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The Girl of the Golden West



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The Girl of the Golden West

BY PAULA HALL

It was a mystical West where men were men, and many women were just as tough. Western woman was far more than a face hidden by a ragged sunbonnet. This determined, strong-willed and enterprising woman of the West captured the attention of musical composer Giacomo Puccini, as she did many novelists, playwrights and artists of the day. Each developed individual versions of what these "gentle tamers" of the West might be.

Puccini's opera heroine, Minnie, arrived on the musical scene at the gala premiere of "La Fanciulla del West" at New York City's Metropolitan Opera on December 10, 1910. He first met her during a trip to New York in 1907, when he saw the character delighting Manhattan audiences in David Belasco's play "The Girl of the Golden West." Belasco and Puccini had already collaborated on "Madama Butterfly" and once again joined forces.

Minnie's complex character blends with the Wild West atmosphere to create the romantic images revered by audiences of the

early 1900s. A mix of gentle virtues and tough determination, Minnie is a bundle of contradictions. Living in a small California mining camp during the Gold Rush days of 1849, Minnie serves as barmaid for The Polka saloon and camp school teacher. She even reads scriptures from the Bible to the miners, who entrust their gold to her for safekeeping.

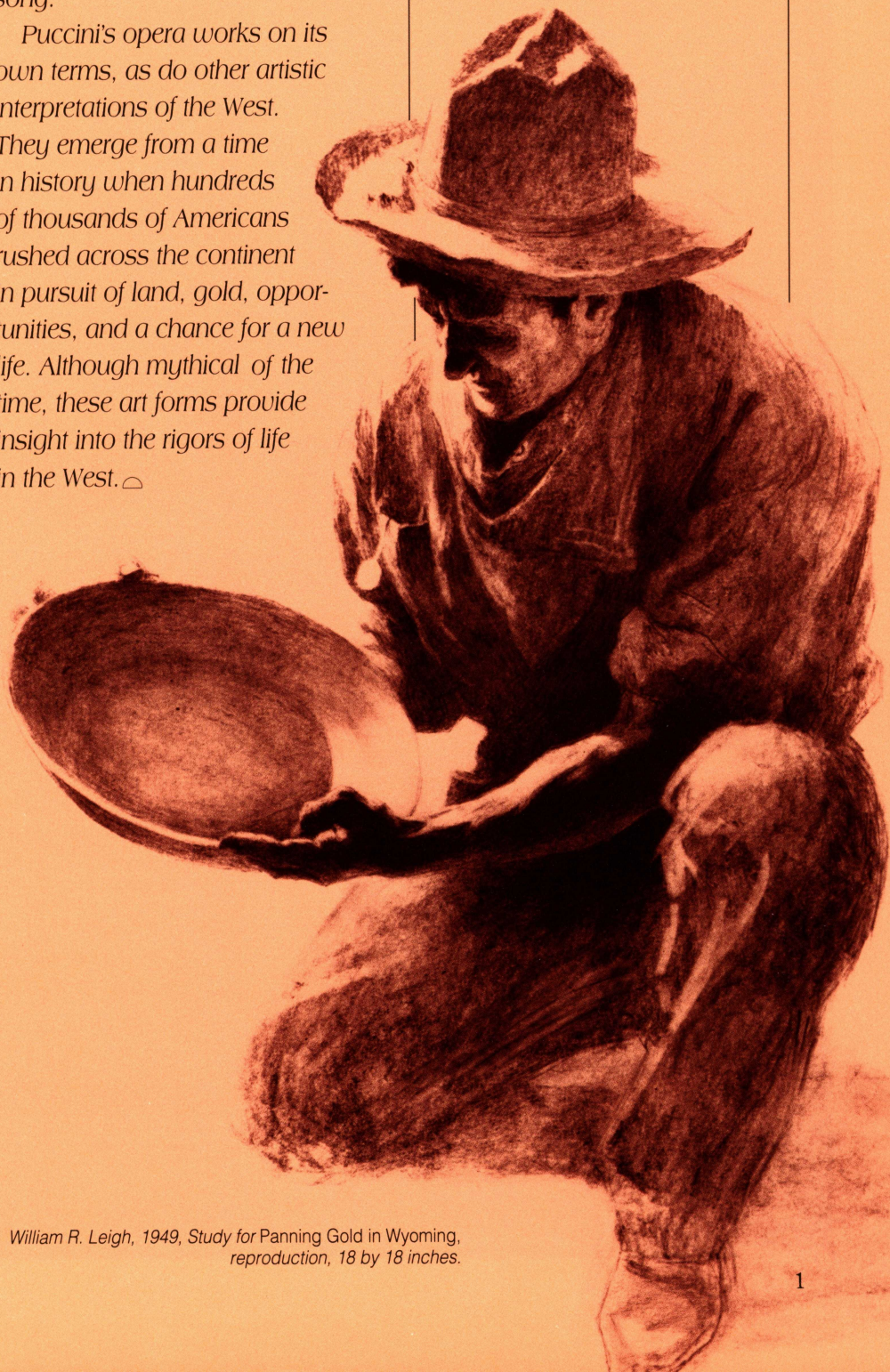
Influenced by the charms of a handsome stranger in the camp, Minnie displays another side of her character. Even though she knows her lover is a bandit, she hides him from the sheriff. Ramerrez is found eventually and the vengeful miners are determined to hang him. Minnie holds the mob at bay, reminding them of her years of devotion and in return asks for her lover's life. Minnie and Ramerrez leave the mining camp to begin a new life.

Although the story bears little resemblance to facts as they were during the California mining days of the mid-1800s, Puccini's conception of the American West and the sharp-shooting, virtuous Minnie, reflects a romantic version preferred by American and European audiences of the time. He never saw the West except in his mind's eye. He delved into as much authentic musical Americana as he could find. Minstrel

songs and ballads, plus the syncopated rhythms of the cakewalk, influenced his score. A lullaby from the opera has been thought by many reviewers over the years as an actual Indian song.

Puccini's opera works on its own terms, as do other artistic interpretations of the West. They emerge from a time in history when hundreds of thousands of Americans rushed across the continent in pursuit of land, gold, opportunities, and a chance for a new life. Although mythical of the time, these art forms provide insight into the rigors of life in the West. ▢

Gilcrease Museum joins the Tulsa Opera to offer a "Gold Dust Weekend" symposium to be held in conjunction with the November production of "La Fanciulla del West." Tulsa Opera's production will be the Oklahoma premiere of Puccini's composition.



William R. Leigh, 1949, *Study for Panning Gold in Wyoming*, reproduction, 18 by 18 inches.

*Families
of the West*

The Ties that Bind

BY ELLIOTT WEST

In his preface to the score of “The Girl of the Golden West,” Giacomo Puccini quoted from an early chronicle of California. During the gold rush of 1849, this historian wrote that people gathered from all corners of the world, leaving their pasts and even their very names behind them. There, in the rude camps of the Sierra Nevada, they “worked out their strange destinies in a manner incredible to us today.”

