

# THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: HOW WOMEN TOOK PART IN THE COLONISATION AND SETTLEMENT OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

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The “Wild West” is perhaps one of the most popularised eras of history, recalling a glorified image of freedom and lawlessness all embodied through male caricatures: cowboys, outlaws and pioneers. It was men who were seen as founders of the frontier and responsible for the Native American Resistance. Early frontier historian Fredrick Jackson Turner writes the American West was a “meeting point between savagery and civilization”, summarising the view contemporary Americans had when approaching this new land.<sup>1</sup> This “open” land offered European American settlers the opportunity to create a new life and a new home. However, this opportunity relied on the land being stolen from the native population. Their lifestyles were reduced to being “uncivilised” to allow white Americans the moral right to “tame” the area and build a society modelled around their ideals.<sup>2</sup> This period in history saw not only an attempt to create a homeland which promised wealth and freedom to European Americans but continuous resistance from Indigenous people to protect their land and their lifestyles. Women and particularly Native American women’s role in this key stage of history is not forgotten but undermined, particularly by certain scholars, for example, Turner. Their existence is attached to the existence of a man, and their impact is overlooked. As the first historian to record frontier history, Turner’s word was often viewed as undoubtedly true; yet this does not exclude the fact that his narrative excluded Pioneer women and Native American women, thus helping to form the continuous view women were absent from this history.<sup>3</sup> This essay will aim to correct such stereotypes, bringing attention to the various roles women played from resisting invasion to creating frontier homesteads and towns.

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When the trope of a masculine West is continued, it is implied that women's existence did not contribute the formation of the frontier.<sup>4</sup> This fact remains untrue as both married and unmarried women heavily contributed to the formation of the frontier. Unmarried women proved particularly significant after the 1862 Homestead Act allowed them to take up homesteading.<sup>5</sup> Unmarried women began to make claims on Western land, though it should be noted this was often claimed within a family context. Homesteading required a community so while these women were creating new lives without a husband, they were not doing so without support from their biological family.<sup>6</sup> This does not disprove their significance, rather it shows that they were still dominant in the creation of permanent homesteads which would turn the West into a settlement. Unmarried women, including divorcees and widows, were also able to thrive through starting businesses. A particular case of this is Mary McNair Mathews, who, after being widowed early, moved to Virginia City with her son and established a successful business; first taking on domestic tasks such as laundry and sewing, before running a school and finally opening a boarding house.<sup>7</sup> Business opportunities were rife along the frontier, and unmarried women had the chance to establish successful businesses, thus contributing to the local economy, and, creating roots of a wider self-equipped town. The domestic sphere also proved an irreplaceable element to creating a stable economy. Married women cared for livestock, often making a profit from selling eggs and butter which would be used to pay for farm equipment or vital infrastructure, like windmills. Thus, married women's labour within the home formed the backbone that allowed a running homestead to be maintained.<sup>8</sup> Therefore the work of both married and unmarried women can undoubtedly be seen as a key element of the formation of an economically thriving frontier town.

Establishing a European American hegemony in the West required more than just the establishment of an economy and basic infrastructure, it required both physical and "social reproduction".<sup>9</sup> "Social reproduction" refers to ensuring that society is recreated through education.<sup>10</sup> This included raising children within societal boundaries and creating a united community. Pioneer families consisted of multiple generations so it should be noted

generational differences did arise when deciding what traditional values should be continued. Diaries and letters of pioneer women are an excellent source of evidence when exploring this change, but again, it is important to treat each account as an individual experience rather than a common one. That said, comparing multiple diaries and letters allow common themes to rise. It can be understood that older women were embedded in values belonging to the Eastern coast and Victorian England. The diary of Adrietta Hixon reveals that her mother was quick to guarantee that her and her sister remained "lady-like"; ensuring they protect their complexions with bonnets and lotions and always riding aside.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Mollie Dorsey Sandford recalls dressing in her father's clothes to make retrieving a runaway cow easier and the way her mother feared she was losing her "dignity" due to this act.<sup>12</sup> These accounts reveal older generations were still attempting to enforce values deriving from Eastern society and despite younger women like Mollie breaking these norms and adopting to the lifestyle at hand, ultimately these generational ideas would still have a heavy impact on continuing traditional lifestyles. These traditional values allowed the family unit to successfully continue with daughters entering marriage or caring for their parental families. "Social reproduction" is often unconsidered by early historians such as Turner or popular media which prefers to focus on famous and exciting characters such as Jesse James or Wyatt Earp. However, this female dominant task ensured that frontier towns became a community through sharing values and continuing to build a stable domestic sphere.<sup>13</sup>

