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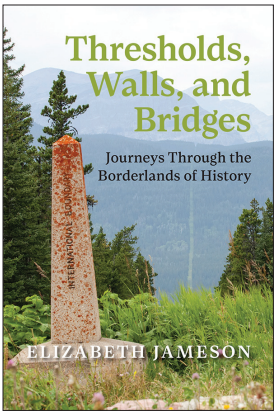

THRESHOLDS, WALLS, AND BRIDGES: JOURNEYS THROUGH THE BORDERLANDS OF HISTORY

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Guns to Butter: Reconceiving the American West

March 28, 2001

One of the great pleasures I discovered in Calgary was browsing the second-hand stores in Inglewood. There was an historical object at the Olde Tyme Antique Store to which I returned on every visit. I coveted it, calculating the cost against the frontier history it evoked. I could pass up the branding iron, the saddles, the rodeo posters, and ancient license plates. But I wanted the hand-cranked butter churn.[1] I imagined myself turning the crank with one hand while I read or perhaps savored a prairie sunset. These images, so central to my imagined pioneer past, remain seemingly far removed from the frontiers of history and collective imagination.

Ambrose Bierce once defined history as "an account mostly false, about events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools."[2] Substitute sheriffs for rulers, outlaws for knaves, toss in the cavalry, and you could have the "buns and guns" version of the American West. If Bierce's definition resonated for generations of glazed-out school children, it no longer defines all that history can be. A generation of new social histories have taken us some distance from a history bounded by battles, dates, and kings.

In this essay I consider the significance of western women's histories for what we might call History with a capital H—for rethinking a major narrative of American history. Putting women into histories of the American West requires confronting the part that the West has played in American history and American identity. From a Canadian perspective, it may also involve rethinking a mythic American West that has helped define what a mythic Canada is not.

That we can now think about how women and other so-called "ordinary" people made history—that we have the information to do that—is

the result of extensive collective labor to recover the stories of a vastly expanded historical cast. My own work has focused on a less heroic cast than the stock characters of our mythic Wests. My faith in their power to reshape the historical narrative was shaken by the literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun, whose *Writing a Woman's Life* contains a passage I found so troubling that I've been wrestling with it for decades.[3] I read Heilbrun seeking insights about adding women's lives to western history. She suggested that was not enough. "[L]ives," she wrote, "do not serve as models; only stories do that. . . . We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. . . . They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories are what has formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives."[4] And new histories.

So I begin with one of the histories that formed America and Americans—the tale of the mythic American frontier. The actors of this essay—hide tanners and translators, gardeners and gatherers, boardinghouse keepers and butter churners—are the female counterparts of a selective cast of men, the protagonists in the most influential essay in American history, Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." American history, Turner announced in 1893, had been "in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."[5]

Turner opened his story by evoking a popular image of opening the trans-Appalachian West, the artist George Caleb Bingham's painting of Daniel Boone leading pioneers through Cumberland Gap in 1775 (see Figure 2.1). In Turnerian history, a predictable progression of frontiersmen trekked inexorably across the continent. "Stand at Cumberland Gap," he wrote, "and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed them by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession."[6] In inevitable sequence, generations of pioneers repeated the "trader's frontier, the rancher's frontier, or the miner's frontier, and the farmer's frontier." Men's jobs defined these frontiers. There was no schoolteachers' frontier, no gardeners' frontier, no laundry workers'

Figure 2.1. George Caleb Bingham, Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, 1851–52. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 1/4". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis. Gift of Nathaniel Phillips.

frontier, no chicken raisers,' or butter churners' frontier. Turner's frontiers wrote most women out of history, and probably most men as well.

I once thought our job was simply to add the missing players. I no longer think that is true. We have recorded the lives of many western women, but they remain largely separate from mainstream History. Putting new actors into their own histories is harder than recovering their lives. Because, as Heilbrun reminds us, there are two fundamental elements of any story, characters and narrative—people and plots. And there are, I think, three basic stages to reconceiving histories. First, we add the people—this is the stage that feminist historian Gerda Lerner called "add a woman and stir."[7] Next we see how the new actors stretch the limits of inherited histories. And only then can we begin to try to imagine new stories from the perspectives of the expanded cast.

From the perspectives of women and people of color, I think the project is somewhere in the middle of Stage Two. We have added women to history; survey textbooks include women; but only in books about

women's history and only in women's history courses do women occupy center stage. Even then they are often simply slotted into inherited plots of westward movement and nation-building or grafted onto popular historical images. Even the newest histories do not cast women as leading actors in a history of all westerners, or all Americans.

To accept this challenge is to grapple with how intricately images of the American West are connected to the history of the nation, and with the stubbornly enduring influence of Dr. Turner, whose frontier thesis excluded women. I revisit Turner not out of any great desire to re-trash his thesis, or out of any disrespect for a man who was, in 1893, a progressive and creative revisionist. I do so because his plot fundamentally shaped the story Americans inherited as the story that "formed us all." It is, in Heilbrun's terms, a necessary starting point for new narratives, new histories.

To add women, we must dissect the plot that excluded them. Turner's subject was not frontiersmen but frontiers, not people but the nation. The frontier separated America from Europe and made Americans American. The story of westward expansion became the story of the country; western frontiers became the crucibles of American individualism and democracy. This, for Turner, was progress.

