Westward the Women

LYNN WENZEL

"We were young, we were merry, we were very, very wise,
And the door stood open at our feast,
When there passed us a woman with the West in her eyes,
And a man with his back to the East."
Mary Elizabeth Coleridge

My maternal great-great-grandmother, Mary Ann Patterson, was one of the intrepid Victorian women who made their way to Alaska, across White Pass up into Juneau and Skagway, to prospect for gold during the great Klondike rush of 1897-98. She was 75. Later, she cashed in her nuggets at the bank in San Francisco and went on down to San Diego where she built a mansion next door to President Taft.

These stories, and more, have filled my mind since I was a child. Proudly, my grandmothers and great aunts kept alive the memories and exploits of the hardy pioneer women who settled this country and whose acts of bravery and endurance have mostly been ignored and trivialized. The following recent books on westering women offer an antidote to obscurity, a refutation of all those tomes which mentioned women only as footnotes to history, if they mentioned them at all.

Klondike Women, True Tales of the 1897-98 Gold Rush by Melanie J. Mayer (Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, c. $34.95, p. $18.95) tells, through the personal diaries and reminiscences of the participants, the stories of women who risked all and joined the great Klondike gold rush of 1897-98. Contrary to historical stereotypes, the women who participated were not all prostitutes and dance hall girls. "There were miners, business women, storekeepers, restaurateurs, journalists, physicians, nuns, entertainers and teachers," says Mayer. "We have images of what autonomous women are like. And even when we do have the real woman and her accomplishments we don't believe them." In 1899, women had been banned from using Whitehorse Rapids to get to Dawson and, instead, were forced to cross a tortuous trail and go around as the rapids were deemed "too dangerous for women and children." Kate Rockwell, an entertainer, refused to comply with the order. Instead, she disguised herself as a boy and "went through the rapids wearing

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—Woman on burro in the Southwest

overalls and a cap despite the $100 potential fine if she were caught and found to be female."

Women prospectors defied the Victorian attitudes of the time. Alaska offered not only gold but freedom, a chance to burst the choking bonds of artificial propriety and breathe the intoxicating air of infinite possibility. Women in Alaska entered almost every trade. One of the best known was a Mrs. Harriet Pullen, "a widow with a brood of little boys, who arrived in the fall (of '87) with seven dollars in her pocket and parlayed it into a comfortable fortune. She drove a four-horse freighting outfit up the (White Trail) pass by day, and by night made apple pies in dishes hammered out of old tin cans."

In **Libby, The Alaskan Diaries & Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879-1880,** as presented by her granddaughter Betty John (Houghton Mifflin Company, $8.95 p.), we are treated to a passionate love story whose backdrop is the Alaskan Pribilof Islands in 1879. Libby and her husband are forced to share a small cabin with his senior officer. A forbidden liaison thrives and grows ever more intense. Everything about Alaska is a shocking contrast to Libby's life in Washington, D.C., where Libby studied art, nursed Civil War soldiers and became a cartographer. In Alaska, she wears sealskins and crawls on all fours against fierce winds to teach English. Her conversation is of whaling, seals and icebergs. Will she die, starving and isolated during the winter, or will wailing winds and ice storms destroy her? "Even though a thaw has set in there is no way of getting out," writes Libby in her diary. "John has tried with pickaxes and mallet to make his way through the pack ice, since he cannot get up over it... We have to wait, and the waiting is a terrible thing. The cold is a bitter, damp cold now, penetrating. We have to spend more of our time in bed. Our fuel is so low now that we have only our bodily heat to keep each other warm. That and our love."

In 1842 in Cazenovia, New York, a mysterious illness and fever took the lives of six out of 13 of Esther Bullock Dryer's family. Within three months Allen (her husband), Barzilla, Rufus, James, Benjamin and finally, Esther, the last, died. Townspeople said it was because the family well was too close to the local graveyard. The deaths remain a mystery. But I've always thought about Esther, my great-great-great-great-grandmother. How her heart must have broken as, one by one, her children and then her husband died in her arms.

