

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 fron-

tierswomen 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

* 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.

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 Richardson; 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



known genres.¹ Writing in 1921, historian Emerson Hough characterizes the tragic tenacity of frontierswomen 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.²

In 1959, one of the few women writing about frontierswomen rejected such a pathetic view. Helena H. Smith remonstrates that prevalent "long lamentations" about

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."⁴ 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."⁵

Apparently, writers were far from agreeing about the nature and impact of women's frontier experiences. At

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



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."³

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."⁶

"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

¹ See Beverly J. Stoeltje, "'A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Woman," *Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (January-March, 1975), pp. 25-41, and Glenda Riley, "Images of the Frontierswoman: Iowa as a Case Study," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 8-2 (April, 1977), pp. 189-202.

² Emerson Hough, *The Passing of the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 93.

³ Helena H. Smith, "Pioneers in Petticoats," *American Heritage*, 10-2 (February, 1959), pp. 36, 103.

⁴ Everett Dick, "Sunbonnet and Calico, the Homesteader's Consort," *Nebraska History*, 47 (March, 1966), pp. 12-13. See also Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937).

⁵ Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 223.

⁶ Kent L. Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 269.

his view of the ravages of the Great Plains on the women who attempted to settle on it. Another side of pioneer women was drawn by such writers as Vardis Fisher who in 1943 portrayed women of stamina and ingenuity in his novel about the Donner Party tragedy. In 1946, Willa Cather similarly created strong and successful 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 seldom been collected, much less investigated. This meant that almost all of the speculating and mythologizing about western women had been carried on without soliciting their own opinions, remarks, and memories. Incredible as it may now seem, generations of Americans had accepted images of frontierswoman that had little relation 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 unmarried 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. Schultzes. About 10 miles from Bertha.

18th. View of Leaf Mts. 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 Clitherall. Camp at the outlet of Lake Citherall 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 hollow by R.R. *Gold*. Very cold. Steep hills, lakes. Wind heavy. (15 mi.)

21st. Deyo's birthday—understood. *Very cold wind*, freezes us up. Dine on hillside 2 mi. east of Fergus having traveled 7 mi. Lemon pies. Clean up before noon. Stay till Monday noon and pay \$2.00 for pasturage.

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 Breckenridge and Wahpeton, camp ½ mi. west near race track baked bread at a Germans traveled 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. Traveled.

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. Conklin's.

Sund. 28. Start about 11. A.M. Camp at Old Ft. 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 till 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 before we get home. (2)

Wednesday, July 8. We pick up and stan on our journey 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 shanty. Hattie rustles a couple of boards under the stove. Camp off the road a mile or so and Thurs-

⁷ Hamlin Garland, *A Pioneer Mother* (Chicago: The Bookfellows, 1922); Ole Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1929); Vardis Fisher, *The Mothers, An American Saga of Courage* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1943); and Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

⁸ Mary Hetty 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 reproduced 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 school-house. Dine by an ancient lake all grass grown and sunken.

Camped *Thursday* eve. about ½ 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 Tappen high winds, Dawson and _____, some 5 miles west. (Traveled 20 mi to get 16)

Tues. 14. By Steele, nice town, and Camp some 2 mi west of Geneva station. traveled 14 mi. Very hot, still clouds at eve. Broad level prairie, scarcely water.

Wed. 15th By (2) Sterling. (1) Trisele 16 mi. Very hot. Water at a well 200 Ft. deep. Camp at edge of marshy place. Hot winds. Find cactus.

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. Jone'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 lirtle 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 sigbt.

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. (40 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 are 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, bet 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 ate 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 near and start homeward a different

Even the contemporary illustrations of women at play provide glimpses of the customs and attitudes of earlier ages. The genteel poses of Mrs. Margaret Roberts and Ana Uderman 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



rout. cross Mr. Stop at a cow-boy ranch to get water. There are 4 of them and the *handsome* cook came and asked us to come in and rest awhile for the day was very hor. We decline. had no time. Cross the Lit. Missouri again and camp near a very high bluff. The men start for deer, and wound one. Such a pretty level valley. Mond. Morning Aug. 17 Lead the horses by a deep washout. We travel along the Davis Riv valley. Mr. Warner kills such a fat deer. We camp for dinner and I get some more currants. I find a boule. We move along the valley and Deyo and G go ahead on the right hand bluffs and hunt. As we wind among the hills, Hattie spied some moving object ahead, and we think it is a buffalo. Through the spy-glass we feel sure of it, and Mr. Warner starts ahead with his gun, and I climb a high hill to see it better and see D. and G. coming. I tell them of it and D. Starts ahead but G. spooks! and comes to wagon when Mr. Warner runs back to get a cartridge loose from his gun. They both start on again knowing it to be a buffalo. I climb a high butte to see it, while Hattie rather care for the team. I am ½ a minute too late to see it—We have a glorious shouting and great excitement over it but we soon see that it is "branded". We hurry along till we meet a cowboy who tells us about it.

