5-1-2001

The Changing Landscape: Women of the Westward Expansion 1847-1853

Mary Ann Ricigliano Cashman
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations

Part of the United States History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/2365
The Changing Landscape: Women of the Westward Expansion 1847–1853

Mary Ann Ricigliano Cashman

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts in the Department of English Seton Hall University

May 1, 2001
Approved by:

[Signature]
Thesis Mentor

[Signature]
Second Reader
Introduction

Between 1840 and 1870, a quarter of a million Americans crossed approximately 2,400 miles of the continental United States in one of the greatest migrations of modern times. They traveled west to claim free land in the Oregon and California Territories and regions in the Southwest, and they went west to strike it rich by mining silver and gold. While once historians described the West as the exclusive territory of trappers, cowboys, miners, and soldiers, the region has now been recognized as far more gendered in its history. In the past, westward-expansion texts have relied predominantly on men’s diaries and journals to chronicle the overland journey west and provide examples of one genre of literature during that time. However, it is only recently that the writings of the women who also made this journey have been acknowledged for their historical and literary value.

Many women who made westward journeys have now been given both an identity and a voice in the archives of western history through the literary recognition of the diaries, letters, and journals describing their experiences. Even though women often had no other choice but to accompany the men on their journey, their experiences—the landscape, the hardships of weather, starvation, birth, death, and the interactions with the Indians—are also an integral part of the literature that arose from this great migration. Just as important to the content of their writings is the manner of writing, including spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the lack of it. These stylistic anomalies are important statements about these authors, describing them and the society within which they lived. These intimate revelations offer a version of western history that is quite different from tales of exploration and conquest, but one that is just as essential to our understanding and appreciation of the cultural values and mores of the West that emerged during this period.
During the era of the overland migration, women did not always greet the idea of going west with enthusiasm, but rather worked out a painful negotiation between historical imperatives and personal necessity. Existing within the patriarchal nature of this society was the idea of the "cult of domesticity" (Reynolds 337). This trend defined the home as primarily the "woman's sphere"—that is, traditional women's work, such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children, was separate from the "man's sphere" of business (338). The cult of domesticity emphasized a woman's nurturing and maternal capacities as well as her possession of higher moral sensibilities (337).

On the frontier this idea of a "man's sphere" and a "woman's sphere" was especially evident in the responsibilities that husbands and wives, men and women, maintained during the journey. The men drove the wagons and cattle, navigated through the unknown frontier, hunted for food, and protected the women and children against attack. However, the women's responsibilities were equally as demanding, with their days often beginning before dawn and ending well after sunset. In the details of their domestic responsibilities contained within their writings, the women frequently used a tone that was often stoic and realistic. To the women of the westward expansion, the West meant the challenge of rearing a family and maintaining domestic order against the disordered life of the frontier. The separate spheres of men and women co-existed peacefully as long as life remained set in traditional paths, but life on the trail often caused a collision of the two worlds. This separation of spheres is captured most visibly in the memoir of Catherine Haun, who made her westward journey in 1849.

One of many domestic roles that women played during the overland journey was that of caretaker. They nursed not only their own family members but also others in the caravan. They saw firsthand the effects of cholera, illness, and accidents. The meticulous care that these women
gave to recording the death toll of the journey illustrated that to them the overland adventure was
sometimes more of an extravagant expense of human life. Both Elizabeth Dixon Smith (1847)
and Amelia Stewart Knight (1853) carefully noted and acknowledged in their diaries each grave
they passed and within their short, yet poignant, entries they mourned each death personally
along the trail. Women did not necessarily see death along the trail for its cumulative impact, but
felt it more as personal tragedy. They experienced each death as an individual catastrophe and
each notation of a roadside grave was saturated with a sense of their vulnerability on the plains.
Each grave signified just how close death always was. The graves became synonymous with the
devastation and desolation that frontier life sometimes bred.

Just as unnerving as the roadside graves were the crossing of rivers. Lives could be lost in
the unrelenting current of the water as well as life's possession washed away in an instant. Fear,
anxiety, and concern for the safety of husbands and children surfaced clearly in terse entries
recounting the harrowing experience. Lydia Allen Rudd's (1852) description of crossing a river
via a bridge formed from rock was as overwhelming as the roar of the turbulent water beneath
her. While these dangerous crossings were a part of daily life, each crossing came to represent
the westward experience: the daily struggle with nature, never knowing the outcome.

Like the rivers they encountered, the landscape itself was both an enemy and an ally. As
they described the prairie's barren, wasteland appearance, the women's loss of enthusiasm was
overwhelming. The terrain at times was treacherous and perilous, or it was flat and life
threateningly dry. The primitive roads were filled with obstacles: ankle-deep mud, fallen trees,
and carrion. The stench of death was relentless, as cattle collapsed and died on the trail from
starvation, dehydration, and sheer exhaustion. Crossing the mountains was also an unsettling
experience for the women, especially those with children. It was a group effort combining both
human and animal power to push and pull the wagons up and down the insufferably steep and jagged mountains. The unyielding landscape reflected their journey and the hardships that they experienced.

Weather also played a significant role for those who went west. Many caravans experienced several rainy months, which eroded the stamina and zeal needed for such a wearisome and challenging journey. Many times the weather would set the tone and mood for the day's travel or sometimes aggravated an already tense situation. Under these conditions the exasperation, loss of hope, and longing for the familiarity of home reverberated throughout their descriptions of the unfriendly landscape and its elements.

On the contrary, the landscape also presented the women with natural beauty that sometimes overwhelmed them and left them searching for the appropriate words to adequately describe the magnificence around them. The poetic and emotional language that they used within these entries was a stark contrast to the matter-of-fact and passionless language they used to describe quotidian tasks or the frustration and hopelessness of the sometimes-hostile landscape. Witnessing the majesty of the natural world revived their hope of what their journey could be and revitalized their determination and energy in their efforts to make their migration a success.

Another significant element of the migration west was their interaction with the Indians. Although many of the women feared the Indians, others came to know the Indians as helpful guides and purveyors of services on the frontier more often than they described them as enemies. Lydia Allen Rudd (1852) and her caravan traded quite often with the Indians and employed their service in crossing several rivers. Having no stake in overpowering the Indians, some women packed extra clothing and blankets to be used for bartering for both delicacies and necessities.
However, there were many, like Anna Maria Morris (1850) who regarded the Indians as animals—barbaric, primitive, and predatory.

While there are many similarities among the accounts and observations of the women who traveled the westward trails, the difference is in how each woman individually responded to her journey, using her resources to cope, change, and grow. The harsh, unfamiliar, and demanding circumstances of the West provided women with situations that demanded daily courage, a courage as personal as its expression in the diaries and journals they kept.
Chapter 1. Elizabeth Dixon Smith

Elizabeth Dixon Smith was 38 years old when she made her overland journey from Laporte, Indiana in 1847 to Lafayette, Oregon in the winter of 1848. She and her husband at the time, Cornelius Smith, took the long and often treacherous road to Oregon with their seven children. Smith’s account is one of the starker stories among women’s diaries of the westward expansion, as she and her party were greatly tested and challenged by their journey. Her days were very busy taking care of her family and she often had to wait until her “babe and all hands” had gone to sleep and write by candlelight (Holmes 126). Smith’s writing details much of the daily routine of frontier life, her domestic duties, crossing mountain ranges and rivers, stretching supplies, and hiring Indians to help them hunt. Even in the course of relating the internal dynamics of the household, the weather, or the road conditions, Smith occasionally allowed her more creative and thoughtful side to emerge whenever the natural beauty of the foreign landscape overwhelmed her. Smith found time to write in her journal nearly every day, even during some of the most trying times of her journey. Some entries were quite short while others were lengthy and often poetic. Smith and her caravan experienced death, hunger, loss, grief, and loneliness, and while she did not always provide great detail of the pain and suffering she felt, her lack of description told its tale in volumes.

Home on the Trail

Smith provides a very unemotional description in her diary of the internal dynamics of her own wagon “household.” Many of her entries include her daily tasks of preparing meals, washing clothes, caring for her children and the sick among her caravan, and searching and collecting fuel for the fire, which would soon become a more difficult task the further along the plains they traveled. Some of Smith’s more general housekeeping entries tend to be brief.
sounding more like practical observations in response to advice or tips she had been given prior to leaving home: “... have to use [buffalo] dung for fuel a man will gather a bushel in a minute 3 bushels makes a good fire” (121); “[the Soda Springs] are not so good as has been represented only one or two of our company like it tastes [sic] like weak vinegar with a little saleratus in it” (129); or “it was told to us before we left the states that the dry grass was better than the green be it so or not always when we have had a dry feed the first green grass we come too we stop to let the cattle feed” (139).

Since preparing and cooking meals is part of her domestic responsibilities, she notes almost daily what she has to use in order to build a fire to cook by: “willows to burn” (131); “had ceder to burn (138); or “no wood or shrubs” (139). The further they travel into the wilderness the more creative Smith must be in finding viable sources of fuel and often uses sage, dung, weeds, willows, and grass. However, there is an ever-present wind on the plains with which she is constantly fighting in order to keep the fire going. Smith’s exasperation is heard in her entry: “jest step outside and pull a lot of sage out of your garden and build a fire in the wind and bake boil and fry by it and then you will guess how we have to doo [sic]” (127). About midway through the journey Smith finds “perhaps ... a thousand acres of level land covered with grass interspersed with beautiful stony brooks and plenty of timber such as it is quaking asp” (128). There is lift in Smith’s tone and her entry is closer to a complete sentence as opposed to the staccato phrases she has been using. The land is beautiful and green with life, making her day’s work easier. Her hope is renewed, even if only temporarily. The terrain has provided a respite for her weary body and mind.

Smith’s practical nature constantly surfaces in her attitude toward maintaining her household. She often tries to use the natural elements in order to make her life within the
domestic world a little less complicated. She is not always successful in her attempts; however, she is persistent. For example, Smith abandons the idea of collecting the thin layer of Epsom salt she finds covering the ground, thinking she might be able to use it somehow later (127), but when she comes upon a saleratus (an old term for baking soda) bed, she collects some to use in baking. Again she shows her ingenuity when she is able to bake some bread using the natural saleratus: “This saleratus is far from being equeal [sic] to artificial saleratus although it looks as good it will not foam buter [sic] milk one bit .... baked a lot of light bread” (126). Throughout her journal Smith notes the herbage she encounters and compares it with that found back east: “all this region is prickry and briery the sage dredful [sic] on the clothes it grows from 1 to 6 feet high has a stalk like our tame sage or sedge the leaves are smaller and very narrow it has a sage taste though it is very biter we have to use it sometimes to burn” (124).

