

"I WILL GO NO FARTHER!": RELUCTANT PIONEER WOMEN
IN FICTION AND REALITY

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In memory of

Catherine Thorpe Boles Barnes Jagoe

and

Lady Kate Pearson Medders

my beloved grandmothers

They taught me the two most important
things in life: to laugh and to think.

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ABSTRACT

The female protagonists in The Wind by Dorothy Scarborough and Giants in the Earth by Ole Edvart Rölvaag present a realistic view of women participating in the westering experience in nineteenth-century America. Both Letty and Beret are strong characterizations of the reluctant pioneer.

Many women were very reluctant to move west, and many who did so were traumatized by their westering experience. It is important to understand that it was principally men who responded to the lure of the West: the promise of a better life, economic independence, and the prospect of wealth. The need to understand and know the relationship of women and the westering experience has emerged in this second half of the twentieth century; and diaries, letters, and personal narratives are rich sources to use for making discoveries about daily life on the frontier.

By viewing Letty and Beret in terms of their abilities to cope with their separation from known culture, their isolation enforced by geography and climate, and the lack of supportive female companionship in their lives, similarities can be seen and comparisons can be drawn between the novels. A comparison of these two characters and the personal accounts of real women undergoing the American westering experience makes clear that Letty and Beret were based in reality.

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CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF THE PIONEER WOMAN:

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

"This country is all right for men and
dogs, but it's hell on women and horses."

. . . frontier aphorism

Women participating in the westering experience in nineteenth-century America were many and varied. They were competent and eager homesteaders, they were prostitutes and dance hall girls, and they were reluctant pioneers.

Two novels set in the nineteenth-century American West, written in the first quarter of the twentieth century present strong characterizations of the reluctant pioneer. The female protagonists in The Wind by Dorothy Scarborough and Giants in the Earth by Ole Edvart Rölvaag present a realistic view of women participating in the westering experience in nineteenth-century America. Both women suffer, and in one case the result of the suffering is suicide. Although the backgrounds of the authors are vastly different and the circumstances which place the female protagonists in their separate situations vary,

the female characters themselves possess remarkable similarities. These two fictional women each face adversity and are tested by it. Their abilities to deal with it are similar--they do not suffer it well.

Scarborough, a native Texan, published The Wind in 1925. Considered to be a significant part of Texas literature, The Wind was one of the first novels to deal realistically with the negative aspects of the great myth of the west.¹ Perhaps because Letty in The Wind was created by a woman, the character experiences realistic rather than romanticized emotions and reactions to overwhelming situations. Orphaned, forced to move from her home in Virginia with its lush, green vegetation to dry, bleak, windy West Texas, Letty faces an impossible situation in trying to cope with the circumstances of her new life. She is forced into a marriage of convenience which brings unhappiness to her and to her husband. She is left alone for long periods of time at a cabin on the lonely, desert-like West Texas prairie; she is seduced by a worldly man whom she kills out of desperation. Realizing the consequences of the act of murder, she runs headlong into a West Texas sand and wind storm to commit suicide, the ultimate act of self-destruction.

Rölvaag, a Norwegian who immigrated to Minnesota, published Giants in the Earth in English in 1927. Considered a classic work, this novel is the story of Norwegian immigrants and their struggle settling the Great Plains, with a special focus on Beret, a young immigrant wife. Isolated by both climate and language, Beret withdraws into herself and separates herself from society. Some do not consider Beret the central character in Giants in the Earth. However, a close examination of the book reveals the transition and growth Beret undergoes during her family's westering experience. One sees the difficult circumstances she survives, her psychological coping mechanisms in process, and her relationship with her family and with others in her community. Beret's husband and children thrive in their new surroundings, but she does not. Moreover, her husband never recognizes that Beret, who lives on the same farm and in the same house with him, is not participating in the same westering experience that he is. Beret survives in her own way--perhaps the only way she can--as did many real-life female pioneers.

The traditional, romanticized, stereotypical portrait of a pioneer woman, however, is often represented in American literature as a capable individual doing her own work as well as the work of others and serving and supporting

her man. John M. Faragher has called this situation "the double burden of femininity."²

The stereotypical woman pioneer shared with her husband the job of driving the team of oxen across the prairie to the spot where she helped him build their sod house. She turned the raw prairie into a farm, plowing and digging post holes beside her husband. She tended the vegetable garden, canning enough produce to see her family through the harsh winter on the prairie. She often spun the thread and wove the cloth to make her family's clothes. She educated her children as best she could and ensured their religious upbringing in the absence of opportunity for formal education and indoctrination. She sometimes gave birth alone, and she sometimes buried the dead by herself. Long days and even longer nights alone on the prairie were hers when her husband traveled the distance to the nearest settlement to buy those necessities they could not grow or make themselves. Ingenious, intrepid, remarkable--the pioneer woman survived and left behind a tradition of determination to succeed.

In his seminal 1893 work, The Significance of the Frontier in American History, Frederick Jackson Turner cites the advance of the American settlement westward as

the single most important influence on the emerging American character. Turner states,

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (200)

Turner further explains that the growth of American civilization has not been continuous, but rather it has been a return to primitive conditions in each settlement on the frontier. American social development has taken place continually, beginning again in each new settlement. Even a settler having come from the most sophisticated background was forced to regress to meet his or her most primitive and elemental needs on the frontier. Gone were thoughts of the amenities of life. What became foremost in the minds of the pioneers were the necessities of life--food, clothing, shelter, and self-preservation.

Turner argues that because the United States evolved in a region of unsettled land, the conquest of that open land made Americans, among other things, individualistic, active, progressive, and democratic. Historian David Potter, in his 1959 essay, "American Women and the American Character," pointed out that Turner's thesis, one of his

most influential interpretations of the American experience, was based upon a fallacy. Potter observed that the Americans who acquired these traits in the course of cutting down forests, plowing up the tough prairie sod, fighting the Indians, and founding new governments constituted only half of the population. Women engaged in none of these activities, according to Potter. The frontier and the West in general, Potter implied, must have been a quite different experience for women from what it was for men.³

But Turner's observation that American pioneers continually faced a return to primitive conditions with each progressive step in their trek West is certainly correct. Just what effect did this regression of social development have on the women settlers of the American West?

The subject of women's participation in the daily life of the westward migration is one which has only recently come into the range of historical interest, and Potter's statement that women did not participate in the same activities as men has been refuted time and again by accounts in diaries, letters, and personal narratives left by women on the prairie. The need to understand and know the relationship of women and the westering experience has emerged in this second half of the twentieth century.

Diaries, letters, and personal narratives are rich sources to use for making discoveries about daily life on the frontier. But diaries both reveal and conceal information, and it is important to consider that most diaries are constructed on the premise that the subject family is worthy of note and that future generations will want to hear its story.

These diaries and letters reveal that many women were traumatized by their westering experiences. The Victorian social system, within which many of these women were reared, reached far across America. But this same social system which offered a strong structure for American men and women to live by, became the very instrument inflicting trauma on some of the women. The roles they found in their new lives did not always allow them to follow the Victorian code of behavior. They often desperately attempted to preserve what they associated with civilized society despite its inappropriateness in the wilderness.⁴

However, in Women on the Texas Frontier: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, historian Ann Patton Malone offers a viewpoint in stark contrast to the previously stated one:

Paradoxically, the Victorian social system in some ways prepared these women for the adaptation required of them. The system had conditioned

them to develop the traits of patience, acceptance, submission, stoicism, and above all, adaptability. The keen-honing of such traits might explain why supposedly helpless women could defend their cabins with guns and axes against marauding Indians, or could very ably manage businesses, farms, or plantations in their husbands' absences. Since their survival mechanisms had developed within a Victorian framework, the increasingly self-reliant and independent frontier women were also willing, even anxious, to abdicate their authority upon their husbands' return or when the crisis had passed. (18)

Undoubtedly, there are threads of truth in each proposition. Surely one could find evidence in the lives of real pioneer women to support both theories. The Victorian code of behavior, although unwritten, was, and remains, powerful.

