Women's History from Women's Sources: Three Examples from Northern Dakota*

by Glenda Riley

Legend, myth, hyperbole, and stereotype are all terms that describe the traditional approach to the lives of women on the American frontier. Until recently, scholars and others who were curious about the roles and contributions of women to the development of the West turned for enlightenment to fictional accounts, media images, and historians whose interpretations were limited by a paucity of source materials. Apparently, it seldom occurred to writers and researchers to examine women's own documents, the letters, diaries, and reminiscences written by actual frontierswomen. Investigators seemed oblivious to the idea that the most accurate source of information concerning western women might be western women themselves.

This essay argues for the crucial importance of utilizing women's writings to understand women's lives. During the last decade, scholars and other writers have increasingly begun to recognize the richness and authenticity of women's own words. The three examples of women's documents presented here illustrate the unique flavor of these writings. Each piece has drama and detail that offer valuable insights into a small segment of women's experiences.

Before turning to the documents, however, it may be useful to review the inaccurate characterizations of frontierswomen that have resulted from the failure to investigate women's sources. Over the years, western women have been variously portrayed as Gentle Tamers, Pioneers in Petticoats, Saints in Sunbonnets, Madonnas of the Prairies, Pioneer Mothers, Light Ladies, Calamity Janes, and Fighting Feminists, to mention a few of the better times used with this article are drawn from the exhibit "Women on the Plains." The exhibition, funded in part by the North Dakota Humanities Council, opened at the North Dakota Heritage Center on September 28, 1984, and continued through November.

Sources of the history of women in North Dakota exist in profusion. For example, photograph collections often illustrate women's work and lives. This picture from the W.H. Brown real estate company promotes lands near Richard- ton; its caption reads "Eggs, chickens, and butter earn big 'pin money' for the women of North Dakota." The photo was taken on the E.B. Barry farm about 1906.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

* Illustrations used with this article are drawn from the exhibit "Women on the Plains." The exhibition, funded in part by the North Dakota Humanities Council, opened at the North Dakota Heritage Center on September 28, 1984, and continued through November.
known genres. Writing in 1921, historian Emerson Hough characterizes the tragic tenacity of frontier-women in dramatic terms:

The chief figure of the American West... is not the long-haired fringed-legged man riding a raw-boned pony, but the gaunt and sad-faced women sitting on the front seat of the wagon, following her lord where he might lead, her face hidden in the same ragged sunbonnet which has crossed the Appalachians and the Missouri long before... That was the great romance of all America—the women in the sunbonnet.\(^1\)

In 1959, one of the few women writing about frontier women rejected such a pathetic view. Helena H. Smith remonstrates that prevalent "long lamentations" about the harshness of women's lives on the frontier were immensely exaggerated. "The emptiness of the Great Plains is thought to be peculiarly depressing to the fair sex," she remarks, "but when we reach the Pacific Northwest it turns out that the trees were what got them down." In Smith's view, pioneer women dealt with a "life that was tough" but "so were they."\(^2\)

\(\text{Even if unidentified, photographs can open doors to the history of women. Styles help date a picture, and the backdrop may indicate the opulence or poverty of the home. Though this picture probably was taken in the early 20th Century, it shows three tools (rake, broom, and dustpan) that are often seen in modern homes.}

---State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection---

A few years later, in 1966, historian Everett Dick followed Hough rather than Smith by painting an extremely bleak picture of the western woman's plight. "How much of the retreat from the frontier from time to time was due to the figure in the sunbonnet and calico is not known," he writes, "but it is certain that many stayed until the prairie broke them in spirit and body."\(^3\) In 1970, yet another historian, Page Smith, added that westering women "accompanied their husbands across the continent, suffering the most desperate physical hardships as well as a desolating sense of loneliness."\(^4\)

Apparently, writers were far from agreeing about the nature and impact of women's frontier experiences. At least part of the problem stemmed from a reliance on stereotypical rather than on factual materials. Women's letters, diaries, and memoirs were infrequently employed. When they were used, they were few in number and narrow in their representation. Consequently, historians' account of women tended to support legends rather than provide genuine insights.