Frequently, Smith’s domestic entries are interspersed with a feeling of weariness or disillusionment; however, whenever she finds something that is familiar to her or a reminder of home, there is a noticeable change in her style and tone. Besides the shift from broken phrases to sentences, there is a deeper sense of happiness and pleasure within her text. One example is Smith’s discovery of “goos [sic] berries.” Her excitement in finding this luxury along the trail is revealed in the manner in which she describes the taste—“like grapes”—and texture—“smothe [sic] as currents”—of the wild berries, admitting that all the gooseberries “this side of Missouri is smothe” (127). The recognizable taste and texture provides her comfort, reminding her of home.

Smith’s role as caretaker encompasses her family and even extends to the animals that are part of the caravan. Smith includes several notes about incidents of oxen running away, drowning or dying, or lack of sufficient feed, water, and rest for them. There is a sense that Smith not only cares for the animals but also identifies with the instincts they possess. For
example, Smith notes, “last night one of our cows went back one day's journey to see her calf that we had given away that morning” (118). Within this entry is the idea of leaving something behind as well as maternal instinct. Smith has given up and left behind her family and friends—everything that is familiar—for life on the unfamiliar frontier. She is longing, like the cow, to return to a place that is comfortable. Furthermore, Smith identifies with the cow going back to retrieve her calf. As a mother she knows the reality of frontier life: children getting lost or dying from illness or accident. This fear of loss and separation is very real for Smith because there is no retrieval, no going back. The animals are in many ways like the pioneers themselves: they, too, experience the challenges and stress of the journey. The loss of these creatures reflects the vulnerability of life on the plain and the harsh reality of the overland journey.

During the latter portion of the journey, Smith’s duties begin to shift from the “women’s sphere” to the “men’s sphere.” When Smith’s husband Cornelius becomes too sick to lead their wagon, Smith assumes the responsibility. She guides the wagon, carrying her younger children through snow, mud, and water up to their knees. The stress of the task overwhelsm her: “... I have not told half we suffered. I am inadequate to the task ... rain all day evry [sic] thing now falls upon my shoulders I cannot write any more at present”—and she does not for several days (143). Smith nurses her husband for the several weeks in a small, leaky shack she finds with only a mattress on the floor. She writes of the constant worry and difficulty in her new role: “I have not undressed to lie down for 6 weeks besides all our sickness I had a cross little babe to take care of in deed I cannot tell you half” (146).

Ten months after leaping into the unknown, her “earthly companion” dies, leaving her with a grief and sorrow that is unbearable. Smith realizes now “how comfortless is that of a widows [sic] life” (146). She is alone and straddling both the male and female spheres of
responsibility. She is painfully aware that she must rely not only on her own resources, but also on the land for survival during the final leg of her journey. Several weeks later with the weather warm and clear and leaving behind much of their personal items and one of their wagons, Smith and her children head out on their own. Through the thick woods carrying her baby, Smith and her children make their way over the muddy roads and decaying bridges and make their first night's camp in the woods that were "infested with wild cats panthers bears and wolves" (147). This animal imagery reinforces the danger and vulnerability she feels being alone as well as the uncivilized nature of the land.

**Nature's Reflection**

Smith takes time to describe the natural world around her as best she can, usually identifying rivers and mountains by name as well various vegetation and surface consistencies. For the most part her language is filled with energy, excitement, and emotion. Smith notes almost immediately in her diary the beauty she encounters when only several days journey from her own home: "had a view of the great ... and admirable works of nature and art as we pass through Illinois" (117) She describes the land near the Platt River as "the roughest [sic] country here that the mind can conceive of indicative I think of the shapes of the earth no level land all ridges mounds and deep hollows covered with no herbage whatever but you will see now and then in some deep hollow a scrubby cedar [sic] growing ... . . . . (123). Although the landscape possesses a certain wildness invoking excitement within her, there is also a personal identification for Smith. The unevenness and irregularity of the landscape illustrates the limitlessness of the natural world. For Smith, in her structured world, there are limitations for her as a woman; she has her place. In the natural world there are no restrictions; she is free.
Smith also possesses a great deal of topographical knowledge, often explaining the possible formations of the mountains and nature of the soil as dating back to millions of years ago. She describes what she thinks is "hundreds of acres [that] seem to have been bursted [sic] and thrown up by volcanic eruptions the earth along here is strong with lye after a shower if the little ponds were not rily [sic] one could wash linen without soap" (123). Based on these quite scientific observations, she is able to determine why the cattle are having problems walking: "it is plain to my mind what makes their feet wear out it is the lye [sic] nature of the ground" (123). Another example of Smith's understanding of geology occurs when she notes that the ocean must have at one time covered the area because her husband had found petrified seashells on top of the mountain as well as creases in the rocks showing the different water levels (124). In making these assumptions, Smith is free from the binds of her role as woman during this time; she has transcended the traditional role of a woman and has entered the masculine realm of science. She is liberated from her societal constraints and freely ruminates on the connection of the landscape to its history. Through her reflections, Smith connects to the landscape and understands the transitions and cycles that it has experienced.

Furthermore, nature also represents life for Smith. This is illustrated in her description of a natural spring that she discovers. She explains in detail the size of the spring, giving her estimations in what is familiar to her, a common household item: "the hole is about as large as a large dinner pot" (130). She describes the water flowing from the spring as "blood warm" indicating that she identifies the earth as a source of life. In contrast, Smith also details how lifeless the plains can be—using the words "barren", "destitute", and "dry" to describe the landscape. She notes that the further west they travel that the land has the appearance of being burnt and that the surface resembles black stone. Contrary to her free-spirited descriptions and
connection to the beauty of the earth, these bleaker descriptions of the arid landscape may be a reflection of her mental state at this point in her journey. The weight of traveling is beginning to bear down and the psychological burden is beginning to take its toll.

Even though Smith makes an earlier connection to water as a life-giving force, it also represents a life-consuming force. Smith recounts several days when they are “bound by water” and the group must make preparations to cross a river. Her entries become short and clipped, most likely because she is preoccupied with thoughts or worries about the safety of her family. It is evident that for Smith river crossings are truly a frightening and stressful experience since she is completely helpless and at the mercy of nature. In order to cross the river, the wheels of the wagon are removed and the body of the wagon is set on a raft. The men of the caravan guide the rafts across the river using ropes, while the women and children sit inside the wagons on the rafts. Often the river currents are strong and extremely treacherous. There is always the risk of a raft being carried away with the current or the possibility of falling into the water and drowning. With eight children to worry about during these river crossings, it is not surprising that Smith’s details are sparse.

Weather plays an important role throughout Smith’s diary, sometimes setting the tone and mood for the day or aggravating an already tense situation, especially during river crossings. In early November, Smith and her company have to wait a day for the wind to blow down stream in order to set out on their rafts. In order to cross the river, they take the wheels off the wagon, lay them on the raft, and then place the wagon on top. Smith recounts that while traveling down stream that the water ran three inches over the raft on which she rode. They spent the day floating down the Columbia River in “cold and disagreeable” weather before they stopped along
the shore to wait for the water to calm down. Here they tried to build a fire to cook and stay warm as the wind blew and the river raged (140).

Likewise, crossing the mountains is an unnerving experience for Smith. While crossing the Blue Mountains, the men in Smith's party have to steady the wagons during the descent while the women carried and lead their children down the mountain. There is no reprieve between the mountains the company has to cross that day. In her next entry, Smith describes how the men have to use double teams of oxen in order to ascend the mountain. It is nature at its most challenging. In both the crossing of the rivers and the crossing of the mountains, Smith is helpless. Nature is in control and is remorseless. The rush of the water and the rigidity of the mountain require her utmost focus and unbounded energy. Her succinct description allows for only a few pointed words to convey her terror.

Dust becomes another consuming element of the natural world against which Smith clashes constantly. She notes that the dust is like nothing she has ever known back home: "you in the states know nothing about dusk it will fly so that you can hardly see the horns of your tongue yoke it often seems that the cattle must die for want of breath and then in our wagons such a spectacle beds cloths victuals and children all completely covered" (131). The dust is pervasive and unrelenting; it is suffocating and stifling. It physically debilitates, and each gust erodes the spirit.

Like the oppressiveness of the dust, death too looms on the frontier. Roadside graves are a constant reminder of this imminent possibility. Smith notes that her party continually finds buffalo skulls and carcasses and elk horns. There is no escaping death for humans or animals on the wild western plains. Upon seeing a grave on the side of the road, Smith writes, "saw one grave day before yesterday and one today by the lonely way side made this spring" (120). Her
description of the grave's location as "lonely" represented what the journey west meant for many: loss of family, friends, and familiar surroundings. It came to represent the vast, desolate landscape before her and the anonymity that often came with death on the frontier.

On a human level, death also meant being alone on the frontier, a fear that many women shared. Smith recounts an incident in which a man accidentally shot himself, leaving behind a wife and children. Smith writes: "the man he had shot himself last night accidentily [sic] he left a wife and six small children the distress of his wife I cannot describe he is an excellent [sic] man and very much missed" (122). Smith notes the death of the man as a loss to his wife and family, an emotional loss, not as a loss to the human power of the caravan. Smith feels empathy for the widow, who now is alone and must fend for herself and her children. Remarriage occurred often on the journey west; however, the widow's future is full of uncertainty. In another incident, the caravan loses two more men who drown while trying to swim their cattle across the river. Smith notes once more the families that these men leave behind. By stressing the constant fear that many women experience about losing their husband on the frontier and the devastating effect of that loss on the family, Smith illustrates clearly in these entries the reality of life—and death—for women of the westward expansion.

