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"Holding Up Their End":
Women on the Old Northwest Frontier

by

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1. Introduction

The American westward migration has been immortalized in the national imagination. Through books and film, it has passed beyond history and into legend. Mention of pioneers and the west evokes standardized images of covered wagons, Indians, and gunslingers. The western fable is usually one that focuses on men, and creates stereotypes that are also male. Although this notion of the west is recognized to be myth, the overblown proportions of these larger-than-life icons still throw a shadow on the reality of the American west.

This study seeks the figures within that shadow: those of pioneer women. My discussion examines their lives and roles in the Old Northwest during its pre-1840 frontier period. The western woman, like the man, has been entangled in the web of image and stereotype. While men were seen as flourishing in the hardy and free west, white eastern-born women were pictured as surviving in an environment for which they were ill-suited by nature. These women faced the challenge of bringing the comfort of domesticity to
their families in the west. Alexis de Tocqueville, French philosopher and 1830s American tourist, described the contemporary image of one of these women:

Look at that young woman at the other side of the hearth who as she sees to cooking the meal rocks her youngest son on her knees....[H]er dress still shows an ill-suppressed taste for clothes but time has pressed heavily upon her. By her features worn before their time, by her wasted limbs, it is easy to see that existence has been a heavy burden for her.

In fact this frail creature has already had to face incredible trials. Scarcely embarked on life, she has had to tear herself away from her mother’s tenderness....[C]arried off in an instant and without hope of return...[s]he has exchanged the charms of society and the joys of the domestic hearth for the solitude of the forest....To devote herself to austere duties, to submit to privations once unknown to her, to embrace an existence for which she was not made, such has been the work of the best years of her life....Want, suffering, and boredom have changed her fragile frame but not broken down her courage. Amid the deep sadness engraved on her delicate features it is easy to see...natural firmness and tranquility that faces all the trials of life without fear or boast.

Half-naked children bursting with health...press round this woman....To see their strength and her weakness one would say that she has drained herself to give them life and does not regret what they have cost her.¹

Tocqueville’s interpretation of the circumstances and mentality of the pioneer woman is part of the notion of the feminine ideal as it developed in the east in the first half of the nineteenth century. This
ideal woman was a loving wife and mother who spent her days within the confines of family and friends. As one historian has expressed it, "the cult of true womanhood demanded that women be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic." Popular and influential family manuals of the day emphasized that it was women's duty to remain within the home. More importantly, women were reading that their feminine natures made them perfectly yet exclusively suited for the domestic life, and as they were morally superior to men, it was women's destiny to bear and raise children for the good of society.

When America's westward settlement began in the Ohio Valley women were expected to perpetuate these values by recreating the domestic sphere on self-sufficient farms, away from the urban development and industrialism that had distracted the population from family concerns back east. In helping to build homes and upholding a high moral example, women in the Old Northwest would also serve as the civilizing force that would tame the wilderness. Yet, according to the mythology of gender, this task, although important, would be a passive one: women would do their part simply by expressing their inherent natures, not by using their individual abilities to actively to settle the land. This image was perpetuated by the "sunbonnet myth" of the "Madonna of the
Prairie," a woman who was a wife and mother, nonaggressive and tolerant, yet strong, who later also settled the far west and the Great Plains (Figure 1). My study shows that while western women worked to change their environment they laid claim to less traditionally feminine attributes such as practicality, stamina, and resourcefulness. At the same time they actively sought to reproduce at least some of the gender ideals they had left behind.

Curiosity about pioneer women has grown in recent decades. Early women's historians, such as Dee Brown, allowed the nineteenth century saintly feminine ideal to cloud their picture of pioneer women. Some, such as John Mack Faragher, looked deeper into women's lives but did not seem to see beyond their daily routines and into their motivations. Other historians focused on the outcome of the frontier way of life for women. Sandra Myres found in the women's western experience a path to liberation; Julie Roy Jeffrey was more conservative in her estimation of the degree to which western women were freed from social restraints. I examined primary source material such as women's letters and journals to help me draw my own conclusions. A tour of an operating historical farm also gave me unique material. This essay challenges the notion that women were simply passive "Madonnas;" but replaces that notion with a paradox. Women actively shaped the frontier to their own ends, but because of
Figure 1. *The Madonna of the Prairies* by W. H. D. Koerner portrays the saintly image of the pioneer woman complete with halo.
the the way they defined these ends, women themselves prevented the frontier experience from being fundamentally liberating.

The Old Northwest is an important setting for this theme. As the frontier moved west, the midwest region changed from wilderness to an extension of the east. From 1775 to 1850 the midwest population increased from a handful of squatters to ten million citizens. The Old Northwest became firmly settled in a pattern not seen in the far west. As the local frontier closed, the role of female residents would undergo a metamorphosis from frontier woman to farm wife. Their duties, both physical and moral, would be affected. As their letters and diaries reveal, pioneer women strove to bring about this change in their positions and recreate as closely as possible the gender roles in which they had been socialized. Yet, having lived through the frontier experience, they could never look upon eastern values in quite the same way again. My study of that development will be facilitated not only by the works of other historians, but more importantly by examination of the actual thoughts and feelings of the women themselves.
The settlement of the trans-Appalachian frontier began even before the Revolutionary War with a small stream of emigrants into the Kentucky and Tennessee region via the Ohio River and the Cumberland Gap. These people came mostly from very rural areas, in particular the Carolina and Virginia backcountry. With the end of the Revolutionary War, the settlers began travelling to the region northwest of the Ohio River. The area was officially organized by the Land Ordinance of 1787, and the lure of large amounts of cheap, quality land soon brought farmers from over-cultivated New England. This was fully encouraged by the government with bonus land giveaways, such as the millions of acres donated to the veterans of the War of 1812. The settlers of this land were primarily lower- or middle-class Anglo-American, with racial, institutional, and religious roots in Britain, yet they would work to develop their own society on the frontier.