Legends regarding western women undoubtedly grew from the romantic aura and promise of the American West that still intrigue millions of people across the globe. In the nineteenth century, such myths were created or perpetuated by writers who were anxious to please their largely-urban reading audiences. As one historian notes, Eastern writers freely "romanticized frontier characters in response to literary conventions and commercial requirements."\(^5\)

"Dime novels" of the nineteenth century were followed by the "realistic" novels of the twentieth century. In 1922, Hamlin Garland, for example, created the heart-rending image of the "Prairie Mother" when he presented his own recollections of his mother's hard life on a Midwestern farm. In 1929, Ole Rolvaag contributed

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his view of the ravages of the Great Plains on the wo-
men who attempted to settle on it. Another side of
pioneer women was drawn by such writers as Vardis
Fish, who in 1943 portrayed women of stamina and in-
genius in his novel about the Donner Party tragedy. In
1946, Willa Cather similarly created strong and success-
ful western women in her popular novel, My Antonia.7

By the time that the field of women's history began to
emerge in the late 1960's and early 1970's contradictory
images of western women had taken firm hold in both
public and scholarly minds. As historians of women
attempted to remedy the "invisibility" of women in
American history, it quickly became obvious that
women's diaries, letters, and other documents had sel-
dom been collected, much less investigated. This meant
that almost all of the speculating and mythologizing
about westering women had been carried on without soli-
citing their own opinions, remarks, and memories. In-
credible as it may now seem, generations of Americans
had accepted images of frontierswoman that had little re-
lation to women's own perceptions of the reality of their
lives.

Once this discrepancy came to light, historians and
other scholars began to collect women's source materials,
no mean task after so many years of neglect. Today,
women's documents found in North Dakota illustrate the
importance of women's writings. The first is a 1885 diary
of a cattle drive from Minnesota to the Little Missouri
Bad Lands area in northern Dakota.8 Its author, Mary
Hetty Bonar, was a schoolteacher in Wadena, Minnesota,
when she learned about the drive and left her teaching
post to sign on as cook. Twenty-five years old and un-
married at the time, she perhaps viewed the trip of
slightly more than two months as an adventure. Certainly
the remarks in her diary reveal a curious and enthusiastic
young woman who ended the trip "tired;" but "happy."

Bonar returned to Wadena by train after the drive.
Sometime in the 1890's she moved to Washington where
she taught school in Waterville. She married in 1898 at
the age of thirty-eight and took up farming with her
husband near Davenport, Washington, apparently living
out her life in that locale.

June 14, 1885. Go to Deyo's.
June 15. Strawberry short cake.
Wednesday, June 17. 1885. Start about 9 o'clock
A.M. for the West. Team got stuck in the mud
before leaving timber. (Team understood.) Deyo's
pony gets away from him gives them all a chase.
Dine at Mrs. Tyrell's. Supper and night at Mr.
Schultze's. About 10 miles from Bertha.
18th. View of Leaf Mrs. Fine day. Dine on a steep
hillside, and look for strawberries while Deyo goes
on a trade. Fails. (Both berries and trade) Pass
Henning. Camp 3 or 4 miles West of it. First
night in tent and rains. (14 mi.)
19th. Dine some 4 mi. east of New Citharrall. Camp
at the outlet of Lake Citharrall on shore—traveled
some (10 mi.). Deyo gets a trade, and two steers
for me.
20th. Pass Battle Lake and dine on a steep hillside,
while cattle stay in a low place in water. Very hot
morning. Think we have passed round Turtle Lake,
and over very high hills on its sides. Soon after
starting the wind brings rain. Very much colder
suddenly. Very steep slippery hill. Camp in a hol-
Wind heavy, (15 mi.)
21st. Deyo's birthday—understood. Very cold wind,
freezes us up. Dine on hilledike 2 mi. east of Fergus
having traveled 7 mi. Lemon pies. Clean up be-
fore noon. Stay till Monday noon and pay $2.00
for pasture.
Monday 22nd. Through Fergus Falls. Camp some 5
mi. west on a broad level prairie, and get wood
½ mi. R.R.
23rd. Cross level prairie, and Red Riv. go through
Brekenridge and Wahpeton, camp ½ mi. west
near race track baked bread at a Germans trav-
eled 25 mi. first alkali.
24th. Cross level prairie get stuck after crossing a
little bridge. Canary got out of cage. Camp near a
vacant R.R. elevator a fine place, so we cook up a
lot. Travel.
25th. Pass through Wineton Jimmy Tilly, and dine
then travel through a slough all the afternoon 7 mi.
Camp on its edge. Mosquitoes very bad.
26th. Sprinkles rain at 4 A.M. and we start on in
haste. Go back a mile around a bad place. Get on
to solid ground and go through Milnor at noon.
and bake bread at Mr. Ristaus' (He speaks of the
Misses Bowing) Camp near Little Cheyenne Riv.
It rains hard during night, blows. I get wet and
cold. High prairie.
Sat. 27. Travel 12 mi. Camp in Lisbon find Geo.
Ransome in a ravine by a fine big spring.
Monday hotter. One of the best cows was hurt by
fast driving through grain fields and it is decided to
stay still she and the pony with sore back are
able to travel.
Tues. Go to P.O. also Wed. July 1. for washboard.
Thurs. Move up on hill side, and wash and bake
bread at a house ½ mi. distant.
Fri. Cool till most noon. Hot days. Clouds up at eve.
cooler.
Saturday July 4th. 1885. I got up on a high bluff
and watch the people go to celebrate. After dinner
it begins to rain and when it stops raining we get
supper and get ready to go to the Celebration
grounds by the store. Dance a little. It rains be-
fore we get home. (2)
Wednesday, July 8, We pick up and start on our jour-
ney about 10:30 A.M. Bake bread at Mr. Hodgins
Irish before starting. M.E. Currie is the merchant
and P.M. at Ft. Ransome. Dine near a claim shan-
ty. Hattie rustles a couple of boards under the
stove. Camp off the road a mile or so and Thurs-