The Wild Landscape

Smith's first mention of Indians occurs after crossing the Missouri River and a small mountain range. She notes a few days later after entering Indian territory that two horses have been stolen from their company during the night. While she does not offer elaborate descriptions of the Indians or much detail about her interactions, her terse sentences about the Indians and associations of the Indians with theft and begging indicates that she is fearful and cautious.
Although Smith will sometimes recount their interactions with Indians through missing cattle and items, it is when they camp at a French and Indian residence where their first interaction with an Indian occurs. Smith does not mention being afraid, only that her group is cautious in their dealings with the Indians. Smith gives the Indians “meal meat flour and beans” when they beg; however, the caravan suffers later because of her gift since their food provisions are desperately low. It is difficult to surmise if her giving away provisions to the Indians was due to her fear or possibly compassion, but nonetheless she continues to negotiate with them. On another occasion during which she trades old shirts for some fish, she describes the Indians that she interacts with as being naked except for “an old rag tied a bout their hips” (133). While there is a suggestion of wildness within her description combined with her overall apprehension in dealing with the Indians, Smith does realize that in many ways it is essential to survival on trail. The Indians, like the landscape, represent the wild uncultured nature of the wilderness.

By far the most grisly encounter with the Indians occurs at the Whitman Mission. Smith’s company separates in October of 1847, with some wagons going on to the Whitman Mission for the winter and the others (including Smith and her family) continuing along the Oregon Trail. The Whitman Mission had been established as a way station for overland immigrants to Oregon. An outbreak of measles in 1847 ravaged the Cayuse tribe that lived near the Whitman Mission and although the Indians received medication from the mission, the number of fatalities continued to grow. In November 1847 the Cayuse attacked the mission and slaughtered everyone present. Smith noted in her entry on October 12 that those from her caravan who had gone on to the mission were killed in the attack. Her matter-of-fact notation of the bloodbath is alarming, especially when juxtaposed with her next sentence that details a transaction between her husband and the Indians for some meat. Death infuses Smith’s entry through both the dead animal flesh
being bartered and the carnage of the massacre. The transaction, ironically, is for their continued existence, their survival, even though it is surrounded by death. The association between death and the Indians emphasizes the common fear among many westward travelers of the Indians’ savage nature.

Conclusion

Overall, Smith’s diaries not only paint a picture of her own experiences but also provide an understanding of the author herself. For example, Smith seemed most at ease within the domestic realm, but was able to assume a traditional male role when her husband died. This flexibility was essential to the success of her westward passage. Without Smith’s stamina, determination, and passion she would not have been successful in embracing the challenges that her westward journey presented. While flexibility was vital for the journey west, so was an understanding of the landscape itself: In many of Smith’s entries it is clear that she was very much in tune with the land and, though the landscape provided both pain and pleasure for her, Smith demonstrated a connection to the land through her knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of its power, features, and history.

Smith’s writing style reflected her mental and physical state during her journey as well as her respect and appreciation for the power of nature. Smith exercised great care in finding the right words to describe appropriately the appearance of the landscape. The variation in her writing style—short phrases and long sentences, punctuation or no punctuation, many details or none—revealed Smith’s personality, the effect that her journey had on her, and what her life was like within the culture of 1847. Smith’s diary of her journey west is emblematic of who she was as a person and the meaning and the effect of her journey for generations to come.
Chapter 2. Catherine Haun

Catherine Haun and her husband began thinking about their journey west to the California Territory in January of 1849 hoping to "strike it rich" in the gold mines. As a young, newly married couple with no children, Haun and her husband were both a bit restless and discontent living in Clinton, Iowa. Haun's health had not been very good and her physician recommended a change of climate to boost her health and lift her spirits. Initially, the doctor had suggested a sea voyage, but then agreed that a trip across the plains in a "prairie schooner" would be beneficial for Haun, as outdoor life had been advocated as a cure for her ailments. Full of excitement and enthusiasm, Haun looked at the dangerous voyage as a "wedding tour" and even packed a "quasi wedding trousseau" (Schlissel 166-8).

The Hauns were well educated and from middle-class families, which is evident both by Catherine's writing ability and her experience traveling west. Her account of her overland journey is a recollection that she wrote several years after her arrival in California. Haun described her journey west as being "romantic" and "thrilling," quite contrary to many pioneers' experiences (185). Her caravan reached Sacramento, California, on November 4, 1849, just six months and ten days after leaving Clinton, Iowa. At the outset of the journey, their caravan had 25 people, growing to 120 people; however, by the time they arrived in Sacramento there were only 12 people in their caravan. Even though she traveled with a well-equipped and experienced wagon train, the wild frontier still provided plenty of obstacles.

The Community

Throughout their journey, Haun has few household responsibilities because initially her caravan hires a woman to cook and take care of other domestic tasks on the journey. However,
only days into the journey the hired woman decides to return home, abandoning her domestic commitments. The men in the caravan want to abort the journey once the housekeeper has abandoned them, emphasizing just how important the domestic sphere was overall to the journey west; however, Haun “volunteers” to assume the domestic responsibilities as long as “everybody else would help” (169). Having been raised with servants, Haun admits that her “culinary education had been neglected and [she] had yet to make [her] first cup of coffee” (169). Haun’s novice cooking skills are aided by the other women in the caravan and the benefit of camping near farms, which allows for a generous supply of eggs, bread, butter, and poultry before taking the “final plunge into the wilderness” of the frontier (170).

Even though she has the responsibility of maintaining domestic order within her own wagon, Haun still has time to visit during the day the with the two other women in her caravan “talking over our home life back in the state’ telling of the loved ones left behind; voicing our hopes for the future in the far west and even whispering a little friendly gossip of emigrant life” (180). Within the unfamiliar frontier, she is able to find some of the comforts of home within the network of women with which she traveled. Leaving home and embarking on a new life in an foreign land was painful for many women who made the journey west, however, Haun is able to temper her loss and find solace within her small female community.

Haun’s practical nature becomes obvious, not through the limited description of her domestic chores, but more by her explanations of the maintenance of the caravan as a whole. She takes time to explain how essential “sizing up” is to the success of the journey. She notes those pioneers who are “insufficiently provisioned or not supplied with guns and ammunition” are not desirable to the caravan; however, heavily loaded wagons are not sought-after either (170). It is essential that the animals be sturdy, that schooners have canvas covers to protect them from the
dirt and dust, that the people themselves in the caravans be healthy, and "above all not too large a proportion of women and children" (170). However, Haun later dismisses this idea that too many women would have been an impediment to the success of the journey, instead sees their contributions as directly relating to the success of the journey. Haun notes that presence of women exert:

"good influence, as the men did not take such risks with Indians and thereby avoided conflict; were more alert about the care of the teams and seldom had accidents; more attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation, and lastly but not of less importance, the meals were more regular and better cooked thus preventing much sickness and there was less waste of food."

Haun's analysis clearly reinforces the idea of the cult of domesticity popular at the time. Besides noting the domestic contributions of women in the caravan (the "women's sphere"), Haun also extols women for their virtues of purity and passivity, implying that the mere presence of women has a tempering effect on men. For Haun, women possess the ability to "tame" the wildness of men and, thus, tame the wild frontier.

Early in her journey Haun recounts many evenings filled with "laughter and merrymaking," with everyone sitting around the campfire listening to readings, singing songs, and telling stories (180). She notes in particular the festivities they enjoyed upon reaching the Laramie River on the Fourth of July: singing patriotic songs, firing off a gun, and "giving three cheers for the United States and California Territory in particular" (181). Overall, a sense of community permeates her wagon train. The closeness and familiarity that the community offers softens the harshness of the frontier. Haun's caravan does not travel on the Sabbath; instead the men repair wagons and harnesses, and shoe animals while the women wash clothes, prepare food for storage, mend clothes, and perform other domestic duties.

Like electing a mayor in a town or city, Haun's caravan community selects a "colonel" to lead the caravan and agrees upon a "code of general regulations for train government and mutual
protection" (172). There is a choreography in the way they arrange their wagons at their campsites, with the "leader wagon" turning first from the road and the other wagons following, alternating from right to left, "forming a large circle, or corral" (172). While cooperation and organization are essential to the journey, Haun's caravan in many ways transcends those fundamentals and creates a mini-city on wheels. This need for a town-like atmosphere is connected to the loss of the comfort and security of their homes that the pioneers are experiencing. They are anxious to find some substitution of civilization within the wild.

Haun takes time in her memoir to describe the people within her caravan community, recognizing and appreciating the differences within their group. She also identifies their shared mutual dependence upon each other and the fact that they are "bound together by the single aim of 'getting to California'" (171). Her lengthy descriptions of the sundry and abundant supplies and equipment that they all contribute illustrate not only her level of education and culture, but also conveys a positive feeling about her journey, as well as an overall excitement that remains with Haun throughout her journey.

The Predators

With such a large caravan community crossing rivers and mountains is a slow and arduous task. However, a large caravan is also a safeguard against Indian attacks. While Haun's initial impression of the Indians is that they are friendly but insistent beggars, she still views them as a source of anxiety. The members of Haun's caravan try to prepare themselves as best they can in case of an Indian attack by performing "surprise and impromptu practice drills":

"Colonel Brophy gave the men a practice drill ... He called 'Indians, Indians!' ... We were thrown into a great confusion and excitement but he is gratified at the promptness and courage with which the men responded. Each immediately seized his gun and made ready for the attack ... The women had been instructed to seek shelter in the wagons at such times of
danger, but some screamed, others fainted, a few crawled under the wagons and those sleeping in wagons generally followed their husbands out and all of us were nearly paralyzed with fear. Fortunately, we never had occasion to put into actual use this maneuver, but the drill is quite reassuring...”

(175)

While never having to put into practice these drills, Haun’s feeling of reassurance reiterates the comfort she feels in the safety that her community provides her. However, her group is not always prepared against the night thefts that occur on the plains. For example, one night some Indians steal the blankets from two men in the caravan while they are sleeping. Nobody hears a sound. Haun attributes the quiet burglary to the fact that the Indians wear “soft moccasins” and take “light steps and springing, long strides” and that the Indians are so “stealthy and treacherous” (175–6). There is a great deal of animal imagery present in her description of the Indians. Their light steps and long strides depict the movement of a wild animal and the softness of their steps like an animal’s padded paws, making no noise as they sneak up on their prey. There is an undertone of Haun’s feelings of vulnerability on the open plains among the Indians within her description as well.