That image – of a rough-and-tumble society of colorful, sometimes dangerous characters – is a familiar one. It appears in the stories of Mark Twain and Bret Harte and in films like “McCabe and Mrs. Miller”



Emanuel G. Leutze, ca. 1861, Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, 30 by 40 inches, oil on canvas.





and “Paint Your Wagon.” As history, it is exciting and dramatic — and distorted. For it leaves out almost entirely the story of ordinary families that were an important part of early California society.

In some ways, to be sure, the gold rush camps were truly “incredible to us today.” The vast majority among the hordes of goldseekers were males. Young unmarried clerks and farmboys hoped to make their fortunes before heading back east to settle down; husbands and fathers hesitated to drag their wives and children across the continent. As a result, the population was crazily out of balance. Officials at Fort Laramie, in present-day Wyoming, kept careful count of the overlanders who passed their post on their way toward the Pacific. As of June 3, 1850, the tally for that year stood at 119 women, 99 children, and 17,443 men. In the mining towns at journey’s end, men outnumbered women and children by ten-, twenty- and sometimes thirty-to-one.

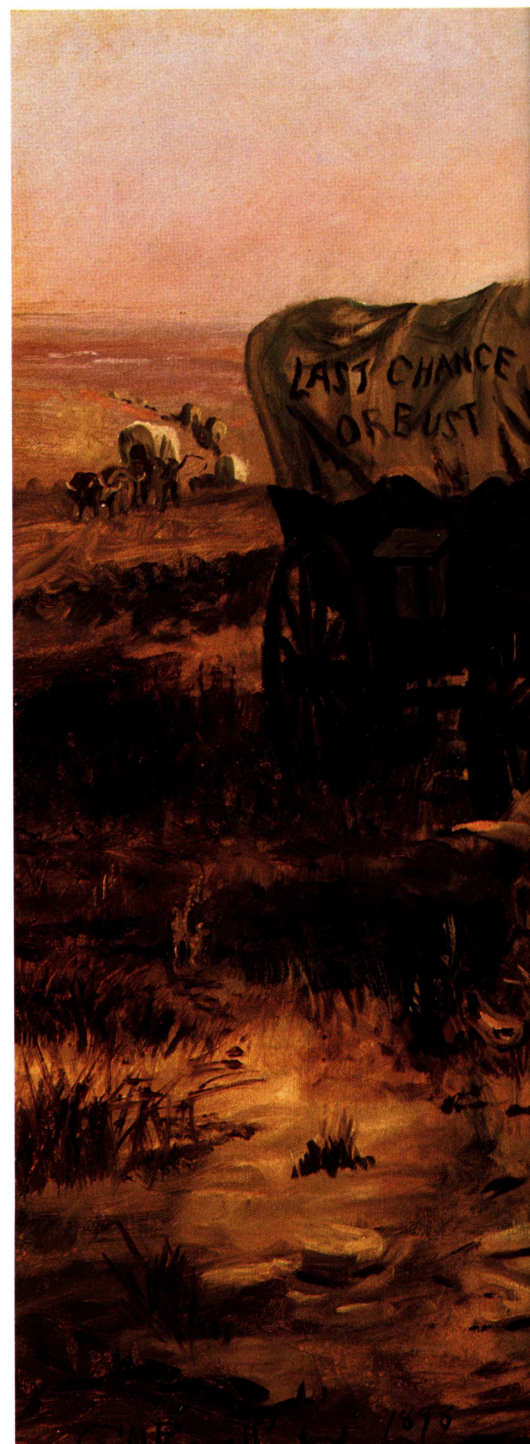
In the first flush days of the gold rush, then, the ordinary family was a rare sight indeed. That, in turn, affected attitudes and behavior in the camps. Not surprisingly the male majority looked on females and young people with special affection.

A piece of contemporary fiction described the reception of the earliest female arrival in one town:

“Hooray! for a live woman in the mines! What’ll the boys say? They’ll peel out o’ their skins for joy. A live female woman in the mines! . . . Turnpikes and railroads come next, and steam engines! . . . A live female woman in the mines! fol lol do lol — lol lol de ral!”

Children, if anything, were greeted with even greater enthusiasm. Many fathers “baching it” were plagued by loneliness. “I would give a good share of my prospective interest in California for one hour with wife and children,” one argonaut wrote in his diary. Some feared their daughters and sons would forget them. William Dresser asked his wife, Sarah, to “give my love and affection to each of the children, talk to them about their father.” Such men were racked by guilt over leaving sons and daughters behind. In a gold camp poem, a man working a prospector’s “rocker” summed up the feelings of this homesick army:

“So here condemned, by Fates unkind,
I rock illusive sand,
And dream of wailing babes at home,
Unrocked, an orphan band.”



*“That image - of a rough-and-tumble society
of colorful, sometimes dangerous characters - is a
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and dramatic - and distorted.”*

William De la M. Cary, Covered Wagon Camp, sepia ink on paper, 8 1/4 by 11 1/4 inches.

Charles M. Russell, 1898, A Doubtful Visitor, oil on canvas, 24 1/4 by 36 1/4 inches.



tional support. Neither could she bring many of the tools needed for her astounding variety of labors — cooking, cleaning, washing, doctoring, making and mending clothes, and much more. California's isolation and explosive population growth kept the cost of living high. Rents were exorbitant. An egg might cost fifty cents, a pound of bacon ten times that. One woman recalled paying five dollars for a quart of pickles and three dollars a year for small, sour apples strung on twine. Because her husband's income was erratic, a housewife often had to supplement the family income with even more work — washing and mending for single men and taking in boarders.

All the while a wife and mother was expected to rear her children by the proper path and see to the moral betterment of society. That, to say the least, was an uphill struggle. Observers universally agreed that California camps, teeming with frustrated, bored, unattached men, were among the most debauched societies ever seen. "On this point [morality], it is impossible to be too severe," a miner wrote. One woman wrote that her neighbor called her town "a perfect hell, and so it is." After seeing men and women dead drunk in a gambling hall while nude women danced on tables, she added: "I never saw a place where there was so much need of teaching and preaching and living as we ought to live."

Many of the same men who cheered the arrival of a respectable woman, then, seemed determined to make her job as difficult as possible. Saloons like The Polka in Puccini's opera typically outnumbered all

other businesses combined. The activities inside, however, were considerably more degraded and depressing than shown in "Girl of the Golden West." Children's relentless curiosity drew them to the bawdiest side of mining town life. As adults, recalling these years, they would write with authority of grogshops and whorehouses, of faro games, drunken brawls, and drug addicts.

Given all this, rearing children honorably by the standards of the day might appear a hopeless task. Yet the wild side of early California, while certainly most noticeable, was also misleading. The key word to

understanding gold rush society is not "corruption" but "paradox."

Some elements of respectable and refined Victorian society appeared virtually from the start. The Polka was not the only game in town. At least in the more prosperous camps, a church or two was available within a couple of months, and a school not long after. Not all unattached men wallowed in whiskey holes. "I have read my Bible, Pope's 'Essay on Man,' and some fugitive pieces from Byron," W.T. Parker wrote in his diary one Sunday.

Behind the doors of a family cabin a vigorous social life might flourish. "Frequently our visitors were



William De la M. Cary, *Homesteading*, wash on paper, 9 1/4 by 7 1/2 inches.

