

Women

Document #1: Women in Mining Regions

Though single white men numerically dominated the western natural-resource frontier, many communities did have substantial populations of white women who had come for the same reason as men: to find a fortune. But on the mining frontier as elsewhere, women's independence was limited; they usually accompanied a husband or father and seldom prospected themselves. Even so, many women used their labor as a resource and realized opportunities to earn money by cooking and laundering and in some cases providing sexual services for the miners in houses of prostitution. In the Northwest they worked in the canneries, cleaning and salting the fish that their husbands caught.

Women also helped to bolster family and community life as members of the home mission movement. Protestant missions had long carried out benevolent activities in foreign areas, such as China, and had been crucial in the settlement of Oregon in the 1840s. But in the mid-nineteenth century a number of women broke away from male-dominated missionary organizations. Their efforts focused on aiding women in countries that supported "barbaric" practices such as polygamy and female infanticide. Soon, these women- middle-class and white- were establishing missionary societies in the United States to fulfill their slogan, "Woman's work for woman." In the West,, they exercised moral authority by building homes to rescue women- unmarried mothers, Mormons, Indians, and Chinese immigrants- who they believed had fallen prey to men or who had not yet accepted the conventions of Christian virtue.

-Mary Beth Norton *et al*, A People and a Nation (2001)

Document #2: Diary of a Woman Preparing for Oregon

Kitturah Belknap's description of her preparations to leave Iowa for Oregon reveals the numerous tasks that began well before a family took to the trail. In her Iowa homestead on the Des Moines River, Belknap bore four children, three of whom died. During her 1848 overland trip, while pregnant, she cared for her surviving four-year-old. After reaching Oregon, she gave birth to five additional children, two of whom died from typhoid fever. Belknap lived until 1913, to the age of ninety-three.

We found the folks all excitement about Oregon. Some had gone in the spring of 1847. Four families of our connection and many of the neighbors but they had not been heard from since crossing the Missouri River. All was excitement and commotion. Our home was sold waiting our return to make out the papers. [...]

My dear girl, Martha, was sick all summer and October 30 she died, one year and one month old. Now we have one little puny boy left. So now I will spend what little strength I have left getting ready to cross the Rockies. [...]

[November, 1847.] Now I begin to work and plan to make everything with an eye starting out on a six month's trip. The first thing is to lay plans and then work up to the program. The first thing is to make a piece of linen for a wagon cover and some sacks. Will spin mostly evenings while my husband reads to me. [...]

February. The linen is ready to go to work on and six two bushel bags all ready to sew up. That I will do evenings by the light of a dip candle... Have cut out two pairs of pants for George (homemade jeans).

Now it is March and we have our team all ready and in good condition... The company have arranged to start on the 10th of April. George is practicing with the oxen. [...] I think we are fixed very comfortable for the trip. This week I will wash and pack away everything except what we want to wear on the trip.

April 5th. This week I cook up something to last us a few days till we get used to camp fare. Bake bread, make a lot of crackers and fry doughnuts, cook a chicken, boil ham, and stew some dried [sic] fruit. [...]

Monday, April 9th, 1848. I am the first one up. Breakfast is over and our wagon is backed up to the steps. We will load at the hind end and shove the things in front. [...] The wagon looks so nice. The nice white cover is drawn down tight to the side boards with a good ridge to keep from sagging. [...] Now that everything is ready I will rest a little then we will eat a bit.

Document #3: Letter Describing the Experience of the Donner Party

This letter was written by thirteen-year-old Virginia Reed in 1847. Her story relates the harrowing ordeal of the Donner party, an overland saga that included acts of cannibalism.

I take this opportunity to write to you to let you [k]now that we are all Well at present and hope this letter may find you all well to My dear [cousin] I am a going to Write to you about our [troubles] getting to California [sic]; We had good luck til we come to big Sandy thare we lost our best [yoke] of oxons [sic] we come to Brigers Fort & we lost another ox we sold some of our provisions & baut a yoke of cows and oxen [...]

We had to Walk all the time we was a travling up the truckee river [...] [I]t was [raining] then in the [valleys]and snowing in the mountains so we went on that way 3 or 4 days [until] we come to the big mountain... [T]he snow then was about 3 feet deep[.] [There] was some wagons [there]. They said they attempted to cross and could not, well we thought we would try it so we started and they started again.

[W]ell the women were all so [tired from] carrying their children that [they] could not go over that night so we made a fire and got something to eat & ma spred [sic] something over us & ma sit up by the fire & it snowed one foot on top of the bed... [W]e had to go back to the cabin & build more cabins & stay thare all Winter without Pa[.] [W]e had not the first thing to eat[.] [...] [W]e had to kill [little] [C]ash, the dog, & eat him. [W]e ate his head and feet & hide & every thing about him[.] [Oh] my Dear Cousin you don't know what [trouble] is[.] [...]

[Oh] Mary I have not wrote you half of the [trouble] we have had but I have[e] wrote you [enough] to let you [know] that you don't [know] what [trouble] is. [B]ut thank the Good god we have all got [through] and the only family that did not eat human flesh[.] [...]

Document #4: Sarah Palin's Great Great Grandmother (Just Joking)



Mrs. Smith, Glenrock, Wyoming, 1890

Document #5: Picture Celebrating Women's Suffrage in the West



“The Awakening,” Map by Hy Mayer February 20, 1915