out in the black earth" (Cather 55). The Burdens also learn how the frontier wilderness of a strange land has devastated the family. Mr. Shimerda tells their story as Antonia translates:

He wanted us to know that they were not beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family were respected there. He left Bohemia

with more than a thousand dollars in savings, after their passage money was paid. He had in some way lost on exchange in New York, and the railway fare to Nebraska was more than they had expected. By the time they paid Krajiek for the land, and bought his horses and oxen and some old farm machinery, they had very little money left. He wished grandmother to know, however, that he still had some money left. If they could get through until spring came, they would buy a cow and chickens and plant a garden, and would then do very well. Ambrosch and Antonia were both old enough to work in the fields, and they were willing to work. But the snow and the bitter weather had disheartened them all. (Cather 56)

The Shimerdas, in attempting to survive a Nebraska winter, keenly feel the isolation and desolation. Mrs. Shimerda and Antonia seem to take responsibility for the care of the family, although their resources are severely limited. Following the Burdens' visit, the weather warms and a thaw results. Antonia and her mother visit the Burdens to maintain communication and likely free themselves from their loneliness. Although Antonia has visited the Burdens several times, Mrs. Shimerda has never done so. Cather described Mrs. Shimerda's reaction to seeing the Burdens' house:

...she ran about examining our carpets and curtains and furniture, all the while commenting upon them to her daughter in an envious, complaining tone. In the kitchen she caught up an iron pot that stood on the back of the

stove and said: 'You got many, Shimerdas not got.' I thought it weak-minded of grandmother to give the pot to her.

After dinner, when she was helping to wash the dishes, she said, tossing her head: 'You got many things for cook. If I got all things like you, I make much better.'

She was a conceited, boastful old thing, and even misfortune could not humble her. (Cather 65).

Although Mrs. Shimerda appears confident and even boastful, Antonia tells of her father's condition:

'My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. When I beg him for play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree.' (Cather 66)

After the Shimerdas leave, Mrs. Burden comments upon the circumstances they are facing: "She's not old, Jim, though I expect she seems old to you....But, you see, a body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in 'em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things" (Cather 67). The Nebraska winter has loosened its grip temporarily, but as all are soon to experience, the worst is yet to come.

The blizzard begins the morning of January 20 and continues throughout the day.

Cather describes the storm:

The snow did not fall this time, it simply spilled out of heaven, like thousands of feather-beds being emptied. That afternoon the kitchen was a carpenter-shop; the men brought in their tools and made two great wooden shovels with long handles. Neither grandmother nor I could go out in the storm....Next day our men had to shovel until noon to reach the barn—and the snow was still falling! There had not been such a storm in the ten years my grandfather had lived in Nebraska. He said at dinner we would not try to reach the cattle—they were fat enough to go without their corn for a day or two....They made a tunnel under the snow to the henhouse, with walls so solid that grandmother and I could walk back and forth in it....That was a strange, unnatural sort of day. (Cather 68).

That night, Ambrosch Shimerda has made his way to the Burdens to tell them that Mr. Shimerda is dead from an apparent suicide. The next morning, in relating the tragedy, Mr. Burden says "...his family are in great distress" (Cather 69). At the time of his death, "nobody heard the gun go off. Ambrosch was out with the ox team, trying to break a road, and the women folks was shut up tight in their cave" (Cather 70). With the death of Mr. Shimerda, Mrs. Shimerda and Antonia are left alone to make their way in this hostile frontier wilderness.

By the time spring comes to the Nebraska prairie, Antonia has become more accepting of her father's death. The neighbors have helped the Shimerdas build a new four-room cabin which stands in front of their old cave, now used as a cellar; they also have a new windmill, a chicken house, chickens, and a cow (Sternsheim 116). Cather

writes, "The family were now fairly equipped to begin their struggle with the soil" (Cather 87). As spring turns to summer, Mrs. Shimerda worked in her kitchen and, when visiting with Jim, attempts to be shrewd about obtaining information about planting corn. Antonia begins to work the fields beside Ambrosch. Antonia works like a man:

She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draft-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries... She greeted me gayly, and began at once to tell me how much ploughing she had done that day. (Cather 89)

Then when asked about going to school, she replies, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now" (Cather 89). Antonia must have feel alone and somewhat helpless, as her boastful remarks give way to tears: "I felt something tense in her silence, and glancing up I saw that she was crying. She turned her face from me and looked off at the red streak of dying light, over the dark prairie" (Cather 89). Sternshein points out that when Antonia begins working in the fields like a man, her civilized attributes disappear: "Her genteel manners and social veneer are stripped away, leaving a woman just as coarse and crude as any male field hand. Thus, as the land of Nebraska is being stripped of the red grass by the plow, Antonia is also being stripped of her initial attributes as she works in the fields" (117).