*“By the thinking of the
day, those moving west
were not simply
developing the land’s potential;
they were also implanting
values and carrying a social
order into what was considered
a moral wilderness.”*

gentlemen of education and refinement who would have done honor to any party, even in the most refined circles of our eastern cities,” a mother remembered. Men trained in Boston’s Handel and Hayden Society often serenaded her family. Another wife wrote home:

“When we have a good blazing fire and all sitting in its cheerful light, with the flute, guitar, books and papers . . . and occasionally a pleasant group having a social game of whist, we can hardly realize that we are isolated from the whole world and completely hemmed in by the snowclad mountains of California”.

In quieter moments, parents and children spent evenings reading and visiting. Frank Kellogg’s memories were of his mother playing guitar while his father, a whittler extraordinaire, carved for his children an impressive collection out of yellow pine — pots and pans, birds and bears, a sawmill, pirate swords and General Grant’s saber.

The intimate moment shown in Eastman Johnson’s *The Doll* could easily have taken place in Grass Valley or Tin Cup in the California gold fields, perhaps a few doors away from the kinds of raucous and

bloody events portrayed in Puccini’s opera. Not every family behaved decorously, of course, and some seemed as wild as the gang of thieves in which one of Puccini’s characters, Ramerrez, grew up. A diarist in Boone’s Bar, California, wrote of a party among a family of Missouri neighbors that included two daughters, fourteen and sixteen: “It was a perfect rookery, a loud mingling of drunken foolery with blasphemy and obscenity.” The wife and mother, Sarah Royce, worried especially that the stresses of life in the diggings and the overwhelming male majority pulled many families apart, in particular tempting women to abandon their husbands for more attractive prospects.

Nonetheless, the surprising thing is that families survived as well as they did. Royce’s son, Josiah, grew up to become one of America’s most distinguished philosophers. Transplanted into one of the oddest and most turbulent societies in our history, working within the paradoxes of the mining frontier, the Royces, and others like them, managed to function according to the standards of the day. “Life . . . flowed along quietly with routine household duties, troubles and joys, much as it did in the mansions and cottages in the far-away East,” wrote a California boy grown to manhood.

We should beware of sugarcoating. Moving west brought plenty of emotional trauma, physical exhaustion, and psychological dislocation to mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. But the story also shows the resilience and adaptability of the most pervasive and important institution in American life — the family. ◡

Elliott West, Ph.D., professor of history at the University of Arkansas, has authored more than 30 articles on western history as well as several books. His Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far-Western Frontier published by the University of New Mexico, 1989, received the Western Heritage Award for Outstanding Nonfiction Book on the American West in 1989. West is a recognized specialist in western and frontier social history with a particular interest on the role of the family. He will be a featured speaker at Gilcrease Museum’s “Gold Dust Weekend” symposium.

A



*Olaf C. Seltzer, ca. 1928,
Pioneer Woman,
watercolor on paper,
18 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches.*



Women of the West

Myriad of Roles

BY ANNE BUTLER

Those pioneer women — what did they do in the settlement of the American West? For many years we thought the answer to be a simple one: nothing much! Of course, we admired the sunbonneted wives and mothers who trekked across the Plains, because they reeked of courage. We respected the few spunky military wives, dressed in Victorian Sunday-best, who bravely faced the “dangers,” because Frederic Remington showed them to us in his painting, *The Escort*, and Libby Custer told us about them in her memoir, *Following the Guidon*. We accepted the “soiled doves” who lurked about every frontier saloon, because the Old West needed a few slightly tarnished hues of glamour and sin for our amusement.

Americans do seem to love a myth. This one, that women played limited stereotypical parts in the Anglo expansion into the American

West, satisfied our national imagination for many years. Recently, those interested in the history of American women and frontier settlement patterns challenge these notions that the distaff side remained peripheral to the transformation of the trans-Mississippi West, or that its participation can be measured by two or three simple characterizations. The results of these historical inquiries offer us a rich new interpretation of the meaning of American womanhood and a deeper appreciation for the experiences of all women in the West.

Certainly pioneer women included many bold wives and mothers. Americans point with understandable pride to ancestors who endured amazing hardship to reach and settle lands in the West. Hundreds of family journals, letters, photographs, and reminiscences yield ample documentation as to the nature of women’s lives on the overland trail and during the early days of frontier community-building. Almost without exception, within these sources we detect the grit and fiber of sturdy, hard-working women and feel awed.

The imaginative depiction of the

spirit found in many of these personal recollections provided artistic inspiration for a covey of American painters. Many 20th century illustrators used art to convey personally held values about the American West. They portrayed nobility, strength, and determination, coupled with genteel physical beauty, in female subjects. This is not to say that actual and intangible character inaccuracies mar these artists’ works or that many pioneer women did not possess these qualities. It is to say that glib labels make it easy for us to overlook other aspects of women’s pioneer experiences.

In fact, the physical brutality of pioneer life, which took its toll on men and women, seems missing in our artistic representations. In a desire to capture the majesty and import of the western movement, artists, as well as others, tended to exalt, both physically and intellectually, the persons who became

westerners. In response, an American public hungry for information about the West or convinced that western settlement, in and of itself, accounted for unique qualities in the American character, eagerly absorbed the images, the novels, the films.

Indeed, faced with the press of family care and the uncertainty of what lay ahead, women turned to the West with some reluctance. Although a new western life promised economic improvement and increased social status for men, women often saw only the demands of new work for them in areas far from kin and kind. They feared the unknown about to be placed on them.

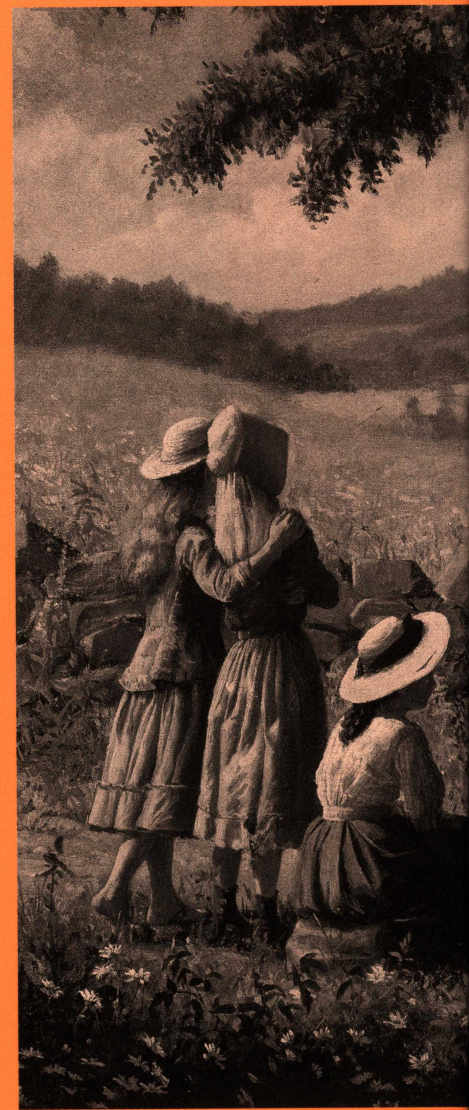
The frontier environment proved the women correct. The rigors of trail living, passage through unfamiliar terrain, and the struggle to establish a homestead quickly required that the usual boundaries between men's work and women's work blurred. While necessity forced women to learn a plethora of traditionally male skills — hunting, wagon mending, tending livestock, fording streams, building fences —

they also continued to manage their usual domestic chores and child care. Thus, women juggled two gender responsibilities. Our sunny belief that they did so without complaint or concern for the impact of these events on their own lives is misplaced and denigrates their endeavor.