Mond. 17 Camp on a broad open valley. near a little creek. Think often of Buffalo.

Tues. 18. Get near to edge of Bad Lands where I start out to hunt for specimens. Get dif. colored soil and sands. About the middle of forenoon we come suddenly near four or five antelope and the men shoot and cripple one, which runs almost into the wheel before they kill it. Camp for dinner on South Fork of S. Heart—having just seen 1005 cattle and chasing an antelope. Eat in shade of trees in a dry gulch by this creek, some 10 mi. from home. See more antelope after noon. Very hot day. Reach home near sunset. Tired and happy.

Mond. Very cold.

Aug. 24, 1885. Take train at 10 A.M. Stop at Mandan to get ticket through, and as the train stops 20 min. I run into the Indian (Curiosity Shop) Bazaar, and see what a taxidermist can do for the birds and animals. Such beautiful specimens. Buffalo heads mounted, horns, of all kinds & c. Cross the great Missouri Riv bridge and look far below at the river bed which has changed much in a month. Reach Bismarck and such a crowd of people coming and going. Reach Jamestown just after dusk. Valley City—a fine looking place by full moonlight. Saw the electric lights at Fargo. The train then speeds along, and I sleep till near Wadena which I reach at 5 A.M.

Tues. Aug. 25. Cold yet. I wait at the "Merchants" hotel till people are astir, and then proceed to Mrs. Barrett's.

The next document is a 1889 letter from Ellen Emery, *nee* Stebbins, to her sister Lizzie.⁹ 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.

In the letter Emery mentions her husband Oliver, her son Hub, and her daughter Fanny. The family were settlers in the Emerado, North Dakota, area. Shortly after writing this letter, Ellen Emery succumbed to what was to be her last illness. In her daughter Fannie's words, she "took to her bed" about January 10, 1890, and died shortly thereafter.

Dec. 31, 1889

Dear Sister Lizzie,

I write to tell you the "Fire-Fiend" has again visited us early this morning we were awakened by a man pounding on the door, yelling "fire"! I jumped out of the bed and looked toward the barn—and saw the awful sight—that our new and pretty barn was all on fire—the flames just bursting through the roof on the northwest corner. Hub, Oliver and our man ran out, almost naked, and tried to save the poor stock, but were too late: the poor things were all in the agonies of death.—one horse had got loose and got near the door and fell—when Hub tried to pull him out he too fell and came nere loosing his life. Nothing could be done, except to pull the chickens out of their coop close by and then some of them flew back into the fire. You can imagine our feelings, to see Cal and Prince and the mules after fighting through that Prairie fire and then to be burned to a crisp here in the barn at last. All the Horses mules two little colts and our two cows, our Young Cow was just last week coming in. It it thought the whole loss was near \$3,000 dol. Oliver had just last week put \$750.00 ins. on the barn and two thousand on the house. He had not yet record. his Policy, but had paid the Premium. and Mr. Hancock had witnessed it, so they think that will be all right. Poor Hub! he just cried aloud when he saw the poor things dieing in the Fire. some of the tools were burned our Buggy happened to be at your barn. Shep-dog was also burned. All was all right at the barn at ten o'clock at night: and none knows how it happened all we can think is that *mice* might have knawed at some matches that might have been in some of the pockets of some old clothes the men left in the barn, or fired by some tramp waiting between trains. I feel now completely broke up—now and for those poor dumb brutes that have been so faithful and true to help us. Everybody seems so sorry for us Fanny was very much frightened and I was so worried about her, but she controlled her feelings, and tried to comfort me. The girls were so delighted with their rings, nothing could have please them better—and enjoyed their Christmas and I thank you for the little gift and remembrance to me—but just expect it will be burnt up again. but, such is our life; and mine in particular, and a sad ending of the old year. Oh! yes, Mr. J. Everett Scott was buried last week—'twas a very sad funeral indeed.

Please write soon and love to all,

Your Sister Ellen

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

period; Emily was three at its beginning and ten at its end. Lindstrom never married and her means of supporting herself is obscure. In 1913, she moved to Tacoma, Washington, where she lived with a niece until her death in 1948 at age seventy-seven.¹⁰

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, by 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 set out on skis for Caledonia, 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 house 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 see. 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, belying the stereotype of the frontierswoman 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.



Mrs. Ted Pope.