This helplessness is illustrated when the night after the theft, she makes sure that the fastenings of the canvas are snug in the wagon in which she and her husband sleep together, even adding pins to reinforce it. In the process of being so diligent she manages to shut out all the ventilation and during the night her husband “opened the wagon cover wide enough for not only the savage eye but the whole savage himself to enter!” (176). Her description of the Indians having a “savage eye” again reiterates her seeing the Indians as animals, quietly waiting for the opportune moment to attack their prey. She also compares the Indians to snakes, “crawling ... on the ground up to its intended prey” (176), invoking the image of the devil or evilness.
There is always a wariness in their approach in “doing business” with the Indians, like one would an unfamiliar animal, as their constant fear is of being attack. Like many pioneers, they recognize the need of Indians as guides across rivers and the unknown terrain, but also understand the danger in interacting with them. Once after realizing the need to lighten their load, Haun’s caravan decides it would be best to bury the barrels of alcohol they are abandoning “lest the Indians should drink it and frenzied thereby might follow and attack us . . .” (179). This image of wantonness and complete debauchery pervades many of her description of the Indians themselves or the interaction with them.

Another incident Haun recalls is the evening that a woman with a young girl approaches the campsite. The woman is trembling in terror and between sobs manages only to say the word "Indians." They give the woman and the young child food and shelter for the night. The next morning the woman explains that both her sister and husband have died from cholera and the others in her caravan, including her brother and young son, have been murdered during an Indian attack. She has managed to flee with her five-year-old daughter and has been walking alone for several days, hunting for food. Haun’s caravan offers the woman and her daughter an invitation to travel with them to California, which she accepts, relieving Haun of her domestic responsibilities in return for her board. The stamina and strength of this wandering woman illustrates not only in her ability to survive on her own, but also in the fact that she helps Haun’s caravan drive an oxen team. She is an example of another woman of the westward expansion who can effectively span both spheres of male and female responsibilities.

While the sense of community is again depicted in the extension of a safe haven for the woman, the savageness of the Indians is also present. The woman’s story speaks to their basic and constant fear of the predatory and savage nature of the Indians. By taking in one of their
“own”, Haun’s community demonstrates their belief that in order to survive among the wild, they must band together against the rapacious animals of the frontier.

The Landscape

Even though her journey is fairly pleasant overall in comparison to many overland journeys (despite her constant fear and worry about Indians), Haun only once briefly notes the beauty of the landscapes. Her notation is presented more as an aside: "—beautiful trees and grass." This is the only time in which Haun’s usual complete sentences are terse and broken. However, a river crossing and contact with Indians—both a source of great anxiety for Haun—frame this description.

She notes several occasions and in great detail the peril landscape presented. The further into the frontier they travel, the more Haun’s frustration with the “uselessness” of the landscape emerges. The land is dry and dusty and even when they do find a water source, it is of no use to them because of its being “alkali.” Her biggest betrayal by the landscape occurs when they follow a sign that boasts a shortcut to the Humboldt River, which would ultimately take them into California (177). However, this shortcut soon leads them into an area of land that is bleak, desolate, and rough. Haun recalls: “I shudder yet at the thought of the ugliness and danger of the territory .... Entirely destitute of vegetation the unsightly barren sandstonehills [sic], often very high and close together ... with ravines and gulches between and mighty full of crouching, treacherous Indians ... we feared that we had been purposely misled in order that they might do us harm ...” (177). The dry, destitute land and the repulsiveness of the landscape, implies hell with its hot, dry, and hideous atmosphere.

Haun makes this connection between the land and hell when she remembers that they saw nothing but “Indians, lizards and snakes .... Trying, indeed, to feminine nerves ... Surely
Inferno can be no more horrible in formation” (178). Again, this reference to Dante’s Inferno reveals her connection between the landscape and its inhabitants to hell and wickedness. The caravan pushes recklessly forward to get back to the road that ran along the Platte River making the rest stops few and traveling from dawn until dusk.

Another test of the landscape comes while crossing the mountains. Trekking across the mountains is both treacherous and physically taxing, as everyone in the caravan—including the women and children—are called upon to help pull and push the wagons up the mountains. Haun recalls: “Oh such pushing, pulling, and tugging it was! I pity the drivers as well as the oxen and horses—and the rest of us” (179). One young man in Haun’s caravan plays his harmonica as they trudged along, helping to drown out and soften the creaks and the rattles of the wagons as they roll over the mountain roads.

The caravan turns southwest and arrives at Fort Bridger, a trading post for fur trappers and soon crosses the Great Basin or “sink” of the Humboldt River. The wagons are badly worn; the animals are exhausted; and food and stock are low with no chance of replenishing them. During this month of transit, Haun and her train experience the greatest privations of the entire trip. It is not unusual for them to see death and desertion around them in graves, animal carcasses, and abandoned wagons (which furnishes wood for campfires as the sagebrush is scarce and the buffalo are not as plentiful) strewn across the plains. Haun remembers how suffocating and irritating the dust is, how the clouds of dust often blind them, and “how the mirages tantalize us; the water is unfit to drink or to use in any way, animals often perish or are so overcome by heat and exhaustion that they have to be abandoned in case of human hunger, . . .” (183). The blinding image of the dust combined with the hallucinations from the heat and starvation again symbolize the debilitating force and brutality of nature.
Everyone in the caravan suffers, including Haun: “Across this drear country I used to ride horseback several hours of the day which is a great relief from the continual jolting of even our spring wagon. I also walked a great deal and this lightened the wagon. One day I walked fourteen miles and was not very fatigued” (183). It is during this dry and desperate leg of the journey that Haun's caravan experiences their first death within the train. One of the women in the group suddenly becomes sick and dies, leaving a grief stricken husband and two children. No mention is made by Haun that this woman has been pregnant during the trip except in the final emotional entry: "We stopped for the day to bury her and the infant that had lived but an hour, in this weird, lonely spot on God's footstool away apparently from everywhere and everybody" (183). The bodies are wrapped together in a comforter and are bound with pieces of a shredded cotton dress. They have no tombstone to mark the site—it just becomes one of the thousands of graves that mark the trail of the pioneer, consigned to the cold embrace of the immense, lonesome, and desolate western plains.

**Conclusion**

In highlighting the importance of community and friendship to the overland journey, Haun's writing also conveys what the overland meant for the individual: the connections and reactions to the landscape; the feelings of despair and vulnerability; and the excitement of the adventure. Although Haun was eager to travel west, she also revels in the familiarity of the small network of women within her caravan. Her narrative provides a glimpse of what life is like for a middle-class woman traveling in the late 1840s and, while she seems content in her traditional role as woman, she also celebrates the strength of women.
Chapter 3. Anna Maria Morris

Anna Maria Morris and her husband, Major Governor Morris of the U.S. Army, both from two of New York's great pioneering families from the colonial days, left for Santa Fe, New Mexico in May of 1850. As the wife of a commander of a military unit, Morris was given all the attention and care that such a position demanded while she recorded her daily observations. Morris traveled with servants, rode in the ambulance wagon, and had no domestic responsibilities. Morris was not traveling west for freedom, farmland, or fortune, but simply to accompany her husband to his new station as part of the defense of the frontier in the Southwest as a follow-up to the Mexican War (1846–1848). They had no children at the time of their journey and arrived in Santa Fe in October of 1850. They remained there for three years before returning to the Northeast.

Morris' diary reflects a very different experience of the journey west. Unlike many of the women who traveled along the trails west, Morris did not have the responsibility of handling the domestic tasks, and therefore, her focus is more on the journey itself. Almost daily she notes the number of miles they traveled, the time they began the day's journey, and the condition of the road, that is, muddy, dusty, and so on. She writes about the unit's doctor and several of the officers who visit her daily as well as some of the officers' wives who are also traveling with them. She is surrounded by many comforts from home and a great deal of socializing. In many ways, the division she is traveling with has become a small community, much like the one she left back East, and this allows Morris to feel relaxed at times.

Morris notes with concern the danger in crossing the rivers and sometimes having to wait a day or two until the water is safe to cross. Battling the elements surfaces a great deal in Morris' diary and she includes many references to the insufferable heat and dryness the further southwest
they travel as well as the dust, mud, and heavy storms. Having plenty of time to experience both the beauty and the ugliness of the southwestern landscape, Morris does so in a very matter-of-fact manner. On both accounts her entries are short and abrupt—especially the longer she travels. While she notes the natural world, she also provides a sense of impatience with it. She has had enough and is eager for the trip to end.

Morris faces with the reality of death on the frontier like any other pioneer and she, too, takes the time to include the names of the deceased in her entries. However, she is fortunate that no one close to her on the journey dies so those entries that include death seem to be very casual. It is difficult to feel a sense of remorse within the notations; however, the fact that she includes these notations indicates that the deaths do affect her. Morris is surrounded on her journey by many of the comforts to which she is accustomed and knows many of the soldiers by name. These familiar objects and people shield her from the harsh realities of the road and it is only towards the end of her journey does she note her exasperation and longing to end the journey.

Morris' caravan encounters Indians quite regularly as well as a few Mexicans. Morris sees the Indians as curiosities and bizarre in their mannerisms and behavior. She does not barter with them, but does interact with them on several occasions. Within her entries, sometimes she is assertive about not being afraid and other times there is an undercurrent of fear. However, traveling with a military unit certainly has its benefits in providing protection, as they would often send out reconnaissance units to make sure that the road was safe and passable. Morris notes that there is a Mexican man traveling with her group who collects wood and does other miscellaneous jobs for the unit, but only refers to him as “our Mexican.” When writing about this Mexican or other Mexicans they meet on their journey, there is an undercurrent of class
distinction by Morris illustrated by the fact that she does not call them by name, but by their ethnic background.

Morris' writing style throughout her journal includes no punctuation and some complete sentences, but mostly long phrases. She uses long dashes to denote what would be a new sentence or thought. She jumps from topic to topic within many of her entries possibly revealing her anxiety or nervousness of undertaking this journey, even though she does state a few times in her diary that she is not afraid of being out in frontier. Her entries are addressed to her father and she is able to mail several pages of her diary back East and even receives a letter from her father while on the trail. Although she is traveling with her husband's military division, there is an underlying sense throughout her writing of her unease and restlessness of venturing into the unknown.