Once settled in the West, women retained their traditional feminine domestic tasks, their masculine labors from the trail, and added new responsibilities. Although depicted as “stay at home” types with little knowledge of or interest in monetary affairs, frontier women actually boosted the family economy with paid and unpaid labor. In addition to farm chores, some sold eggs, handwork, or homemade preserves. Others took in boarders or fed seasonal workers at harvest time. Still others worked as the rural post mistress or the local midwife. Far from being “pin money,” these funds often guaranteed a cash flow for farm families where annual profits fluctuated with little warning. As farms grew, many wives took over complete supervision of the family books, keeping detailed financial

“Women turned to the West with some reluctance.

Although a new western life promised economic improvement and increased status for men, women often saw only demands of new work for them in areas far from kin and kind.”



records and finalizing the decisions to purchase new equipment or additional lands. In more than one family, upon the death of a husband, a widow successfully maintained the farm or expanded it into a larger business.

While the national myth building process short changed pioneer farm women, it also glossed over other groups of western females. Among these, prostitutes especially fell prey to a one-dimensional frivolous treatment. Whether in art, fiction or films, images of frontier prostitutes exploited a predictable formula.



Jennie A. Brownscomb, 1879, *The New Scholar*, oil on canvas, 18 1/4 by 24 inches.

The standard definition of frontier prostitutes only allowed for gaudy, lusty, greedy women, ultimately softened by a “heart of gold” and a sentimental regard for their own discarded moral values. Even Olaf C. Seltzer’s *Dance Hall Girl*, intended to capture the somber character of the saloon woman, surrounds its subject with the agents of her “downfall” — cards, cigarettes, and alcohol. Although Seltzer’s painting avoids overt glamorization, it nonetheless resonates with the tragic implications for this woman fallen from social respectability.

Seltzer’s melancholy figure reflects no womanly grace or fulfillment. The viewer is left to wonder, from whence this unhappy woman? What and whom did she leave? What led her to this “life of sin?” What dreary fate awaits her?

In fact, frontier women engaged in prostitution as a means of economic support. Those stylishly dressed dance hall girls, with the alluring beauty marks, perfectly marcelled hair, and glossy manicures, driven into the demi monde by some youthful moral misstep are the fanciful creations of novelists and

script writers. Many frontier prostitutes often followed their own mothers into the profession, began their careers by the ages of 13 or 14, came from the poorest groups in western society, and never learned to read or write. Commonly, prostitutes married, had families, and continued to work in saloons and brothels with the full knowledge and expectation of their husbands.

Although prostitutes were believed to have lived in elegant brothels, surrounded by decadent splendor and indulged by wealthy clients, few achieved such a luxurious status. Most prostitutes inhabited an uncertain economic world that shifted between a marginal existence and extreme destitution. Violence, in many forms, dominated the lives of prostitutes and early death walked freely among them. In the shallow perceptions treasured about prostitution, we overlook that these women were workers in a frontier society where the burgeoning industry took a decidedly masculine flavor. With few job options, some women chose prostitution as a livelihood, even though it frequently proved to be of the rudest sort.

In addition to missing the female perspective on migration, the varied nature of women’s work, the financial acumen of women, and frontier gender limitations, myth intoxication helped us to lose sight of the rich cultural diversity of pioneer life. Early 20th century illustrators, along with those in other idioms, not only constructed imagery that linked persons to social values, but they also molded an illusion that the



Olaf C. Seltzer, 1931, *Sister of Mercy*, watercolor on paper, 18 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches.

frontier belonged exclusively to white Americans. This unfortunate distortion led Americans away from the richness of frontier history and robbed ethnic groups of the chance to articulate their connection to frontier events.

We limited our sense and sensibilities as to the multi-faceted nature

of cultural expression found in a region where varying groups met, interacted, and clashed across time. Indigenous populations of women — Native American and Hispanic — served only as “exotic” footnotes within the context of white settlement. Happily, historians now move toward a far more complex analysis of the many kinds of women and their myriad parts played out everywhere in the West. The identity and power of Native American and Hispanic women emerge in ever more meaningful patterns, as we examine more closely the tenor of ethnic cultures.

African-American women also assume a newly understood stature in the West. From the pioneer homesteaders of Kansas to the club women of Montana to the saloon dancers of the Dakotas, black females graced the annals of frontier history in a variety of ways. Their contributions, their lives, their impact — all are only beginning to be integrated into the larger framework of western history. It remains for a similar initiative to add substantive knowledge about Asian females, equally burdened with other women of color by the most narrow and superficial historical image.

We need to further illuminate the nature of cultural interaction between and among groups of women. Contrary to popular notions, white women did not unilaterally fear and stay away from Native Americans. Some white women, especially military wives who lived close to reservations, felt keenly drawn to Indians. White women observed