The Old Northwest pioneers of the turn of the nineteenth century, along with those who had arrived in Kentucky and Tennessee
a few years before, were pioneers in the true sense: later emigrants to the far west could benefit from the travel stories of frontier relatives or their own previous experiences. They would also have their selection of guide books, especially with regard to the Oregon Trail. Midwest frontier women did not have these options. Most had never ventured beyond their home locales, and survival in the wilderness would require ingenuity and improvisation, as their eastern upbringing and education had not prepared them for the rigors of the frontier. While men, taught to be independent and ready for adversity, were prepared for a life outside the home, women were instructed to turn to and remain in the comforts of home both in times of peace and trial. Women in the wilderness suddenly found that they were not only without the accustomed support of an established home, but they and they alone were responsible for creating one.

The popular image of the migrating family is one of a hardy couple with many children. However, examination of census records from 1800-1840 shows that, with the exception of 1830, the average family on the frontier was the same size or actually smaller than that of the settled east. Two factors could account for this. First, extended family members such as grandparents tended to stay behind, making the travelling family size smaller. Second, migrating families tended to be young, either newlyweds or couples with only
one or two children. Thus most women came to the Old Northwest as young wives or mothers of just a few small children. Upon arrival, both husband and wife would have to create their homestead and make the farm productive without expecting substantial help from offspring or adult relatives. In addition to making a home in the wilderness, the woman would have considerable child care responsibilities, which would increase as the family grew. With her husband usually occupied outside the house with extensive farming and hunting duties, the pioneer woman was even more the primary parent than her eastern counterparts.

Some large families did migrate, however. Indeed, the lands of the west offered opportunity to those with little hope of supporting their families in the east, where many felt "it was impossible for a poor man to get along and support his family." The Old Northwest lured those in other countries as well. English immigrant Rebecca Burlend's narrative tells of her family's departure from home in 1831: "the entire absence of any prospects of being able to supply the wants of a large family had tended effectually to fix my husband's purpose of trying what could be done in the western world."14

Even if it did not originate overseas, migration was still a formidable undertaking. The Old Northwest was settled at a time when pioneering was relatively new and transportation very rough.
Looking back on her experience in 1870, Illinois pioneer Christiana Tillson, noted that "in 1819 going to Illinois was more of an event than a trip now would be to the most remote part of the habitable globe." However, the large numbers of migrants encouraged others to follow. As traveller and diarist Margaret Van Horn Dwight Bell recorded in 1810: "They say there has been a heap of people moving this fall."

The most common mode of travel was by wagon, the typical one being a small four by sixteen feet. For part of the journey, at least through Pennsylvania, there was a corduroy road, a rough pathway usually made of logs laid on the ground. Some pioneers did not even have the benefit of a wheeled vehicle to use on these roads. One family of eight went from Maine to Indiana "dragging the children and their worldly goods in a handcart." An 1810 pioneer woman expressed a common sentiment: "the reason so few are willing to return from the Western country is not that the country is so good, but that the journey is so bad." Many emigrants sought to alleviate the hardship by rafting the water route to the west via the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. By the 1820s it was the preferred method of travel, rendered especially convenient by the spread of the steamboat. Boat travel was faster than a seven- to eight-week wagon trek. The burden was in particular lessened for women, since the steamboat would not be considered the temporary home as would
a wagon. The quick river journey also reduced the chance of health hazards such as childbirth on the way.

A necessary part of resettling in the west was leaving family and friends behind. Although both men and women felt the pain of saying goodbye to those who were familiar, women were more likely to express these emotions in their diaries.22 As one female emigrant noted: "I left all my relatives...although it proved a hard task...."23 Another agreed: "Partings, the breaking up of home attachments, have always been to me particularly painful...."24 The reactions of relatives could increase the trauma of parting. Tillson's grandmother commented on "the carriage that was to take me away...not aware that she said 'hearse' instead of carriage."25 Yet despite the trauma of departure, women responded to the motivations of economics and family duty.26 Since most women in the nineteenth century formed their identity within the family, accompanying their husbands west for many was a forgone conclusion. Indiana military wife Lydia Bacon articulated this feeling in 1812: "I felt a little vexed at those wives...who would prefer staying at home, rather than suffer a little inconvenience, what did they get married for[?]"27

One way to ease the loneliness of departure was group migration. This popular way to travel usually involved a party of twenty to forty families who were kin, neighbors, or fellow church
members. With similar goals and reasons for migrating, the member families travelled together for company and security. Group travel, usually undertaken by land, made emigration possible for those who otherwise would not have taken the risk or would have been left behind, such as older couples and very poor households. The number of men and women travelling in groups was usually sufficient to ensure a division of labor on the trip. While on the journey, women’s tasks included daily duties such as food preparation, child care, laundry, and nursing. Necessity, however, would induce members of both sexes to pitch in where needed, men with the packing and washing, and women with the driving.

