



EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

No other region of the United States has so shaped the image of our national identity as has the West. Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner articulated his famous "frontier thesis" in 1893,¹ historians have debated how and to what extent the frontier nourished American individualism and democracy. The contribution of the western frontier to our national mythology is less debatable. From Daniel Boone to John Wayne, our national folklore is replete with white male "rugged individuals" finding their selfhood in the freedom of an untamed land. This image, like most other stereotypes, is one-dimensional and historically inaccurate and incomplete. It leaves out most westerners, including the original inhabitants of the land, American Indians, and Hispanics; men who came West, not as loners, but with their kin; and women of all ethnic groups and social classes.

Recently western and women's historians have begun to address the omissions of the older western history, and the articles in this book represent pioneering efforts to reexamine the West through women's eyes. They are based on papers presented at the first Women's West Conference, in Sun Valley, Idaho, in August, 1983. The Women's West Conference was the first national meeting devoted to western women's history, and the work in this volume represents the most diverse and detailed examination yet undertaken of women's pasts in the West. As organizers and participants, we saw the conference as an important step in the development of a new area of historical inquiry. It brought together historians, both independent and institution-based, and provided us an opportunity to share and compare work with other researchers and with westerners whose lives are part of the history we seek to record. It was an exciting conference, full of the delight of discovery and the satisfaction of confirmation.

The articles in this book are important because of the ways in which they describe women's roles in western history and add the experiences of western women to national scholarship in women's history. Women have been virtually absent from traditional western history. This omission has severely distorted our understanding of the settlement and development of the American West. Sadly, ignorance of western women has been nearly as pervasive in the much newer field of American women's history. We start, then, with the obvious assertion that there *were* women "in them thar hills," that historians are now recording their experiences, and that western women's history offers important insights into our national past.

The absence of women from older western histories reflects in part a narrow concentration on the early Euro-American ² frontier period, when, especially in mining areas and boom towns, women were scarce. More were present on agricultural frontiers, which were frequently settled by families. But whether one defines the frontier as a place characterized by a low ratio of people to inhabitable space or as the process by which a place is settled and cultural forms are established, the narrow focus on a brief historical epoch obscures the lives of the original inhabitants and of later settlers whose experience changed over time. There were, in fact, many frontiers, beginning with the arrivals of the first Europeans and Africans on the East Coast in the seventeenth century. In this volume, however, we focus not on the frontier but on the trans-Mississippi West, defined as the area west of the ninety-eighth meridian. That is, of course, a very large area. It was settled at different times by people of different ethnic heritages, and it includes a variety of geography, climate, and regional economies. That diversity is demonstrated by the careful studies of women's experiences in different times and places in this book. Central to the articles is the recognition that the diversity of western experiences requires us to understand the different circumstances of western women's lives before we can arrive at large generalizations about what the West has been for women.

Early scholarship on western women asked the same questions that researchers trained in western history or in women's history brought with them. From western history we inherited the question of whether or not the frontier was a liberating environment for women. From women's history we inherited scholarship based in prescriptive literature which told Victorian women what the dominant culture considered their appropriate roles, and we asked whether these roles and values were challenged in the West.³ We think that many of the studies in this book demonstrate that a more complex set of questions is posed by the lives of western women and that the current state of scholarship calls for more such detailed histories of actual lives.

One purpose of many of the articles is to identify and then begin to correct some of the oversights and omissions in earlier histories of the West. It is not enough to put a few western heroines into our stories of a heroic and masculine nineteenth-century frontier. Many of the topics of the new women's history do not "fit" into older accounts. In fact, the more we learn about work and family roles, the more we become convinced that much male experience is also omitted from the older western history.

What does the new research on western women offer to the general field of American women's history? Many of the articles consider how idealized eastern sex roles were changed in the West. A number of authors look at the impact of role definitions on women who could not achieve them, and ask whether the contradiction between daily reality and idealized expectations produced new roles for western women and men. In this way western women's history contributes to all of women's history by providing studies of how ideal definitions of womanhood were accepted, rejected, or adapted

by nineteenth-century women, in this instance western women. Other articles indicate the limits of beginning with the role prescriptions of the Victorian elite. They show that many different understandings of sex roles were held by many different westerners, and begin to explain how these changed over time.

Thus this volume has been shaped by our interest in western history *and* women's history. This dual focus has led us to break with the nineteenth-century frontier format and to raise new issues that apply to men as well as women. As we have confronted the inadequacy of older scholarship, we have, inevitably, examined the methodological tools and theoretical assumptions with which we began and have searched for new materials and new ways to achieve a more complete historical understanding of western women. How can we document the lives of millions of women who are not represented in historical archives? How can we include the experiences of women who lived in the region before written history? How can we include the important variables of ethnicity, class, regional economy, period of settlement, family status, and women's life cycles without losing the forest for the trees? We are beginning to see the need to forge new tools and new models. That is what these articles are *most* about: What analytical tools do we need, to ask and to unravel the important questions?

We believe that western women's history must be inclusive. It should offer a multicultural economic perspective that includes all races and classes, in addition to both sexes. It begins with the histories of American Indians and of Spanish conquest, not with Euro-American settlement in the nineteenth century. We will need to use the tools and insights of archaeologists and anthropologists to reconstruct part of the history of western women. In addition, it is important to pay more attention to economic class than do some of the older accounts. The recent interdisciplinary work in the fields of American Indian, Hispanic and Chicano, black, and Asian-American studies is crucial to the achievement of an accurate and inclusive history. Other new questions, insights, and techniques will emerge as we continue to explore.

We think that a new and more comprehensive framework is desirable. We have tried to provide one in the organization of this volume, which reflects our sense of the rethinking implied by the term the "Women's West." We begin with a section on images of western women because we believe that the first step, and probably the hardest, is to free ourselves from the all-pervasive masculinity of the popular image of the American West. Until that basic re-vision occurs, we cannot see women in their own right. Authors who write about western women without confronting this most basic reconceptualization fail, in our opinion, to meet the challenge posed by western women's history.

Then we move not to the nineteenth-century Euro-American pioneers but to the original inhabitants of the West and their interactions with the newcomers. This section challenges the customary "pioneer" framework of traditional western history. It is not as extensive as we would like, which reflects how recently we have recognized that a major new topic is