Women also contributed to the formation of society by ensuring the community was equipped to continue reproduction. Through undertaking teaching posts, women created a self-functioning community and stability which would allow future generations to securely raise children; again, this created not just an economy but a community.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, this continuation of a community can be seen when looking at the role of women as midwives who created a self-reliant community and the ability for future generations to be born, thus guaranteeing the continued population of the West. It is described, how on the trail, women assisted each other in giving birth, with wagons used as

birthing chambers.<sup>15</sup> When medical systems had not yet been fully established, midwives continued to ensure safe births and, therefore, the future of the frontier. Midwives provided the healthcare needed to create a self-sustaining society and create formative towns which would not end after the death of one generation but be continued.

The journey Westwards and the following attempt to build a new lifestyle was both physically and mentally straining. Support systems were needed to be able to continue to live such a lifestyle and establish frontier towns. Women often provided this support system for each other, including small acts of kindness and unity that took place on the trail, such as women standing in a circle with their skirts held out, to give each other privacy when they wished to relieve themselves.<sup>16</sup> However, it also included large acts of kindness following disaster. For example after the death of Naomi Sager's husband and her own illness on the trail, the women of the party cared for her and her children.<sup>17</sup> While Naomi did succumb to her illness on the trail, this account reveals the support shared between women which allowed them or their families to continue the journey and populate the frontier.

The colonisation of the American West was reliant on the displacement and cultural death of the Indigenous groups who already had established lives on the land. Assimilation was a key tool used by European Americans to allow the European way of life to gain hegemony in the West. Many organisations looking to enforce assimilation hired female missionaries and teachers, who, due to the rise of the idea of the "New Woman" (women who were working towards developing female liberation), were beginning to take part in further education.<sup>18</sup> Female missionaries were agents of government assimilation projects with a particular famous case being the first white woman to migrate to the West; Narcissa Whitman. Whitman joined her husband working for the "American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions" to travel to Oregon Country to convert the Cayuse.<sup>19</sup> While the Cayuse tribe first welcomed the missionaries, it became clear that Whitman's aim was not just to convert but to destroy culture. She records a disdainful attitude towards the Cayuse, viewing them as dirty and ruining her

home.<sup>20</sup> Tensions increased as the Cayuse became dissatisfied with the Whitmans' consistent discussion of damnation, they requested for the Whitmans to pay for the mission land or leave. Finally, tensions reached an ultimate high and ended in the Whitman massacre with the family being assassinated by members of the Cayuse tribe.<sup>21</sup> Whilst this example ends in their death, it is telling of the methods and aims of unnamed missionaries who avoided the pages of history due to their success in enforcing Christianity and their dismantling of other cultures. Women's roles in assimilation allowed Christianity and European culture to gain hegemony in the West while Native practices became restricted. This ultimately developed the united culture rooted in wide-spread Christianity and Christian values known to history.