Whatever the method, the trip west was an important period of transition between settled lives in the east and the uncertain frontier. Some women attempted to lend security to the future by planning ahead. The journey gave women their first taste of frustrated efforts. One male pioneer remembered a loss his family suffered while journeying to Ohio in 1790:

We were eight weeks on the journey. Among other preparations...my mother and sister Lydia had knit up a large quantity of socks and stockings. They were packed in a bag....By some means the bag was lost out of the wagon or stolen....Next morning, Sardine went back the whole distance of the previous day's journey, inquired and advertised it, but without success....I do not remember how many pairs of stockings were in [the bag,
but I judge there were at least one hundred. One pair to each of the family were saved, besides those we had on our feet. It was a severe loss. My mother had foreseen that we should have no sheep for some time in Ohio and had labored hard to provide this most necessary article of clothing for her family. And so it was. We had no sheep til six years after that time.²⁹

When pioneer women were faced with an unexpected and unsolvable crisis such as this, the trip west represented an important period of acceptance. The harsh journey not only dispelled any romanticism women might have felt towards the west, but also provided their initial exposure to primitive and cross-over labor. Despite the trappings of traditionalism that group migration might have preserved, women moved farther away from a strict female sphere of work while also distancing themselves from the support of female family members left behind. While male pioneers faced the concrete tasks of settlement on the frontier such as clearing land, women anticipated hard physical labor laced with additional emotional duties. These women had not only lost their own support systems by leaving their extended kin network, but now had to create new ones for their own families, with themselves at the center. As wives and mothers, husbands and children would turn to them for a physical and emotional re-creation of the home and security they once
enjoyed. How well women accepted this responsibility determined whether the pioneering venture would result in successful settlement.
3. "The Necessities of the New Country":
Making a Home

Life on the midwest frontier was isolated. However, group settlement as the outcome of group migration would lessen the degree of household isolation and create channels of communication between the pioneer households. The clustering of people would allow members to retain to a degree the traditional division of labor: there was less need for the woman to perform male tasks, such as fieldwork if there were other men to help. Yet many groups did not settle together, and some families came to the frontier alone. Families from the south in particular prided themselves on self-reliance and individualism, and eschewed migration en masse.30

The family alone in a remote cabin was the most common form of settlement in the Old Northwest.31 This isolation forced the early pioneer homesteads to be self-sufficient. Family farms were the best means to this end, and the family was the social and economic unit upon which Old Northwest society was based. From 1800-1840 the number of midwest farming settlers who lived without their families never rose above 3%.32 These solo settlers were primarily male
"trailblazers" who were occupied in setting up farms in advance of their families' arrival. Single women who made the journey west did not do so alone: they always came with a family. Unlike later settlement efforts such as the mining camps of Nevada and California, where a single woman could hope for employment as a laundress, boarding house matron, or prostitute, there was little or no economic reason for women to migrate alone to the farms of the Old Northwest.

New Means to Old Ends

In the east, the emphasis of women's lives was gradually shifting from production to consumption. With increasing ease the eastern woman could buy household products such as butter and soap at market or cloth at the store. Since these conveniences were unavailable on the frontier, women were compelled to return to the older ways of production for their household goods. Both husband and wife on the frontier worked for the family's subsistence, yet the nature of this labor focused women on the home even more so than in the east. Settler women on the frontier were family-oriented, and their first concern upon arrival would be the family's new dwelling. With timber readily available throughout much of the Old Northwest,
a rough log cabin was the most common form of housing. The first view of the cabin, often prepared in advance by the husband, could be daunting, as Anna Shaw, a Michigan pioneer, relates:

I shall never forget the look my mother turned upon the place. Without a word she crossed the threshold, and, standing very still, looked slowly around her. Then...she sank upon the ground....When she finally took it in she buried her face in her hands, and in that way she sat for hours without moving or speaking....Never before had we seen our mother give way to despair.

Eastern-bred women such as Shaw's mother were unprepared physically and mentally for the rough reality of the west. In addition to disappointed expectations, these women had to overcome both the harsh conditions and their own lack of training and confidence. Creating a home-like atmosphere out of such beginnings was a challenge, and most women had few materials with which to work. Space and weight considerations required that only the simplest furniture was hauled from the east. Most cabins featured homemade stools, benches and bedsteads. Often there were no windows, and the door would be left open much of the year for light and ventilation. The following is a typical contemporary description: "the tables were made by splitting lumber into slabs....The bedsteads were made by placing low posts on the floor and laying slats from these to a crack in
the side of the cabin. A board, placed upon pins in the logs, was the receptacle for the pewter dishes and wooden trenchers.33 With only such basic amenities, women called upon their own creativity to make the dwelling more pleasant. Materials on hand, such as newspapers or old maps, were used for wallpaper or curtains to decorate as well as insulate the room. One woman made a mirror by "taking an old black shawl and tacking it smoothly over a board" and placing a pane of "some of the presious [sic] window glass" over the shawl. Another "sewed sheets together & tacked up to the joists as a ceiling to the house."36 Faced with privation, western women fulfilled their traditional role as homemakers by developing new domestic techniques.

There was a limit, however, to what women could do with so few materials. Some abandoned the idea of reproducing eastern styles and instead emphasized simplicity as a social grace. Caroline Kirkland, an 1830s Michigan writer and pioneer, described the "republican spirit" that prevailed among the women of her settlement. They expressed "the reluctance to admire, or even approve, any thing like luxury or convenience....Your carpets are spoken of as 'one way to hide the dirt;' your mahogany tables as 'dreadful plaguy to scour;' your kitchen conveniences as 'lumberin' up the house for nothin';' and so on...."37 Whether these comments were motivated by the ethic of
egalitarianism that Kirkland ascribes to them or by more petty emotions, pioneer women enforced informality in homemaking. After their initial failure to reproduce eastern standards with scant resources, women in the west soon took the initiative and began to define new aesthetic values for their homes.

Lack of eastern ostentation did not, however, mean lack of improvement. The log cabin's single room was initially convenient but ultimately limiting. Space for work, eating, relaxation and sleeping were the same for the entire family. Women, whose tasks kept them in or near the house, were more affected by the cramped conditions than men, who were in the fields or perhaps hunting all day. The cabin was the woman's domain, and therefore by general agreement the first home improvements were usually those that expanded or improved her workspace, such as adding on to the kitchen with a lean-to or putting in a window. Installing a loft also upgraded the cabin by adding more sleeping space and increasing separation between parents and children, as well as between brothers and sisters.