1 Hamlin Garland, A Pioneer Mother (Chicago: The Bookfellow, 1922); Ole Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper and Row, 1929); Vardis Fish, The Mothers. An American Saga of Courage (New
York: The Vanguard Press, 1943); and Willa Cather, My Antonia (Bos-
2 Mary Henry Bonar, Transcript of Diary, 1885, State Archives and
Historical Research Library, State Historical Society of North Dakota,
Bismarck. The original diary is part of the James Crayton Bonar Papers,
Washington State University Library, Pullman, WA; the transcript is re-
produced here by permission.
The Methodist Ladies Aid of Hamilton, North Dakota, posed for this group portrait about 1900. Stern and unsmiling, immaculate in white dresses, and unadorned, the women reveal much about the society in which they lived.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection

day morn pass the German 4th of July schoolhouse. Dine by an ancient lake all grass grown and sunken.
Camped Thursday eve. about \( \frac{1}{2} \) mi. from an Englishman’s house. I ride Frank and lead Billy to water.

Friday Dine some 2 miles S. East from Jamestown.
Stay till 5 o’clock P.M. Pass through Jamestown, and Camp 4 mi. west. Ft. R. to Jamestown 50 mi.
Through Eldridge—get to mail (send 2.00 to organ.) Along N.P.R.R. camp by dug out by R.R. see some queer looking fish or polywogs. Camp S. of R.R. track 16 mi. mosquitoes bad. sprinkles.

Sunday, July 12 dine n. of R.R. (high wind) rolling prairies. Camp at Crystal Springs. (fine.)

Mond. 13 (I wash an undersuit). Thro rolling prairies and lakes. By Tappin high winds, Dawson and _____, some 5 miles west. (Traveled 20 mi to ger 16)


Thurs. 16. Passed through Menoken and Deyo sold 2 cattle to Mr. Walter B. Marston. Through Bismarck and camped on a River bottom. Missouri

Fri. 17. Crossed No. Bismarck to Mandan (2 mi.) 5 mi. on a steam ferry. Through Mandan and camp oo Heart Riv. bottom opposite brick-kiln. Cattle are footsore, and think we have a chance to sell yearlings so we stay.

Sat. Go up to Mr. Wm. Jones’s, and stay all day and to rink at eve. hot.

Sund. 19. rains early Start about 10 A.M. Go up on high bluffs and soon strike the Old “Custer Trail”, go over rolling prairie. stony. Are following up the Heart Riv. which we ford and Camp for the night about 3. P.M traveled 10 mi. or more. Very hot, but cool breeze on bluffs.

Mond 20. Great hills. ______ By old fort Warren.—find a spring—Sidalia, New Salem, and travel till nearly nine o’clock at eve looking for a place to camp where there is feed. Go through a flax field and unhitch while Deyo goes to a house and then we pick up and go oo a few rods to the gulch by the side of a pasture fence. (All Germans.) Here we see a goat. high stony hill.

Tues. 21. Nor quite such high hills. Very hot sun but strong and cool wind. Afternoon we see our first Antelopes, and they try to kill one. Eve, a black cloud comes rapidly up in North and gives us a little wind and rain. Camp in deep ravine. Tie wagon down! I find a barrel in the gulch.

Wed. 22. Over rolling prairie and come in sight of Knife Riv. Station. And while they go for wood, Camp. about 4 miles farther on. I drive on. rain. Poor feed for several days past. no mosquitoes. Young man’s butte in sight.