By night she made apple pies in dishes hammered out of old tin cans

"Trouble Attends Me. Trouble trouble trouble. O Lord when will it be over," wrote Abigail Malick in her diary on October 10, 1850. And life for the pioneering woman could be so unpredictably cruel and tragic that she might ask herself, why go on? In **Far from Home, Families of the Westward Journey** by Lillian Schlissel, Byrd Gibbens & Elizabeth Hampsten (Schocken Books, $19.95 h.c.), Abigail Malick writes from Oregon Territory to her married daughter in Illinois, "I never shal see eney of you eny More in this world. We Are Almost three thousand Miles apart...And you never Will see Hiram...(her 17 year old son)...Hiram drounded in the Plat River at the Mouth of Dear Krick. The young Men tried to save him but he had the Cramp and Could swim no more. And they Said o hiram do swim but he said I cannot swim eney More. And the other boys Called to him and said O hiram O swim. And he said o my god I cannot eney More. They said that he went down in the water seven or eight times before he drounded.... So you know All about Hiram's death now. So you need not ask anything About him eney More for it will not do us eney Good to trouble ourselves About him eney More. It has Almost kild Me but I have to bear it. And if we Are good perhapes then we can meete him in heven."

Far from Home tells the stories of other pioneering families. Charles and Maggie Brown move 24 times in 27 years searching for the strike that will make them rich. In the course of their odyssey, they bury six of their seven children. Death shadowed every pioneer woman's days. It was no idle threat.

My grandmother told me often of the death of her first child. "After I gave birth, the nurse wrapped the baby in a blanket and gave it to me. Nobody told me it was dead, but when I turned back the blanket and looked at its face, I knew." She told me, too, of the summer of 1890 in Kingman, Arizona, when she was four and her little brothers one-and-a-half and three. A diptheria epidemic struck all three. The little boys died. My grandmother lived, though barely, and to the everlasting resentment of her mother, for whom my grandmother's blue eyes and bright hair shining in the sun were a constant reminder of the babies she had lost.

—The grassland with no equal on earth

In **Far from Home**, Mary, the only surviving child of Charles and Maggie Brown, tells of the deaths in 1891 from Russian influenza of her two younger brothers. "Albert caught it first, then Johnnie. Albert was terribly ill with it and Maggie, realizing he had a very short time to live, said, "Oh, Albert, do you have to leave us?" He looked up at her and said, "Yes, Mama, and Johnnie too." Johnnie was not yet sick at that time, yet in five days both children were gone."

And Anna Herschy, one of my Pennsylvania Mennonite ancestors, who had four children, wrote a litany of sorrow in the family bible.

The first fruit of our marriage, Amos, our dear little son, entered the blessed sleep in the arms of Jesus on Saturday morning at 7 o'clock on the 18th of July, 1829 as a result of diarrhea and vomiting. His age was eight months minus one day.

Our little son, Heinrich Herschy entered the blessed sleep in the arms of Jesus on the 12th day of August, 1832, aged five months and 16 days.

Our dear little son, Andreas Herschy, died on the 31st of July in the year of the Lord 1843, at night around the 8th hour of the evening. His age was five months and nine days.

Our beloved son Daniel Hershey died on Wednesday the 30th say of June in the year of Our Lord One thousand Eight Hundred and Fifty Two, aged 22 years, two months and 20 days.

Anna died three years later at 55.

Women's enormous and varied contributions to the work and politics of the frontier have been consistently overlooked. Because the frontier was without boundaries and because all hands were needed just to survive, women performed tasks that would later be denied they had even any knowledge of. So it is in **Women in Pacific Northwest History**, an anthology edited by Karen J. Blair (University of Washington Press, $14.95 p.) that the work for suf-

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Peter E. Palmquist
—Riding astride across open land in Oregon

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—Schoolteacher in Hecla, Montana, 1893

frage by Abigail Scott Duniway and May Arkwright Hutton is given voice, as is the story of the Woman's Building in Seattle. And in **Georgiana, Feminist Reformer of the West: The Journal of Georgiana Bruce Kirby, 1852-1860,** ($9.95 p.) with biography based on research by Helen Giffen, Carolyn Swift and Judith Steen, edited by Carolyn Swift and Judith Steen (Santa Cruz County Historical Trust), Kirby's work for the anti-slavery movement, penal reform and women's education, in spite of personal tragedy, illuminates her journals and letters.