Three lines defined the forward progress of this history. The first line moved from East to West. As the nation moved west, human society, in an equally linear fashion, improved. The second line moved upward from savagery to civilization, as White Americans conquered the wilderness and the Indigenous people who lived there.[8] History progressed, Turner explained, as "primitive peoples" became "new nations."[9] Like his late-19th-century contemporaries, Turner assumed a ladder of civilization that moved upward in a sequential hierarchy of cultures, with hunters and gatherers at the bottom. The progression through Cumberland Gap charted the onward march of civilization from hunters to herders to pastoral agriculturalists.[10] Americans brought a superior civilization to "savages" whose lives would be improved by adopting nuclear families, private property, agriculture, and Christianity.

Turner's last line of progress wrote women out of history. The third line of progress moved from the inside out; it assumed that public life was more important, historically, than private life. History progressed as people moved from "families into states." "Complex society," Turner wrote, "is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family."[11] History then progressed as men formed

territories and governments, as they established states—the *real* subjects of history.

Family households—those "primitive" social units—buried women in a history of the nation, a history that isolated them behind domestic walls, invisible and unheard. We can see and hear many more women than we could a generation ago. The next step is to try to imagine western history from their perspective, to imagine it, in effect, as the story of the chicken raisers' frontier.

Let's try. Add some women and stir. We begin with a female cast, the counterparts of Turner's Indian, fur trader and hunter, rancher, miner, and pioneer farmer. From women's perspectives, the separate sequence of the Indian, the fur trader, and the hunter become the same frontier. This is because the women of the fur trade frontier *were* Indians. The various fur trades involved exchanges among men from Britain, France, the U.S., and a multitude of Native peoples over a vast time and territory. In 1980, in her pathbreaking book, *Many Tender Ties*, Sylvia Van Kirk showed that the Canadian fur trade *depended* on Aboriginal and Métis women. Aboriginal men served as trappers, guides, and boatmen; Native women trapped smaller animals, particularly the highly prized marten, prepared furs for storage and shipment, made clothing, snowshoes, and moccasins, produced pemmican, an essential staple of the fur trade diet, and served as translators, diplomats, and guides.[12]

For women, the most significant feature of all frontiers was an excess of men. For over a century there were no European women in Western Canada. British and French men married Native women according to the "custom of the country." Native women and their daughters became favored domestic partners who forged a distinct fur trade society.[13]

The smaller U.S. fur trade developed in the early-19th century, conducted largely by men who were themselves trappers. An estimated 80 percent married during their years in the trade; over half married Native American women, a fourth married Hispanic women of the northern Spanish borderlands, and a fourth, European women. About 70 percent of trappers' marriages with Native women lasted until one partner died—fifty-two marriages lasted an average of twenty-six years.[14] White society was often inhospitable to these couples, and husbands more commonly remained with their wives' people. Such was the case when Huntkahitawin (Brule Sioux) married trader James Bordeaux, a union that strengthened her husband's position as trader and her brother's as paramount chief. She and countless other native women literally mothered new peoples

throughout the Americas. What that meant for *them* is harder to discern, because most of our sources come from the men. But they suggest that strong emotional bonds linked many couples. Asked, for instance, why he hadn't left his Nez Perce wife behind when he retired and settled in Oregon, Joe Meek put his hand on his chest and said, "I could not do that, it *hurt here*."[15]

Turner's economic categories of trader and hunter become particularly muddy through the story of one Hidatsa woman, known most often as Buffalo Bird Woman, whose name in her own language was Mahidiweash.[16] What we know of her life comes through the filtered translations of Presbyterian minister and anthropologist Gilbert L. Wilson, who worked at the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota for twelve summers, beginning in 1906. He published her story in two volumes, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden* (1917), based on a typical seasonal cycle in 1857, when Buffalo Bird Woman was eighteen years old, and *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story* (1921).[17]

From 1787–1845, there were three independent Hidatsa villages at the mouth of the Knife River, before the fur trade precipitated enormous changes for the northern Plains tribes.[18] Demand for buffalo hides depleted the herds, intensified women's labor tanning hides, altered the relationships between women and men, and increased conflicts among peoples who competed for buffalo. Horses and guns made it easier for men to kill many buffalo quickly, increasing women's work preparing hides for market. First acquired through raiding, horses entered the tribes as the private property of young and daring men, who were good raiders. Their new prominence elevated youth over age, aggression over cooperation.[19] These changes, however, enter Mahidiweash's account only tangentially, as European trade goods like iron hoes altered women's work. The Hidatsa economy combined hunting and agriculture. The development of agriculture is a central unifying thread in the Hidatsa history Mahidiweash learned from her grandmother, who taught her that the Hidatsa trace their origins to Miniwakan, or Devils Lake, now called Spirit Lake:

> We Hidatsas [she told Wilson] believe that our tribe once lived under the waters of Devils Lake. Some hunters discovered the root of a vine growing downward, and climbing it, they found themselves on the surface of the earth. Others followed them up, until half the tribe had escaped; but the vine broke under

> the weight of a pregnant woman, leaving the rest prisoners. A part of the tribe are therefore still beneath the lake. . . .
>
> Those of my people who escaped from the lake built villages nearby. These were of earth lodges, such as my tribe built until very recent years. [20]