Antonia leaves the land for a time and moves to town as a hired girl. While living in Blackhawk, she establishes a reputation with the young men far different from that

which she had on the farm. She eventually returns to her family disgraced; she works in the fields and tends livestock (Sternsheim 118). Cather writes, “She lives at home, on the farm, and almost never comes to town” (215). Antonia suffers from her shame alone. She is described as being “crushed and quiet....She never went anywhere” (Cather 228). Throughout her pregnancy, she vigorously works in the fields and tends cattle. She also delivers her child alone:

That very night it happened. She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen, and shut the door. There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child. (Cather 230)

Antonia’s love of the land sustains her. Following the birth of her child, Antonia decides to remain on the farm and work the land. As she does so, she begins to regain her self-esteem and self-confidence (Sternsheim 119). Antonia marries Tony Cuzak, lives on a farm, and has ten children. She is very content with her life. As have many pioneer women, Antonia has overcome isolation and desolation and “helped to cultivate and tame the land so that her children may now engage in the frivolities of education, music, and other fields in the humanities” (Sternsheim 119).

Laird notes that Antonia Shimerda is classed from the beginning as an outsider:

An immigrant, a “hired girl” working for wages among townspeople unwilling to accept her on anything like an equal footing....She is portrayed as having little choice but to accept the conditions that define her domestic and social situation and she proceeds to ground her practice

in a simple and abiding faith in the life she nourishes, in the land she cherishes, and in the small community she manages to sustain.

It is a composite portrait, rendered from multiple perspectives that reveal both triumph and defeat, a serenity of spirit and at the same time a sense of anguish and exhaustion, loneliness and loss. (Laird 247-48)

CHAPTER IV

GARLAND'S PERSONAL NARRATIVES:

A SON OF THE MIDDLE BORDER AND

A DAUGHTER OF THE MIDDLE BORDER

"The isolation of women was a universal problem of plains settlement..."

(Hampsten 178). Riley notes that the Great Plains was an "unusually harsh frontier area" (*Female Frontier* 5). It was considerably more difficult for women than other frontiers had been (Riley, *Female Frontier* 77). The "northern plains are a hostile environment in every season, what with dangerous cold, snow, and wind in winter, and the likelihood of floods, fires, tornadoes, droughts, mosquitoes in other months" (Hampsten 39). To cultivate the plains, settlers were required to use more advanced methods than those pioneers who farmed the prairies: windmills, barbed-wire fencing, and more complex machinery. All of these demands required more capital and knowledge from those attempting to conquer the plains wilderness (Riley, *Female Frontier* 12). Many women (sometimes silently, sometimes verbally) were reluctant pioneers, especially when expected to settle in such desolate regions as the Dakotas.

Men often brought their families to homestead in these areas, drawn by the image the Garden of the World promised. Charles Forbes, new to Buxton, North Dakota, wrote to his wife in Michigan:

You have no idea, Beulah, of what [the prairies] look like until you see them. For mile after mile there is not a sign of a tree or stone and just as

level as the floor of your house....Wheat never looked better and it is nothing but wheat. Just as far as a person can see on every side there is nothing but wheat, wheat, wheat.... (Hampsten 44)

Frontiers, though, could exhibit darker aspects: heartbreak, loneliness, and despair (Schlissel, *Far from Home* 234). However, in depicting the settlement of the frontier many of these aspects were ignored. Accounts of frontier life were often romanticized or given a homespun simplicity (Riley, *Female Frontier* 5). Myres notes that the following description could be stereotypical of the pioneer wife:

The sturdy helpmate could fight Indians, kill the bear in the barn, make two pots of lye soap, and do a week's wash before dinnertime and still have the cabin neat, the children clean, and a good meal on the table when her husband came in from the fields—all without a word of complaint or even a hint of an ache or a pain. (Myres, *Westering Women* 3)

The demands placed upon frontier women and the resulting toll upon them both mentally and physically were often disregarded. Armitage tells of the oppression of women and the economic exploitation they faced as wives of homesteaders and miners. These women often faced grinding poverty in attempting to support their families alone. It was not unusual for husbands to leave their families for long periods of time to conduct business, hunt, search for other work, or even desert the family in an effort to cope with failure. Economic insecurity, rootlessness, and dependence became a way of life for many women. “Surely one major reason for reluctant pioneering was realism: the

knowledge that constant hard work simply wasn't enough to break through the drab greyness of poverty" (Armitage 47).

Political and literary recognition of these economic certainties surfaced in the 1890s in the Populist movement and in novels such as Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* (Armitage 47). Garland's realism "chronicled the rapid settlement that caused the prairie to be 'blackened by the plow' and farming to pervade the land" (Riley, *Female Frontier* 5). McCullough in his introduction to *A Son of the Middle Border* quotes S.T. Cloves: "*Son* is not only an autobiography but also a chronicle of the times and experiences that thousands of American families went through in taming the West" (xiii-xiv). The narrative covers Garland's life from 1864 to 1893. His main theme involves the following: "The conflict between Garland and his strict disciplinarian father, who represents the pioneering spirit, and his sympathy for his mother, who accepts the continued moves as well as the drudgery and poverty of farm life with quiet resignation..." (McCullough xvii). A major emphasis in Garland's work is the hardship of women on the prairie.