The cabin's general lack of privacy would work to break down the rigid separation between the sexes maintained in the east. Women, however, made efforts to ensure that some standards were upheld. Eliza Farnham was an educated New Yorker who published an
account of her pioneer experiences in 1846. Compelled to board with a "unequivocally filthy" family while her cabin was being completed, she soon learned that which "was enough to make the greatest heroine that ever lived in romance stand aghast": she was to share her room with "the boys." Attempting to accept the situation, Farnham quickly observed that "it was so at war with our eastern usages to sleep in a room with other people, that I scarcely saw how to become reconciled to it." Instead, she "toiled away" cleaning the room and demanded "a heavy partition of quilts doubled on each other twice or thrice" to give her a space that was "exclusively mine."\(^{38}\) Although it was often necessary to men and women to share sleeping quarters, Farnham's vehement objections stemmed from the fact that she was to sleep alone in a room with the host's sons and, "oncet or twicet a week," the county surveyor. Part of Farnham's shock at this incident was that it was another woman who suggested the initial arrangement. Obviously, not every woman on the frontier was worried about eastern proprieties. Most women, however, realized that while they could not be unreasonable, there were certain standards they would not sacrifice.

Women also resorted to less straightforward, and perhaps more ridiculous, machinations in the name of modesty. As one man related, when a woman making a trip to the outhouse
sees any menfolks around, she's too bashful to go direct out so she'll go to the woodpile, pick up the wood, go back to the house and watch her chance. The average timid woman...I've knowed to make as many as ten trips to the wood-pile before she goes in....On a good day you'll have your wood box filled by noon, and right there is a savin' of time.39

Thus, while in some ways, such as home decoration, western women created new norms, in other ways, they strove to preserve the social standards of the east. Overall, however, women in the west did not simply accept existing conditions but actively worked to shape their environment according to the values they considered appropriate. Women had the latitude to formulate these values and devise ways to adhere to them because the upkeep of the household was completely their concern. By extension, both frontier men and women felt that women and women alone could bring order to the home. Farnham visited a neighboring family who lived in "utter poverty and filth" and whose wild children were in "rags and filth." Farnham diagnosed the problem as "merely the incapacity of the mistress of this family to appreciate a better condition, or help to create one. I afterwards saw many cases of a like mode of living, and...the credit was due in nearly every one to the females." Not only did the husband not share the responsibility for the family's degradation, according to Farnham, but
he was an innocent victim of domestic tyranny: "the father of this family was a man of sense...[H]is morals were unimpeachable, and his character commanded respect..."40 In casting the wife as the villain, Farnham's vignette reflects both pioneer conditions and conventional eastern assumptions about the role of women at the time. Women were to bring cultivation and moral strength to the wilderness. This was to be accomplished through the home and family, the cornerstone upon which the civilization of the west was to be built. When women failed in this regard, men, bound by their masculine natures, were assumed to be powerless to help.

_Pioneer Women as Producers_

Abstract duties, however, were not foremost in the pioneer woman's mind as her family settled into the log cabin. Her time was consumed with a daily round of chores that were vitally necessary for survival. The strenuous nature of the woman's day meant that fancy or even traditional dress was discarded. One man in 1820s Indiana described to his family back east his glimpse of "a strange figure [that] emerge[d]...from the tall rank weeds in the road before us....The figure was undeniably human; and yet at bottom it seemed to be a man, for
there were a man's tow-linen breeches; at top, a woman; for there was
the semblance of a short gown, and indeed a female kerchief on the
neck and a sun-bonnet on the head...." He concluded that this outfit
"originated in the necessities of the new country."41 The woman's
mixture of male and female styles reveals a conflict between her
desire to adapt to western living and her fear of losing her identity as
a woman. Yet she was still more flexible than most western women in
this regard. Despite the fact that long dresses were not the ideal
costume for a western woman's daily toil, they were the most common
feminine attire on the frontier, albeit in simplified form: collarless and
made with homemade fabrics, usually worn with an apron and rough
shoes or boots. One frontier woman remembered that "to dress in
style was not thought of in those days....[T]o get clothing sufficient to
protect the body from the cold of winter and the heat of summer was
the only thing thought of."42 Although western women ridiculed the
over-fancy wear of the east as completely impractical for their daily
existence, they did enjoy fashion. Rather than feeling liberated by
their rough wear, women looked forward to devoting more time to
their dress and visibly reestablishing the femininity they felt slipping
away on the harsh frontier.

Simplicity of dress was the watchword for all members of the
pioneer family. Underwear, for example, was deemed unnecessary
and rarely worn before 1840; in the warmer months attire in general was kept at a minimum. Moccasins were popular because they were made with soft materials and easy to patch. Women looked to a variety of materials for dressing their families, including animal skins, wagon covers, and flour sacks. Resorting to the latter sometimes had unfortunate results. Anna Shaw recalled her first suitor: "He wore a blue flannel shirt and a pair of trousers made of flour bags. Such trousers were not uncommon in our region...but on one leg was the name of the firm that made the flour...on the back,...directly in the rear of the wearer, was the simple legend '96 pounds'."