The people planted gardens of ground beans and potatoes they brought from their home under the water. Buffalo Bird Woman measured change in gardens, by their size and their crops. The Hidatsa, she said, learned of corn and squashes from the Mandan, who lived at the Missouri River. After the Hidatsa got corn, they joined the Mandan near the mouth of the Heart River. "I think," she said, "this was hundreds of years ago."[21] When firewood grew scarce, they moved to the mouth of the Knife River. "Smallpox was brought to my people here, by the traders. In a single year, more than half my tribe died, and of the Mandans, even more." The worst epidemic, in 1837, killed over half the Hidatsa and perhaps seven-eighths of the neighboring Mandan. Buffalo Bird Woman dated her personal history from that disaster: "I was born in an earth lodge by the mouth of the Knife river, in what is now North Dakota, three years after the smallpox winter."[22]

The survivors moved up the Missouri and "built a village at Like-a-fishhook bend, where they lived together, Hidatsas and Mandans, as one tribe." She continued, "We lived in Like-a-fishhook village about forty years, or until 1885, when the government began to place families on allotments."[23] Whites also, Buffalo Bird Woman said, brought weeds, like thistle and mustard, new seeds for oats, wheat, watermelons, and onions, and for vegetables she considered inferior, like turnips, and big squashes (see Figure 2.2).[24]

Like-a-fishhook village became part of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, where missionaries and the U.S. government tried to teach the Native Americans the virtues of Christianity, private property, and patriarchal nuclear families. Buffalo Bird Woman moved from an earth lodge in a village to an isolated square log cabin. But she continued many of her accustomed tasks, particularly gardening.

The history she told Wilson was told to younger women by older women. The historical actors include old women and a pregnant woman as well as hunters and warriors; the important events include exchanges among tribes, the acquisition of crops, and garden technology. The

Figure 2.2. Buffalo Bird Woman in Her Garden. "Hidatsa Indian woman hoeing squash with a bone hoe." Date and photographer unknown. Gilbert L. and Frederick N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, 9448-A. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

narrative framework places gender and subsistence at the center of the story.

Wilson, however, had her conclude *Waheenee* with words that echo Turner: "I am an old woman now. The buffaloes and black-tail deer are gone, and our Indian ways are almost gone. . . . My little son grew up in the white man's school. He can read books, and he owns cattle and has a farm. . . . Our Indian life, I know, is gone forever."[25] Through Wilson's filters, Buffalo Bird Woman became the unacculturated voice of tradition. Her son, Goodbird, who learned English and converted to Christianity, fit the Turnerian trajectory from savagery to civilization. Goodbird joins mainstream history, while his mother's story lags, unconnected.[26] This was hardly progress for a woman who had not been isolated from other women or separated from her own story.

But the stories she inherited did not shape the story Wilson recorded. *Her* story challenges Turner's. The women of the fur traders' and hunters' frontiers were not only hide dressers and gatherers. They were traders, translators, economic and domestic partners, historians, and agriculturalists—gardeners. The ladder of civilization moved Mahidiweash from collective agriculture and villages where women shared a community and a history, from gardens and lodges owned by women to an isolated farm and nuclear family controlled by men.[27] From her perspective, progress becomes an ambiguous and contested concept.

On Turner's ladder of cultures, mining was a step up from trading, hunting, and gathering. But the women of the mining West rarely found their fortunes sifting precious metals or toiling underground. Their hopes lay in domesticity, in pursuits not so far removed from Buffalo Bird Woman's garden. If you read the previous essay, you encountered Susanna Townsend, who accompanied her husband Emery in the California Gold Rush to a claim on Jackson Creek in Amador County. While Emery worked the diggings, Susanna insisted on a garden. The Townsends' security owed as much to Susanna's grubbing after vegetables as to Emery's grubbing for gold. "It is astonishing," she wrote, "how the sale of a few vegetables mounts up. Our cabbages have been very fine solid heads and we have sold them at a gold shilling per pound and some of them weigh 8–10 and 12 pounds."[28] From a half-acre of cabbages, tomatoes, and other vegetables she "cleared twelve hundred dollars." She had always hoped, she wrote, "to get Emery to settle somehow on a small ranch. I have always felt sure we would do better at it than mining and not work half so hard." By 1853 the Townsends moved to twenty-eight acres near Sutterville. They pinned great hope on a cabbage crop "good for $2000 at least."[29]

If Susanna Townsend followed Turner's progression from the mines to the farmers' frontier, other women violated that trajectory, moving from farming to mining, and inward from the diggings to a domestic marketplace. In the overwhelmingly masculine mining West, women found a narrow set of domestic options. In the paid workforce or in their own households, they cooked, cleaned, sewed, scrubbed, waited tables, and provided "society" for the male majority. Although married White women rarely worked for wages outside their homes, they frequently tended vegetable gardens and small livestock, made clothing, did housework, and provided income by keeping boarders, cooking, or doing laundry at home. Mine shutdowns, strikes, and accidents made women periodically responsible for supporting families. A man's death meant that a woman somehow had

to earn money.[30] Anne Ellis's husband, for instance, was killed when he drilled into an unexploded dynamite charge in the Vindicator Mine in Victor, Colorado. The mine gave her $600 in exchange for a release from liability. Each man who worked on the Vindicator donated a day's wages. Beyond that, Ellis was on her own with two children to support. At first, she lived by selling baked goods—her landlady promised to "see that all the girls" of the nearby Red Light district bought Ellis's wares. Later she kept boarders.[31]

Four-year-old Beulah Pryor came to Cripple Creek from an Illinois farm when her stepfather was recruited as a strikebreaker during the 1903–1904 miners' strike. He was not only a scab, it turned out, but a wife beater as well. Her mother escaped an oppressive marriage, encouraged by the single miners who lived next door, who promised that they would bring her their laundry and would board with her so she could support her four children. Beulah helped her mother bake the pies that attracted her clientele.[32] Anne Ellis and Beulah Pryor's mother might represent one end of an egg and butter frontier. They probably bought their eggs and butter at a local store and then processed them into the bread and pies they sold to support their families.