A Quilt of Words, Women's Diaries, Letters & Original Accounts of Life in the Southwest, 1860-1960 by Sharon Niederman (Johnson Books, Boulder, $15.95 h.c.) further elucidates women's contributions to improving the conditions they endured, in this case, in the Southwest. Niederman asserts, "The harsh, unfamiliar and demanding circumstances of the west provided women with situations that demanded courage, a courage as personal in its expressions as a daring work of art that departs from the rules and shows us something we haven't seen before." Niederman's subjects include Flora Spiegelberg and her "Reminiscences of a Jewish Bride of the Santa Fe Trail" and a Yavapai woman's retelling of the massacre of her people and the capture of Geronimo.

My great-great-grandmother Annie Carr was living in Arizona in the early 1870s. One morning she saw dust and heard hoofbeats and realized Geronimo's band of marauders were approaching her homestead. Pregnant Annie grabbed her children. Terrorized, they hid in the root cellar. Upstairs in the house they heard the sound of scraping, creaking and banging. But not a peep did they make. They huddled, silent, until nightfall when Annie's husband came home and found them. Only later did I come to understand what terrible treacheries had made a renegade out of a warrior.

Daughter of brilliant Senator Thomas Hart Benton and wife to explorer and presidential candidate John Charles Fremont, Jessie Benton Fremont had all she could do to establish a place for herself in that galaxy of stars. But in spite of the strictures of Victorian mores, she became a star in her own right, a politician and writer and the sole support of her family. In **Jessie Benton Fremont** by Pamela Herr (University of Oklahoma Press, $14.95 p.), Jessie, vigorous, direct, emotional, comes alive. Her public activities as the first political candidate's wife to participate actively in a presidential campaign inspired feminists agitating for a wider role in politics in the mid-19th-century. And her courage as an early pioneer in the gold fields of California gave further lie to the assertion that women were incapable of rugged physical endeavor.

"I was born a second-generation Nebraskan on both my parents' sides," begins Marilyn Coffey in **Great Plains Patchwork, A Memoir** (Iowa State University Press, $19.95 h.c.), her lyrical paean to the Great Plains where she was born and raised. Skillfully, movingly, she takes us into the heart of America, where "every moment of time and movement of self changed one's relationship to the infinite space...here where the earliest lesson learned from the land was that beauty and subtlety were inexorably linked." Coffey's tales of grasshoppers, hailstones as big as marbles, tornadoes and the great dust storms of the 30s transport us to a "wondrous strange" place, a grassland with no equal on earth.

Built to follow the exact line of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad, from the 1800s through the 1950s Fred Harvey's restaurants set standards of first-class dining throughout the Southwest. But it is the Harvey Girls themselves, waitresses hired from newspaper advertisements all over the United States, whose story Lesley Poling-Kempes tells in **The Harvey Girls, Women Who Opened the West** (Paragon House, $19.95 h.c.). Dressed in immaculate black and white uniforms, kept to rigorous standards of etiquette and behavior, they were the first women to work along the railroad. Women who worked were often considered "socially inferior or morally

In Alaska, she wears sealskins and crawls on all fours to teach.

suspect." But the Harvey Girls found room in the West and. under the Harvey system, fairness, and loyalty and rewards for hard work (12-hour days, seven days a week). The hundreds of Harvey Girls were truly pioneers of the old Southwest and founders of many a town where, after their contract with Harvey expired, they married, stayed on and settled down.

It is men who have written the history books and, almost without exception, they have left out what really happened in the West. Women hoed the fields, turned wheat into bread, flax into clothing and, soundlessly, buried their babies and left them behind on countless wagon trails marked only by a fresh dirt mound. The "weaker sex" milked cows, made soap, nursed, cooked, repaired roofs, made feather beds and helped the children with their learning when there was no school. But they got something back for it too.

Elinore Pruitt Stewart, a Midwestern homesteader, wrote, "Any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end."

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—Camp of Alaskan prospectors, ca 1900

Peter E. Palmquist