

## Frontierswomen: the Iowa Experience

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## BOOK REVIEWS

MICHAEL D. GIBSON, BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

*Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience*, by Glenda Riley. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981. pp. xv, 211. Photographs, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$18.95.

In *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* Glenda Riley, professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa, examines the experience of women who came to Iowa during the state's frontier period (1830 to 1870). Riley uses diaries, letters, and memoirs, augmented by census reports, newspapers, and secondary sources, to obtain female perceptions about pioneering. At first glance, the scope of the book may appear narrow, but the limitation on the time period and geographical location allow Riley to study in great detail most aspects of women's lives.

After carefully assessing the data she gathered, Riley concludes that many myths and stereotypes about women pioneers do not apply to Iowa frontierswomen. For example, women immigrants to Iowa did not comprise a homogeneous group, but came from varied ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Wherever possible, Riley includes recollections from distinct ethnic groups. Black women left no letters or diaries; nevertheless, Riley presents a useful discussion of Iowa's early blacks, although she cannot deal specifically with black women's experiences. Another myth is that women, who were reluctant to leave their homes, had little part in the decision to emigrate. Riley contends that since women considered themselves to be part of the family unit, many were eager to go West because they saw an opportunity to improve the family's economic status.

Riley expands her discussion into topics beyond the limited concept of frontier experience as the trip west and the establishment of homes in the wilderness. In one chapter, she analyzes the economic contributions pioneer women made to their families, even though

census takers listed such women as "not gainfully employed" (p. 56). She examines Iowa women's responses to the double challenge of the frontier and the Civil War in another chapter. Also, she devotes a chapter to Iowa's first woman suffrage movement.

Riley is to be commended for her readiness to acknowledge that problems may occur with sources. For example, memoirs were usually written years after events took place, and may have been colored by changing perceptions. Riley allows for such possibilities in drawing conclusions. She also points out that as important as suffrage leaders were, they were not representative of a majority of Iowa women. Most important, she places the experience of the Iowa frontierswoman firmly within the context of nineteenth-century life. By our standards, she concludes, life was hard for them but life was hard for everyone. We do not need to portray these pioneers as stoic survivors, for they certainly did not see themselves that way.

Two minor criticisms may be made of the book. The final chapter contains a discussion of white women's attitudes toward Native Americans that would have fit better into the chapter dealing with racial and ethnic diversity. Also, the detailed bibliographical essay would have been enhanced with additional discussion of the works enumerated.

Neither of these points should detract from the book's value as an important contribution to American history. It will interest not only the historian but general readers as well. Glenda Riley's case study approach will stimulate similar efforts by scholars interested in women's experiences in other parts of the West. *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* is an excellent companion volume to Julie Roy Jeffrey's *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* for a study of women in the American West.

NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

CHERYL FOOTE

*Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the America Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, by Ray Allen Billington. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981. pp. xv, 364. Photographs, bibliographical notes, index. \$18.95.

Ray Allen Billington's recent death has brought to a close a distinguished career. His legacy to us is this volume, the last of a dozen book-length works concerned with the frontier experience and the American West. Entitled *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise*,

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