Garland continues his Middle Border work with *A Daughter of the Middle Border*. Holloway provides Hamlin Garland's definition of the Middle Border:

In a sense it does not exist and never did. It was but a vaguely defined region even in my boyhood. It was the line drawn by the plow, and broadly speaking, ran parallel to the upper Mississippi when I was a lad. It lay between the land of the hunter and the harvester. (Holloway 243)

Garland considers *A Daughter of the Middle Border* as a complement to *A Son of the Middle Border* (Garland, *Daughter* ix). He indicates that *Daughter* begins with a return to West Salem, Wisconsin, which Garland's family had left some thirty years earlier. A family homestead had been purchased there. In explaining the reason for the homestead, Garland provides the setting for the work:

My father, a typical pioneer, who had grown gray in opening new farms, one after another on the wind-swept prairies of Iowa and Dakota, was not entirely content with my plan but my mother, enfeebled by the hardships of a farmer's life, and grateful for my care, was glad of the arrangement I had brought about. In truth, she realized that her days of pioneering were over and the thought of ending her days among her friends and relatives was a comfort to her. That I had rescued her from a premature grave on the barren Dakota plain was certain, and the hope of being able to provide for her comfort was the strongest element in my plan. (Garland, *Daughter* vii)

Garland gives major attention to women's plight in his work. The primary woman in his *Daughter* and *Son Middle Border* narratives is his mother. He focuses on the plains landscape, its desolation, loneliness, and harshness, and its effects on Isabel Garland (Thacker 182). Adding to the difficulties the pioneering woman encountered may have been what Hampsten refers to as the "special society of men" (3). Men have been encouraged to think that each is responsible for himself and, thus, central to himself. However, few men have made that assumption about women, considering women

satellite to those male centers (Hampsten 3). In mid-nineteenth century, rural Midwestern America, men generally assumed the decision-making role. Often for the pioneering families, men made the decisions about when and where to move and felt no obligation to consult their wives (Hampsten 7).

Schlissel indicates that it has long been characteristic of Americans to move. People on the American frontier moved because the wilderness called, promising escape from family obligations and compromises. They also moved because success was a promise rarely obtained, and real opportunity was beyond the reach of the majority of pioneers seeking the promised land (*Far from Home* 236-43). This pioneering spirit consumed Garland's father, and his mother followed.

Hamlin Garland was born in Wisconsin in 1860. The Garland family lived on a 160-acre farm in the Wisconsin wilderness. Early in his parents' marriage, his father volunteered to serve in the Civil War. Belle was left to manage on her own:

I have heard my mother say that this was one of the darkest moments of her life and if you think about it you will understand the reason why. My sister was only five years old, I was three and Frank was a babe in the cradle. Broken hearted at the thought of the long separation, and scared by visions of battle my mother begged the soldier not to go; but he was of the stern stuff which makes patriots—and besides his name was already on the roll, therefore he went away to join Grant's army at Vicksburg. What sacrifice—what folly! Like thousands of others he deserted his wife and children for an abstraction, a mere sentiment. For a striped silken rag—he

put his life in peril. For thirteen dollars per month he marched and fought, while his plow rusted in the shed and his harvest called to him in vain.

My conscious memory hold nothing of my mother's agony of waiting, nothing of the dark days when the baby was ill and the doctor far away...

(Garland, *Son* 7)

...My mother's side of those long months of waiting was never fully delineated, for she was natively reticent and shy of expression. But piece by piece in later years I drew from her the tale of her long vigil, and obtained some hint of the bitter anguish of her suspense after each great battle. (Garland, *Son* 11)

Richard Garland returned from the war in 1865. He was a stranger to his children who hardly knew him or did not know him. Belle, of course, found great relief and joy in her husband's return and began reintroducing the children to their father. With Richard's return, life on the farm began in earnest. Hamlin notes, "Life was primitive in all the homes of the coulee. Money was hard to get. We always had plenty to eat, but little in the way of luxuries" (Garland, *Son* 26). Whatever the circumstance, his mother always smiled. Her work was never done: "She knit all our socks, made all our shirts and suits. She even carded and spun wool, in addition to her housekeeping, and found time to help on our kites and bows and arrows" (Garland, *Son* 26). Hamlin remembers that by age seven he had regular duties: "I brought firewood to the kitchen and broke nubbins for the calves and shelled corn for the chickens. I have a dim memory of helping him (and grandfather) split oak-blocks into rafting pins in the kitchen" (Garland, *Son* 26).

Winter brought fierce winds and snow to the Wisconsin coulee. Hamlin's father sometimes had to dig deep trenches in the drifted snow to reach the barn. On winter evenings indoors, his father shelled corn; and the children built houses with the corn cobs, while his mother sewed carpet rags and knit mittens. Quilting bees were a social function which took place in the afternoons. The quilt on its frame made a beautiful tent under which Hamlin and his brother camped on their way to Colorado (Garland, *Son* 28-29).