Traveling West

In almost every entry in Morris' diary she includes the mileage covered for the day, the time they started, and the condition of the road. Since she is traveling with a military unit, it is not surprising that she would have access to these details; however, there is a sense with these constant notations that she is anxious for the journey to end. For example, she writes: “We camped the Grasshopper at 7 O'cl Came 9 miles and encamped at 2 O'cl on Walnut Creek 13 miles from the Kansas — We find the new road very deep in thick mud…” (Holmes 22); “Left Cotton Wood at 10 Ocl crossed without much difficulty and arrived at Little Turkey Creek 19 miles at 5 Ocl” (26); or “...The roads are heavy & sandy…” (32). In these entries and many other similar entries, Morris is very aware of time passing during the trip and how the group is progressing—are they being slowed down by the road or covering ground with ease. This forward motion of both time and miles denotes an urgency and impatience within Morris. It is as
if she sees this journey as something she is expected to do because she is a military wife or possibly just a wife, regardless of her husband's occupation—she has no choice; or she sees the journey as an inconvenience, but is eager to be done with it and settle back into a life to which she is more accustomed when she reaches her final destination. The final example ("The road is heavy") is later in her journey and possibly illuminates Morris' state of mind at that point. She, like the road, is heavy or weary both mentally and physically from the weight of her travels.

Even though the condition of the road reflects her spirits, she does maintain a note of optimism regarding the road in her entry: "at Kansas we overtook Lt. Field & his party who had preceded us to repair the road so our party is on the increase" (23). Morris sees the greatest obstacle along the trail as the road itself.

**The Progress of the Journey**

Since weather played a large role in the caravans that traveled across the frontier, Morris notes regularly the conditions and its effect on the progress of the journey. Her group experiences very wet weather as well as very hot and dry conditions as they travel further southwest. Being part of the upper class, Morris most likely has had few occasions in which she would be physically exposed to unfavorable weather conditions. In the earlier entries in her diary, she mentions the weather more in passing; however, her later entries include an underlying tenseness about the weather. For example, she writes: "...it is impossible to keep dry in a tent in such storms The Fly protects the top, but the rain beats in at the sides..." (25); "...it blows a hurricane at night. The tents do not protect one from such winds..." (29); or "We had an awful wind storm this afternoon accompanied by a little rain, it came up very suddenly. The first intimation we had of its approach was my portfolios blowing open & scattering my papers to the winds all over the prairie" (31). The first two examples reveal her recognition of her
vulnerability against the elements. She is unprotected. Even though she is traveling with soldiers, there is no protection from the suddenness and power of the natural world. The final example exposes her sense of helplessness, both when she notes that the storm came on quickly and through her choice of words in the phrases, “blowing open” and “scattering my papers to the winds all over the prairie.” The natural world invades her personal belongings, dispersing them across the empty frontier. Each of these phrases illustrates not only a lack of control when dealing with the natural world, but also a vastness that is represented by the frontier.

Like many other caravans traveling across the frontier, the dust was often overwhelming. While Morris only mentions the dust on one or two occasions, she does notes how often they encounter mud: “thick black mud” (22); “The roads are very muddy” (26); and “hot muddy water” (31). However, it is in one of Morris’ last entries when she sees Santa Fe for the first time that her exasperation is clearly expressed: “The houses are mud, the fences are mud, the churches & courts are mud, in fact it is all mud” (41). Throughout Morris’ journey mud represents difficulty: it slows the horses and the wagons, it dirties the water, and it is the end product of a storm. With Morris’ sense of wanting to push forward illustrated by her counting the miles and time, mud is a hindrance. Since mud has come to represent hardship for Morris, when she sees that Santa Fe, the place she is to live for the next three years, is “all mud,” she is frustrated. She has traveled this far to be surrounded symbolically by adversity.

Another element that weighs heavily on Morris as she journeys to Santa Fe is the scorching heat. She notes numerous times how harsh and intolerable the heat becomes—especially on the open prairie where there is no respite from the “boiling” sun (30). However, she does find a short interruption from the oppressive heat and enjoys “renewed strength and spirit” after camping for the evening at Cold Springs (33). The heat literally and figuratively drains
Morris of her energy and strength of mind. It steals away her mental, physical, and spiritual existence; however, it is through water that she experiences renewal and in some ways a momentary rebirth and revival of her oppressed spirit.

The Natural World

Even though Morris focuses many of her daily entries on mileage, road conditions, and social activity, she does take a moment or two to recognize the beauty and grandeur around her. She notes that the “prairies are perfectly covered with flowers & beautiful ones too” (28) and that “I never thought I should be as near the Rocky mountains as I am but here I am seeing their distant grandeur” (35). For Morris the landscape symbolizes life and new life. The blossoming flowers covering the landscape denote that the landscape is alive and emanates a sense of hope. The magnificence of the mountains signify that Morris is getting closer to her ultimate destination where she will create a new home and life for herself. Also, just as the natural world displays its power adversely through the harsh weather, the mountains before her illustrate that the natural world can also display its power auspiciously.

Another example of Morris’ commentary on the splendor of the natural world occurs when she notes on one occasion after a storm that “the sky was perfectly beautiful sublimely beautiful and I quietly enjoyed it” (31). As noted before, the storms that she experienced on the plains were often sudden and violent; however, here she is experiencing the opposite effect: peace and serenity. Furthermore, she compares the landscape outside of Las Vegas to Harper’s Ferry, noting that “some of the passes almost equal to Harpers ferry [sic] which boasts the most grand & beautiful scenery in our Country” (39). Her comparison associates a familiar setting with an unfamiliar one, providing her comfort within a foreign environment.
On one hand the natural world sometimes provides a respite from the wild and unknown for Morris; however, the landscape also offers a bleak, depressing, and discouraging atmosphere as well. For example, the further southwest they travel the landscape changes and Morris notes that “the whole earth in this country is covered with Cacti and a kind of palmetto as to render a walk anything but agreeable” indicating that the region is dry and hot (34). While before Morris was admiring the unencumbering beauty of the landscape, here she is held captive within the landscape because her movement is limited by the prickly plant life. In addition, she notes that “Las Vegas is the most lonesome looking I ever saw and has fewer attractions—there is nothing pleasant to cast the eye on for a moment not a tree a shrub or a flower nothing but black mud walls” (38). In this description, there is desolation and loneliness and, while Morris has had the benefit of company around her, it indicates that she has begun to realize how isolated and lonely the frontier is. Again she notes the mud, signifying the hardship and difficulty involved with traveling west and it is disheartening for her.

Just as unnerving as the landscape could be at times for Morris, crossing rivers provides anxiety as well. As with many westward travelers, crossing a river is an almost daily experience and the preparation and effort involved falls upon everyone’s shoulders in the caravan. Many times Morris’ group is waylaid several days due to swollen creeks and rivers because crossing is just too dangerous. Unlike the other women who rode the westward trails, Morris does not provide much detail regarding each crossing except that they did so quite regularly. However, she does note that on one occasion that the river “was high & we had a good deal of difficulty getting all over. Mrs. Graham, Mrs. Smith & I crossed in an Ambulance they were frightened, but I was not in the least, tho the Doct [sic] informed me after we landed that we came within an ace of upsetting” (30). Although Morris remarks that she was not frightened at the time, the fact
that she notes these details of the crossing suggests her uneasiness in learning about her close call. So far she has been quite insulated against the harsher realities of making a journey like this one and hearing that she was so close danger helps to put the risk she is taking into perspective for her: she is not invulnerable to danger.

The Foreign Landscape

The unit with which Morris travels encounters Indians early in their journey. Morris' first encounter with Indians occurs when the caravan stops for a few days because of a swollen river. Morris writes that they went inside one of the Indian houses there and that "the woman was pretty & spoke french [sic] She was making mockasins [sic], plenty of Caw Indians about the door; a dirty bedaubed set ..." (23). Even though Morris notes that the woman was pretty, she still looks at them as dirty and excessively ornamented. However, the next time she mentions the Indians she notes that she was afraid of Indians one night, but "they say we are not on dangerous ground yet" (26). Her first interaction is positive and benign, yet the next time she mentions Indians she is afraid.

The next "social" interaction with the Indians again goes well. Morris notes that her group had "met a party of Arapahoes to day they approached us rather timidly at first were quite sociable afterwards & had long talk which they carried on by signs" (29). She is not afraid and seems to enjoy their foreignness. Again on another occasion while they are waiting for the rest of the unit to cross a river Morris writes that they were "perfectly beset with Indians and amused ourselves with them. One of the young squaws took a great fancy to my diamond ring & generously offered me a brass bracelet in exchange which I declined" (30). In this situation as well as the other interactions, the Indians amuse Morris; they entertain her by their uncultured ways. She does not feel threatened by them during the day; however, her only mention of her
fear of the Indians is during the night. Even though her experiences have been uneventful with
the Indians, this fear may be spurred by the fact that on several occasions they have come upon
"broken arms, arrow heads, bones, pieces of clothing, scraps of paper" indicating that the people
had been involved in a conflict and had been murdered and buried there. There are also many
stories of massacres along the trail, even though there is often no physical evidence of it actually
taking place.

Besides encounters with the Indians, Morris also notes a few encounters with Mexicans.
The first notation is her reference to "our Mexican" who performs miscellaneous tasks for
modest payment (27). She never mentions his name, but does note that on one occasion after he
had collected a good deal of wood, she had "sent him a good drink of Brandy & he felt well
compensated for his trouble" (27). However, later she notes that the Mexican had $70 stolen
from his trunk that he had been saving to give to his daughter in Santa Fe. Her referring to him
by his ethnic background distances herself from him—he is other. To Morris, he is beneath her in
class and race. The fact that she pays him by giving him a drink as opposed to money (which he
obviously understands the value of since he is saving his earnings to give to his daughter) seems
demeaning, especially when she notes that he feels "well compensated" by it. It is an implication
the he is uncultured and wild, like the landscape in which he lives. His foreignness is
synonymous with debauchery.