Their domestic labor intersected the public world of the marketplace. At the same time, women of the mining frontier told the public history of "knaves and soldiers" in terms of private domesticity. Kathleen Chapman, a miner's daughter born in 1895, dated a crucial miners' union victory in family time. "In 1894," she told me, "Tom was born. And that's when the Bull Hill strike was."[33] The story of a key battle between miners and an army of deputy sheriffs became a family story.

> There wasn't too many people up there, you know—and the men went out and they had their wives come along with them. And Mama said she wrapped Tom in a blanket and went along. And the men took their coats off, and their hats, and put them up in a tree and put the guns up in there. And then, of course they were milling around, you know, and oh, they just thought that the *world* was up there, this militia did, when they seen them. . . . boy, they stopped and they turned around and went back to Colorado Springs *on the run*![34]

Ten years later, when the militia occupied the Cripple Creek District during a second miners' strike, her mother pointedly kept "two great big

butcher knives . . . razor sharp. And she always said if one of those militia men ever come in her house in the middle of the night, they'd leave with less than they brought in!"[35] When the miners lost that strike, Kathleen Chapman again described the defeat in terms of domestic loss. Asked what difference the strike made for working people, she replied:

> Oh my, it changed it awful! . . . Well, you should have seen the homes that was up there. . . . They were beautiful, some of them. They were just gorgeous. Well, people just got up and left, you know, and left their homes like it was, and lots of them never come back to them. People would go in and destroy the homes, and pick up what they wanted, and the houses went to wrack, and they tore them down, and—oh, it just, it just used to make me sick all over.[36]

This history, usually described as a labor war, became a personal and family story of domestic loss.

Ranching was roughly equivalent to mining in Turner's cultural hierarchy. Ranch women, like mining and fur trade women, were outnumbered and often restricted from ranch management or working the cattle. Their relationships with cows involved dairy more than beef. Joan Jensen has documented in some detail how eastern farm women developed butter into a significant cash product and replaced textiles with butter as a primary household industry.[37] Women continued their trade as they moved West—quite literally. Kit Belknap recorded her recipe for making butter on the Oregon Trail in 1848.

> Milk the cows at night and strain the milk in little buckets. Cover them up and set them on the ground under the wagons. In the morning, take off the nice thick cream and put it in the churn. Save the strippings [the last milk drawn from the cow] from . . . the morning milking and put it in the churn also. After riding all day you have a nice roll of butter as long as you have plenty of grass and water.[38]

We could probably chart a mid-19th-century butter frontier that followed women's ingenuity and the grass and water supply. Nineteenth-century city dwellers like Anne Ellis bought the butter that farm women exchanged for cash or goods at country stores, and women on successive western frontiers supplemented ranch and farm incomes with their butter, eggs,

and cream. Guri Olsdatter wrote from her Minnesota farm in 1863 that with her three cows she produced 230 pounds of butter in one summer to earn $66.[39] Montana women by 1910 used their butter money to buy the windmills that made it possible to survive on the arid plains.[40] Elinore Pruitt Stewart wrote in 1913 that her ten cows' butter bought a year's supply of gasoline and flour—two essentials that her Wyoming ranch could not produce.[41] Years later, Mildred Kanipe's dairy herd enabled her to expand her ranch near Oakland, Oregon. She added 700 acres and paid for it by running "a grade-A dairy for eight years. Let me tell you," she said, "don't ever get a dairy unless you want to work yourself to death. Because it don't make any difference. If you died, you'd have to get up and milk those cows. . . . It wouldn't be so bad if you had two people. But I done it alone for eight years."[42]

Ranch women's work was not so far removed from the farmers' frontier, which in turn recharts the meanings of frontier opportunity and frontier individualism. One of the fundamentals of the Turnerian story was the opportunity provided by access to free land. The land may not have been free, or even empty, but the Homestead Act of 1862 offered some women an independent stake in the land for the first time—if they were single or heads of households. Thousands took the chance. Colorado, Wyoming, and North Dakota land records indicate that women constituted anywhere from 5 percent of homesteaders in the 1880s to 20 percent by 1920.[43] In her study of a sample of single women homesteaders, Elaine Lindgren found that 34 percent of women homesteaders in North Dakota were immigrants—24 percent were Norwegian; 5 percent, Canadian.[44] Few women homesteaded as rugged individuals, but often settled near women friends and kin. In Lindgren's sample, only 40 percent stayed on their land much longer than fiver years, the time required to claim it.[45] The sales of homesteads financed numerous dreams. Anna Thingvold and her widowed sister Emma stayed on their homesteads only long enough to gain title, then rented them and used the income to finance a millinery and dressmaking shop in Willow City, North Dakota, to support themselves and Emma's daughter. Theona Carkin's homestead financed her university degree. Maggie O'Connor, from County Cork, filed for land in 1891. She gave the cash from its sale to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Paul, the order she joined as Sister Anita.[46] Many women homesteaders married, but later than their contemporaries; many used their homesteads to expand joint marital landholdings.[47]