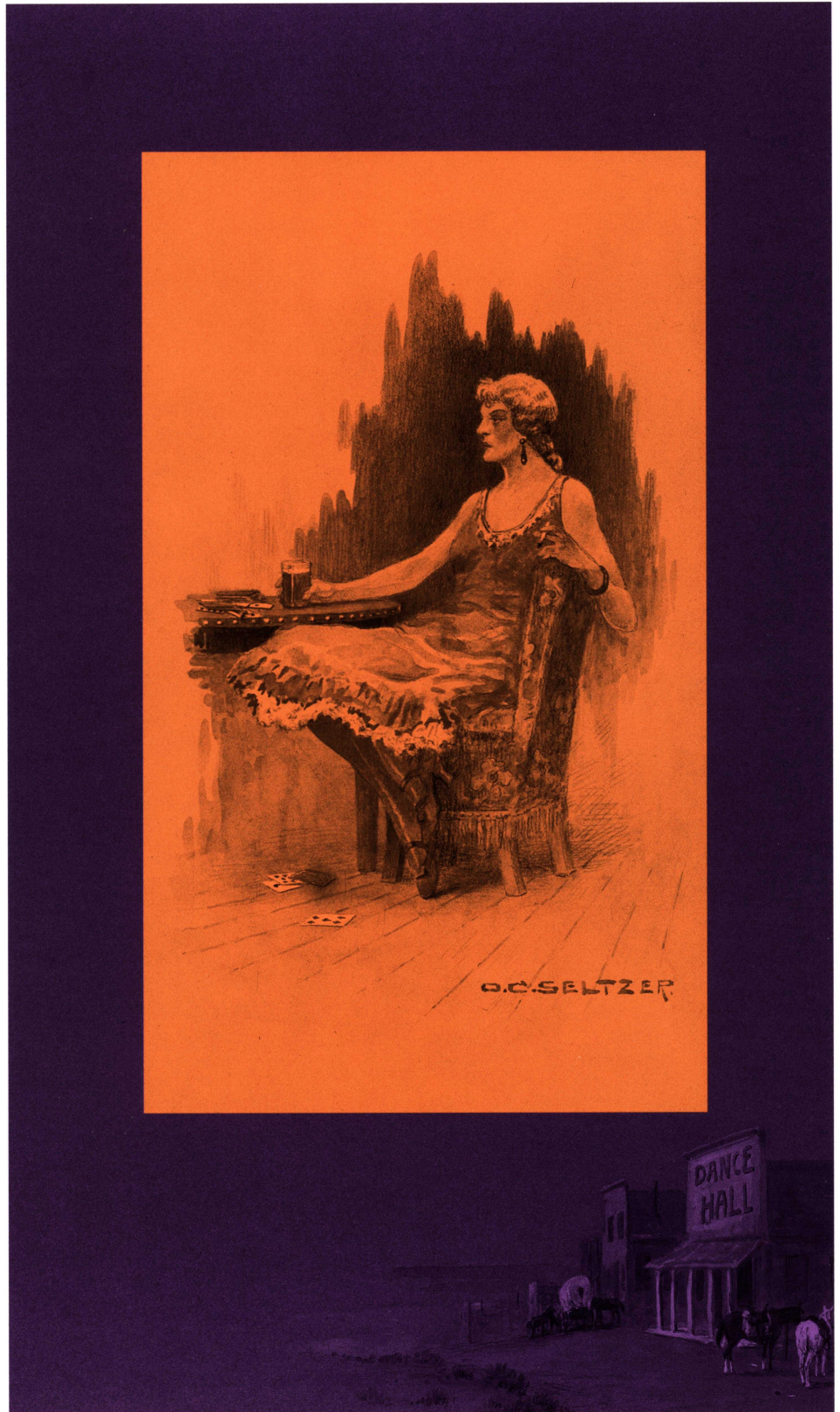
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family customs with interest and especially wanted to learn more about Indian practices of childbirth — the most universal of female bonds. Despite language barriers, the two groups often sought out each other and military wives shared what few supplies they had with Native American women whose families staggered under harsh reservation conditions.

Missionary women, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, also pursued relationships with Native American people. Although a desire to bring about conversions fueled their energies, missionary women did not shy away from Indian society. Narcissa Whitman, Protestant missionary to the Cayuse Indians, despite her rather difficult and self-righteous personality, is an example of early cultural contact. In Kansas, the Franciscan Sisters of Philadelphia prepared an enormous Sunday dinner each week, while Indians without adequate government food allotments sat outside the little convent and waited for the meal. Unable to accommodate more than a few inside the tiny kitchen, the sisters served in shifts and fed Indian families throughout the afternoon.

Perhaps the most influential missionary woman existed in the



Olaf C. Seltzer, 1928, Dance Hall Girl, watercolor on paper, 18 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches.

person of Mother Katharine Drexel, foundress of the Philadelphia-based Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. From the late 19th century until her death in the 1950s, this heiress to the immense Drexel fortune, nearly single-handedly sustained the Roman Catholic mission effort in the far West. Before and after she established her own community of missionary sisters, Mother Katharine traveled extensively to Indian reservations, making donations that guaranteed continuance of various religious missions at reservation schools and churches. Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictines all benefitted from her generosity. From New Mexico to Minnesota, Mother Katharine became a familiar sight, as she traveled among the Indian tribes and religious communities of the West.

With her great energy and compassionate manner, Mother Katharine might easily be the inspiration for Olaf C. Seltzer's watercolor, *Sister of Mercy*. In Seltzer's illustration, the gentle nun strokes the head of one Indian child, while another peeks from the protective folds of her long black habit, which bears a remarkable resemblance to those worn by the sisters of Mother Katharine's community. The lines, the composition, the figures, the arrangement of the children about the skirt of the kindly nun mirror Seltzer's other watercolor, *Pioneer Mother*. Indeed, the two illustrations placed side by side reinforce a 19th century assertion that women — whether married or single — are imbued with a maternal sense that transcends any other considerations. If a woman,

lured by the glitter of the West, dismissed this element of femininity, then she lost, according to Seltzer in *Dance Hall Girl*, her moral strength and maternal nature.

What do all these observations about women and their depiction in the cultural forms of our country ultimately say to modern Americans? The art of the American West is a great national treasure. We are privileged to have such collections to study and to enjoy. Yet, western art may not speak to the absolute reality of the frontier. Women, of any age or hue, are not central to western art. When women do appear, the subtlety and patterns of their lives are often askew. If we depend only on our art for knowledge about western women, then the historical record will be slighted.

Perhaps, if Americans would be willing to loosen the constraints of the national myth, they would be surprised to discover that, in the West, the history of women offers much for celebration. From it we can learn about race, gender and class within the boundaries of an exquisite geographic region. With such knowledge, we will strengthen a balanced sense of national identity that does not exclude but embraces, that does not scorn but uplifts. Such approaches promise to enhance our historical analysis of the frontier, western womanhood, and the content of our cherished art collections of the American West. ▽

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William R. Leigh, *Water Pockets*, pencil on paper, 13 3/8 by 11 inches.

deric Remington, Clarence Come Quick the
ffee's Boiling Over, pencil on paper,
by 9 inches.



William T. Carlton, 1928, Interior of a Schoolroom, oil on canvas, 30 by 37 1/4 inches.

Telling the Tales Western

BY PAULA HALL

Somewhere between the extremes of paint and canvas portrayals of staunch, bonneted women etched boldly against stark prairie horizons, and the buckskinned, iron heroines depicted in the dime novels, lie the real lives of women who traveled west.

Perhaps they are the individuals who make themselves known through the diaries, journals, letters and books written of the time. First-hand material from early 19th century women traveling west is rare. Women were often uneducated and seldom encouraged to record their thoughts. Even more obscure are the lives and stories of the minority women.

The few documents that have survived were recorded by the upper-middle class, those women who had the means and education to successfully carry out the task of

documenting their daily lives. Although these accounts usually were penned by a particular segment of society, they offer intimate revelations, charming and often crude, and a version of western history that is quite different from the tales of men's exploration and conquests of the 19th century.

Most of them are now forgotten, with only brief fragments of their lives preserved in a letter home, travel journals or a simple diary. But the fact that these women kept records of their journeys and wrote detailed accounts to eastern family and friends, indicates their awareness of being involved in a major event in American history.

On June 15, 1856, Mary C. Greenleaf traveling to Indian Territory wrote:

"The Arkansas is so low we can proceed no further by water, so with the leave of Providence, we expect to set out tomorrow in a large, new covered wagon, with two horses, taking with us our own provision for

of Movement



William S. Prettyman, A Frontier Home, photograph, ca. 1880.



Above: William S. Prettyman, Ponca Indians, photograph, ca. 1880.