In addition to considering the cultural background of pioneer women and the framework in which they were, and in some cases still are, viewed it is perhaps even more critical to understand that many women were very reluctant to move west. It was principally men who responded to the

siren's song of a better life, economic independence, and the prospect of wealth.

Historian Lillian Schlissel in "Diaries of Frontier Women" attempts to provide insight into the dilemma faced by women whose husbands were caught up in the feverish excitement to move west:

As heads of households, men bore the responsibility for the family's support, and the determination to go west was usually expressed in terms of a desire for upward mobility. The journey was universally understood by men as a route to economic success and sometimes as an effort to improve the health of one or more family members. The responses of women, on the other hand, seemed to vary from acquiescence to resignation or despair. The different responses suggest the distance between life experience and expectations in those joined by marriage but separated by gender and role. (55)

Schlissel says further that, particularly for women, migration carried with it the loss of a closely woven network of friendship, the loss of access to other women with whom the major part of their daily experiences had been lived. To many women their move west forced a cruel

separation from other women--from their mothers, sisters, and friends. Schlissel believes,

Women's attachment to place was rooted in the relationships that had been formed; men's decisions seemed more determined by the possibilities of tomorrow's "place," and the promise offered for the future. Men also would not lose the company of other men, their lives on the trail would continue much as before. But women knew they faced the possibility of being without the company of other women, and particularly if they had reached child-bearing years, if they had borne and perhaps buried children in the church-yard, if they faced the prospect of giving birth on the trail, the decision to uproot for this particular journey was filled with anguish. (55)

According to Schlissel,

The sense that one gleans from these diaries is that women endured the westward migration because of their commitment to maintaining the family, and because life offered them few choices. If their husbands were determined to go west, the women were just as determined to go west with them, and to keep their families together.

Their endurance often hid feelings of resentment, anxiety, and pain. (57)

The women who left reminiscences may have provided us with a somewhat one-sided and glorified record of their lives. These women who persevered and left records may not have been, in fact, extraordinarily courageous as they are often credited; but at the very least they had successfully developed survival mechanisms. If it is true that the diaries and other sources recount the stories of pioneers who persevered, it is also true that there must have been just as many who gave up or who did not keep diaries, or if they did those diaries did not survive.

What of Letty and Beret and the real women upon whom these fictional characters may well have been patterned? By viewing these two characters in terms of their abilities to cope with their separation from known culture, their isolation enforced by geography and climate, and the lack of supportive female companionship in their lives, one can see similarities and draw comparisons between the novels. What follows will provide comparison between the fictional portrayal and those accounts which have come to us from real women undergoing the American westering experience. That Letty and Beret were based in reality will become clear.

NOTES

¹Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1959) 463.

²Lillian Schlissel, "Diaries of Frontier Women: On Learning to Read the Obscured Patterns," Women's Places: Female Identity and Vocation in American History (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979) 53-66.

³David Potter, American Women and the American Character (Deland, Florida: Stetson University Bulletin, 1962) 5.

⁴Schlissel 60.

CHAPTER II

THE WIND

" . . . I have just washed the dust out of my eyes so that I can see to get supper."

Diary of Amelia Stewart Knight
On the Overland Trail, 1853

Published anonymously in 1925, The Wind was met with outrage and indignation in Texas, the state in which it is set. Texans received the novel as a scathing attack against Texas. Literary critics reviewing for Texas newspapers vilified the book. R. C. Crane, a Sweetwater lawyer and president of the West Texas Historical Association, denounced the book in an article printed in the Dallas Morning News. In it he called The Wind "a deliberate effort, by disregard and exaggeration and distortion of facts, to deliver a slam on West Texas in the making."¹ Some readers concluded the book was anti-Texas propaganda intentionally perpetrated by some "wicked Yankee."²

Regardless of the negative feelings Texans had about the depiction of their state in The Wind, many critics praised it. Mabel Cranfill in a 1929 issue of The Texas Monthly writes,

The fame of this book went beyond our own prairies, the London critics comparing its treatment of nature to that of Thomas Hardy and Conrad. The London Times commented: 'For a novel of the Texas prairies to be vital and fresh is a rare achievement; such, none the less, is The Wind.'³

Sylvia Ann Grider in the foreword to the 1979 Barker Texas History Center edition of The Wind discusses the significance of Dorothy Scarborough's best known novel. That it was written by a woman about a woman is of primary importance. Its early feminist viewpoint "attacks the popular image of the helpless southern belle and the society that produced her. The frail, vulnerable Letty depicts the plight of all gentle, protected women" (v). But the tragic theme of The Wind sets it apart from the rest of early Texas literature, according to Grider. Walter Prescott Webb in his book The Great Plains calls it "the only novel of the cattle country that has a tragic ending" (463).

Publishing the book anonymously was an advertising ploy by Harper and Brothers, Scarborough's publishers, designed "to arouse the reading public to the point where it will buy The Wind in commercially profitable quantities."⁴ Eventually Scarborough convinced her publishers to reveal that she was the author. In 1926 the second edition of

The Wind was published, this time giving attribution to the author. This revelation did not soothe the readers in Texas. On the contrary, they were more outraged than ever that a woman had written a novel with such an unhappy ending. Not surprisingly, the most violent reactions to the book came from Sweetwater in West Texas. Grider states that although the rumors have never been confirmed, there may well have been public book burnings in the town of Sweetwater.

Scarborough authored an eloquent defense of her book in 1926 in which she discussed the influence of her mother's recollections of her life in Sweetwater. Sylvia Grider includes this defense in her foreward to The Wind:

I've been accused of disliking West Texas, but that's a mistake. It's a great section, and I love it. . . . The Wind has its real origins in the impressions I got from hearing my mother's vivid accounts of her struggles with the climate of the West. She loved the people out there but she did not care for the weather. (vii-viii)

Scarborough offers an explanation for having established the various elements of the novel as she did:

I chose the past for the time of the story, since the present wouldn't have fit. Now that the country is built up, civilization would offer

any Letty many ways of escape. Only the savage isolation of the past would provide a situation where she would have no defenses. And former residents of the section assured me that the great drought of the late eighties, '86-7, would furnish conditions most trying. (viii)

Grider's foreword establishes an historical perspective for The Wind by including excerpts from reviews written upon the publication of the novel in 1925 along with Scarborough's rebuttal to the attack on her work. Controversy regarding the circumstances of the book's publication notwithstanding, sales were brisk in both the United States and England.

Dorothy Scarborough was a native Texan educated at Baylor University. Because her mother contracted tuberculosis, Scarborough's family moved to Sweetwater for its dry climate when she was five years old. The family lived there for approximately five years, and during that time her father practiced law and for a time served on the bench. Then, the family moved to Waco. "Miss Dottie," as she was affectionately called, attended Baylor University where she received bachelor and master of arts degrees in English and for a time taught English. She did postgraduate work at the University of Chicago and also studied at Oxford

University although women were not accepted as candidates for degrees. According to Grider, Scarborough's year at Oxford marked the beginning of the intellectual independence for which she was noted throughout her life.

Upon completion of her studies at Oxford, she returned to Baylor and in 1916 was promoted to assistant professor. She was granted a leave of absence to work on a doctor of philosophy degree and in 1917 was awarded that degree by Columbia University. Her doctoral dissertation, The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction, was widely acclaimed by her colleagues and professors and has become a basic reference work.

According to Grider,

Scarborough enjoyed a distinguished career at Columbia, coming up through the professorial ranks until she was promoted to associate professor in 1931, and only one other woman on the faculty outranked her. (xv)

Although she lived in New York City until her death in 1935, she maintained close ties to her home state throughout her life.