For the women who remained on the farming frontier, butter and egg income often provided the crucial buffer in family economies. Rosa Ise moved to her western Kansas homestead with her husband Henry in 1873, just before the onset of a four-year depression. "The first butter Rosie sold," that year, her son John later wrote, "brought forty cents a pound, but all prices soon began to decline, and before the end of the summer, butter was worth only ten cents a pound and eggs scarcely worth taking to town. Some of the local politicians talked about a panic and hard times in the country, but Rosie knew only that butter and eggs were cheap."[48] The Ises survived the hard times in part through Rosie's efforts on the local trading frontier as she accumulated butter and egg credits at the store in Cawker City. The welcome arrival of an early spring relieved the successive disasters of grasshoppers, drought, and a hard winter. "When the grass began to turn green in March, Rosie was able to make butter to sell, so that they could buy sugar and real coffee, and material for baby clothes. . . ."[49] During lean times, she gave her friend Mary Bartsch a dressed chicken for Christmas; for her contribution to the local Christmas tree fund Rosie offered her due bills at the store for butter and eggs.[50] Rosie Ise's butter and eggs linked her family to neighbors and the local community. When Anne Ellis bought the butter and eggs that women like Rosie bartered, the butter and egg frontier also linked the mining and farming frontiers.

Equally direct and messy links connected the Indians' and farmers' frontiers. As Buffalo Bird Woman talked to Gilbert Wilson, a young woman homesteader named Rachel Calof journeyed to Buffalo Bird Woman's starting point—a homestead north of Devils Lake, in Ramsay County, where she homesteaded from 1894–1917. Born in 1876, south of Kiev, she came to North Dakota for an arranged marriage to Abraham Calof whose parents, brother, and two cousins had claimed homesteads around a post office called Benzion.[51]

The farmers' frontier hardly seemed the apex of civilization to Rachel, numbed by her mother-in-law's uncaring control and shocked by conditions in the homestead shack she shared with the extended Calof family.[52] Most winters for eighteen years, her parents-in-law and other relatives joined Abe, Rachel, their growing family, and their livestock. During the first winter, their twelve-by-fourteen-foot homestead shanty housed five people, twenty-four chickens, and a calf.[53]

Calof wanted above all to control this domestic space, including the domestic religious ceremonies that established her as a married Jewish woman in her own home. Her first victory came when she fashioned

lamps from dried mud and a scrap of rag, fueled by butter. She made more of the lamps "Seeing that the old woman had not even a bit of candle with which to greet and bless the Sabbath ...." Her achievement, she said, won her "status in the household even though I was both young and only a woman."[54]

Soon, pregnant with her first child, she plastered and whitewashed her tiny claim shanty and foraged to augment their meager food supply of "a little flour, some barley, some soured milk, and a little butter." Rachel "found what appeared to be wild garlic. . . . It tasted wonderful and didn't seem to harm me, so I gathered quite a number of bunches." Since "bread and garlic make a poor meal," she looked further and found wild mushrooms. She hauled water and dry grass to bake bread and fried the mushrooms and garlic in butter. "This meal made in large measure with food gathered from the wild prairie was simply delicious," she recalled over forty years later.[55] Her success as a gatherer became not a step downward on the ladder of civilization, but a rare happy memory on a farmer's frontier.

Pauline Shoemaker journeyed to another site in Buffalo Bird Woman's personal landscape, to teach school on the Knife River where Buffalo Bird woman was born. Shoemaker stayed to homestead. In 1910, a local rancher invited her and some friends to join the annual horse roundup. "Needing some more supplies for the prospective trip," she wrote,

> . . . four of us went in the auto to a ranch five miles away to get the butter supply. There was a large sod house at this place and we were invited in and found the interior as cheerful as tho the house were built of the best lumber. The inside was papered and there happened to be a very jolly crowd assembled and they were enjoying music on the piano, cornet, mandolin and phonograph which shows that life is not so dull even in a sod house.

Shoemaker was glad that she had "seized the opportunity" to go on the roundup, she wrote. There would "probably be but one more round up in this section of the country" because a "Reservation [would] be opened up next year."[56]

If Pauline Shoemaker feared that the reservation would end the open range, for Native American women it had long since closed. They experimented with new products to buffer economies endangered by the

frontiers that eroded tribal resources. Navajo women wove and Pueblo women sold pottery to buy the items they could no longer produce. Osage women in Oklahoma and Yakima women in Washington turned to butter, producing 24,000 and 20,000 pounds respectively in 1890.[57] They followed a dubious trajectory "from savagery to civilization" as Euro-American gender roles charted new relations of race and power.