Loss on the Frontier

During the journey, several soldiers in her husband's military unit become sick and die.
Surprisingly though, while Morris does take note of the deaths in her diary, she does not attach
too much emotion to the loss. One of the first deaths that occur soon into her journey is that of a
soldier in their camp who dies from cholera. This entry is framed by a note in the change of
weather (from warm to cold) and followed by the fact that the division had to shorten their march that day due to four more soldiers having contracted cholera. Subsequently, another military unit commanded by “Maj Graham” overtakes her husband’s unit and moves forward (24). Since Morris’ focus is on the journey itself, that is, the mileage and conditions, here death is viewed as an impediment to the progress of the journey. The fact that the weather has turned colder is a significant backdrop to the death and impending deaths that she writes about in the next sentence. She does not name the deceased and dying, but does name the major whose unit has passed them. Here Morris sees the journey west as a competition among the military units and she wants to win.

A week later “a soldier private Fisher” drowns (27). At the beginning of her entry Morris notes that it is “impossible to cross the Creek,” but then continues explaining that one of the officers’ cooks made her a loaf of bread and told Morris that the prairie life agrees with her (27). She names the deceased in this entry, but expresses no further emotion about the death. One possible reason for her stoic ism towards the deaths could be that she does not want her family, namely her father to whom she addresses her diary, to worry about her safety and health. Coming from the upper class background that she does, she may not always deal with this harsh of circumstances, therefore, she does not deny the deaths, but minimizes them so as not to worry her family. What she does note, however, is that amid the death and disease she is healthy.

However, the most striking entry on this topic is her penultimate entry in which she notes both a death and a birth framed by her homesickness and feeling “sick & low spirited”: “Capt Sykes called to bid me good by it made me quite homesick to see him going to the States and direct to my dear home – Mrs. Easton had a daughter born this morning - An artillery Soldier shot himself last night being as he said weary of life” (43). The weariness of the road, the foreign
land, and the deaths she has experienced all weigh heavily on her. She recognizes what she has left behind: her family and her home. The birth, the sign of hope and new life, is inserted between loss and death, illustrating that her hope is overwhelmed by despair.

**Conclusion**

Although she has become acclimated to living on the wild frontier, Morris still feels a sense of loss by journey’s end. Throughout her journal she maintains a moderate tone regarding what she is experiencing; however, by the journey’s conclusion the tone of her entries become much more emotional. It is quite a startling contrast when Morris notes in her opening entry that everybody was “in good health and spirits,” (20), yet closes her diary feeling “sick & low spirited” (43). While Morris was fortunate to have many of the comforts of home around her, these material objects cannot displace the sense of loss and loneliness that she feels.
Chapter 4. Lydia Allen Rudd

Lydia and Harry Rudd and their friends—named in her diary only as Henry and Mary—set out for Oregon in May of 1852. Neither couple had children. The couples intended to file for shares of land in Oregon under the Donation Act, which provided that both husbands and wives could enter claims for land. Rudd, in particular, seemed to have been anxious to have land in her own name. Her diary shows them traveling through the cholera epidemic that swept through the wagon train in June. They also traveled with other sickness as well—measles, mountain fever, and dysentery. The bad weather and the constant exposure affected even the young and the strong. Rudd describes as almost commonplace as pattern of barter with the Indians they met along the road. It is clear that whatever exchanges the men may have carried on, Rudd made her own bargains herself with the Indians and exhibited no reticence in doing so. The final leg of their journey was made in an Indian canoe. Rudd arrived in Oregon in October of 1852.

In many of the diaries of the women who went west it is often obvious which aspect of the journey provided the greatest distress and preoccupation—crossing rivers and mountains, domestic duties, safeguarding their children, and so on. For Rudd it is the death and sickness that surrounds her on her journey. After her initial enthusiasm regarding the trip, her spirit is deflated by the loss of life that she sees on a daily basis. On several occasions Rudd provides as much background as she can about the deceased. Death is overwhelming and its futility spurs Rudd not to allow the land to consume any individual without a sentence or two remembering them.

Sickness, like death, is also ubiquitous on the frontier. In almost every entry for several weeks Rudd makes some notation regarding a fellow traveler’s illness and prognosis. Some entries contain only a notation of sickness, including the Rudd’s friend Henry. The caravan often stops for days at a time in order for the sick to recuperate and regain their strength. Rudd notes
the stark reality of the cholera epidemic when she writes: “The sickness on the road is alarming—most all proves fatal” (191).

With a streak of independence as well as a strong desire to claim land for herself through the Donation Act, Rudd exhibits business savvy in her exchanges with the Indians. While she does see the Indians as inferior, she does not note feeling afraid of them. She has several bartering transactions and her group makes use of the Indians’ expertise in piloting the rivers.

Rudd begins her diary enthusiastically. Her first entry is lengthy and filled with awe and appreciation for the land. She is embarking on a new life and is filled with hope and excitement; however, very quickly her eagerness wanes. Soon there are only a few scattered notations in her diary regarding the landscape. Her entries instead are filled with details of the death, sickness, and suffering that surrounds her caravan. Her nascent spirit is stifled and she remains disillusioned for most of her journey.

Rudd in many ways challenges the notion of domesticity. While there are a few short remarks regarding household maintenance, there is a strong sense of her independent spirit. She travels west with her husband, but she also travels west for herself—so she can claim land—and emerges as a true pioneer.

The Desolate Frontier

Rudd’s diary is filled with notations about the graves she passes. Only three days into the journey her death toll begins. Rudd feels each death personally and takes a moment to remember the unknown individual by recording what information she can glean about the deceased from others. After passing her first grave, the group meets a man on his way back east; he had just buried his wife that morning. Rudd’s details of the grave and the man they met are only short phrases. Her scarcity of words reveals the impact and reality of the death for Rudd. There is an
underlying feeling of anger toward the land and its ability to provide the opportunity for new life, yet at the same time extinguished it.

Another death about which Rudd provides details is that of a “deaf and dumb man” in their caravan. She writes: “Our deaf and dumb man died this morning a few rods from our camp name and place of residence we could not learn for he was too sick to write We found him lying by the side of the road without a person near that ever saw him before” (190). The sense of desolation and isolation on the open prairie is overwhelming in this entry. By acknowledging his existence through only a few sentences in her diary, she has given him an identity so he will not have died alone and abandoned.

Rudd records the death of a young woman in their train whose sister is also gravely ill. Rudd speaks to the father of the two women and he tells her that “within two weeks he had buried his wife one brother one sister two sons in law” (191). The next several entries note that because of the number of sick people in the caravan they either travel only a few miles or none at all and Rudd notes the situation as “rather discouraging” (192). Misery, angst, and tragedy pervade the text and Rudd begins to feel a sense of futility when she herself becomes ill for a few days and she feels as if she is “almost dead” (193). The cattle are sick and dying, too. Death comes every day.

The Wild Frontier

Being one of the only people who does not become completely debilitated by illness, Rudd has many interactions with the Indians in order to secure the food and assistance they need. On the second day of their journey they encounter Indians, who were collecting a toll for passage across the river. Later that evening the Indians came to their campsite and Rudd notes:
We gave them something to eat and they left. Some of them [had] on no shirt only 
a blanket, while others were ornamented in Indian style with their faces painted in 
spots and stripes feathers and fur on their heads beads [sic] on their neck and 
brass rings on their on their wrists and arms and in their ears armed with rifles and 
spears.

(188)

There is neither mention nor implication that Rudd is afraid of the Indians. Their unusual 
style of dress make some uncomfortable, but Rudd seems to be interested in the difference since 
she takes the time to note the various items they are wearing.

Rudd's next several entries involving interactions with the Indians are written in a very 
matter-of-fact manner, noting what she has "swapped" (bread, an apron, a sewing need, and an 
old shirt) and what she has received in return ("good berries," "a pair of moccasins," and 
"salmon") (192–3). However, in her entry in which she notes that she received the berries, she 
refers to the Indians as "snakes" ("Some of the snake Indians came to our camp this morning") 
(192). It is difficult to surmise why Rudd uses this derogatory reference. The entry is framed by 
one of the few entries describing the beauty of the landscape and another about Rudd and her 
friend finding strawberries. It is possible that the Indians' connection and association to the land 
remind her of the wildness of the frontier and the lives that the wildness has claimed.

The Ever-Changing Landscape

Rudd expresses mixed feelings toward the landscape. As noted earlier, her first entry is 
filled with enthusiasm and excitement. She writes: "In front of us as far as vision could reach 
extended the green hills covered with fine grass ... Behind us lay the Missouri with its muddy 
water hurrying past as if in great haste to reach some destined point ... But with good courage 
and not one sigh of regret I mounted my pony ..." (188). The green hills are symbolic of the 
new life, freedom, and possibility the frontier promised; the Missouri River represents the
thousands of emigrants that also hurried past on their way to obtain their goal of going west. Unlike many women who traveled west, Rudd expresses no regret in leaving her home behind. She is eager and, with the possibility of her owning a piece of this freedom, full of courage and drive to go forward into the uncivilized frontier.

Like Rudd’s initial entry, her next one regarding the natural world is also lengthy and full of energy and emotion. She describes the lush valleys, rolling prairies, belts of timber and flowers, and thick foliage. The sense of freedom and limitlessness that the natural world possesses permeates her writing. Her independent spirit is allowed soar and she takes in the majesty of the frontier. By choosing to describe the miles of trees “winding through the prairie like some huge snake,” Rudd is using the language of nature to fully describe her experience.

In addition, once her caravan is only a few days from their final destination, Rudd notes that there are signs of “civilization in the shape of a few houses” (196). She has emerged from the wild and uncivilized frontier, and her journey has come full circle: she began her journey in the civilization of the east, traveled across the wild frontier to emerge into the civilized new life of the west.

Even though Rudd expresses admiration and joy in the unknown landscape, she also experiences its harshness, too. Rudd’s caravan crosses its share of dry and dusty creeks and roads and the prairie winds provide a constant cloud of dust and dirt. With this dryness is also unbearable heat as Rudd notes: “This has been the warmest day that we have had this year. We have had a tedious day our road has been sand hills the sand six inches deep in places and the heat almost intolerable . . .” (190). This entry is framed by two entries about the number of deaths that they have encountered over the last several days. The image of dust, dryness, and death are synonymous with the vulnerability of life on the plains and evokes a wasteland image
with no signs of hope or any life sustaining force. Likewise, Rudd describes the landscape as "miserable" and the "most desolate looking region ... that ever I dream was in this world" (193). The landscape now has become consumed with disease and death for Rudd and any beauty has been overridden by the severity of her situation and the overwhelming sense of pointlessness.