The notoriety gained by The Wind at its publication sometimes seems to overshadow the book itself. When Hollywood translated the story to the screen, the 1928 movie

version of Scarborough's novel also met controversy. In addition to basic differences in the presentation of the story in the book and the movie, the movie changed the ending of the novel.

In her autobiography, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me, Lillian Gish, who starred in the movie as Letty, reveals that after the film was released with the same ending as the novel, it was recalled and the ending was changed to a more conventional ending wherein everyone "lives happily everafter." The major movie distributors would not accept a film with an unhappy ending. The producer-director, Victor Seastrom, acquiesced to the demands of the distributors. He reassembled the cast and crew and reshot the final scene.

During the suspenseful ending of the novel, Letty kills Wirt Roddy and buries his body in the sand. The wind blows and uncovers the body, driving Letty over an emotional brink. She then runs blindly out into the windstorm with no thought of survival. In the equally suspenseful ending of the film, the sand uncovers the body; but when Letty's husband Lige returns to the cabin and Letty confesses her act to him, the body has been covered up again. Her husband tells her the old legend, probably created by Hollywood, that "wind always covers up a man killed in justice." The closing narrative title of the silent film is Letty's

conciliatory words to Lige: "I'm not afraid of the wind, I'm not afraid of anything now because I am your wife." These truly are words of unexpected conciliation since Letty had heretofore refused to consummate her marriage. This change in the movie's ending implies that the wind, which in the novel consumes her, becomes Letty's accomplice.

Miss Gish states that when the ending of the movie had to be reshot, "The heart went out of all of us, but we did what they wanted. Working on The Wind was one of my worst experiences in film making" (295).

The character of Letty Mason initially bears a close resemblance to her real-life counterparts, those young women, unmarried and innocent, who eagerly traveled west anticipating the new life ahead of them. In contrast to the attitudes of married women facing an overland journey, the accounts of new brides and young girls are filled with hope and enthusiasm. Perhaps their naivete allowed them to escape the worry which seemed to plague their more experienced sisters.

Orphaned and penniless, Letty moves west to live with her cousin and his family in Sweetwater, Texas. Reconciled to her situation, Letty begins her journey eager in her anticipation of a new life in Sweetwater. The very name of the town evokes recollections of her life in Virginia.

But when she discovers what Sweetwater is really like, Letty truly seems to realize that her life has changed irrevocably for the worse:

All the old values seemed left behind. Ahead lay the path to the West, with its trail of broken bodies, its threats of storms and unknown perils, its winds that would torment her. Behind her lay the road whose shining rails led backward toward Virginia, toward home. . . . (32)

Her response is like that of many pioneers hardier than she. Walter Prescott Webb states, "Most of the evidence, such as it is, reveals that the Plains repelled the women as they attracted the men. Here was too much of the unknown, too few of the things they loved" (Webb, Great Plains 505). This separation from known culture played a role in Letty's destruction. Although the circumstances which bring Letty west are somewhat different from those which brought most pioneers west, she shares with pioneers the initial dream of a new life and the hope for a better future. But even on the train ride west, Letty realizes that she is truly on her own and that there is no turning back from what lies ahead of her:

A wave of desolation swept over her, almost overwhelmed her. Homesickness so acute that it

was physical agony possessed her. She felt she must shriek aloud for the train to stop, for the wheels to reverse, and let her go back to Virginia. She felt a mad impulse to fling herself from the train, to chance her fate by the wayside, even in that wild, lonely land, to walk back to Virginia if need be, if she could get there no other way. Home! . . . (32)

Scarborough foreshadows Letty's own tragic ending by having her meet Wirt Roddy on the train trip from Fort Worth to Sweetwater. In all innocence Letty asks him to tell her about Sweetwater, "And please tell me I'll love it there!" (18). He refuses, telling her instead, "Go back to your Virginia, little girl. This country's not like what you've been used to. Take my advice and vamoose--while the going's good" (19). He warns her that West Texas is worlds away from Virginia. The reality of West Texas is more than Letty can cope with, but like many other women going west in the nineteenth century, Letty has no other choice. She has no family to return to.

When Wirt Roddy questions why Letty has come to Texas, she explains her situation and says that her pastor and neighbors have convinced her to go live with her cousin,

a conventional response from a community that fears having a dependent woman on its hands:

"It would be a change for me, they said."

"It'll be a change, all right." His tone was grim. "A hell of a change!"

She questions his meaning,

"But what is the trouble with the country-- that you tell me to go back?"

"It's all right for them that like it. Some do--mostly men, though. It's hard on the women!"

(19-20)

To demonstrate how hard life here can be on women separated from what they know, Scarborough has Lige, the man who eventually marries Letty, tell her the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, the white girl who was stolen from her family by Indians: "'She all but died of homesickness, when she had to resign herself to life among the Indians'" (58). Later when Cynthia Ann had accepted life as an Indian, had married Peta Nocona, son of the Chief, and had borne him two children, the Texas Rangers killed her husband as she looked on. They took Cynthia Ann and her daughter Prairie Flower prisoner and transported them back to the white settlement where Prairie Flower died. Legend says the grief Cynthia Ann felt over the death of her husband and daughter and her

separation from her son Quanah was so intense that she died from it. In the same sense, Letty--separated from all she had known and loved--cannot cope with her own grief. She finds nothing in Texas to assuage her grief or compensate for her losses in Virginia. As we shall see, homesickness played a significant part in both Letty's and Beret's unhappiness. Like Cynthia Ann Parker, Letty and Beret had great difficulty adjusting to having been uprooted from everything they knew and cherished.

Letty is appalled when she learns that she will not be living in town but on her cousin's ranch twenty-five miles outside of Sweetwater. Although she realizes that the inconveniences in her life should not be as overpowering as the difficulties encountered by the true pioneers in West Texas, she feels overwhelmed by all of the new experiences that challenge her. Her day-to-day existence in West Texas is a constant reminder of all she lost or left in Virginia.

Even in Virginia, however, Letty may never have had control over her life. Thus, she does not know how to take control of it in Sweetwater. She is swept along by events:

She told herself in her bewilderment that she didn't know how to meet the situation, because it was so different from anything she had ever known.

There never had been much money, or many luxuries in her life, but always there had been love and consideration, nothing but tender care for her welfare and her wishes. . . . (114)

Scarborough makes clear to the reader Letty's situation and Letty's dependence on a man to look out for her:

Letty was a helpless young girl that had always been treated as a child. She had never been given responsibility, not been expected to make decisions for herself, so that she felt bewilderingly weak and impotent. What could she do? She couldn't go back to Virginia, for there was no near relative to take her in. It would be asking charity to write to some old friend and beg to be given shelter and food. Her family pride revolted from the thought. The men of her family had always taken care of the women and so it had seemed the natural thing to turn to Cousin Bev when her mother was dead. Of course she hadn't known Cousin Bev's wife then! . . . And the pastor hadn't reckoned with Cora when he had felt so sure that it was the wise and right thing for her to come to Texas to live with them. . . . (115)

Jane Gilmore Rushing, in "The Wind: A Review Essay," discusses Scarborough's characterization of Letty:

Letty Mason, the typical "helpless southern belle" came from a background hard to believe today, in which she had been so thoroughly cosseted and protected that she practically had no mind of her own. Since so many women came from East Texas and the Old South, to become the sturdy-minded great grandmothers of modern West Texas, it is hard to account for Letty strictly on the grounds of her delicate upbringing, as Miss Scarborough seemingly intended to do. The child had no inner resources, no self confidence, literally no judgment. It is not surprising that the wind at last drove her crazy, but its naturalistic force seems diminished by the fact that its adversary was such a weakling. (92)

More than a weakling, Letty was, as Scarborough described her, a girl; and most young girls separated from home for the first time experience homesickness. Letty is overwhelmed by her homesickness; and to compound the problem created by the homesickness, Letty has no other woman to whom she can turn for support and comfort. Cora resents

Letty and is jealous of Letty's relationship with Bev.