This attempt to conquer native land was met with fierce resistance. Each tribe has its own history of battle, massacre and colonisation but throughout these individual histories, key figures can be seen to advocate for their lifestyles and home. Accounts directly from Native American sources are rare; Indigenous culture and history has often been destroyed and replaced by a European narrative. Even the accounts that do exist must be treated with care as many were written by Europeans and so are dependent on a good translator and an unbiased writer to be completely accurate.<sup>22</sup> These accounts are mainly focused on male resistance leaders such as Sitting Bull or Red Cloud. However, indigenous women do still play a major role in the fight to protect their culture, they are just often unnamed. Therefore, to understand how women resisted, an exploration into group resistance and domestic roles must be undertaken. Resistance took place through physical altercations with the US army as well as through outspoken advocacy and conservation of

culture.<sup>23</sup> A key conservation of this culture is the continuation of dance; an act of resistance carried out by many indigenous men and women.<sup>24</sup> As part of an attempt to force assimilation, US figureheads attempted to restrict dances, particularly if they believed the rituals would interfere with farming - a tool used to limit tribes to one area and end a mobile lifestyle. An example of this restriction is noted by Stephen Ferara in his study of Sioux religious beliefs, when he states dances of all types were banned by the government to "stamp out" indigenous practices.<sup>25</sup> The Sun Dance was banned in 1883 but was continued in secret, with the practice being preserved until the ban was lifted in 1950, allowing modern-day Sioux people to continue the practice.<sup>26</sup> The existence of this dance shows an act of community resistance which undoubtedly involved generations of women defying their oppressors to preserve their culture. Female authors who recorded their tribes' traditions and histories can also be seen as resisting European rule. Their refusal to allow their culture or their tribe's fate to be forgotten or generalised by white historians ensures



the world could not push their lives aside. Susan Bordeaux (a mixed-race women) described her own experience in the changing Western world. This included describing the dances held at Fort Laramie and the outfits of mixed-race Native American girls such as "their moccasined feet".<sup>27</sup> This simple act of recording the outfits worn allows an aspect of lifestyle to be remembered. Bordeaux also recorded darker elements of Native history, including attacks from the US Army. These attacks being recalled by an Indigenous person ensures the narrative is not twisted by white historians to justify the actions, but rather the true horrors are presented. Bordeaux's account of the Battle of Blue Water uses accounts told directly by those who experienced it such as Cokawin. Cokawin, who managed to conceal

herself, describes the horror to Bordeaux as "Men, women and children were shot right down".<sup>28</sup> This account guarantees the horror experienced can never be twisted or justified and serves as an act of resistance in the face of the Americans who wished to forget the blood spilt in the name of settlement.

Native American women also held positions of power within their communities, meaning that all acts of physical rebellion credited to men were supported by women. Plains Native American women were of major significance in economic and ceremonial matters.<sup>29</sup> The writing of Josephine Waggoner, a mixed-race woman who recorded her changing world, reveals the responsibilities of women by recording the work of her mother: Ithatewin.<sup>30</sup> Waggoner records the work of her mother in Powder River Country as she tanned hides for trade with US Army Officers.<sup>31</sup> While this recording takes place after Red Cloud's war it can be assumed that this work is generational and thus performed by Plain women before Waggoner's time. When war broke out between the US Army and the United Plains troops led by Red Cloud over the ownership of Powder River country, it can be assumed that tribal women were supporting the armies through helping to create the economy needed to sustain a war. These unnamed women provided the home support which allowed acts of resistance to be made against the US army. Red Cloud's war was won after two years; with the US ordering their soldiers to abandon Powder River Country.<sup>32</sup> This war was sustained by the efforts of women and ultimately shows their resistance to oppression. Native American women can occasionally be noted to take part in physical battles. A famous example is Buffalo Calf Road Woman, who saved her brother after his horse was shot out from under him at the Battle of the Rosebud or what the Cheyennes call the Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother.<sup>33</sup> This example of bravery shows that women again supported the army in their acts of resistance and were passionate about protecting their homelands.

In conclusion, when exploring the history of the American West we see much more than the romanticised image created by popular imagination but rather a simultaneous attempt to create and preserve a home. European American women fought to create a

permanent frontier and the promise this new homeland embodied while Native American women fought to preserve their land and culture against foreign oppressors. The West is not just a history of men, but a complex history of the women often left unnamed and their role in the creation of a European West and the gradual breakdown of Indigenous lifestyle.

### Footnotes

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