Despite flour sacks and the like, home cloth manufacture was unavoidable. With no stores and usually no money, every family had their wear their own make. This was usually flax and wool combined to make homespun or linsey-woolsey. Obtaining each ingredient was in itself a project. Farm women sowed flax in March and harvested in June. The flax was then crushed, often by the men, who also assisted by shearing the sheep. From then on, the work was done by women. They spun flax while sitting at a small wheel; wool, after being carded and cleaned, on a wheel often taller than they were (Figure 2). The spinner would pace next to the wheel, whirling the spinning wheel with one hand and guiding the yarn with the other. After pacing four miles, a woman would spin two miles of yarn, which translated into
Figure 2. Frontier woman spinning wool. Also note the doorway as the lone light source, the ceiling "festooned [with] strings of drying pumpkins," and the man with wild fowl, a staple of the early pioneer diet.46
about three yards of woven wool. A family of four required a minimum of 40 yards of cloth for basic clothing each year, an order requiring more than 52 miles of pacing for the spinner.

Weaving was done at a large, often homecrafted loom, which could be disassembled. Most women were skilled spinners and weavers. Some went beyond that. Achsa Colburn arrived in Illinois from New Hampshire in 1821 without a loom. She attempted to find a man to make one for her, but "all declined to undertake it, some for want of skill, and some for want of tools. Mrs. C. then procured an axe, a hand saw, a drawing knife, an auger and a chisel....She made with her own hands a loom, warping bars, winnowing blades, temples for the lateral stretching of the cloth and for spools she used corn cobs...." This story is an example of a woman overcoming difficulty with skill on the frontier. Yet it also shows how women had accomplishments forced upon them by outside circumstances rather than actively grasping them themselves: Achsa Colburn made the loom herself only after exhausting all possible male resources. Western women were socialized to a sexual division of labor that they sought to preserve where possible. It was the western reality, rather than the women's choice, that occasionally ended this social code on the frontier.
Looms such as Mrs. Colburn's were standard on the frontier, and, although rough, could be used to make simple patterns. Weaving was a long process, usually delegated to the winter months when outside chores were at a minimum. The resulting cloth was then shrunk and dyed with a variety of substances that either the woman or her children collected, including plants, berries, nuts, bark, and iron filings. Before being sewn, the cloth was sorted by quality. Rough "tow," or short-fiber linen, was made into field wear, towels, and menstrual cloths. Finer linen and woolen cloth was reserved for better garments and bed coverings. Wool yarn was knitted into socks, mittens, and caps. Although some eastern housewives sold home-produced cloth in the town markets, spinning and weaving were so labor-intensive that the busy pioneer woman could not find time to produce surplus goods to sell outside the home. In this sense, these tasks did not contribute to the woman's autonomy or give her visibility outside the home. Yet for many women weaving was key to their productive value inside the home. The resultant cloth was lasting, tangible evidence of the importance of women's labor to the family. While men could perform more straightforward chores such as cooking and washing in a rudimentary fashion, clothes production was a skill that most men never learned and could not take over in the women's absence.
All clothes were put together by hand. Sewing was a skill rather than a chore, and girls learned to use a needle and thread even before they were taught to read. Sewing, and especially embroidery, was the major creative outlet for pioneer women and an antidote to the months of drudgery in a tiny cabin, while weaving and spinning were examples of the pioneer woman's blending of hard, monotonous work with craft and expertise. Later these projects would also have community and entertainment functions, such as the quilting bee. As one farm woman commented: "I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts to do."54

The daily life of the Old Northwest pioneer woman, however, was largely made up of harsher and far less rewarding chores than sewing. One was washing. Although doing the laundry was hard for women everywhere in the first half of the nineteenth century, frontier conditions magnified the difficulty. Women, often with the children's help, hauled water from the creek, well, or rain barrel. They heated the water in a cauldron or washtub over an open fire, and added homemade soap. The clothes were then boiled in this mixture, scrubbed against a washboard, rinsed with fresh water, wrung out by hand and then hung or spread on bushes to dry. The hard work, hot water and harsh ingredients would often cause women's hands to chap and bleed. In the winter or on rainy days, the clothes were hung
inside to dry, further cluttering the cramped living space while making the house damp and clammy.  

One woman's list of instructions details the labor involved and shows how tasks were facilitated by combining them (note the use of wash water). It also illustrates the philosophical attitude necessary to endure as a pioneer woman:

1. Bild fire in back yard to het kettle of rain water.
2. set tabs so smoke won't blow in eyes if wind is peart.
3. shave 1 hole cake lie sope in bilin water.
4. sort things, make three piles. 1 pile white, 1 pile cullord, 1 pile work briches and rags.
5. stur flour in cold water to smooth then thin down with bilin water [for starch]
6. rub dirty spots on board, scrub hard, then bile, rub cullord but don't bile just rench and starch
7. take white things out of kettle with broom stick handel then rench, blev and starch
8. pore rench water in flower bed.
9. scrub porch with hot sopy water
10. turn tubs upside down
11. go put on a cleen dress, smooth hair with side combs, brew cup of tee, set and rest and rock a spell and count blessings.  

Women not only had to obtain their own water for the laundry but also make their own soap. In the east, some farm women also made their own soap, but by the early nineteenth century women
were selling home-produced soap at the local market to other women, and factory-made cleansers were also gaining prominence. Western women did not have these amenities; instead, two or three times yearly, they faced the day-long, dirty, smelly job of soap-making. Women would save ashes from the hearth, pour water and lime through them, and collect the resultant lye. Household grease was then mixed in, often a disgusting task, as one midwest pioneer from New England relates: "all the grease and fat trimmings that had been collected during the year were brought to the place...that from entrails of hogs, or saved from cooking....There were likely to be some pounds of meaty scraps and rinds...." Because of the smell, the grease and the lye were heated together in an a large kettle outdoors. Even after hours of stirring success was still not guaranteed, for the grease and ashes would not always blend properly. If the soap did "come" it could be stored in a barrel as soft soap or mixed with rosin for hard cakes. It took hard-earned expertise, a "real presiding genius," to create good soap, and even then, its effectiveness was held to a minimum by the hard creek or rain water.