Their initial meeting contrasts the two women:

Letty stepped forward impulsively, then hesitated, feeling a chill of doubt.

Cousin Cora kissed her, it is true, but with reservations, coldly, as one would touch hands with a stranger. And did she imagine it, Letty asked herself, or did the gold-brown eyes have in them a look of disapproval, almost of hostility toward her? (69)

Cora treats Letty as if she were still just a child, not acknowledging her adult problems. Letty must share a room with the children; and not only does this deny her privacy to which she is accustomed, but by reinforcing Letty's childlikeness it denies her the opportunity to mature, something she had not accomplished in Virginia.

Never in all her life had she habitually shared her room with another. Of course, when a girl came to spend the night with her, they had slept together in order to be sociable, but that was different. She thought of her own room at home, with its mahogany four-poster bed, its highboy and dresser, its white, ruffled curtains, its bookcase, its braided rugs, so dainty, so immaculate!

A room for day-dreams and visions. Not even her mother had entered without knocking. (80-81)

When Cora plays matchmaker for Letty, she is at first unsuccessful. Letty is not ready for marriage, but Cora makes it clear to Letty that she cannot stay in their home indefinitely. When Letty realizes that she has no chance for a happy life with Bev and Cora, she unhappily chooses between the two suitors Cora offers her--the stereotyped cowboys, Lige and Sourdough. Letty deliberates between the two men:

So, they took it for granted that she must choose one of them! How funny, how deliciously amusing! . . . Letty's face crinkled with laughter. It was impossible to take this seriously, when Sourdough was so funny. . . . Her laughter bubbled over in confusion, and her eyes were bright, as she said teasingly, "You talk like you expected me to marry both of you at once!"

"No'm, just one. . . ."

She pulled herself together to answer. They really were serious then, and this wasn't one of Sourdough's jokes. (145-146)

Although it was outside of Letty's limited experience in Virginia, whirlwind courtships were standard on the frontier, when there was time for a courtship at all.

In Texas Tears and Texas Sunshine: Voices of Frontier Women, Jo Ella Powell Exley presents excerpts from dairies kept by Texas women during the nineteenth century. Ann Raney Thomas Coleman sailed to Texas from England in 1832. Shortly following her family's arrival in Texas her parents died, and Ann moved in with a husband and wife with whom she was only slightly acquainted. While Ann was still in mourning, Mr. Thomas visited the home in which she was staying. Upon their introduction he proposed marriage, and after having seen him only six times Ann accepted his offer of marriage. On their wedding night Mr. Thomas told her, "'My child, I will be a father as well as a husband!' . . . I hid my face in my handkerchief and wept bitter tears. Would he fulfill all he had promised? I had need of a father's and a husband's care. I was fifteen years younger than Mr. Thomas and a child in appearance to himself" (42).

Somewhat older than Letty, but still very young, Ann seems to have adapted more readily to marriage than Letty. Ann had the opportunity to travel to Texas with her family, surrounded by people of similar backgrounds and similar dreams. This voyage on a ship which was populated by others moving to Texas to join Austin's Colony provided a transition period for the travelers. Unlike Letty, an only child, Ann had a loving sister to share her grief with; and Ann had

many new friends who comforted her in her grief. Mr. Thomas was a prosperous Texas planter with an established home and servants. Upon seeing it for the first time Ann commented, "'How glad I am . . . I have got home.'" (43). Her initial reaction to marriage evolved into acceptance of her new life. In stark contrast to the fortunate Ann, when Letty sees her new home for the first time, she reflects, "It could not be that life was bringing her to that rude shack set in a bleak expanse of sand, to spend her days!" (181). Unlike Ann, Letty seems unable to make the transition from her childhood in Virginia to adulthood in Texas. As we shall see, Beret also had difficulty adjusting to her new home in America. She, too, suffers a final separation from her parents.

James Neatherlin in his doctoral dissertation, "Dorothy Scarborough: Form and Milieu in the Work of a Texas Writer," addresses the function of marriage in the novel's plot:

The Wind presents an interesting example of Dorothy's problem with plot. The key to the complication is to get Letty on the prairie alone, where the wind can work its terrifying effects. But her sudden promise of marriage and her willing participation in the ceremony, though explained both by her desire to spare Bev more domestic

quarrels with Cora and by her fear of the wind,
is more deus-ex-machina than character motivation.
In fact, one wonders if Letty isn't completely
demented already. . . . (131)

Neatherlin does not take into consideration that there were no other choices open to women like Letty. Letty could stay with Bev and Cora and face a future certain to be miserable, or she could marry and face an unknown future. There were simply no other options available to her in her setting.

Neatherlin is correct, however, in identifying the necessity of isolating Letty in conflict with the wind. Scarborough begins the novel,

The wind was the cause of it all. The sand, too, had a share in it, and human beings were involved but the wind was the primal force, and but for it the whole series of events would not have happened. It took place in West Texas, years and years ago, before the great ranges had begun to be cut up into farms and ploughed and planted to crops, when there was nothing to break the sweep of the wind across the treeless prairies, when the sand blew in blinding fury across the plains, or lay in mocking waves that never broke on any

howsoever-distant beach, or piled in mounds that fickle gusts removed almost as soon as they were erected--when for endless miles there seemed nothing but wind and sand and empty, far off sky. (1)

With this description of West Texas, Scarborough sketches the scene which meets Letty upon her arrival in Sweetwater. Even in her innocence, though, Letty has had a premonition of impending loneliness. As Letty travels on the train from Fort Worth to Sweetwater, she gazes in amazement at the changing scenery, and a wave of desolation sweeps over her. Not only will she be in a different part of the world, but the only person she will know is her Cousin Bev:

She would need companionship, she told herself. She felt oppressed by the solitude of nature, which was so different from the friendly countryside she had known at home--these vast, distressing stretches of treeless plains, with nothing to see but a few stunted mesquite bushes, and samples of cactus that would repel the touch. No friendly intimate wild animals such as she had always been used to seeing--gossipy squirrels grey or brown, chipmunks--only these colossal

jack rabbits, and these prairie dogs that yapped at you as you passed. (56-57)

A whole new world lies before her, unfriendly because it was different. Virginia was never like this.

Interestingly, it is not the people she left behind in Virginia that she talks about missing. Letty misses her possessions, the house she lived in, and Aunt Charity, her "Mammy," but more the comfort she could provide Letty than the woman herself:

Letty realized that her homesickness was more for nature than for people, since if she went back home she would be too proud to reveal her sufferings to her friends, even the most kindly.
(273)

Her apparent lack of attachment to individuals may explain her failure to make friends in Sweetwater.

When Lige and Letty marry and she moves into his cabin on the ranch, her isolation from others deepens because when Lige is out on the range, Letty is virtually completely alone. She is a day's ride from the nearest store. "Here there weren't even what you could call roads to be seen, just stretches of sand everywhere the same . . ." (170).

Letty is not completely alone, but she has no real companionship:

She saw very few people, save Lige and Sourdough-- who had as quickly as possible erected his one-room house and taken up his separate life--and old Pedro, the Mexican, who lived in a dugout, and who came occasionally to talk to her in his broken dialect." (191)

Letty was simply afraid to be alone.

One can only speculate on Letty's length of endurance if her circumstances had been made even more difficult. At least Letty had a cabin in which to live. She may have considered it to be primitive, but at least she did not have to live in a hole in the ground, like Beret.

In Women and Men on the Overland Trail, John Mack Faragher describes the typical isolation of women on the prairie:

This residential isolation severely limited the social opportunities for women. Men's responsibilities allowed them to lay up their ploughs or hoe for the day and ride or walk out to visit the neighbors or frequent the village store, but women, with their more or less constant responsibilities at home, especially the care of children, could not be so casual. 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)

When Wirt Roddy pays his periodic visits to Letty at her cabin, she greets him with mixed emotions. She fears the impropriety of his visits during Lige's absences, yet she is grateful for the presence of another human being. She defends her actions when Sourdough chastises her about having a male caller while her husband is away: "'Mr. Roddy was kind to me on the train, and I was glad to see him stop by. It's plenty lonesome for me, with you and Lige gone most of the time'" (255). Letty simply was not strong enough to ask Roddy to leave her alone.