Right: Engraving of Mary C. Greenleaf from Life and Letters of Mary C. Greenleaf, published in 1858.



the way. Mr. B__ bought me an air pillow in Boston, which will serve for a cushion, and supply the place of springs: and we trust the same kind hand which has preserved us hitherto, will still be our guide. I meditate upon the ninety-first Psalm, which prevents apprehension."

Mary was born on January 31, 1800, in Newburyport, Massachusetts. At the age of thirteen her education ended, and she began a routine of home duties and labors that lasted until the death of her mother in 1851. She then joined Miss Morrison, a missionary to the Choctaw's Native Tribe for eight years, and a young male teacher from Pittsburgh on a journey into Indian Territory to help with



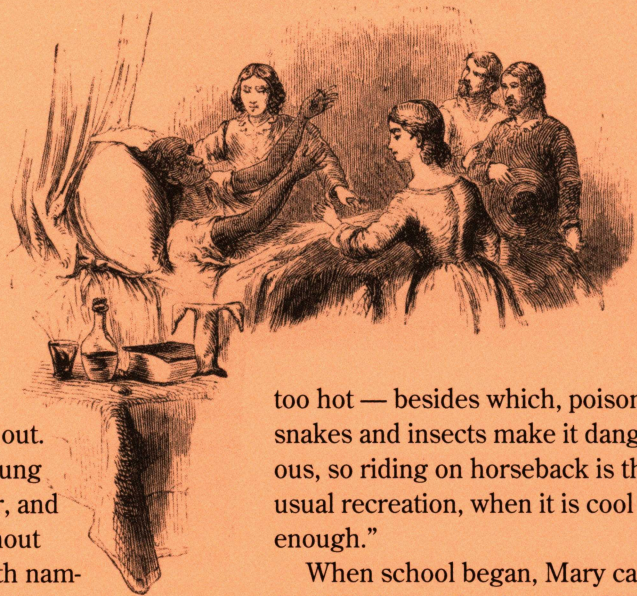
Choctaw and Chickasaw missions.
June 27th, 1856, (Choctaw
Nation):

"Here I am, brought thus far safely on my way about eighty miles from Wapanucka (final destination). We reached this place today, just before twelve o'clock, and having been refreshed I sit down to tell you a little of our journey from Little Rock. We left that place sixteenth instant, just before noon, in a large covered wagon with two horses, accustomed to drawing a wood cart. In appearance we very much resembled the Barrington beggars, except that we had no baskets to sell,

and no squalid children peeping out. However, Mr. Young was a good driver, and we got along without any obstacle worth naming . . .

We met many of them (Choctaws) on the road, men, women, and children . . . Most of them dress like the whites except that the women do not wear bonnets, but tie handkerchiefs over their heads instead. I meant to have said before, that the roads are very good for a new country, all over which we passed, being public roads . . . But it is hilly and rocky."

Mary settled at her final destination with the Chickasaws a few weeks later and wrote friends in Newburyport: "The territory is very large, and the Indians do not settle in villages but rather about, generally at some distance from the road . . . The Chickasaws are a small tribe, numbering not quite five thousand . . . I generally rise a little before five o'clock, breakfast a quarter before six, then we have prayers. We then disperse and I stir round a little for exercise, the remainder of the day I read, write and sew. We cannot walk out in the morning on account of the heavy dew, and afterwards the sun is



too hot — besides which, poisonous snakes and insects make it dangerous, so riding on horseback is the usual recreation, when it is cool enough."

When school began, Mary cared for 33 Indian girls who stayed in the mission throughout the school year. "I cut and fit their garments, teach them to make and mend them, and try to be what a mother ought to be to them."

Caring included nursing the girls during frequent battles of dysentery and various "fevers and chills." She reported in one letter: "Not an hour's sickness have I had since I came here . . . A strong body is needed here, as well as many other qualifications. There is a great lack of laborers — all the stations within twenty miles or more, need females, but none can be found willing to come."

Although strong, she became gravely ill with dysentery and died June 26, 1857, just one year after her arrival to Indian Territory.

The call for teachers brought many women to the West. Until the middle of the 19th century, schoolteaching, like all other

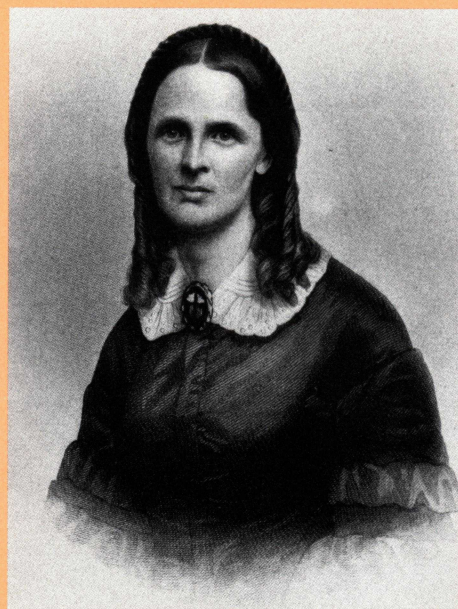
professions and occupations, was monopolized by males. In the public mind, women's place was in the home.

A minister from the Sioux Mission in St. Paul, Minnesota, requested a teacher who "should be willing to forego, not only many of the religious privileges and elegances of New England towns, but some of the neatness also. She should be entirely free from prejudice on account of color, for among her scholars she might find not only English, French and Swiss, but Sioux and

Chippewas."

Harriet E. Bishop answered the call and writes in her book, *Floral Home*, published in 1857, "In short, I came because I was more needed here than at any other spot on earth. Life was no longer an idle dream; the hours dragging heavily, and with soul-longings for some real purpose."

She grew to truly "love" her new Minnesota home and through her writing, encouraged other women to follow in her steps. Many journals and books of women traveling west



Engravings from *Floral Home*, published in 1857, of Harriet E. Bishop, above, and Sioux pupils, below.



were published by religious societies hoping to attract other women to follow suit.

From *Floral Home*:

"Woman, in all states of society, and in all ages of the world, has had a part to perform, an all-important part, known only in its results . . . So those who were earliest in Minnesota, and who lived more in the future than in the present, were indeed blessings to their companions. Even since the writer's introduction into the Territory, it has been said most emphatically that a 'unit added to the female population, was virtually of more importance than a whole cargo of the sterner sex.'"

A true supporter of women moving into previously male dominated roles, she often chided those who discouraged travel west through "tales of danger."

"During my first journeyings westward I was frequently advised to retrace my steps, as 'dangers, and perhaps cruel death,' awaited my debut among the 'bloody Indians.'"

Although death or capture by hostile Indian factions did occur, there were many more realistic dangers: sickness, rough terrain, weather and low food supplies were faced in the mid-1800s. Women often misinterpreted Indian behavior, reacting in terror. These reactions were fueled by earlier accounts of white women captives.

Tales of terror and loneliness filled the pages of Hannah Hicks'



Hannah Hicks Hitchcock, far right, photographed by Robertson Studio, Muskogee, Indian Territory, ca. 1900, with family members.

diary as she traced the activities and effects of the Civil War on the Cherokee Nation and her family. By May 1861, the United States' troops had evacuated Indian Territory posts. Old Cherokee factions formed opposing camps — some siding with the Confederates, while others joined the Union forces. The Cherokee Nation split in two and raiding began in earnest.