Women's home production extended far beyond clothes and soap making to many other labor-intensive tasks, such as candle-making. The family fully depended on all these labors, some for survival, others for quality of life. The frontier increased the woman's
productive workload, and along with that her level of direct responsibility to the survival of her family. Some tasks, however, such as soapmaking, involved onerous labor and often less than satisfactory results. It was unrewarding activities such as this that women gladly gave up when the land became more settled and alternatives became available. This willingness to sacrifice productive capacity was part of the "easternization" of the frontier.

Women and "Masculine" Labor

In the course of their daily labor, frontier women would sometimes perform "masculine" tasks. Although neither Christiana Tillson or her husband knew how to butcher a cow, the task, as part of food preparation, fell to Christiana, who "by the help of directions laid down in a cookery book and a little saw...attempted this art."61 A double standard of labor developed: women regularly performed rough tasks out of their sphere by necessity, while men did household chores rarely and then as a favor. Tillson felt "surprise" as she watched a man change a diaper, "and in the most handy manner performed all that a good nurse or mother could have done."62 A man's regular assistance, however, would make his masculinity
suspect. This gender division was perpetuated by women as well as men. An ill Caroline Kirkland, for example, watched her husband stumble through the housework and wished "for one of those feminine men, who can make good gruel, and wash the children's faces."63

Women, however, assumed male tasks competently, and apparently without maligning their femininity. One Iowa woman, for example, wrote how the "hired man left just as cornplucking commenced so I shouldered my hoe and have worked out ever since."64 Occasionally women took on even more responsibility. Rebecca Burlend proudly and in detail described her actions in a time of necessity:

Our wheat was quite ripe...and if not cut soon, would be lost....I was therefore obliged to begin myself. I took the eldest child into the field to assist me, and left the next in age to attend their [sick] father and take care of the [baby]. I worked as hard as my strength would allow; the weather was intolerably hot....In little more than a week, however, we had it all cut down...The wheat was still unhoused, and exposed to the rays of the burning sun...[and] should be gathered together forthwith. Having neither horses nor wagon, we here encountered another difficulty....With a little trouble I got two strong rods, upon which I placed a number of sheaves near one end of them. I then caused my little son to take hold of the lighter end, and in this manner we gathered together the whole of the three acres...[and stacked the wheat]....The reader may probably suppose that I am endeavoring to magnify my own labours, when I tell him I reaped, carried home, and stacked our whole
crop of wheat, consisting, as before stated, of three acres, with no other assistance than that of my little boy under ten years of age. My statements are nonetheless uncoloured facts, and...the work was performed in addition to the attendance necessarily required by my young family and my sick husband, during the hottest part of the year, in a climate notorious for excessive heat.65

However pleased a woman might be with her stamina in the fields and ability to rise to an emergency, "cross-over labor" was considered a temporary contingency of frontier life that would become unnecessary with settlement. The women who came to the Old Northwest were not looking to change the sexual status quo, but rather to extend the norms of the east.66 Liberation in the modern sense was certainly never a goal of the female emigrants, who were primarily wives and mothers, and even if it had been they would not have considered field labor a means to this end. Instead, prolonged departure from the female sphere of labor was seen as depriving women of their beauty and vitality while giving them only premature old age in return. As one 29-year-old lamented: "I am a very old woman. My face is thin sunken and wrinkled, my hands bony withered and hard."67

Maintaining attractiveness included a racial dimension for pioneer women. Succumbing to the influence of the Indian lifestyle represented an abandonment of the eastern model of womanhood
they felt was their duty to establish on the frontier. Using white standards as their criteria, most pioneer women did not recognize the femininity of Native American woman as legitimate; rather, they equated it with the masculinity they wished to avoid and a fall from civilization they wished to prevent. Caroline Phelps had married her trader husband and moved to western Illinois against her father's wishes and described the resulting trauma the family in her diary:

I was one day sitting in the [Indian] camp thinking what my Father had told me before I was married, it was about living in just such a place....I would have to live like a squaw if I married [my husband]. I was thinking it all over to myself, when who should ride up to the camp but Father himself. He...did not say much, but I thought his face looked sad and mournful....He went out. Eliza my sister followed him. She came back and said Father was crying.68

Later, Caroline and her sister went out to her father, where "we all sat down on a log and wept heartily." Caroline, however, stayed with her husband instead of returning east with her father.

White women's fear of Native Americans was formed in ignorance in the east and carried to the frontier where it was reserved due to lack of substantial interactive contact with indigenous people. The women in the sources I studied dealt with the Native Americans they encountered (mostly men) civilly but with
mistrust. Caroline Phelps was an exception. Despite her distress during her father's visit, Phelps lived among and learned to relate to the Native American women. She often went out of her way to associate with them, including preparing a Fourth of July feast for "100 squaws" and their children, and assisting a woman whose infant was prisoner of another tribe. This interaction extended to her children as well. When the Phelps and Native American children would play together, Phelps admitted--apparently without concern--that "many a time I have went in where they were dancing, all having blankets on, and I could hardly tell my own children," especially since "my daughter could talk the indian language just as well as she could our own." Although she also lived near white women, Phelps did not choose to isolate herself socially from the Indians. Since there was nothing remarkable in Phelps's upbringing or education, the difference in her attitude towards Native Americans must have stemmed from the daily contact with them her life afforded her, something from which most western women did not benefit. In addition, while Phelps and her husband traded with the Indians, unlike missionaries they had no desire to change them. This acceptance paved the way to better communication between the Phelpses and the Native Americans. Despite socializing with the Indian women, however, Phelps did not turn to them for domestic advice. She was not willing
to relinquish the identity of her household as one of white standards and traditions.