With Lige and Sourdough out on the range attempting to avert an impending cattle stampede, Letty is afraid once again. She is afraid of an accident involving the men. If there were a tragedy, would Letty be able to assist the injured men? She was all alone with no one to help her:

All day Letty walked the floor in a fever of fear. She pictured the bodies of the men lying face downward in the sand, while the avalanche of cattle that had swept over them passed on. Who would be left to bear her news? She felt as never before the desolation of this lonely land, where human habitations, human faces were so few,

so few, so far away. What would happen to her there helpless, if Lige and Sourdough never came back? She could not walk the ten miles to the nearest ranch. Perhaps no passerby might come for days on days. . . . (239)

Letty does not actually fear for her husband and friend's safety, but rather for her own circumstances if they are no longer available to assist her.

Letty is unable or unwilling to accept responsibility for her life. The wind is her excuse for her inability or unwillingness to adjust or adapt to her new surroundings. Life in Sweetwater was undeniably different from life in Virginia, but many women were able to make the transition from a far different setting. Although Beret experienced difficulty in adapting to life in the Dakota Territory, the other women in the settlement managed to adjust and lead productive lives. Cora and the women of Sweetwater faced the same conditions as Letty, but unlike her they were able to maintain their hope for a better future.

The belief in a brighter future is what kept Lige on his range during the drought watching his cattle die. He is willing to stay on his ranch, to do what he has to, until "things get right again" (282). But finally Lige recognizes Letty's immaturity and selfishness: "'You think

too damned much of what you won't stand, and not enough of what I've got to stand!'" (285).

In the final chapters of the novel, Letty reflects on her life in West Texas and her marriage:

For the first time since her marriage she began to appreciate her husband. . . . She looked back on what she had held as grievances against him. She had blamed him for her sufferings--but what had he done but take her from an unbearable situation, make her his wife, give her a home? (314)

Letty realizes that if she had been able to be more willing to accept life as it was in West Texas she could have made a happier existence for herself, but she continues to blame the wind for her irresponsibility,

She hadn't been responsible, when you looked at it right. She hadn't been herself. It was the wind, the wind was to blame! Nobody ought to hold a crazy person responsible for what he did, and the wind had made her crazy. (312)

Letty even blames the wind for her having succumbed to Wirt Roddy's advances. She blames Roddy's murder on the wind. The wind continued to be Letty's enemy, for when she buried Roddy in the sand, the wind uncovered the body.

Letty literally makes the wind the instrument of her own destruction by running out into the windstorm to her own suicide.

NOTES

¹Sylvia Grider, foreword, The Wind, by Dorothy Scarborough (1925; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) vii.

²Grider vi.

³Mabel Cranfill, "Dorothy Scarborough," The Texas Monthly September (1929): 222.

⁴Grider v.

CHAPTER III

GIANTS IN THE EARTH

"Now my children and grandchildren,
I am going to try to tell you something
about the way your pa and me had to do
to get land for you. . . ."

Mary Crownover Rabb
Early Texas Pioneer

The Dakota Territory in the 1870s forms the setting for Giants in the Earth written by Norwegian immigrant Ole Edvart Rölvaag. This novel, which is considered a classic in American literature, is the story of Per Hansa, his wife Beret, their children, and the group of Norwegians who travel with them in search of a better life in America. Drawing from his own experiences, Rölvaag describes the difficulties encountered by these immigrants. Beret, the young wife, is a classic characterization of a reluctant pioneer.

Rölvaag left Norway in July, 1896, at age twenty to join his uncle in South Dakota with hopes of finding a more fulfilling life than he had as a fisherman in Norway. Realizing that achieving his dream of becoming a writer

would require further education and an increased knowledge of the English language, he enrolled two years after his arrival in America at Augustana Academy, a Lutheran preparatory school in Canton, South Dakota. He studied there three years and earned a high school diploma.

In 1901 Rölvaag enrolled at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. During his years there he was heavily influenced by his study of Norwegian Literature, including the writing of Ibsen.¹ After nearly ten years of study and work in the United States, Rölvaag returned to Norway for further study in Norwegian language and literature. Upon the completion of his year-long studies at the University of Christiania (now Oslo) he wrote his fiancée in America to share his news of having scored the highest grade possible on his final examination. It is evident from his letter to her that his return to Norway provided him with an opportunity for self-discovery and the realization that his Americanization was complete:

I am very glad that I stood perfect; not that the standing is worth anything in itself, but I was an American, and the big fellows in Christiania have not much faith in us.²

He was obviously proud of belonging in his new country. Whatever sacrifices he made must have been compensated by the gains he made.

Returning to Minnesota following his study in Norway, he began teaching in the Department of Norwegian Studies at St. Olaf Academy. Eventually he became head of the Department of Norwegian Studies at St. Olaf College where he was highly regarded as a scholar in the field of Norwegian literature.

Rölvaag long believed that the role of Norwegian immigrants in settling America should be told and that he should be the one to tell it. His goal was to write for an audience of Norwegian-American immigrants because he strongly believed that these new arrivals should attempt to retain their nationalistic individuality as they absorbed the values of the new culture surrounding them in America. He wrote Giants in the Earth, published originally in Norwegian, during a year-long leave of absence from St. Olaf College. The translation of the novel from Norwegian into English was a complicated process undertaken by several people simultaneously under Rölvaag's direction. The principal translator, however, was Lincoln Colcord, a writer and friend of Rölvaag's publisher, Eugene Saxton of Harpers.

Giants in the Earth was originally published in Norwegian as a two-part work. The first volume, entitled In Those Days: A Story of Norwegian Immigrants in America, was published in 1924. The second volume, In Those Days:

The Founding of the Kingdom, was published in 1925. These two volumes were published as one by Harper and Brothers under the title Giants in the Earth, which is taken from the same Biblical quotation which supplied the Norwegian title:

There were giants in the earth in those days;
and also after that, when the sons of God came
in unto the daughters of men, and they bare
children to them, the same became mighty men
which were of old, men of renown. (Genesis vi:4)

Appearing in June of 1927 as a Book of the Month Club selection, Giants in the Earth sold nearly eighty thousand copies in six months (Reigstad 115). Carl Sandburg's reaction to the book stands in praise:

. . . We have had laughter and tears, going from chapter to chapter of Giants in the Earth. If we should be asked to name six most important and fascinating American novels past and present, Giants in the Earth would be one of them. It is so tender and simple. It is so terrible and panoramic, piling up its facts with incessantly subtle intimations, that it belongs among books to be kept and cherished. (Reigstad 116)

Paul Reigstad in Rölvaag: His Life and Art succinctly states the significance of Giants in the Earth as a novel of frontier America,

Critics universally recognize that Giants in the Earth is unique in presenting the westward movement as a psychological rather than an economic phenomenon. (16)

In his introduction to the first American edition of Giants in the Earth, published in 1927, Vernon L. Parrington writes that most authors before Rölvaag tended to glorify the westward movement as an epic and romantic chapter in American history:

But the emotional side, the final ledger of human values, we have too little considered--the men and women broken by the frontier, the great army of derelicts who failed and were laid away, like the Norwegian immigrant lad, in forgotten graves. The cost of it all in human happiness--the loneliness, the disappointments, the renunciations, the severing of old ties, and quitting of familiar places . . . too often have been left out of the reckoning in our traditional romantic interpretation. (qtd. in Reigstad 116)

Beyond his desire to tell the story of the Norwegian immigrants in America, Rölvaag recognized the need to tell the story of those who were broken by the westering experience, and he set as his goal the telling of "the true story of pioneer life on the prairie, revealing the cost as well as the gain of the great land taking" (Reigstad 44). Giants in the Earth is more than the story of a group of Norwegian immigrants. It is the story of all people who uprooted themselves and their families to travel to an unknown destination taking with them their dream of a better life.