Rudd notes a few times when they had to cross the swift and dangerous waters of the Columbia River. Her first mention of fording the river is brief and short: "this is a very rapid stream to dangerous to ford we ferried over our wagons and forded our stock ..." (194). However, her next two entries are much longer and are composed of several sentences rather than phrases. Rudd's caravan crosses the Columbia River after several days of waiting for the wind to dissipate or the weather to improve. She describes the scenery along the river as "picturesque and wild" as well as the unrelenting wind and rain that makes the crossing even more treacherous. One woman in particular is "very much alarmed and screaming every breath as loud as she could possibly" (195).

The Freedom of the Frontier

While Rudd makes very few mentions of her domestic responsibilities, her strong sense of individuality comes through in the text. She notes that she is "so anxious to get some place to stop and settle that my patience is not worth much" (196). Rudd is so close to the end of her journey and her patience has been worn by the constant death and disease that surrounded her during her journey. She is ready to claim the reward that she has traveled so far to obtain: land.

Rudd seems intent on securing land not so much to augment her husband's share of land, but for her own sense of independence and self-reliance. After they have reached their destination in Oregon and her husband has met up with an acquaintance that owns a store in
town, the Rudds realize that there are no available houses in which to live for the winter. Her husband is able to secure a job and his acquaintance allows them to live in the back room of his store for the winter. Rudd's last entry in her diary expresses her frustration and her sense of futility of her journey when she realizes that they will be unable to make their claim for land. Her disappointment is devastating when she writes, "I expect that we shall not make a claim after all our trouble getting here on purpose for one I shall have to be a poor and dependent on a man my life time" (197).

Even though there are some women writing and speaking about women's rights during this time, the women's movement is still only in its infancy. Rudd is very much ahead of her time with her desire to own land and move away from the traditional role of woman that society has dictated for her. Her wanting to take charge of her own life is a startling contrast to the women who are part of the cult of domesticity and Rudd longs to span the spheres that separate men and women. She has taken the incredibly long and arduous road west, not only for her husband's dream but to see her own dream fulfilled. For Rudd, the crushing disappointment and disillusionment of her journey's end becomes more overwhelming than even the most challenging aspect of the trail west.
Conclusion

Rudd’s writing reflects the spirit and drive that many pioneers possessed. She was a woman who was ahead of her time in her acknowledgement and frustration with the role of woman in society. Her strength came not only from her physical constitution, but also from her mental capacity to maintain hope in the face of adversity and lost dreams. Her writing style and tone were very closely tied to her emotional and mental state allowing the flow of the narrative to rise and fall with the challenges of her journey. She emerges from the pages of her diary as a natural leader.
Chapter 5. Amelia Stewart Knight

Amelia Stewart Knight started from Monroe County, Iowa, and headed for the Oregon Territory with her husband and seven children in April 1853. The main focus of her diary is her children and the road. Her children provide her with constant worry: a few contract scarlet fever and poison ivy, another one falls from the wagon twice, and one of her daughters gets left behind. Her diary also demonstrates that for Knight the Indians were both much-needed guides and provisioners. One important detail that Knight omits from her writings is that when she begins her journey she is in the first trimester of her pregnancy. Her information about feeling too sick to cook or sensitive to the smell of carrion along the road, that rainfall has kept them all in wet clothes, or that the mountain passes have forced them to walk and climb seem matter-of-fact, but when weighed against the fact that she is pregnant they take on new meaning and significance. Knight and her family arrived in the Oregon Territory September 1853.

For Knight the western landscape was more of an enemy than an ally. Early on in the journey she writes that she wishes she were “home, sweet, home” (Schlissel 202) and later she notes in exasperation of the hardships of their journey “all this for Oregon ... Oregon you must be a wonderful country” (206). The disappointment she expresses upon finally arriving in Oregon exemplifies her overall attitude toward going west: “... there we are in Oregon making our camp in an ugly bottom, with no home, except our wagons and tent. It is drizzling and the weather looks dark and gloomy ...” (216). The landscape and the weather reflect Knight’s disillusionment on two levels. First, as a woman in 1853 she has no other choice but to leave her family and familiar setting and go west with her husband. Living within the confines of a patriarchal society she has no viable alternatives. Second, she is in the first trimester of her eighth pregnancy. She is aware of the stamina and endurance required to make a journey like this
and realizes that maintaining her household on the road will prove to be even more taxing for her during this time.

In addition, it is evident she is uncomfortable in the natural world and is more at ease within the domestic world, which is familiar to her and where she is in control. Each journal entry mentions some aspect of her role as mother and family caretaker. She notes the natural beauty around her only once and it is brief. For Knight, there is danger in the unfamiliar land and the alien people who inhabit it. The constant exasperation, fear, and apprehension is clear and inherent in the details she includes about her children’s illness, the deaths around her, the terrible roads, the weather, the sand, dust, and mud, her interactions with the Indians, and crossing the rivers and mountains. Knight learns firsthand the disappointment and loss involved in the overland journey and focuses on what causes her the most distress and angst: the unknown and unyielding landscape.

**Life and Death on the Frontier**

Knight’s primary preoccupation throughout her diary is with the road and her children. Both of these concerns are closely intertwined. While there is mention of domestic chores, they are brief: “Hurrah and bustle to get breakfast over“ (201); “Done some washing and sewing today” (203); and “Wash and cook this afternoon“ (205). Knight feels at ease within this domestic sphere, which may explain her brevity in description. However, Knight does provide frequent, although minimal, details about her children’s illnesses and accidents. Only a few days into their journey two of her children contract the mumps. Later one of her sons has scarlet fever, her youngest son falls twice from the wagon, and they leave one of their daughters behind by mistake. Her entry containing the details about her son’s fall is framed by death (carrion) and fear (a river crossing) both of which become for Knight the epitome of her journey west.
The angst that Knight feels when she realizes that she has left her daughter behind accidentally permeates her lengthy entry. They had traveled some miles and had stopped to rest when another caravan drove up with their daughter. The young girl had been sitting under the bank of the river and didn't realize that her family had left. It was common for children to ride in other wagons within the train and Knight assumed her daughter was in a neighbor wagon. Many pioneers had to leave behind their homes, their relatives, their belongings, and their lives in order to begin a new existence in the west. This incident resonates this theme of loss associated with traveling west, both in terms of leaving behind something and the possibility of losing family and friends during the journey.

Another theme throughout Knight's journal is the death she witnesses on the plains. Counting, noting, and acknowledging those who had died put the journey in perspective: with expansion west came loss of life. It also reiterates and reminds Knight just how dangerous a journey she is embarking upon and the frequency with which death occurs on the frontier. Knight is very aware of the risks that frontier life presented. They constantly are confronted by death either when passing dead cattle or graves on the roadside, hearing of deaths from other caravans, or the sickening stench of carrion that permeates the air. Knight feels each death personally whether it is an unknown individual or animal and takes a moment, however brief, to lament or acknowledge the casualty of expansion. One particular death she notes is of a man who had drowned and left behind an ailing wife and several children. She notes, "with sadness and pity I passed [the wagon] who perhaps a few days before had been well and happy as ourselves" (204). Knight's exposure to death on the plains makes her uncomfortable and causes her to acknowledge her own vulnerability.
Knight, like other frontier women, recognizes how important their cattle and other animals are to the journey. They rely on the animals for strength and endurance as well as for nourishment, but like the other families, the Knights lose a great number of their cattle due to illness and fatigue. Knight writes, "This evening another of our best milk cows died. Cattle are dying off very fast all along this road. We are hardly ever out of sight of dead cattle... this cow was well and fat an hour before she died" (211). This last sentence conveys a similar sense of vulnerability that is contained in her note about the man who drowned: life can be lost in an instant on the frontier.

Knight notes the strain and stress to which the animals are subjected and identifies with animals in that regard. The constant death begins to take its toll on Knight: "... we are constantly driving around dead cattle, and shame on the man who has no pity for the poor dumb brutes that have to travel and toil month after month on this desolate road. (I could hardly help shedding tears, when we drove around this poor ox who had helped us along thus far, and has given us his very last step)" (213). Knight identifies with the ox: she is traveling the desolate and treacherous road; toiling over the unmarked trails; and giving all her energy, her last steps, to the journey. She cries these tears of frustration for herself, her children, and for all those lives that have been lost in order for the pioneers to move forward.

The Troubling Landscape

Like other women on the frontier, crossing the rivers and mountains is always a source of stress and anxiety for Knight. With small children to worry about, the thought of possibly losing all their possessions is insufferable. Knight goes into great detail about one crossing in particular in which they had to walk across an extremely narrow, rock bridge "with water roaring and tumbling" below them (210). She notes several times the solidness of the rocks surrounding them
and rushing water below. While a source of nourishment and life, water also can just as violently extinguish life. The rocks provide no flexibility for Knight in her crossing, much like the constant and unyielding landscape. In order to survive the challenges of the landscape she needs to flexible; but the same is not true for the frontier.

Another troubling region of the landscape that Knight encounters the crossing of the “Devil’s Crater” (207). She describes this stretch of land as being the “roughest and most desolate piece of ground that was ever made . . . Not a drop of water, nor a spear of grass to be seen, nothing but barren hills, bare and broken rock, sand and dust . . . ” (207). The Devil’s Crater essentially is hell—dry, desolate, barren, jagged terrain with dust and sand. However, once across the crater there is the promise of renewed hope. Ultimately, this is the journey west: a test of endurance with the possibility of reward for those who succeed.

Another aspect of the landscape that Knight notes in her diary is that of dust and mud. With a constant wind blowing across the plains, there is an ever-present sandy film coating everything from the wagons to the food. The dust is so thick at times that it blinds Knight and she has to wash her eyes out several times in order to see (207). Knight, like the rest of the pioneers, has struck out without knowing for certain the direction or outcome of her journey. This image of blindness represents the uncertainty of the wilderness, the unknown challenges of the frontier. She, like those pioneers before her, is making her way blindly across the western landscape.

On another level, blindness also symbolizes the darkness of looming death and isolation on the frontier. Similarly, Knight describes how difficult travel is with mud being “ankle deep” (208) and “up to our hubs” (205). The mud weighs her feet down making movement difficult. The mud restricts her movement physically, psychologically, and even spiritually. Like the
mountains the mud is obstinate and immobilizing. Both the dust and mud have religious connotations as well. In the Bible, God created humanity from the earth and through death, they will return to the earth. The living are united through the dust and mud with both the land and those pioneers who have gone before them.