About a year after Richard Garland's return from the war, Grandmother McClintock died. Hamlin wrote of his Grandmother's life as a pioneering woman. She had seven sons and six daughters. He commented, "It was well that this pioneer wife was rich in children, for she had little else... She was practical and a good manager, and she needed to be, for her husband was as weirdly unworldly as a farmer could be. He was indeed a sad husbandman" (Garland, *Son* 18). Hamlin was very young when his grandmother died. His Uncle David told of her death:

...The girls were washing clothes in the yard and the silent old mother was getting the mid-day meal. David, as he came in from the field, stopped for a moment with his sisters and in their talk Samantha said: 'Mother isn't at all well today.'

David, looking toward the kitchen, said, "Isn't there some way to keep her from working?"

‘You know how she is,’ explained Deborah. ‘She’s worked so long she don’t know how to rest. We tried to get her to lie down for an hour but she wouldn’t.’

David was troubled. ‘She’ll have to stop sometime,’ he said, and then they passed to other things, hearing meanwhile the tread of their mother’s busy feet.

Suddenly she appeared at the door, a frightened look on her face.

‘Why, mother!—what is the matter?’ asked her daughter.

She pointed to her mouth and shook her head, to indicate that she could not speak. David leaped toward her, but she dropped before he could reach her.

Lifting her in his strong arms he laid her on her bed and hastened for the doctor. All in vain! She sank into unconsciousness and died without a word of farewell.

She fell like a soldier in the ranks. Having served uncomplainingly up to the very edge of her evening bivouac, she passed to her final sleep in silent dignity. (Garland, *Son* 21-22)

As Richard Garland carved his farm out of the Wisconsin wilderness, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the land. He reflected more and more on the magnificent prairies he had seen during a trip he had taken to Minnesota before the war. Opportunity in a promised land lay somewhere other than in Wisconsin. In fact, his liberation was near. During the spring of 1868 a merchant from LaCrosse began negotiating for the

farm and bought it shortly thereafter; he wanted to develop it into a dairy farm. Hamlin's father exalted at the sale. The impending change became a magnet; Iowa now held the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Belle, however, not an immigrant by nature, thought of the loss of home and family the move would bring. Most of her brothers and sisters lived in the area, and the idea of leaving them for a wild, unknown region frightened her (Garland, *Son* 35-36).

Hamlin Garland describes a ballad about emigration which his mother sang. The song is a dialogue between a husband and a wife, representing the debate which went on in his home (as well as in other homes in the valley). He points out that the mothers did not prevail:

It begins with a statement of unrest on the part of the husband who confesses that he is about to give up his plow and his cart—

Away to Colorado a journey I'll go,
 For to double my fortune as other men do,
While here I must labor each day in the field
And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield.

To this the wife replies:

Dear husband, I've noticed with a sorrowful heart
 That you long have neglected your plow and your cart,
 Your horses, sheep, cattle at random to run,
 And your new Sunday jacket goes every day on.
Oh, stay on your farm and you'll suffer no loss,

For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss.

But the husband insists:

Oh, wife, let us go; Oh, don't let us wait;

I long to be there, and I long to be great,

While you some fair lady and who knows but I

May be some rich governor long 'fore I die,

Whilst here I must labor each day in the field,

And the winter consumes all the summer doth yield.

But the wife shrewdly retorts:

Dear husband, remember those lands are so dear

They will cost you the labor of many a year.

Your horses, sheep, cattle will all be to buy,

You will hardly get settled before you must die.

Oh, stay on the farm,—etc.

The husband then argues that as in that country the lands are all cleared to the plow, and horses and cattle not very dear, they would soon be rich. Indeed, 'we will feast on fat venison one-half of the year.' Thereupon the wife brings in her final argument:

Oh, husband, remember those lands of delight

Are surrounded by Indians who murder by night.

Your house will be plundered and burnt to the ground

While your wife and your children lie mangled around.

This fetches the husband up with a round turn:

Oh, wife, you've convinced me, I'll argue no more,

I never once thought of your dying before.

I love my dear children although they are small

And you, my dear wife, I love greatest of all.

Refrain (both together)

We'll stay on the farm and we'll suffer no loss

For the stone that keeps rolling will gather no moss.

(Garland, *Son* 36-38)

This song was not a favorite of his father's; man's giving in to womanly doubts and fears was contrary to Richard Garland's confident nature. Therefore, his father often called for the family's marching song which expressed his love of exploration and adventure:

This ballad which dates back to the conquest of the Allegheny mountains opens with a fine uplifting note,

Cheer up, brothers, as we go

O'er the mountains, westward ho,

Where herds of deer and buffalo

Furnish the fare.

And the refrain is at once a bugle call and a vision:

Then o'er the hills in legions, boys,

Fair freedom's star

Points to the sunset regions, boys,

Ha, ha, ha-ha!

And when my mother's clear voice rose on the notes of that exultant chorus, our hearts responded with a surge of emotion akin to that which sent the followers of Daniel Boone across the Blue Ridge, and lined the trails of Kentucky and Ohio with the canvas-covered wagons of the pioneers.

A little farther on in the song came these words,

When we've wood and prairie land,

Won by our toil,

We'll reign like kings in fairy land,

Lords of the soil! (Garland, *Son* 38)

This family song profoundly influenced the lives of the McClintock and Garland men. It suggested mountains and valleys teeming with wild game. It voiced the pioneering impulse which directed the lives of at least three generations of his family (Garland, *Son* 39).

