

Women and Men on the Overland Trail

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"Women and Men on the Overland Trail." *The Annals of Iowa* 45 (1981), 581-582.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol45/iss7/9>

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Book Reviews

Women and Men on the Overland Trail, by John Mack Faragher.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. pp. 281. Bibliography,
index. \$6.50 paper.

Scholars of women's history are re-examining events once viewed from the male participants' perspective to ask: What was this experience like for women? John Faragher has methodically studied 169 diaries, recollections, and letters in an attempt to answer this central question for the overland trail from 1843 to 1870.

Women were not the passive, sunbonneted cargo depicted by many twentieth-century novelists and film makers, according to the emigrants' own accounts. They were the working support of the trail's labor system. Many women walked much of the journey and searched for buffalo chips to use as fuel. After the day's trek, the men relaxed and enjoyed other men's company, while women worked at their separate fires, preparing food for the next day. A third of the women's diaries mention women driving wagons and stock, a rift in the traditional sexual division of labor.

A major portion of *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* tackles the perplexing issue of why the sexes perceived going West so differently. Why did anxiety pervade nearly every woman's overland account? Faragher depicts the different psychological traits attributed to each sex in light of their role restrictions and expectations. He concludes, ". . . for men, the overland emigration was an archetypal nineteenth-century event, for it was conceived in the spirit of progress, publicly designated to fulfill economic goals, yet infused and overlaid with male projections and identifications." While for men the overland trek was "a grand encampment" and a continuation of their social roles, women were torn from their domestic context.

Much of the book describes this rural midwestern family context. The bibliography cites an impressive range of psychological and sociological resources used for studying the family and roles. On the farm, women were engaged in from one-third to one-half of all food production. They had a restricted, but valid gender role in the home-consumption economy. But while men and women were partners in the farming enterprise, they inhabited quite different social worlds. Faragher uses prescriptive literature, folk sayings, and recollections to recreate these separate worlds.

Men had more social contact, but were also expected to be competitive. They had aggressive outlets in swearing, drinking, and hunting along the trail. Women's culture was concerned with life processes, children, marriage, domestic economy, and a network of female

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friendships. For a woman, the disruption of her home meant a loss of her autonomous sphere and much of her status. It was the man's decision to move West, according to Faragher's sources. Not one of the wives in his study initiated the move; nearly a third wrote of their objections to it. Once on the trail, men had little empathy for women's fears and jettisoned their possessions along the way. The women's deepest sorrows came from severed friendships at home and on the trail, as families broke from one train to go on alone or regroup. The most common feature in women's overland diaries, according to Faragher, was endurance: self-denial and resolve to keep up a cheerful front. Women's journals became their confidantes, private places where these displaced persons could work out their anxieties.

Faragher did a content-analysis of fifty overland diaries to deduce the values men and women held. He found both sexes equally concerned with the practical aspects of their journey, their health and safety. However, men's accounts contained many more aggressive sentiments, while women's were amiable. Twice as many of the women wrote about other people; men wrote about objects and things. Faragher found, "Men so disregarded women that in male diaries and recollections women were practically invisible." A sense of male camaraderie pervaded the trail—men used the pronoun "we" in their diaries, while women chose the isolated "I."

The diaries and recollections are well-integrated into Faragher's clear narrative. He is at his best when specific, and weakest when he bases sweeping generalizations on secondary sources. But Faragher is more careful than many historians in making the jump from individual accounts to meaningful generalizations about past behavior. His content-analysis of personal documents is an encouraging step towards giving form and order to the diaries of previously ignored people.

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Warrior In Two Camps: Ely S. Parker, Union General and Seneca Chief, by William H. Armstrong. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978. pp. xi, 244. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$11.95.

Pressured by the ever increasing onslaught of white settlement on New York's western frontier, Seneca Indians, throughout much of the first half of the nineteenth century, found themselves caught up in an

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