Hannah begins her diary on the Sabbath, August 17, 1862. She was then a widow of slightly over a month, her husband having been murdered while on his way home from buying supplies. Her husband of 10 years, Abijah Hicks was the son of an early eastern Cherokee chief and had journeyed to Indian Territory over the "Trail of Tears." Hannah's parents were missionaries to the Cherokees. Hannah and her husband were parents to five children.

Sabbath, August 17th, 1862:

"Oh! what a year to remember will this ever be to me and to us all. We thought we had some trouble last year, but how happy was that compared with this. Then, we saw our dear friends depart, to go where we have every reason to think they are living in peace and quietness. 'Twas hard to part with them, yet we knew they were better off than we if they could only get safe through. But this year! On the 4th of July, my beloved husband was murdered, killed, away from home, and I could not see him. So far from it — he had been buried twenty-four hours before I even heard of it. Buried without a coffin, all alone, forty miles from home. Alas, alas, my husband. Still the cry of my heart every day, and every hour, is, oh, my husband."

August 31:

"Another week has past since I

have written here. The weeks seem like months in this time of suspense. It is very hard to believe that it is only two weeks since the Army was established here. The troops have moved to Tahlequah now to guard the Council in its deliberations. I hear only one Law, as yet which is a Conscript law — compelling boys & men from 16 to 35 into the Army. Oh the Cherokee people are ruined.”

The seven-month diary chronicles the rumors, anticipations, food shortages, deaths and illnesses which occurred while she and her family were secluded and almost totally confined to home. Constant fear of raids kept Hannah and her children close to their home located 18 miles from Fort Gibson.

November 17:

“Today we have had experience in being robbed, as I expected. As soon as it was light they came and began. They took many valuable things, and overhauled every closet, trunk, box & drawer they could find. The leaders were Cherokees, those who have often eaten in my house, some of them. When sister N. went and reported to the Gen. he sent a guard at once, ordered them all away, & made them return what they saw. But the most valuable things, are gone ‘for good.’ Still I can rejoice, oh, I am so thankful that life is still spared.”

Two months after her last entry on Feb. 20, 1863, Hannah saw order restored and the Union troops remained in control of Fort Gibson for the remainder of the war. Hannah was a 29-year-old widow and mother of five.

She eventually moved her family to Fort Gibson in 1864 and married Dwight Hitchcock who was assistant surgeon at the post. She died in her home at Fort Gibson, Jan. 12, 1917.

Not all journals and diaries of the day were filled with such suspense and potential dangers. Ann Archbold authored *A Book for the Married and Single, the Grave and the Gay: and especially designed for Steamboat Passengers* in 1850. She told of her travels to the West in 1845, “to get among Indians with a view to give instruction to their children.” Among her prose were light-hearted tales of experiences aboard ship, as well as philosophical anecdotes “designed, if

possible to call off the youthful mind from the light and false productions of the day.”

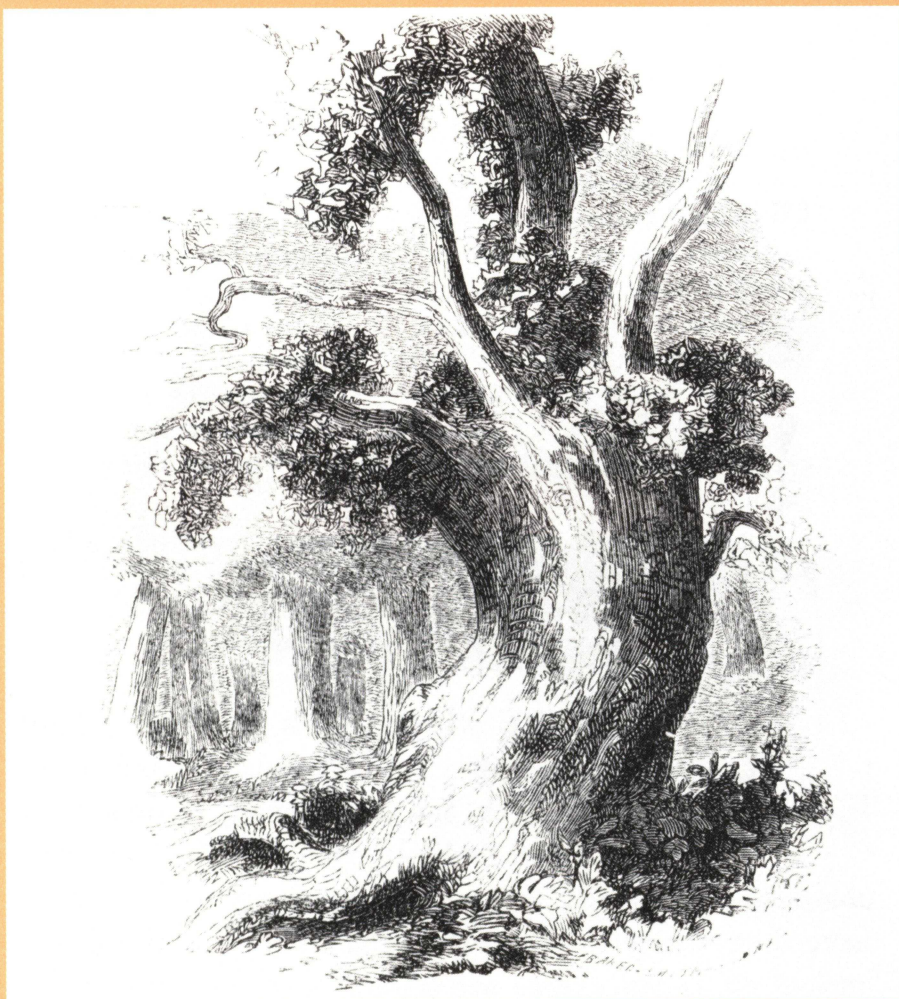
While in Indiana, Ann was asked by a new acquaintance to stay in the area and teach. “O do, said he, if you will, you can get our Governor, he is a fine man, has a good house, and but one child, being a widower. I told him that he held out strong inducements, but that men were so ungrateful that I feared I should be repulsed, if I should stop with that view.”

Traveling with her niece, she finally arrived in Indian Territory in the spring of 1848, almost three years from the start of her journey in the East. Shortly after her arrival, “the slavery question excited much alarm and the Wyandots and Kickapoos took all their children from the school.”

A minister from the Creek Nation requested she move to his mission,



Front cover engraving from *War and Pestilence!* Capture of Two Young Ladies by the Savages privately published in 1833. The short narrative describes the capture of Frances and Almira Hall by Sac and Fox Indians and the women's safe return 10 days later.



Illustrative engraving and accompanying poem by Sarah Jacobs published by 1853.

From *Nonantun and Natick*:

"The old trunks of trees rise
round;

Like pillars in a church of old
And the wind fills them with a
sound

As if a bell were tolled."