Even though Grandfather McClintock was himself an emigrant, he decried the continued moving: "It's the curse of our country,—this constant moving, moving. I'd have been better off had I stayed in Ohio, though this valley seemed very beautiful to me the first time I saw it" (Garland, *Son* 51). He warned Richard Garland to stay in Wisconsin. Richard resented the warning and retorted:

That's all very well for the few who have the level land in the middle of the valley,... but how about those of us who are crowded against the hills? You should see the farm I have in Winneshiek! Not a hill on it big enough for a boy to coast on. It's right on the edge of Looking Glass Prairie, and I have a spring of water, and a fine grove of trees just where I want them, not where they have to be grubbed out. (Garland, *Son* 50-51)

Grandfather repeated his warning, "But ye belong here,... You were married here, your children were born here. Ye'll find no such friends in the west as you have here in Neshonoc. And Belle will miss the family" (Garland, *Son* 51).

The Thanksgiving festivities that year seemed to be somewhat saddened by Richard and Belle's pending move. Richard called for "O'er the Hills in Legions Boys!" Richard was exuberant, but Hamlin Garland notes:

But on my mother's sweet face a wistful expression deepened and in her fine eyes a reflective shadow lay. To her this song meant not so much the acquisition of a new home as the loss of all her friends and relatives. She sang it submissively, not exultantly, and I think the other women were of the same mood though their faces were less expressive to me. To all of the pioneer wives of the past that song had meant deprivation, suffering, loneliness, heart-ache. (Garland, *Son* 52)

When Richard Garland finished closing out the business of the Wisconsin farm, the family began its move to Iowa—in February. Hamlin indicates that he and his sister

wandered around whining and shivering while his mother packed. Their misery increased because of the worried look on his mother's face:

...she very properly resented leaving her home for a long, cold ride into an unknown world, but as a dutiful wife she worked hard and silently in packing away her treasures, and clothing her children for the journey.

(Garland, *Son* 58)

The big bob-sled was finally packed; and their journey to Hesper, Iowa, began. Hamlin particularly remembers the ice-choked river the family had to cross on a seemingly unsteady bridge and the terror his mother felt. Once across the river and through snow-covered hills on the other side, their Wisconsin home lay behind them:

All that was familiar was put behind; all that was strange and dark, all that was wonderful and unknown, spread out before us, and as we crawled along that slippery, slanting road, it seemed that we were entering on a new and marvellous world. (Garland, *Son* 59)

Hamlin loved the new farm and felt it was a wonderful place for boys. The house, though, was made of logs and was dark and cold. The roof of the rude little frontier cabin leaked; Hamlin notes that one morning he found a small mound of snow on the floor beside his bed. He was unconcerned about the condition of the cabin, but his mother likely was. Spring brought renewed activity to the farm; his father began clearing the land with the help of two Norwegians who spoke no English. Unfortunately, they brought smallpox with them. As the disease spread, Belle found herself nursing a helpless handmaid and Richard Garland while worrying about her three children and

herself; she was expecting another child very soon. Most of the neighbors avoided the Garland homestead. One neighbor, though, whom they barely knew volunteered to help and in so doing was considered an angel of mercy. Without her, the Garlands did not know what they would have done (Garland, *Son* 61-62).

Richard Garland within a year became dissatisfied with the wood and prairie land of Winnishiek County and, dreaming of the free lands of the farther west, sold the farm to an Englishman. He rented a farm only six miles away, where he moved the family. Once the crops were planted, he left Belle and traveled for several weeks searching for the perfect farm. Richard returned just before harvest and announced that he had purchased some of the best land in Mitchell County, Iowa; after harvest they would resettle.

Hamlin recalls that his mother may not have resented this move as much as the others, as one of her brothers and one of her sisters lived in the area. In late August Richard Garland loaded the household goods into wagons and with a small herd of cattle following, headed west “bound once again to overtake the actual line of the middle border” (Garland, *Son* 67). Hamlin comments on the unsettled prairie across which they traveled:

...we came to a meadow so wide that its western rim touched the sky without revealing a sign of man’s habitation other than the road in which we travelled.

The plain was covered with grass tall as ripe wheat and when my father stopped his team and came back to us and said, ‘Well, children, here we

are on The Big Prairie,' we looked about us with awe, so endless seemed this spread of wild oats and waving blue-joint.

'Forward march!' he shouted, and on we went.

Hour after hour we pushed into the west, the heads of his tired horses hanging ever lower, and on my mother's face the shadow deepened,...He loved this shelterless sweep of prairie. (Garland, *Son* 67)

The family arrived at their new home as night set in: "Nothing could be seen but the dim form of a small house.—On every side the land melted into blackness, silent and without boundary" (Garland, *Son* 68). The next morning Hamlin could see that the cabin faced flat, unfenced sod with no tree in sight. "To the north, as far as I could see, the land billowed like a russet ocean, with scarcely a roof to fleck its lonely spread" (Garland, *Son* 68). Belle busied herself in making the cabin livable and comfortable: "Once more and for the sixth time since her marriage, Belle Garland adjusted herself to a pioneer environment..." (Garland, *Son* 68).