Rölvaag heard many first-hand accounts of pioneers during his early years in America, and this acquaintance with their experiences and hardships provided him with an understanding of "the psychological and spiritual conflict into which they were plunged" (Reigstad 97). Clearly, he was heavily influenced by his own experience of immigration from Norway to the United States, and he must have drawn heavily also on his own feelings of isolation and separateness which he encountered as a young man in a strange country with no knowledge of the language being spoken around him or of the culture.

His wife's father and uncles provided him with a primary source of information because they, too, immigrated

from Norway. He questioned them extensively regarding details of settlers' lives and activities, and their first-hand narratives provided Rölvaag with information he used in Giants in the Earth to portray realistically the day-to-day activities of pioneers. Finally, Rölvaag secluded himself at his vacation cabin in northern Minnesota to immerse himself with the feelings of isolation and separateness with which he so effectively imbued his character Beret. He believed that "the novel could never have been written had he not experienced the solitude and loneliness of that stay in the wilderness" (Reigstad 100).

Rölvaag's own parents were strong influences on his portrayal of the reluctant pioneer. They were so reluctant that they never came to America. His mother was considered an unusually good woman. Jorgenson and Solum in their biography of Rölvaag describe her as being much like Beret, "relying on the long-established social and religious order about her. Emptiness would kill her. She was not the sort who could be a blazer of new trails" (18). Her son's decision to emigrate was supposedly a profound shock to her, but she reconciled herself with his decision to seek a better life and wished him well. His father was just as strongly opposed to Rölvaag's decision to leave Norway.

His life as a fisherman was fulfilling, and he saw no reason for his son to seek another sort of life.

For Beret, the act of leaving Norway was a difficult one, for not only did she leave behind her family and friends, she left her roots and her sense of belonging. In contrast to Per Hansa's excitement over the adventure of going to America in search of a better life for his family, Beret's reluctance to leave her familiar surroundings stands out clearly. Ironically, it is Beret who survives life on the prairie, illustrating that it was not always the typically strong who survived their struggle in settling a new land. Through Beret's psychological and emotional conflicts, Rölvaag illustrates how the prairie took its toll on those who tried to tame it.

Rölvaag juxtaposes his two main characters, husband and wife Per Hansa and Beret, to establish the psychological conflict inherent in life on the prairie. Reigstad believes that beyond presenting a picture of the reluctant pioneer versus the typical pioneer Rölvaag intended to illustrate the tragedy of two people inexorably bound to each other whose spirits are deeply divided by their individual views of the westering experience. Per Hansa cannot turn back from his goal of finding a new life in America. He cannot admit defeat. Instead, he ignores Beret's wish to return

to Norway and all she holds dear. Per Hansa chooses to devote every ounce of his energy to succeeding in his new country, to meeting the unknown head on much as he had as a fisherman when the sea allowed no other behavior.

Beret is terrified by the unknown (Reigstad 118). Soon after their arrival at Spring Creek, Beret recognizes in Per Hansa the driving force which has brought them to the Dakota Territory:

Per Hansa came home late the following afternoon; he had so many words of praise for what she and the boys had accomplished while he had been gone, that he fairly bewildered her. Now it had taken possession of him again--that indomitable, conquering mood which seemed to give him the right of way wherever he went, whatever he did. Outwardly, at such times, he showed only a buoyant recklessness, as if wrapped in a cloak of gay, wanton levity; but down beneath all this lay a stern determination of purpose, a driving force, so strong that she shrank back from the least contact with it. (Rölvaag 42)

To Beret, the prairie was very different from her homeland. Everything in her former way of life revolved around the sea. But more than missing the sea itself, Beret missed

its familiarity. The prairie to Beret was not something in which she could find comfort. The prairie offers none of the comfort that the sea offered Beret. It had "no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched" (Rölvaag 38). To Per Hansa the prairie offers challenges which he can master as he had mastered the sea, and it offers more rewards than the sea. He can own and, within limits, control a part of the prairie as he could not the sea. Beret sees no such manageable challenge. When Beret and Per Hansa finally arrive at the settlement after having been left behind on the prairie, lost for days, she finds no comfort in what will be her new home: "How will human beings be able to endure this place? she thought. Why there isn't even a thing that one can hide behind!" (29).

The separation from her family, the constant uprooting she had been through since arriving from Norway, were all more than she could cope with. If Beret could have remained in Norway, surrounded by all she knew and loved, perhaps she might not have been as fragile as she was in America. Rölvaag's mother, with whom Beret has been compared, was a strong woman, yet she remained in Norway, where she knew her way. Her strength was never tested as Beret's was. It is no wonder Beret longed for something to hide behind. These same feelings of vulnerability were undoubtedly

prevalent in women undergoing the westering experience. In her diary kept in 1853 on the overland trail from Iowa to Oregon Territory, Amelia Stewart Knight describes the open prairie:

Monday, April 18th Cold; breaking fast the first thing; very disagreeable weather, wind east cold and rainy, no fire. We are on a very large prairie, no timber to be seen as far as the eye can reach. . . .³

Beret's anguish over the lack of anything she could hide behind can be interpreted quite literally. As Lillian Schlissel states in Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, one of the constant problems faced by women on the prairie was the lack of privacy. With no shelter, with nothing to hide behind, women could not maintain even a small measure of modesty when attending to their bodily functions. Women aided each other whenever possible if there were no natural shelter available. According to Schlissel,

Resistance to the appearance of bloomers on the frontier becomes more understandable when one considers that the reduced skirts had implications beyond fashion. Long and full skirts on the Trail were soon begrimed and muddy, but they were worn

because of their properties as curtains. Two women together, long skirts extended, lent privacy to a third; and even one woman could provide a measure of propriety to a sister on the Trail.

(98)

Not even their first home in the Dakota Territory provided a sense of comfort for Beret. It was a sod dugout, not like the solid wood or stone houses of Norway, houses which had given shelter for generations to members of the same family. Rölvaag himself grew up in a house where six generations of his family had lived. He understood the feelings Beret experienced in her separation. Beret's resistance in accepting her new life on the prairie is compounded by the new life she brought with her--she will give birth in this place, this place which offers no comfort. Her thoughts are often on the faraway comforts of Norway:

. . . Often, now, she found herself thinking of the churchyard at home. . . . Her whole family, generation after generation, rested there--many more than she had any knowledge of. . . . Around the churchyard stood a row of venerable trees, looking silently down on the place and the stillness within. . . . They gave such good shelter, those old trees! (229-230)

Beret is so withdrawn, so self-consumed that even the offers of friendship by the other women in the settlement provide no support or comfort for her. From the moment Per Hansa's wagon arrives, the other women care for Beret's physical needs; and as her emotional well-being begins to deteriorate, they also offer what emotional support they can. But Beret cannot respond to the other women. She is different from them. They each have their own personal strengths, as do the men. Beret is unable to draw on any inner resource for assistance through the ordeal of settling the untamed prairie. Beret wants something to protect her or hide behind, but there is nothing physical behind which she can hide. According to Curtis D. Ruud in "Beret and the Prairie in Giants in the Earth,"

Security, peace of mind, and trueness to self
had always come from Beret's being able to place
something between her and whatever might threaten
her, and now, if nothing exists, Beret will
create something. (221)

Unquestionably, shelter is desired by all human beings. Along with food and clothing, it is one of the three basic human needs. Beret is not unique in her anguish over the lack of shelter on the prairie.