While Susanna Townsend sold her cabbages, neighboring Chinese also grew food for California miners. They labored to support themselves, and often their families in China, who were legally prohibited from emigrating to the U.S. after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. To care for the overwhelmingly male Chinese population, Chinese men cooked, did laundry, and labored as domestic servants.[58] Most Chinese farmers specialized in truck farming, but in 1860, one, Ah Sam, churned $200 worth of butter on his Sacramento County farm, a skill he probably learned from a Euro-American woman, since Chinese did not at that time commonly eat butter.[59] Chinese men combined tasks that Euro-Americans separated into men's and women's work. A woman, who signed her name only as "Martha," wrote in the *Stockton Independent* in 1876 that an eighteen-year-old Chinese man helped her care for her family of two boys, an invalid husband, and three hired hands. The young man cooked, washed, ironed, churned, cared for pigs and poultry, butchered, herded stock, and was handy with carpenters' tools—all for $20 a month. She found him "honest," she said, and "with principles that would do credit to a Christian."[60] The delegation of butter making and other domestic tasks to Chinese men marked their subordinate status and identified their race with so-called "women's work."

If butter connects these disparate frontiers, it also moved Euro-American women from private domesticity to public activism to protect their precious cash product. From 1870–1900, an estimated half million farm women joined the Patrons of Husbandry, or the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, and the Populist Party. Some worked for suffrage, temperance, or other reforms as well. The Grange championed women's political equality, formed consumers' cooperatives that purchased sewing machines for rural women, and fought the manufacture of oleomargarine that threatened women's cash-producing butter. It forced Congress to pass a stiff regulatory law in 1886 that decreased the manufacture of processed oleomargarine for almost a decade.[61]

So we have added all these women to Turner's West along with a hefty dose of butter. If we stir all these ingredients, what do we get?

Even the limited cast of western women glimpsed here demonstrates abundantly how women stretch the boundaries of western history. They make a mess of it. The domestic women of Turner's frontiers make a mess of his neat categories. Their stories do not move neatly from East to West, from savagery to civilization, from family to nation. They come from Russia, Mexico, Canada, China, Ireland, and Norway; they emerge from the waters of Devils Lake. Through their lives, the tidy progression of successive frontiers becomes very messy indeed. The traders' and hunters' frontier becomes the Indians' and farmers' frontier; the miners' frontier becomes the cooks' and gardeners' frontier; the ranchers' frontier becomes an unkosher mess of meat and dairy, where the egg and butter money buys the windmills and grazing land; the farmers' frontier becomes the gatherers'; and in all this complexity there is no simple calculus of progress, civilization, success, or loss. Victories do not always lie in individual triumphs, on western farms; they can lie in towns, to the East, in St. Paul convents, at the sewing machine co-op and the union hall. Rachel Calof might agree with Turner that her household was a primitive social organization, but her life improved, not as it grew more complex, but as it simplified to her nuclear family—as she jettisoned her in-laws. If 160 acres allowed the Calofs and Ises to raise their families and offered single women an economic stake, for Buffalo Bird Woman an isolated square cabin on 160 acres signified no step up the ladder of civilization, but the loss of the community of women who transmitted history and identity with stories told in communal gardens and their mothers' lodges. Turner thought the frontier forged a composite nationality, a single national identity, but his national creation story was not one that Buffalo Bird Woman or Ah Sam could easily or happily claim.

If we combine these scattered stories to imagine a new frontier, a butter makers' frontier, butter making becomes a lens through which to view economic and social needs. It fuels Rachel Calof's lamps, to preserve tradition and claim domestic space. It cooks the garlic and mushrooms she gathered. It funds windmills, flour, gasoline, and baby clothes. It leads to a concert inside a sod house, underwrites a community Christmas celebration, provides the wages to support families in China, the resources to prop up fragile tribal economies. The butter-makers' frontier opens windows on domestic economies, on differences of race and class in the allocation of domestic labor. It connects the private world of domesticity with the public work of activism, and the women of virtually all of Turner's now-not-so-neatly-sequenced frontiers.

The butter makers' West is a complex and messy place. Here we are in the middle of Stage Two, trying to imagine a new history from all these perspectives. How do we tidy up these cluttered histories? Can we combine them all in one neat story, make a different order of this densely populated and multiply chronicled historical landscape? I'm not sure in this case that our mothers tell us to clean up our mess. I'm not sure that I can, or that I want to impose the kind of single linear story told in a single authoritative voice that drives inherited histories of the West or of the nation. Women's stories do, nonetheless, suggest relationships that might link a messy, complicated, and collective history.

They suggest an American West marked not by democratic progress but unequal relationships of gain and loss, a West characterized not by rugged individualism but by interdependence. The staple economies of Turner's frontiers—the economies of fur trading, mining, lumbering, ranching, and farming that produced the staples of Harold Innis's Canadian West[62] as well—these economies, reconceived, would include the domestic and female labor that was an essential part of the frontier infrastructure.

If we cannot divide the West into neat economic categories, women's lives suggest continuities that bridge long-standing debates among western historians. We still argue about the precise boundaries of the region—where somewhere else ends and the West begins. We still debate whether the frontier transformed Americans, or whether settlers brought their culture West with them.[63] This is either/or history: either the frontier changed everything or nothing changed. Women's lives suggest that we move from these "either/or" constructions to more layered "both/and" interpretations. A history that linked private and public experience could embrace both continuity and change, adaptation and tradition, the histories that people share and particular heritages as well.