Life on the frontier was rudimentary. The house in which the Garlands lived was square and unpainted. It had a small lean-to on one side and a sitting room and bedroom below. The children slept in an unplastered room overhead. When it became too cold to use the summer kitchen, the family lived in the sixteen-foot square room. The furniture was very rustic, typical of that found on the frontier. Hamlin describes the furniture and other elements of frontier living:

It was all cheap and worn, for this was the middle border, and nearly all our neighbors had moved as we had done in covered wagons. Farms were

new, houses were mere shanties, and money was scarce. ‘War times’ and ‘war prices’ were only just beginning to change. Our clothing was all cheap and ill fitting. The women and children wore home-made ‘cotton flannel’ underclothing for the most part, and the men wore rough, ready-made suits over which they drew brown denim blouses or overalls to keep them clean.

Father owned a fine buffalo overcoat (so much of his song’s promise was redeemed) and we possessed two buffalo robes for use in our winter sleigh. But mother had only a sad coat and a woolen shawl. How she kept warm I cannot now understand—I think she stayed at home on cold days.

(Garland, *Son* 76)

The notorious prairie winter made its appearance the second year the Garlands lived in Iowa. They learned the meaning of the word “blizzard”:

...The winds of Wisconsin were ‘gentle zephyrs’ compared to the blasts which now swept down over the plain to hammer upon our desolate little cabin and pile the drifts around our sheds and granaries, and even my pioneer father was forced to admit that the hills of Green’s Coulee had their uses after all.

One such storm which leaped upon us at the close of a warm and beautiful day in February lasted for two days and three nights, making life on the open prairie impossible even to the strongest man. The thermometer fell to thirty degrees below zero and the snow-laden air

moving at a rate of eighty miles an hour pressed upon the walls of our house with giant power. The sky of noon was darkened, so that we moved in a pallid half-light, and the windows thick with frost shut us in as if with gray shrouds.

Hour after hour those winds and snows in furious battle, howled and roared and whistled around our frail shelter, slashing at the windows and piping on the chimney, till it seemed as if the Lord Sun had been wholly blotted out and that the world would never again be warm. Twice each day my father made a desperate sally toward the stable to feed the imprisoned cows and horses or to replenish our fuel—for the remainder of the long pallid day he sat beside the fire with gloomy face. Even his indomitable spirit was awed by the fury of that storm. (Garland, *Son* 89-90)

The Garlands carved out the wilderness on their farm for about seven years. Then Richard Garland announced that he was asked to become the official grain-buyer for the county and that he had agreed to do so. They would move into town. Hamlin notes, “Mother as usual sat in silence. If she showed exultation, I do not recall the fashion of it” (Garland, *Son* 141). Richard Garland rented out the farm, and Hamlin recalls the joys of living in Osage away from the harshness and loneliness of the farm. He remembers that his mother even had time to read. However, about a year later, Hamlin’s father, irritated by the failure of the renter, determined that they were moving back to the farm (Garland, *Son* 141-64).

After two years of devastating crop failures, Richard Garland became disenchanted with Iowa and looked to free land to the west to become a pioneer again. The Jim River Valley in the Dakotas became the promised land. He set out to explore the new territory and returned to announce that he had taken a homestead in Ordway, Brown County, Dakota. Belle resigned herself once more to the idea of creating a new home and sang, "O'er the hills in legions, boys" with what spirit she could muster, but her voice was touched with regret. Just prior to their leaving, the neighbors gave Richard and Belle a surprise silver anniversary/going-away party. Belle was sad at the prospects of beginning a new pioneering adventure. Hamlin states:

...I looked around upon that little group of men and women, rough-handed, bent and worn with toil, silent and shadowed with the sorrow of parting, I realized as never before the high place my parents had won in the estimation of their neighbors....Small wonder that my mother sat with bowed head and tear-blinded eyes, while these good and faithful friends crowded around her to say good-bye. (Garland, *Son* 190-91)

Living on the Dakota frontier proved to be as rigorous as had any frontier. Hamlin indicates that his mother continued to work ceaselessly in the desolation; the weather on these plains was severe. Extremes in the weather devastated crops and destroyed livelihoods. A few years after Hamlin left his parents, he returned for a visit. His mother's appearance startled him:

The changes in her shocked me, filled me with a sense of guilt. Hesitation was in her speech. Her voice once so glowing and so jocund, was

tremulous, and her brown hair, once so abundant, was thin and gray....she had topped the high altitude of her life and was now descending swiftly toward defenseless age... (Garland, *Son* 297)

Months later Hamlin again visited his mother, suspecting that she was ill. He learned that misfortune in Jim River Valley had become commonplace. Two of his father's neighbors had gone insane over the failure of their crops. Several had slipped away to escape their debts. His father who was farming more than five hundred acres of land was deeply worried because it appeared his crops might fail (Garland, *Son* 320). Belle appeared grayer, older, and much less vigorous than when he had last seen her. Hamlin began a plan to rescue his parents from the barren farm. While talking with his sister, he heard a sharp, piercing cry. He hurried outside and saw his mother:

...standing a few yards from the door, her sweet face distorted, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "What is it, mother?" I called out.