Thurs. 23. We climb to the top of this butte where it is said a young man lies buried. A fine view from the top. A fine strong _______ at its foot.
due out a ______ coal bed. We follow the R.R. and travel over a more level country than for days past. rains a.m. hot p.m. pass richardton station, Taylor, and camp in a ravine So of R.R. find iron water. (R.R. iron in the water.)

Fri. 24. Cool and nice. Through Gladstone, over Green Riv, and Camp N. of R.R. Cowboy passes by, I dress for Dickenson. R.M. Rustle peas. (60 acres) While in Dickenson a terrible black cloud rises in the north, and after we get out a mile the wind, rain, and hail comes for ½ an hour. Camp about 2½ mi west, clears up.

Sat. 25. Reach S. Heart about one o'clock, P.M. August 13, 1885. Thurs. 11 o'clock A.M. Mr. Warner, G., Deyo, Hattie and I start for the Bad Lands. Pass Bellfield 9 mi. go 6 or 7 mi. and drive to the right of the old Trail and all at once the Lands came into view. Such a great deep gulch from ¼ to 1 mi. wide with steep hills and steep sides all streaked with different colored soils. We camp on the edge of the bank. Pick nice ripe wild currants, and chokecherries. Find very poor water. Early in the morning Fri. as we ate up early I go down into the bottom of this gulch. As we eat breakfast Hattie spies a deer, and the men start after it. We see another and the men kill a nice one and see ½ a doz. We take the saddle of this and throw the rest into the gulch. Go on cross R.R. through Sulley Springs, saw large petrified stumps. Through a lovely valley passed herds of cattle and ponies into Medora. Buy bread, get water, pass the slaughter house (Du Morse,) where 125 cattle are killed each day and shipped in Refrigerators. Cross the Little Missouri Riv. and O! the stench! Through Little Missouri town, and camp about a mile west. Jerk our venison, ber a quarter. Sat. We keep on the camp near Andrews station, where Hattie and I get sugar and ice-water. Towards evening we come to Sentinel Butte and Hattie, G. and I climb. We find it is a task-the wind blows so hard. The view fully repays us but the air is so smoky we can't see so much. Can see 25 or 50 mi. broken prairie. Stop and pick wild currants which are so nice. We find that the water seen below is black from coal and alkali. Hattie and I are so tired, and I go to bed immediately.

In the morning (Sund.) we travel till about 10 A.M. before we find water and then at a spring by a ranch and we ask for milk. We eat breakfast and dinner neat and start homeward a different 2

Even the contemporary illustrations of women at play provide glimpses of the customs and attitudes of earlier ages. The gentle poses of Mrs. Margaret Roberts and Ana Udeman astride their horses amid the Bad Lands scenery indicates the limits of decorum and style. Note that both women are seated side-saddle on their horses. The photograph is undated.

—State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection
The next document is a 1889 letter from Ellen Emery, née Stebbins, to her sister Lizzie. It focuses on the terror and tragedy that fire held for virtually defenseless settlers.

9 Letter, Ellen Stebbins Emery to her sister, December 31, 1889, State Archives and Historical Research Library, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

The last document is an oral reminiscence. Unfortunately, the date of dictation and recording is unknown. It concerns the childhood memories of Emily Lindstrom, who was born on October 31, 1870, in Cass County, Dakota Territory, only a year after her parents had immigrated from Sweden. The reminiscence spans a seven year
In the fall of 1873, we moved to Grand Forks County and settled on a piece of unsurveyed land westward from Grand Forks, on the Goose River. The post office was at Newburg, some sixteen miles away, Halvor Berg, the post master, was our nearest neighbor.

Our family, at that time, consisted of my parents, myself, a baby brother born in December 1872, and my grandfather, Lars Lindstrom, who had come from Sweden that summer.

Everything was wild, hunting and trapping being the only means of making a living. Foxes were trapped or poisoned for their pelts. With a supply of these skins on hand, either my father or my grandfather would sell them at Grand Forks, the nearest trading post—sixty miles away—to trade the skins for food and other supplies.

In the spring of 1874 other settlers came in covered wagons from Iowa. They were Norwegians. Surveyors came in the summer of 1875. Before that we were all squatters.

All the first settlers built their homes from logs cut from the timber strip along the river. There were all kinds of trees there. None of the first settlers ventured out on the prairies but built their homes near the river.