Turnerian history separated public from private, savagery from civilization, and America from everywhere else. Some of the continuities of women's history cross national boundaries as well, and question the assumption that nations are the main subjects of history. The continuities of ordinary lives may bridge not just Turner's frontiers, but also our separate Wests.

The first crucial step, I think, in reconceiving the West, is to invert Turner's third line of progress that subordinated daily private acts to public events. Most people's lives have revolved around the domestic concerns that Turner casually buried in his primitive organization based on the

family. If any aspiration linked women's stories, and the stories of many western men as well, it was the hope of home. Home was where histories were shared, butter was churned, new peoples conceived. Home was a stake in the future, a reason to build schools and churches, a place of resistance. Women's paths to activism often led from home to community to public politics, as they organized concerts and schools, protected union wages and the family butter money. Home for Joe Meek was what it hurt too much to leave.

The West looks different from inside those domestic spaces. If region figures in these stories, it is expressed in the physical dimensions of homes and families—in the water and food supplies, whether there is wood to burn or dried dung, the distance to neighbors or kin, whether there is grass enough for dairy cows. It is in the social relationships that make a place distinct: the mix of peoples, the numbers of women and men.

The common themes that animate women's own words are subsistence, kin, and generations. To claim them as collective histories means turning Turner on his head—to see families not as the most primitive forms of social organization, but the core of human society, those daily private relationships that first transmit culture and that can transform it. From that perspective, women's efforts to preserve traditions—like Buffalo Bird Woman's stories and Rachel Calof's mud-and-butter Sabbath lamps—become significant sources of identity, rather than obstacles to progress that impede a common national character.

The challenge is to connect women's mundane stories of work and kin and domesticity to our vision of what history is: not only the story of the nation, but also the story of people; not only the story of guns, but the story of butter, too.

So, let's return once more to Cumberland Gap. Imagine the untidy procession in no particular order—the buffaloes and hide tanners, the chicken raiser and trader, the teacher and gardener, the gatherer and boarding-house keeper, the activist and butter churner—your grandmother, your mother. Progress measured not from family to nation, but in iron hoes and millinery shops. The murmurings of our mothers, the family stories, some in uneasy tension with stories learned in school. Imagine all these women at Cumberland Gap. They offer a choice. We can follow Daniel Boone's ghost down the same path west to South Pass, or we can see where the women lead us. We can follow them home.

NOTES

1 I prepared this essay first as a lecture to inaugurate the Research Center on Women at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, March 30, 2000. I am grateful to Joanne Goodwin, who honored me with the invitation to speak and provided gracious hospitality. This essay rests on the prodigious scholarship on western women's histories generated since the 1970s. I am indebted to this community of historians, whose work enables and enriches my own. I returned to some of the themes in this essay in the last essay in this volume, which also references scholarship published in the interim. Regrettably, the Old Tyme Antique Shop has long since closed its doors. I never got the butter churn.

2 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1911), 138.

3 I originally wrote "for over a decade." Now, some twenty years later, Heilbrun continues to speak to me, as chapter 13 attests.

4 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 13.

5 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," first presented at the Historical Congress in Chicago at the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893, was originally printed in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1894). Turner's essay is quoted here from Martin Ridge, ed., *History, Frontier, and Section: Three Essays by Frederick Jackson Turner* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 59.

6 Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 67.

7 Gerda Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History," in *The Majority Finds Its Past*: *Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 169.

8 The concept of a cultural hierarchy from savagery to civilization was widely accepted in the late-19th century, as expressed, for instance, in the work of Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: World Publishing, 1877).

9 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of History," in Ridge, *History, Frontier, and Section*, 49. This essay was originally published in the *Wisconsin Journal of Education* in 1891.

10 Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 67–70.

11 Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 82; "Significance of History," 55.

12 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), esp. 53–94.

13 Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, esp. 28–52 and 95–122.

14 William R. Swagerty, "Marriage and Settlement Patterns of Rocky Mountain Trappers and Traders," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11:2 (April 1980): 159–80.

15 Harvey E. Tobie, "Joseph L. Meek," in *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West: Biographical Sketches of the Participants by Scholars of the Subject and with Introductions by the Editor*, ed. Le Roy Reuben Hafen (Glendale, CA: A. H. Clark, 1965), 325. Like many trappers, Meek had sequential marriages with three Native American women. He first married Umentucken (Mountain Lamb), who was killed by enemy Native Americans. His second wife left him because he drank too much. In 1838, he married a Nez Perce woman he called Virginia. They had seven children, and their marriage endured until Meek's death decades later. See *Oregon Encyclopedia: A Project of the Oregon Historical Society*, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/meek_joseph_l_1810_1875_/, accessed August 3, 2021.

16 Buffalo Bird Woman's Hidatsa name is commonly spelled Maxidiwiac in anthropological accounts, but Michael W. Stevens, *Biographical Dictionary of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara* (New Town, ND: Fort Berthold Library, 2003) gives Mahidiweash as the first spelling; it more closely approximates the Hidatsa pronunciation. http://lib.fortbertholdcc.edu/FortBerthold/TATBIO.htm, accessed July 24, 2015.

17 Gilbert L. Wilson in *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden* (1917; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 6–7. Originally published as Gilbert Livingstone Wilson, *Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians: An Indian Interpretation* (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1917). Gilbert L. Wilson, *Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story* (1921; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

18 Jeffrey R. Hanson, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, xii–xiii.

19 Alan Klein, "The Political Economy of Gender: A 19th Century Plains Indian Case Study," in *The Hidden Half: Plains Indian Women*, eds. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, *1983*), 143–74.