'I can't lift my feet,' she stammered, putting her arms about my neck. 'I can't move!' and in her voice was such terror and despair that my blood chilled.

It was true! She was helpless. From the waist downward all power of locomotion had departed. Her feet were like lead, drawn to the earth by some terrible magnetic power.

In a frenzy of alarm, Jessie and I carried her into the house and laid her on her bed. My heart burned with bitter indignation. 'This is the end,' I

said. 'Here is the result of long years of ceaseless toil. She has gone as her mother went, in the midst of the battle.' (Garland, *Son* 321)

After locating the doctor and waiting in suspense, Hamlin learned that even though his mother had suffered a stroke, she was in no immediate danger. Dr. Cross said, "Nothing can be done for her. No medicine can reach her. It is just a question of rest and quiet....She should have been relieved from severe household labor years ago" (Garland, *Son* 322).

At the end of that week, Belle, although very weak, showed improvement. Her voice was uncertain and her speech extremely hesitant, and she was easily confused. Hamlin determined, "Her days of labor were over" (Garland, *Son* 323). He stayed with his mother as she slowly recuperated, and he reflected on frontier life and the dream:

I got back once again to the solid realities of farm life, and the majesty of the colorful sunsets which ended many of our days could not conceal from me the starved lives and lonely days of my little sister and my aging mother.

'Think of it!' I wrote to my brother. 'After eight years of cultivation, father's farm possesses neither tree nor vine. Mother's head has no protection from the burning rays of the sun, except the shadow which the house casts on the dry, hard door-yard. Where are the 'woods and prairie lands' of our song? Is this 'fairy land' in which we were all to 'reign like kings'? Doesn't the whole migration of the Garlands and McClintocks seem a madness?' (Garland, *Son* 324)

Belle often talked of the days in Wisconsin and of the green hills and trees. Richard Garland, though, was determined: “We’ll try again,” he declared. “Next year will surely bring a crop” (Garland, *Son* 324).

Hamlin became more intent on freeing his parents from the hardship of pioneering, in particular rescuing his mother from the “destitution and loneliness of this arid land” (Garland, *Son* 344). Even though Richard’s wheat crop failed that year, he was undaunted: “The irrigated country is the next field for development. I’m going to sell out here and try irrigation in Montana. I want to get where I can regulate the water for my crops” (Garland, *Son* 348).

Hamlin established a homestead in Wisconsin for his parents. Belle came alone to the new home, with the assurance that Richard would follow. Richard agreed to spend some time in Wisconsin as long as he could return to South Dakota to work the farm during seeding and harvesting (Garland, *Daughter* viii). Hamlin felt that he had rescued his mother from a premature death: “Never again would she burn in the suns of the arid plains, or cower before the winds of a desolate winter” (Garland, *Daughter* 16). Belle must have thought she had found paradise: “After so many years of bleak and treeless farm-lands, it seemed that our mother could not get enough of the luxuriant foliage, the bloom and the odorous sweetness of this lovely valley” (Garland, *Daughter* 17). Hamlin felt content that his mother was safe and secure.

Hamlin Garland wrote of the realities of frontier life in the west as he had lived it and observed it. One woman wrote to him, “You are entirely right about the loneliness,

the stagnation, the hardship....” (Garland, *Son* 334). Pioneering seldom fit the romanticized picture; Hamlin Garland commented on this image:

The main travelled road in the west (as everywhere) is hot and dusty in summer and desolate and drear with mud in fall and spring, and in winter the winds sweep the snows across it, but it does sometimes cross a rich meadow where the songs of the larks and blackbirds and bobolinks are tangled. Follow it far enough, it may lead past a bend in the river where the water laughs eternally over its shallows. Mainly it is long and wearyful and has a dull little town at one end, and a home of toil at the other. Like the main travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and the weary predominate. (Garland, *Son* 332)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The settling of the American frontier is an unforgettable chapter in Western history. Its impact reverberates today. An infinite number of men and women became part of this vast emigration and settlement. Unique to this mass emigration were the records of their experiences in this wild and unknown land. The emigrants encountered and found constant companions in desolation, isolation, and loneliness. As the literature of the West records, women were profoundly affected both physically and psychologically by a deep sense of isolation. Women's diaries, journals, and letters of their overland journeys and homesteading on the frontier exemplify their sense of isolation. Fiction representing life on the American frontier illustrates women's aloneness. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* tells of early Nebraska pioneers and the loneliness women felt. Isolation is also evident in non-fiction narratives. Hamlin Garland describes the desolate, isolated life of his pioneering mother in two works: *A Son of the Middle Border* and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*.

Women often found emigration frightening. Many were reluctant to leave known civilization behind and face the wilderness alone without their established family and friends. A woman's husband generally made the decision to emigrate, and the law supported him. The journey on an overland trail could take several months and cover 2,000 miles. Traveling on a trail could be rigorous, tedious, and dangerous. Emigrants had to deal with inaccurate maps and lack of guides, often encountered fierce storms

which could result in the loss of life and supplies, illness, and disease. Loneliness was always present. Finding another woman with whom to converse often proved to be impossible. Most women lamented the loss of female companionship and resulting isolation and did so in silence.