Within the household, pioneer women in general took on an importance they did not experience in the east. Few capitalized on this prominence, however. With too much to do already, women did not seek to take over men's chores as well. Women hoped to recreate the domestic sphere from back home, not to expand it. Pioneer women carried their role as keepers of the house to the frontier, and adapted this role to the west's primitive and isolated conditions. The frontier woman's day was one of hard work, but her labor was both skilled and productive. For example, she devoted little time to tasks such as dusting; for one, there was not much to dust, and two, she had more essential chores to perform. Having warm clothes for the winter was more important than keeping a clean house. The frontier woman was a home-craftsperon rather than a housewife. This role was not permanent, however. Women adapted their position and work to the environment, but did not change the way they essentially perceived themselves. When the land became more settled, women gave up the productive functions that were no longer necessary for the well-being of the family and adopted the new ones that "civilization" required.
Western women, like their sisters in the east, both desired and were encouraged to become mothers. On the frontier, children were help on the farm and, in the government's eyes, future settlers of lands farther west. Couples were urged by the state to reproduce, although it was the fathers, not the mothers, who were rewarded. Tennessee went so far as to pass a law in 1829 granting the father of multiple births (triplets and up) 200 acres of state land for each offspring. The relative youth of the emigrating families also encouraged the growth of large families on the frontier.

There were other, more subtle, cultural incentives for having children. Throughout the nineteenth century, women's biological ability to give birth was thought to be their fate: for a woman to be a "real" woman, she must produce offspring. On the frontier, having a family was the best way to put down roots and feel secure on the new land. It was also a way that a woman could control her environment. By giving birth to future wilderness tamers, the mother was assuring the settlement of the wilderness around her. In addition to this
practical philosophy, some considered motherhood so special as to take on a mystical, almost supernatural aura. Christiana Tillson expressed this: "A father may love his children, a wife a husband, a brother a sister, but none of these can comprehend a mother's love." 71

This perceived power of motherhood is found in Caroline Kirkland's description of her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Doubleday. The childless Mrs. Doubleday was extremely unfeminine, with "the sharpest eyes, the sharpest nose, the sharpest tongue, the sharpest elbows, and above all the sharpest voice" in Michigan. Indeed, even her figure, "resembling two hard-oak planks fastened together and stood on end" was boyish and unappealing. The "honest, hard-working [and] good-natured" Mr. Doubleday was the victim of her "bottled vengeance," as was the house which Mrs. Doubleday, "possessed with a neat devil," obsessively cleaned. Obviously Mrs. Doubleday needed an outlet for her energies. This soon arrived, and after the birth of Mrs. Doubleday's baby, Kirkland "never saw a being so completely transformed." With the "softened aspect, the womanized tone of the proud and happy mother," Mrs. Doubleday was "my now more happy neighbor, who had forgotten to scold her husband" and who was also more moderate in her housecleaning. 72

Interestingly, Kirkland tells this story only as part of a larger narration about frontier conditions, the motherhood moral seemingly a
foregone conclusion that warranted no separate section of its own. Thus a central eastern cultural ideal was carried to the frontier: the one softening agent on the rough western woman was her motherhood.

Birth and Birth Control

In eighteenth- and very early nineteenth-century America childbirth was almost completely controlled by women. If they used no birth control, women gave birth approximately every 20 to 29 months. Birthing was a regular female-centered event that occurred in the "female" space of the home. The woman in labor was attended by a midwife and assisted by female friends, neighbors, and relatives of her own choosing. In the east, however, during the first half of the nineteenth century, female midwives were gradually being replaced by male doctors. This was primarily due to the choice of the parturient women themselves. Science was entering the medical profession and although doctors emerged from medical school poorly trained and almost totally inexperienced in obstetrics, middle-class women preferred the apparent benefits of a professional scientific doctor over the presumably amateur skills of a midwife. This choice
automatically precluded female attendants, for women were not
admitted into medical school until 1847, and then only in very limited
numbers.\textsuperscript{75}

Women on the midwest frontier had different birthing
experiences than their eastern counterparts. Sparse settlement made
doctors rare, so pioneer women persisted with female-assisted births.
Indeed, there may have also been a prejudice in favor of midwives on
the frontier. As late as the 1920s, the protests of one Ozark women
were recorded: "I sure don't want no man-person a conjurin' around
when I'm havin' a baby!"\textsuperscript{76} Yet sometimes even a midwife was
unavailable. Although the husband was occasionally present at birth,
he served primarily to physically support his wife while women
performed the actual delivery.\textsuperscript{77} Often, a female neighbor, sometimes
a near stranger, would be called to assist during the time of need. For
example, Christiana Tillson reported at the end of her second
pregnancy: "I had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Townsend, who was
with me and remained until John was a week old."\textsuperscript{78}

Tales such as these demonstrate women's reliance not only on
other women, but also on themselves. In a crisis they would have to
deliver their infants unaided, and even under normal circumstances
women carried their pregnancies in harsh conditions with no pre- or
post-partum care, usually working right up to and very soon after the
birth. The psychological value of having female attendants at birth was as important as the physical benefit. For women isolated on the farming frontier, the support of women who led similar lives and survived similar birthing experiences was important and emotionally sustaining.

This support was necessary in the face of the risks women and their babies faced. The dangers of childbirth were very real, made more so by rough and isolated pioneer conditions. Regular childbirth and constant physical labor drained women's strength. An early nineteenth-century Ohio tombstone attests to this:

Thirteen years I was a virgin,
Two years I was a wife,
One year I was a mother,
the next year took my life.79

The experience of this young woman was certainly not unique. One historian researched the case of a pioneer by the name of William Gregory, who migrated throughout the midwest, marrying four times. He had approximately nine or ten offspring with each wife except the third, and was still fathering children at the age of 75.80 Although the historian speaks of his "admiration" of the "vigorous" William Gregory,
one should also consider his wives: hard farm work coupled with the strain of constant childbirth killed two of them!