The summers were fine in those early days. All kinds of wild fruits grew in the woods and on the prairies. Mother would dry these for winter use: strawberries, ground cherries, choke cherries, raspberries, goose berries, June berries, two or three variety of plums. There were plenty of fish in the river. Rabbits, prairie chickens and beaver served for food.

Oxen were the only means of transportation. We did not have any oxen to begin with, but a neighbor plowed the ground for us. I remember seeing my grandfather seeding grain by hand.

We had one Indian scare in the summer of 1875. I can remember that some one came in the night to warn us. We walked some miles to the home of one of the settlers where all the people gathered and stayed there till toward evening the next day. It proved to be a number of friendly Indians walking across country to visit another tribe.

In the spring of 1878 we had our first English school. We were the only ones that had a room to spare so the first term of school was taught in our home. A long table and benches were provided. Nels Tanberg, a local young man, was hired to teach. He boarded around with the parents of his pupils. The term lasted three months. Our next teacher was Joseph Oldham of Grand Forks. That was the spring of 1879. He taught six weeks at our house and the other half of the term at the Paul C. Johnsons who by that time had added an upstairs to their house which was given over for the school.

Another early teacher was a Tom Coney from Grand Forks. To my great disappointment I could not attend school when cold weather came for the Johnson home was two miles away.

During one of those early winters the men folks hired a teacher and they all went to school. A debating society was formed that often met at our house. There was also a singing society with a Norwegian singing master. Church was held at the homes.

Our first Fourth of July celebration was held in 1878. A baby sister arrived at our home in December of that same year.

One day in October 1879 my grandmother Lindstrom and two daughters arrived from Sweden. Amanda was young, only a few months past fifteen. That same fall my parents bought our first sewing machine, a Singer. Grandmother and the two girls lived with us that first winter. In spring grandfather had his house ready and they moved there. His land was across the river from ours. We were on the west side, in a sheltered bend of the river. Our log house was whitewashed inside and outside.

The soil was fine for gardening and mother raised a great variety of flowers and also vegetables. I remember the water melons and musk melons, and the beautiful flowers. A brother in Sweden had sent seeds to mother. When it did not rain enough, mother carried water up the steep bank from the river, at least a hundred feet. She used a yoke and two pails. After the baby sister came she never did much outside work.

One spring the grasshoppers came and ate everything in the gardens.

In the spring of 1880 Miss Emma Missen, a niece of hardware merchant Brown, Grand Forks, taught our school. After the first six weeks the Johnsons moved into a new home they had built and the school was moved downstairs in the old house. The upstairs was then rented to a Norwegian minister—Reverend Hageby—and his wife.

One day, after school, Mrs. Hageby invited me up to her apartment for a little visit and lunch. The dainty meal on pretty dishes and the nice things she had all seemed like a visit to fairyland to me.

Emma Missen was the first American girl I can ever seen. She was very young, pretty, and dressed nicely. The last day of school she asked Marie Sime—another student about three years older than myself—and me to remain after school. We did not know what for until her Uncle and Auntie Brown came from Grand Forks to get her and brought us girls each a little penknife as a remembrance.

In the fall of 1880 I accompanied my parents to Grand Forks, going by ox team. The trip took three days and I think it was mother's first visit to Grand Forks too. It was a wonderful treat to me. My first glimpse of a town and afterwards I wished I could live in town.

These three documents suggest the diversity of women's source materials. Bonar's diary conveys both a sense of daily activities and what events seemed worthy of record to a female diarist. Emery's letter offers a feeling for what its writer thought would interest her distant family. And Lindstrom's reminiscence gives a picture of those aspects of frontier life that remained in a child's memory well into adulthood.

10 Emily Lindstrom. Reminiscence. undated, ibid.
These sources also illustrate the complexity of women's lives on the frontier. They give glimpses into the experiences of an employed woman (Bonar), a farm woman (Emery), and an immigrant woman (Lindstrom). They are all from the same time period and region, yet they give very different perspectives: a cattle drive, a farmstead, and a child's-eye view. Interestingly enough, one woman (Bonar) married late and another (Lindstrom) never married at all, beying the stereotype of the frontier woman as a "helpmate" to a struggling husband. Of the three, Emery, the farm wife, might be considered the most "typical."

These documents clearly demonstrate the variety and individuality of western women. In so doing, they present a strong case for rejecting legend and myth regarding frontierswomen in favor of the reality found in women's own sources. They also demonstrate that it is both more accurate and more exciting to pursue women's stories as they tell them rather than relying for information on customary and outdated shibboleths.