The wilderness could be austere, desolate, and strange. Arrival at the pioneers' destination generally gave little relief—the work had only just begun. A woman's traditional role, care of the family and home, remained in place; and carving out the wilderness simply made her routines and concerns more difficult. The situation created tremendous disorientation, anxiety, and isolation for the woman on the frontier. Families normally lived many miles apart; female companionship occurred infrequently. A woman was repeatedly forced to face the trauma of birth, illness, and death alone. Survival in the wilderness of the prairies and plains increased a woman's isolation and lonesomeness for what she had left behind. Shelter was rustic: lean-tos, sod houses, and tar-paper shacks were common. Pioneers were subjected to extremes in weather, fire, flood, and illness. Women often faced the elements alone, as husbands would leave them to manage the homestead for weeks, months, or even years at a time. Women's diaries and letters tell of their loneliness and homesickness. Many wrote of depression and sick headaches; some collapsed physically and psychologically; some went insane. Taming the wilderness took a heavy toll on women.

Northern and Central European emigrants who settled on the American prairies and plains found pioneering particularly difficult as they had to contend with a strange language, land, and culture. Wives were particularly vulnerable. Their isolation became

more pronounced than that of native-born Americans. These women had an ocean between them and their homes. A return proved to be virtually impossible. They often faced grinding poverty and hard labor and had to contend often with husbands who were unsuccessful and insecure. Lonesomeness and desolation plagued their lives.

Willa Cather in *My Antonia* writes of the settling of the Nebraska frontier in the late 1800s. Cather grew up on the Nebraska plains where her family pioneered; and she was intrigued with the European emigrant families, particularly the Czechs. In *My Antonia* she writes of a Bohemian family who homesteads in Nebraska and of their struggle to survive. The women show particular sensitivity to the vast wilderness of the plains and the isolation and loneliness it brings. Old World families came to America to find personal, religious, and economic freedom. However, the barriers of language, religion, and custom often impeded their dreams and progress.

Antonia Shimerda experiences the difficulties of living in a hostile environment with her family and facing not only the isolation of the wilderness but also the isolation brought about by a strange language and culture. Antonia's mother speaks no English and cares for her family to the best of her ability while living in a cramped, dark sod cave. Antonia relies upon the neighboring Burdens to teach her English, cooking, and culture. The Shimerdas are unprepared for the severe Nebraska winter and nearly starve, as they have no help. Mrs. Shimerda borders on insanity, and Mr. Shimerda commits suicide, for he is unable to make a transition to this new way of life. Mrs. Shimerda is left alone to manage the farm and her family.

Antonia must work the fields like a man and, thus, remains isolated from socialization. Antonia does, however, inherit the Czech love of the land; this sustains her and enables her to survive. She does leave the land briefly and moves to town as a hired girl. In so doing, she dishonors her family, but returns to the land to bear her child alone. Antonia again carves out the wilderness in isolation but eventually marries, has a large family, and is eventually at peace with herself and the land.

The northern Great Plains of the American frontier became known for their hostile environment. Women in particular were often reluctant to settle in this desolate area. However, the plains and prairies held the promise of being the land of opportunity and containing the pot of gold for the pioneering man. This constant push to move and settle the frontier is evident in Hamlin Garland's narratives: *A Son of the Middle Border* and *A Daughter of the Middle Border*. His mother, though, bore the brunt of the isolation and loneliness in settling the plains frontier. Pioneering was often depicted as being very romantic: wives were ideal, uncomplaining helpmates who could conquer the wilderness and effortlessly care for the family. In reality women faced poverty, isolation, and back breaking work. Hamlin Garland lived the reality and saw his mother live it also. He writes of her struggle to settle the frontier.

Hamlin's father was a typical pioneer who was constantly in search of the perfect farm. His habitual moving took him from Wisconsin to Iowa to South Dakota. Isabel Garland faced the drudgery, poverty, and loneliness of a pioneer wife on the move. She was never able to establish roots in one location and, thus, was always beginning over. Belle had to deal with overwork, illness, and childbirth by herself. Hamlin's father,

Richard, marched to the tune of the family marching song; Belle followed as a dutiful wife, smiling and uncomplaining.

Richard Garland seemed oblivious to the effect the pioneering life was having on his wife. She suffered a stroke which was caused by the severity of her intense labor throughout the years. Hamlin hoped to rescue her from an early grave and insisted that his parents live in Wisconsin away from the barren, desolate plains. Belle could no longer cultivate the wilderness. His mother consented and initially came to Wisconsin alone; his father agreed to follow but periodically returned to his South Dakota farm. Belle found Wisconsin as pleasing as she had left it some thirty years earlier. Hamlin Garland witnessed the effects of isolation, desolation, and poverty on his mother and wrote of the reality.

The literary records of the West in diary form, fiction, and biography chronicle the lonely yet heroic experience of women on the frontier.

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