The prairie offers nothing for protection. Per Hansa does not recognize her exposure. Beret withdraws into herself and creates in her mind a shelter from the outside world. Not only is Beret physically isolated from the culture and companionship of her homeland, she isolates herself from those in her family and community who might have been able to comfort her. In essence, her emotional shelter becomes an emotional prison within her physical prison. In addition to protecting her from the forces which frightened her and might harm her, her withdrawal separates her from help.

The physical isolation experienced by Beret and the real women who underwent the westering experience in America was as debilitating as the separation from family, friends, and familiar places. For Beret, the trip west was endless. Each time Per Hansa reached a town in his move from Norway to Dakota Territory, Beret longed for him to stop and put down roots. But each time he moved his family closer to his goal of a farm of his own in America. At the completion of each leg in their journey Beret says, "I will go no farther!" (40). But Per Hansa moves on. "This seems to be taking us to the end of the world . . . beyond the end of the world!" (8). This is Beret's anguished cry on the prairie as her husband attempts to find the trail of his companions who have left them behind.

The landscape of the Dakota Territory was foreign to Beret, who came from the coastal region of Norway. Nothing in her past prepared her for life on the vast prairie:

Now she was lying here on a little green hillock, surrounded by the open, endless prairie, far off in a spot from which no road led back! . . .

It seemed to her that she had lived many lives already, in each one of which she had done nothing but wander and wander, always straying farther away from the home that was dear to her. (40)

Per Hansa seemed to have some understanding and recognition of what effect the prairie was having on Beret. During his deliberation regarding the placement of their own home, Per Hansa considered the ramifications of the selection of the home-site: "'No use in building farther away from you than is absolutely necessary,' he said. 'It's going to be lonesome for the women-folks at times!'" (36). Although he was able to recognize the importance of community, his understanding of Beret's solitude and its potentially devastating effects is not apparent.

Repeatedly Rölvaag has Beret comment about the vast and lonesome prairie and how far away she was from everything she knew:

She sat perfectly quiet, thinking of the long, oh, so interminably long march that they would have to make, back to the place where human beings dwelt. (38)

And Beret is alone even in her home, surrounded by those who love her: "There Beret sat in the room with them, within four paces--yet she was far, far away" (211).

In "Reluctant Pioneers," Susan Armitage quotes from the unpublished diary of pioneer Amelia Buss:

George went to the mountains yesterday morning to be gone all the week . . . after he had gone gave vent to my feelin in a flood of tears. It may seem foolish to those that have neighbors and friends around them. I get along very well through the day but the long evenings and nights are horrible.⁴

Rölvaag recognized the fragility of the human mind and spirit. Embodying this aspect of fragility in Beret, he effectively demonstrated the high price paid by many pioneers. Rölvaag states,

But more to be dreaded . . . was the strange spell of sadness which the unbroken solitude cast upon the minds of some. Many took their

own lives; asylum after asylum was filled
with disordered beings who had once been human.
It is hard for the eye to wander from sky line
to sky line, year in and year out, without
finding a resting place! (424)

Beret could not respond to overtures of friendship and support. However, she is the only one in the settlement who feels an affinity for the woman whose son lies in an unmarked grave on the prairie. The family arrives at a settlement almost unnoticed. Inside their wagon is a woman whose hands are tied to a heavy chest. Her husband explains that he was forced to restrain her after their son was buried on the prairie because she repeatedly jumped out of the wagon to go back to him. Deeply troubled herself, Beret can offer aid to another troubled woman--a woman even more troubled than herself. Although unable to be comforted herself by the women in the settlement, she can recognize the deep hurt felt by the woman tied to the chest. That woman has no other supportive female companionship. Beret knows the pain of that loneliness and reaches out as she can to give comfort to a kindred soul. Beret treats the woman as tenderly as the other women have treated her.

Beret's problems were not all emotional or psychological. Susan Armitage notes that the unrelenting tasks of everyday life on the frontier contributed to the sense of hopelessness many pioneer women felt. She attributes the feeling of reluctance among pioneer women to realism. Those women realized that "constant hard work simply wasn't enough to break through the drab greyness of poverty" (47). Women who came from the eastern states and who possessed high standards of domesticity were understandably frustrated that they could not hope to duplicate their homes in the East, or even achieve minimum standards of cleanliness in spite of their constant effort on the frontier. As we have seen, Letty struggled with this problem which was compounded for her by the drought and the constantly blowing sand which sifted through the cracks in her house to cover everything with its grittiness. Letty's grinding poverty in West Texas stands in contrast to Beret's relative prosperity on the prairie.

Although it is often assumed that Rölvaag's giants in the earth are the heroic, pioneering men like Per Hansa, superhuman creatures with fantastic abilities, Reigstad concludes that Rölvaag intended to call "giants" those elements of nature such as storm, plague, drought, fire, hunger, greed, dread, and loneliness which are clearly the

antagonists of the novel. To a sensitive woman like Beret "small" things like keeping the house clean assume gigantic proportions, and major responsibilities like preserving civilization as she has known it become overwhelming tasks.

As we have seen, these antagonistic forces prevailed in their assaults against many settlers in the western United States. But many others, undaunted by the adversity which they faced, triumphed. In the ending of Giants in the Earth, Beret returns to reality but remains solitary. She turns to her religion and away from the close, loving relationship she once had with Per Hansa. She convinces him to go out into the worst storm the residents of Spring Creek settlement have seen to get help for their ailing friend Hans Olsa. Per Hansa never returns from his mission, and it is not until spring that his body is found, leaning against a haystack facing west. Rölvaag's image is clear: Per Hansa's dream remains unfulfilled. Ironically, it is Beret who survives. Her manner of coping with the emotional problems which result from her separation from family and homeland and from her isolation in the Dakota Territory preserve strength enough for her survival. By protecting her, Beret's somewhat abnormal coping mechanism allowed her to survive. Her mind found comfort in a different setting from that in which her body resided. Beret survived her

early years on the prairie to rear her children and to help bring civilization to the prairie. By this not inconsiderable act of survival, Beret and women like her helped tame the frontier.

NOTES

¹Paul Reigstad, Rölvaag: His Life and Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972) 32.

²Reigstad 39.

³Lillian Schlissel, Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1982) 202.

⁴Susan H. Armitage, "Reluctant Pioneers," Women and Western American Literature. (Troy, New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1982) 43.

CHAPTER IV

THE REALITY OF THE PIONEER WOMAN: THE COST OF TAMING THE FRONTIER

"I am not the wheatfield
nor the virgin forest

I never chose this place
yet I am of it now."

Adrienne Rich
"An Old House in America"

Since writers first began using the westering experience in America as a source for their stories, life on the prairie has been depicted in fiction in several ways. Frequently, life on the frontier has been shown as a great romantic adventure undertaken by Americans and immigrants alike, hungry for a chance for economic independence and a better life for their children. Usually in this situation, the female character, if she is reported or remembered, is a stalwart helpmate, matching her man stride for stride on their march across America toward a new life in the West. Sometimes the woman may be depicted as the idealized "true woman"¹--that Victorian lady who steps down from her pedestal,

giving all credit to her man. These two types of characters have been more popular in fiction and in history than the more recently identified "reluctant" pioneer woman, but none of the types has received the attention of pioneer men, who generally are presented in highly romanticized forms with mythic implications. We have seldom heard stories of "reluctant" pioneer men, principally because if men did not want to go west, they did not go. If they were dissatisfied with their decision to go west, most did not make that admission. Women seem to have been more likely to make the admission of dissatisfaction in their diaries and letters and, therefore, have left us a more accurate record of their experiences and reactions to life on the prairie. These records, however, received little attention until recent years. The "pioneer" experience which was offered as universal was, in fact, largely male in perception, reaction and narration; and time and distance quickly obscured some of the harshness of the pioneers' heroic exploits.

In Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey, Schlissel comments on the differences between men and women in their perceptions of the westering experience:

If experiences attain mythic dimension because some pattern in all the endless variety reverberates against the fixed frame of human

needs and yearnings, if the westward migration became an expression of testing and reaching for men, then it surely must have been an "anti-mythic" journey for women. It came when the physical demands of their lives drained their energies into other directions. The severity of the dislocation of journey can be gauged in the knowledge that about one of every five overland women was seized by some stage of pregnancy, and virtually every married woman traveled with small children. When women wrote of the decision to leave their homes, it was almost always with anguish, a note conspicuously absent from the diaries of men. (14)

As we have seen, in the novels The Wind and Giants in the Earth, the characters of Letty and Beret are reluctant pioneers. Letty is forced to move to Texas from Virginia to live with relatives after she is orphaned; Beret must follow her husband to America from a small Norwegian fishing village in search of what he believes will be a better life. Inexperienced and immature, Letty fails to make the necessary transition from girlhood to adulthood. She never ceases to long for life as it was in Virginia with its lush countryside. Beret, a married woman when she leaves her home, still desperately misses her homeland and her family, in particular, her parents.

The homesickness, which both women share with other pioneer women, overwhelms them. Beret withdraws temporarily into a world all her own in an effort to cope with her unhappy life on the prairie. Letty's homesickness drives her over the brink of despair; and she commits murder and suicide--acts that one doubts she would have committed if she had remained in Virginia.

Both Letty and Beret suffer because of a lack of supportive female companionship, a common problem for pioneer women. Lillian Schlissel discusses the importance of the relationships among women on the overland trail as recorded in diaries:

Women continued to perceive themselves as existing primarily in the presence of other women. Most readers who have examined these diaries at length have found themselves wondering whether the writer were married at all, whether the odd initial that appears occasionally on a page represents a member of the wagon train or the diarist's husband. Women's daily routine--the baking, the washing, the cooking, the caring for the children, looking for herbs and berries and roots, visiting the sick--all of these were performed with women who traveled in the company.

Within a loosely formed, makeshift "women's sphere," even the depressing necessity of having to do men's chores could be absorbed as long as women could make a social fabric of their lives on the Trail. (77-78)

As we have seen, Letty did not benefit from the company of other women on her trip west, and she reflects only briefly on her mother and her "Mammy." Beret had the company of women on part of her journey, but the end of the journey was completed alone. Perhaps this separation from the others of her party precipitated her sense of isolation from the group later in the novel.

The two novels discussed are among the first to deal with the problem of the reluctant pioneer or the unhappy woman on the frontier. In 1913 Willa Cather created her triumphant pioneer Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers!, and in 1918 the strong Ántonia Schimerda in My Ántonia. Both know pain and loneliness, but neither faces the despair of Letty or Beret. Cather's pioneer women have hard, but not desperate, lives.

By contrast, Letty, seduced and desperate, kills her seducer, and, rather than face the consequences, commits suicide. Beret sends her husband, who has taken her farther and farther from home, out into a blizzard from which he never returns.

Rölvaag and Scarborough demonstrate the devastating effect of loneliness in their women characters. Cather allows her women to admit loneliness only after a long life of accomplishments. Would the friendship of other women have helped Letty or Beret? Would their friendship have prevented the death of any of the characters? Who is to say? Beret had neighbors who visited her, but her personal isolation kept her from having any friendships. The geography of the plains offered no friendship or protection to either Beret or Letty.

Even though Edna Ferber's later Giant has many parallels with The Wind, it, like Cather's stories, has a triumphant conclusion for its central female character. In her introduction to the 1979 edition of The Wind, Sylvia Grider quotes Scarborough's statement that she and Ferber were acquainted and had, in fact, discussed Scarborough's idea for the novel:

I was impelled to write the book at just the time I did by a certain incident. I had invited Edna Ferber to speak to the Writers' Club of Columbia University, and I was coming up to the hall with her in a taxicab. She said, "I'm nervous today, and I don't know why."

"Probably because of the high wind that's blowing," I told her. "That affects one's nerves decidedly."

She looked surprised and said, "I had never thought of that."

Then I told her of our Texas winds and sands, and how hard they are on women. I told her of the story I meant to write, of the effect of wind and sand and drought on a nervous, sensitive woman not used to the environment. I quoted our Texas saying, "Never mind the weather so the wind don't blow."

"What perfectly wonderful material for a story!" she cried. "I'd give anything for it!"

"But you can't have it," I laughed, "it's my story. Anyway, no one could write it who hadn't lived in Texas."

"It is folk-material of the richest sort," she went on. "Don't fail to write that story."

(ix)

In Ferber's novel Leslie is a young woman of Virginia who falls in love with Bick Benedict, a wealthy Texas rancher. They marry, and Bick takes Leslie by train to Reata, his ranch. Leslie marvels at vast distances between

towns in Texas and at the stark, desert-like landscape of the ranch. To Leslie, Texas is a world apart from Virginia. But unlike Letty, Leslie is married to a man she loves, and she gains fabulous wealth. Even though she is a strong woman in a loving relationship, even Leslie has second thoughts:

For an engulfing moment she had a monstrous feeling of being alone with a strange man in an unknown world--a world of dust and desert and heat and glare and some indefinable thing she never had experienced. Maybe all brides feel like this, she thought. (110)

Leslie, too, is tormented by the West Texas wind: "The wind again. The wind the wind hot and dry" (145). Leslie must compete with her sister-in-law, Luz, over who will run the house. Luz, Bick's older sister, has always had Bick's full attention; and Luz's jealousy intensifies when Leslie asserts her authority as Bick's wife. Leslie comes to Texas with the benefit of a wealthy and powerful husband whom she loves. In addition, she is a mature young woman, sure of herself and eager to learn what the future holds for her. Homesick, immature, and uncertain Letty might have fared better in West Texas with the same set of circumstances Leslie met. The relationships between Cora

and Letty and between Luz and Leslie are remarkably similar. Cora's intense jealousy of Letty's relationship with Bev parallels Luz's jealousy of Leslie's relationship with Bick; but Leslie stands up to Luz and claims her place as Bick's wife:

"I don't want to take your place, Luz Benedict, but I won't have you take mine, either. I know I can't take over this huge house twenty-four hours after I've come into it. I don't want to, yet, but I won't be a guest in my husband's house. . . ." (187)

In Leslie's place, Letty might have been able to achieve the same degree of happiness; but Letty, ironically now like the strong Luz, has no place in the home of a male relative's wife. Neither has any place, and neither survives.

Leslie has great difficulty adjusting to the climate of West Texas as well as to the way of life there. On arriving in Texas, Leslie observes,

No green anywhere other than the grey-green of the cactus, spiked and stark. Dust dust dust, stinging in the wind. Nothing followed the look or pattern of the life she had left behind her.
(109)

Leslie is only somewhat homesick--she misses her parents and the way things were done in Virginia. However, Leslie brings with her those Virginia traditions she holds dear. Letty seems to bring only a longing for some vague way things used to be. Scarborough stresses in a 1926 letter that Letty's homesickness is an element of her novel that she wishes to emphasize:

My West Texas critics have read so hastily that they missed several important points of the story. One is that the story is given through the mind of the homesick, frightened girl, who sees everything distorted to a certain extent. The other is that the story is a study in obsession, the tyranny of fear. (x)

The fictional characters in The Wind and Giants in the Earth, Letty and Beret, ensure that we are reminded of both real women whose courage and determination civilized the American frontier during the nineteenth century and of real women whose courage failed them. The first-hand accounts of these pioneer women's lives which have come down to us through the years are haunting reminders of their courage, their ability to survive, and the price of that survival. In 1847, on the trail from Indiana to the Oregon Territory, Elizabeth Smith Geer wrote, "I have not told you half we

suffered. I am not adequate to the task" (Schlissel 55).

We can be grateful for the adequacy of Rölvaag and Scarborough in presenting through fiction a largely neglected half of the pioneer experience.

NOTES

¹Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18 (Summer, 1966), pp. 151-174.

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