There are only two occasions in which Knight admires the beauty of the landscape. When their group comes upon a natural hot spring, Knight is amazed, “I have only to pour water on to my tea and it is made. There is no cold water in this part” (211). Her amazement lies in the convenience that the landscape affords her—she does not have to boil water for her tea. The earth has offered her respite from her daily drudgery and she appreciates break. Later in her journey Knight notes the majesty of the Cascade Mountains: “the handsomest timber in the world must be here in these Cascade mountains. Many of the trees are 300 feet high and so dense to almost exclude the light of heaven, and for my own part I dare not look to the top of them for fear of breaking my neck” (214—5). The religious aspect of her comment denotes the awe and respect she has for nature and its glory as well as how insignificant humanity is in comparison.

The Menacing Frontier

While always fearful and cautious of the Indians, Knight has several interactions and exchanges with them. Her first interaction involves the assistance of an Indian to guide her caravan across a small river. Knight does not provide much detail about this incident except that it is very cold and that her hands are “numb.” The numbness that Knight feels may run deeper than it just being cold. The absence of feeling or frozen emotion in this entry can be attributed to the fear of the Indian’s foreignness, her caravan’s reliance on the expertise of the Indian, and her vulnerability amid nature.
Knight’s next encounter is with a large village of Sioux Indians that happened to be passing by close to a river. A number of Indians surround their wagon wanting to trade beads and moccasins for bread. While Knight notes that she gives the Indians all the cakes she had baked, she does not mention what she has received in return. There is a sense that she gives the Indians what they want out of fear. What she wants in return for giving her cakes to them is to be left alone. Her husband trades hard crackers for a pair of moccasins and, after eating some of the crackers, the “big” Indian follows them and demands his moccasins back (207). Knight notes: “[The Indian] did not seem to be satisfied, or else he wished to cause us some trouble, or perhaps get into a fight. However, we handed the moccasins to him in a hurry and drove away from them as soon as possible . . . .” (207). The underlying feeling in this entry is that Knight is anxious, anticipating that some scuffle may ensue with the large village of Indians. Knight and her family are now the outcasts. The fact that the Indian approaches them demanding his moccasins back and they give them back and drive away as quickly as they can again emphasizes the trepidation with which they feel toward the Indians.

Several weeks later Knight notes that the area through which they are traveling is filled with “troublesome” Indians (209). Knight believes that the jaggedness and rugged of the terrain allows many places for the Indians to hide. She notes that this is a place where Indians had murdered several people recently and she is extremely nervous and lies awake all night “expect[ing] every minute we would be killed” (209). Even though Knight feels so uncomfortable with and suspicious of the Indians, she does buy some fish from the Indians, noting that they were “peaceful and friendly” (211), and later relies on them again to cross a river. However, the next interaction with the Indians is upsetting for Knight. A group of Indians sets up camp around their caravan and Knight cannot sleep. She notes that the Indians are “drunk
and noisy and kept up a continual racket,” making everyone uneasy (214). Knight is certain that there would have been trouble with these Indians if it were not for their watchdog that “hates an Indian and will not let one come near the wagons if he can help it” (214). This comment implies that their dog can relate to the Indians because they are both animals. She equates the Indians debauchery and depravity to the wildness within their animal-like nature.

**Relationships on the Plains**

One significant element of Knight’s diary is the brief inclusion of some details about her relationship with her husband. Unlike the other westward women, Knight writes on two occasions about her husband. Living within the cult of domesticity of the times, the separation of men and women is especially evident not only in their responsibilities, but also in many of their interactions. In general, with the patriarchal nature of society, men had more freedom of movement than women, often leaving their wives and children at home and heading west alone. On the trail, men many times went ahead to clear the trail or hunt for food. Women, in contrast, almost always traveled within a family structure and stayed with the wagon. However, in the two brief notes about her relationship with her husband, there is a sense of great love and mutual respect in their interaction with one another.

The first example of their affection for one another occurs while crossing a mountain. Her husband collects a bucket of snow for her as well as some flowers “which he said was growing close to the snow, which was about 6 feet deep . . .” (208). Like many of the women’s diaries from the west, it is the brevity and minimal detail in some of their entries that are brimming with energy and emotion. Throughout her travels Knight does not mention asking for assistance in the execution of her domestic responsibilities even though she is pregnant. In this attentive act, her husband is acknowledging the difficulty of her work and giving her a much-
needed break. After the scarcity and adversity of the landscape, her husband is offering its beauty to her. Knowing the hardship and difficulty she has endured pursuing the dream of going west, the flowers are a glimmer of hope. They are blooming in the snow; there is life and hope within the slumbering earth.

The second time that Knight and her husband share an intimate moment happens when they wander off together to explore a natural spring that the caravan has stumbled upon. The water spewing from the spring is too hot for bathing, so Knight and her husband “wandered far down this branch, as far as we dare, to find it cool enough to bathe in” (211). The act of wandering “as far as we dare” denotes both excitement and romance. It is the only moment throughout the journey that they are truly alone—however fleeting. The act of bathing together suggests a romantic intimacy and privacy that was definitely lacking during many of the westward journeys.

Conclusion

Knight, like so many other women of the westward expansion, shared a connection with the landscape. Her writing reflects her boundless energy, persistence, and determination to keep her family framework together and to maintain domestic order on the plains. From the very beginning it is evident that she was not enthusiastic about the journey and this lack of eagerness permeates her diary. However, even though she experienced loss, suffering, and disappointment, Knight continued to demonstrate her strength, perseverance, and courage.
Conclusion

There are several themes that run throughout the writings presented here: isolation, survival, attachment to the land, death, mourning, and frustration when drudgery got in the way of writing. While each of these women came from different backgrounds and circumstances, the western frontier did not discriminate in its challenges presented to each one individually. Even though each woman’s writing had a different focus and tone, they all shared many of the same experiences and emotions and were irrevocably affected by the frontier experience.

A common insight to the writing presented here was their strong sense of loss or leaving behind a part of themselves when entering into the wild. Whether it was her family, friends, or home, each woman mourned her dispossession of familiar surroundings and culture. Linked to this strong sense of loss was the death of family, friends, and acquaintances that they experienced along the trails. Being very cognizant of what they were leaving behind, what they did take with them, therefore, held even greater significance for them. Death and sickness shook their rootless travel and emphasized the lonely, isolated, and desolate aspect of frontier travel. Whether they named, acknowledged, mourned, or recorded the deceased with great, little, or no emotion, they nevertheless felt the loss on an individual level and could identify with it.

While the fear of sickness and death was a constant reality for the women, another constant fear was of those who inhabited this unknown territory. Some of the women viewed the Indians as wild animals with instincts base and uncultured. Others realized the tremendous benefit the Indians provided in their knowledge and experience with the land and its elements. Sometimes it was a bloody collision of cultures on the frontier; other times it was a mutual curiosity of differences. In either case, both societies were changed forever by these interactions and intermingling of cultures.
Besides the co-existence of the Indian society with that of the pioneers, there was a need for a beneficial co-existence with the land itself. The landscape offered tranquility and beauty as well as difficulty and violence. Some of the writers expressed their furor of emotions regarding the land through clipped phrases of frustration and long poetic paragraphs. The elements of water, dust, wind and fire reminded the women of their basic and natural connection with the landscape. In jumping into the wilderness, they were in many ways returning to the essence of humanity: a community with nature. Although they fought the challenges of mountains and rivers, they also reveled in their splendor and sense of renewal and hope. The women lived and breathed within the limits of their patriarchal confines, but soared within the boundlessness of nature and the expansive possibilities that lay before them.

Even though their role as women was determined for them by their society, each woman stepped out of that traditional domestic role and demonstrated that they possessed the strength and courage necessary to meet the challenges of the road. Whether it was maintaining order within their wagon household, leading the wagon when there was no man present, calling upon their resources to make life on the road bearable, or even driving an oxen team, these women transcended their domestic roles and broke through the gender restrictions placed on them.

Elizabeth Dixon Smith and Amelia Stewart Knight shared many similarities in their journeys. They both focused on their domestic duties and caring for their large families. The landscape provided them with much stress and anxiety, especially in crossing rivers and mountains. They were the caretakers of the sick and dying not only among their families, but also among the caravan as well. Their physical and mental reserves were boundless and they accepted the harsh realities and difficult responsibilities thrust upon them in the wild. Even
though many times they were frustrated by the unyielding landscape, they took a moment to
appreciate its brilliance.

Catherine Haun and Maria Anna Morris shared similar backgrounds and circumstances.
While compared to many women who crossed the frontier, their journey may have seemed less
troubled or at times even easy. However, despite their positions, their experiences illustrated that
the landscape and its inhabitants did not differentiate in administering challenges. These two
women experienced the same death and sickness, harsh weather, interactions with foreigners,
deprivation of frontier life, isolation, and loss of the familiar as women of lesser means. Even
though both Haun and Morris had the benefit of traveling with communities, by the journey’s
end each suffered the pain of leaving behind their former lives for new lives in the West.

While each women in her own way straddled the traditional masculine and feminine
sphere as put forth in the idea of the cult of domesticity, Lydia Allen Rudd embodied the early
stirrings of feminism by wanting to breakdown the barriers that women faced. Traveling west
meant something very different for Rudd: economic independence. Although she was not able to
fulfill her dream, her journey illustrated the injustice that many women felt within their society
and their longing to be treated as equals. Rudd’s journey, and many other women who shared her
ideals, demonstrated that women still had a difficult and long battle ahead of them before they
could begin to enjoy the same rights and privileges as men.

Regardless of their similarities and differences in motivations and experiences in their
travels, what sets these authors apart from other writers of the time is that the journey West was
the source for their inspiration. They ventured from the civilization of the East into the unknown
darkness of the wild frontier and emerged reborn to begin a new life in the West. The writings of
these female authors reveal that they welcomed adventure, felt both the beauty and serenity of
the landscape as well as the harshness and the violence, suffered deprivation, and remained open to change. The writings of these American heroines allow their experiences, their personalities, and most of all their voices to be heard throughout the annals of literature and history.
Works Cited


Bibliography