20 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, 6.

21 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, 6–7; see also Wilson, *Waheenee*, 38–39.

22 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, 7; *Waheenee,* 7–9. Hanson, "Introduction," xv, states that the 1837 epidemic reduced the Hidatsa from about 2500 people to 800.

23 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Women's Garden*, 7–8.

24 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, 119–20.

25 Wilson, *Waheenee*, 176.

26 Wilson, *Waheenee*, 175; Edward Goodbird, as told to Gilbert L. Wilson, *Goodbird the Indian: His Story* (1914; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985).

27 Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden,* 10–11; *Waheenee,* 45, 125–26.

28 Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Secreta Ranch, 20 February 1853; Susanna Roberts Townsend Correspondence, 1838–68, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereinafter called "Townsend Collection").

29 Susanna Townsend to Sister Mary, from Sutterville, October 25 and November 13, 1853; Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Sutterville, December 20, 1853; Susanna Townsend to Skotty, from Scuppernong, October 3–9, 1854; Townsend Collection.

30 See Elizabeth Jameson, *All that Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), chap. 5, 114–39.

31 Anne Ellis, *The Life of an Ordinary Woman* (1929; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 204–9.

32 Oral history interview with Beulah Pryor, Colorado Springs, Colorado, May 6, 1979.

33 Oral history interview with Kathleen Welch Chapman, Wheat Ridge, Colorado, April 27, 1979.

34 Kathleen Chapman oral history.

35 Oral history interview with May Wing, Victor, Colorado, October 21, 1978. May Wing was Kathleen Chapman's cousin, and told this story about her aunt Hannah Welch, Kathleen Chapman's mother.

36 Kathleen Chapman oral history.

37 Joan M. Jensen, "Butter Making in Mid-Atlantic America from 1750–1850," *Signs* 13:4 (summer 1988): 813–29.

38 Quoted from Belknap's diary in Susan G. Butruille, *Women's Voices from the Oregon Trail* (Boise: Tamarack Books, 1993), 68. For the diary, see Glenda Riley, "Family Life on the Frontier: The Diary of Kitturah Penton Belknap," *Annals of Iowa* XLIV (1977): 31–51.

39 Guri Olsdotter to her family in Norway, December 2, 1866, in Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), 58–60.

40 Jensen, *With These Hands*, 108.

41 Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1942; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), excerpt in Jensen, *With These Hands*, 132.

42 Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (1982; repr., Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 120.

43 Sheryll Patterson-Black, "Women Homesteaders on the Great Plains Frontier," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1:2 (spring 1976): 67–88; H. Elaine Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991).

44 Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 22.

45 Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 191.

46 Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 201–2

47 Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 111, 192–93.

48 John Ise, *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead* (1936; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 17.

49 Ise, *Sod and Stubble*, 64.

50 Ise, *Sod and Stubble*, 187.

51 J. Sanford Rikoon, ed., *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995). The area that Calof came from was considered part of Russia when she lived there and became the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917.

52 Rachel Calof had a tense and stressful relationship with her mother-in-law, Charadh Myers Calof, whose "rules" for Rachel and her husband appear cruel or sadistic at times. Charadh Calof presented her rules as Jewish tradition, and it may be that she simply learned or remembered inaccurate folk beliefs rather than Jewish law. Rachel Calof described the flour sack used instead of a veil at her wedding for the actual ceremony and then extended isolation behind a blindfold during the wedding meal and celebration at the insistence of her mother-in-law, so that she could not see the guests, her husband, or the food. She felt isolated and powerless throughout the day. When her first child was born, her mother-in-law refused to clean the baby or feed Rachel because it was the Sabbath and convinced Rachel that she needed to wear a knife and keep a prayer book with the baby to keep away the devils who would try to take the child. She insisted that Rachel's husband Abe, who was working away during the week, could not see her or the baby for almost six weeks because the birth had made Rachel unclean. Rachel's fears of devils consumed her and only the intervention of her husband's cousin, Doba, persuaded her that she was a good person, God was with her, and there were no devils. Calof described her mother-in-law as "a religious fanatic and superstitious beyond imagination." Her dictates were distortions of Jewish law and tradition. For instance, the obligation to care for life supersedes all other laws, including prohibitions on lighting a fire or cooking on the Sabbath. Whether Charadh Calof was ignorant or cruel, the consequence was that Rachel often felt isolated, frightened, and powerless. Rikoon, *Rachel Calof's Story,* 37–39, 46–56.

53 Rikoon, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 38–40, 61–62, 70.

54 Rikoon, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 31–32.

55 Rikoon, *Rachel Calof's Story*, 41–43.

56 Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 236–37.

57 Joan M. Jensen, "Cloth, Butter, and Boarders: Household Production for the Market," *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 12 (summer 1980): 14–24, reprinted in Joan M. Jensen, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 193.

58 Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 52–53; 62–63; 68–69; 74–75.

59 Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil*, 136.

60 Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil*, 364–65.

61 Jensen, *With These Hands*, 145.

62 The book is best known in Canada through the revised edition: Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930; rev. ed., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).

63 For a formative essay in this debate, see Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* V41 (March 1955): 579–600.