Her descriptions of white man's influences over Indians underline her disgust for introducing alcohol into the culture, bringing "ruin and destruction." The book retraced the dwindling Indian population and way of life from 1630 to 1745.

"In 1721, there were but two white families in Natick; in 1745, it was already an English and not an Indian town." In 1848, a commission was appointed to ascertain the condition of Indians living in Massachusetts. "From the report made to the Legislature, we are able to state the present numbers and portion of the descendent of the former sovereigns of the soil. The whole number in 1848 was 847 of whom only six or eight at most are of pure Indian descent."

The demise of Indian culture and native lands was also the subject for Mrs. Houstoun, a visiting European during the late 1840s, in her writing of *Hesperos: or Travels in the West*. Upon her first visit outside Boston to "Indian Hill" farm in New England, she describes her version of struggles between the first white settlers and native Americans.

"It ended, as such struggles have



but the Arkansas River "is only navigable in the spring . . . Yet I make no doubt but that I shall be eternally thankful that I ever set my feet on Mission ground; for until I had done this, I never felt I had done my duty; but after I had made the effort to go to Arkansas, and failed, I felt the burden of spirit removed entirely." She returned to the East in November 1848.

Poetry scattered throughout many of the diaries and journals provides glimpses of inner feelings and thoughts. Sarah S. Jacobs, author of *Nonantun and Natick* published in 1853, chronicled the displacement of Indians in Massachusetts. She tells of the building of the first church in Natick by the Indians.



Engraving from *Nonantum and Natick* published in 1853 illustrating the building of the first church.

Right, William S. Prettyman, *A Typical Boomer Family*, photograph, ca. 1900.

always done, in the total dispersion, and in fact, almost entire annihilation of the original race . . . Since these sad events took place, the experience and industry of civilized man have contrived to render prolific, a soil naturally sterile, and in lieu of a picturesque idleness of the half-clad savage, there is cultivated ugliness everywhere. Not an aged tree was to

be seen, for none of those which greeted the pilgrim fathers on their arrival were left standing."

Mrs. Houstoun's travels took her through Ohio and on to Texas. Throughout her letters, which were obviously sent back to an awaiting editor and publisher in London, Mrs. Houstoun often speaks of the plight of many minorities and emigrants in



the new West.

There is a quality of these diaries, journals and letters that makes the reader believe for no other reason than the personal touch, they present an accurate picture of western life as perceived by the authors. As stated earlier, these accounts often present a narrow view having been written by those with

the education and means to do so.

But there is something about personal writings that beckon following generations to read, research and discover the inner thoughts and feelings of the authors. They provide a lifeline to many of the forgotten heroines of the West. ▽

Paula Hall serves as editor of Gilcrease Magazine and is a frequent contributor to the publication.



Documents from the Gilcrease Collection:

Hannah Hicks, Diary from Aug. 17, 1862 to Feb. 20, 1863, original document.

Mary C. Greenleaf, Life and Letters of Mary C. Greenleaf, Missionary to the Chickasaw Indians, Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, Boston, 1858.
Harriet E. Bishop, Floral Home: or First Years of Minnesota, Sheldon, Blakeman and Company, New York, 1857.

Sarah S. Jacobs, Nonantun and Natick, Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, Boston, 1853.
Ann Archbold, A Book for the Married and Single, the Grave and the Gay: and especially designed for Steamboat Passengers, Office of the "Practical Preacher," 1850.

Mrs. Houstoun, Hesperos: or Travels in the West, John W. Parker, West Strand, London, 1850.

Native American Women of the West

In tracing the role of women during western development, it is impossible to ignore the contributions of Native American women. They were the first to live in unrecorded numbers on the stark, expansive plains of the Southwest and the lush forests of the Pacific Northwest. As original inhabitants, they lived simply, dependent and respectful of the land.

Native American women understood and utilized nature's secrets, providing nourishment for their families and protection against many of the diseases that plagued the white settlers. They planted crops, raised children, tanned hides, prepared and stored food, wove baskets and fashioned implements.

In contrast to many early pioneer accounts of the slave-like position of Indian women, they actually exercised a degree of power within their families and tribes. American Indian women probably had more choice and voice than did their white pioneer counterparts. Many





- ▲ *Beaded Bag, probably Cheyenne, ca. 1880.*
These sometimes intricately decorated bags were used to carry valuable items, such as an Indian's "strike-a-light," a shaped piece of steel and flint used to start a fire.

- ◄ *Child's Dress, Northern Cheyenne, ca. 1900.*
Tanned deer hide, usually treated with brains and liver after having been thinned with scrapers and rubbing, is possibly the softest leather found. Cheyenne women attached commercial trade beads to clothing in individual rows, making them flat and neat. This elaborately beaded yoke exemplifies the attention given to detail, something that cannot be duplicated by a machine.

- ▷ *Cradleboard, Kiowa, ca. 1900.* Indian children spent most of their first year in a cradleboard, an ingenious means of protection and mobility rolled into one. Support boards were extended above the cradle and pointed in order to protect the baby should it fall from the mother's back or her horse. Almost a universal belief, the Indians felt a child was the greatest gift bestowed on people. Women's fertility was thought to be analogous to the earth's bounty and were greatly respected for their ability to reproduce.

- ▼ *Pemmican Maul, found in South Dakota, ca. mid-1800s.* A stone head lashed with rawhide to wood, served as a maul for making pemmican. Pemmican, still made today, is a concentrated food product consisting of lean meat, dried, pounded fine and later mixed with melted fat, fruit and berries. Native American women stored the pemmican in suet sealed rawhide containers, preserving it for the long winter months.





▲ Hide Scraper, probably Ponca, ca. 1890. This elk antler hide scraper served as a tool frequently used by Indian women in preparing hides for use in clothing. Although the men hunted and killed animals, it was the women's job to skin, butcher, transport and preserve the meat and tan the hide.



◀ Doll, Sioux, ca. 1900. Typical of the detail craftsmanship displayed by Native American women, this child's doll mirrors the clothing of tribe members, i.e., the beaded scabbard at the waist.

matrilineal tribes, such as the Mandans of the Dakotas, traced their ancestry through the mother and bestowed great importance upon women. Land was vested in the eldest female of the family who then passed ownership through her female descendants. Native American women frequently functioned as decision makers, sat on tribal councils and served as spokespeople for their communities.

Western settlement resulted in drastic changes for native women in the West. By the mid-1800s, Indian communities were totally disrupted and the Indians were increasingly confined to reservations. Their children began to attend reservation schools. Native Americans continued to adapt to the white settlers' influences and the traditional roles of Indian women began to change, as did the roles of women across the nation. ▽

◀ Woman's Dress, Mescalero Apache, ca. 1900. Apaches were fond of decorating with "tinklers," metal pieces that provided light, inviting sounds during dances and ceremonies. This tanned deer hide dress utilizes "tinklers" to the utmost, with accents of ribbon and beads. Women made all the clothing for tribe members.

Information concerning the artifacts included in the Gilcrease collection was provided by Dana McPike, senior curator, Gilcrease Museum.

GILCREASE

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FRONT COVER:

Eastman Johnson, *The Doll*, oil on canvas,
13 1/2 by 17 1/2 inches.

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