Examples such as this, reminders on tombstones, plus personal experience made many pioneer women attempt to limit their fertility as a way to gain more control over their lives by reducing the risk and apprehension involved in bearing children far from relatives and other sources of security. Women were not only thinking of themselves but of their families: on the frontier there was no network of relatives to care for their children if they died. Also, primitive, cramped cabins and an often tenuous food supply made it difficult to accommodate indeterminate numbers of children. Pioneer women might consider that being a good mother entailed keeping the family size manageable. In this they were certainly successful: the size of the frontier family paralleled that of the settled east, pioneer women following the middle-class model for their own ends.81

There is evidence that Old Northwest pioneer women used birth control in various forms. Frontier fertility rates declined steadily from the first decade of the nineteenth century onward.82 One of the most common methods of birth control was to delay weaning, as the process of lactation has a tendency to reduce fertility.83 The vaginal douche was also known.84 Folk methods, such as swallowing small amounts of gunpowder to prevent conception, also found favor among some
women. Although ineffective, such superstitions still tell of a desire of pioneer women to prevent pregnancy. Other devices, such as primitive forms of the condom and vaginal sponge, existed and were advertised in eastern and western newspapers from about 1820 on. Women also had the option of refraining from sexual relations. The concept of a "safe" period was known, although there was considerable confusion as to when in a woman's monthly cycle it actually occurred. Most of the means just mentioned were discussed in the marital guidebooks available in the east that couples could have brought with them to the frontier. All of these methods were in the woman's power, but one very common type of birth control, coitus interruptus, was in the man's, and required that he too be concerned about limiting family size. The fact that they did not carry the risk of pregnancy and childbirth might make men less concerned with the benefits of preventing conception.

Abortion was another method to limit family size. Indeed, many women found it a necessity rather than an option, given the relative unreliability of the birth control available to them. Abortion before "quickening," or the perception of fetal movement, was widely accepted. Abortifacients such as ergot and turpentine were commonly used. Again, local folklore offered a number of remedies, such as drinking rusty nail water or rubbing one's breasts with
gunpowder. These practices indicated attempts if not necessarily success at abortion.91

For western women, abortion and birth control would have meaning beyond limiting family size. On an isolated farm that was self-sufficient largely through their own efforts, pioneer women lived in a world that was independent but uncertain. They worked actively not only to control their physical environment through productive labor, but also to regulate their physical selves through voluntary pregnancy. Although they wanted children, frontier women realized that very large families would reduce the quality of their own health and the care they could give their families. The idea that motherhood could be a choice rather than a way of life was one that women grasped in an attempt to make their own and their family's future more secure.

Raising Children

For frontier women, the amount of work to be done eliminated the possibility of close maternal supervision of their offspring. Child care was necessarily accommodated to chores, rather than vice-versa (Figure 3). For example, Mary and David McCoy, emigrants to the
Figure 3. In addition to a romanticized cabin, this depiction shows a woman combining child care with other duties.\textsuperscript{92}
Sugar Creek region of southwestern Illinois, plowed the fields together, "he pushing the plow, she driving the oxen, as their firstborn slept in a box strapped to the plow beam." Frontier life was rough, and child care methods often reflected this. A pioneer pacifier was "a piece of bacon rind...attached to a string so it could be retrieved if accidentally swallowed," and children were fed "bread, corn, biscuits, and pot-likker" like their parents. While the philosophy of child rearing was becoming more indulgent in the east, frontier conditions precluded this luxury. Children were treated as little adults and expected to mature quickly. As one western parent commented: "children here have to learn independence and self-reliance as well as their parents." Western girls especially were encouraged to do things on their own in a way eastern girls were not, giving them perhaps more faith in their own judgment and abilities than other young women received. Yet they did not necessarily aspire to their mother's hard work.

Children were an important source of labor on the farm, and they took over tasks as soon as they were able. Pioneer boys and girls learned that they were expected to make a significant contribution to the operation of the farm and therefore the well-being of the family. Their families also depended on them during an emergency. Rebecca Burlend, for example, harvested the family's grain with the sole
assistance of her ten-year-old son, leaving an infant and her sick husband in the care of an even younger child. Farmwork for children took precedence over school attendance, as one disillusioned frontier teacher noted: "school was a mere incident of minor importance, while 'the call of the wild' or 'back to the farm' was imperative."93

While growing up on the frontier may have encouraged self-reliance, it did not do much to change the children's perception of gender roles. Children's work was usually sexually segregated, the boys laboring in the fields and the girls doing work such as sewing, cooking, or milking. It was not uncommon for the girls to help out in the fields hoeing or planting, especially when there were few boys in the family. Boys, however, rarely helped out with domestic tasks. One group of teenaged sons "held their mother up so she could milk the cow. She was still weak from the birth of the baby, but milking a cow was 'woman's work' so they would not do it."99 Women's preservation of gender roles in their children's labor indicates their regard for the eastern status quo. Although they themselves were sometimes forced into untraditional tasks, women in the Old Northwest did not transmit this to their children. Rather, they arranged for them to experience the norms with which the women themselves had been raised in the east. Yet the pioneer mother's
enormous workload distracted her from mothering and took away some of the control she had over her offspring. This led to the children's self-reliance discussed earlier, although this independence functioned primarily within the confines of the conventional gender system, rather than subverting it. In this way pioneer mothers prepared their children for the settling of the frontier and the return of eastern gender norms.

_Nurturing and Health_

As caretakers, women were responsible for the health of their families. This included giving them the best food and medical care possible. Food production on the frontier, however, was not only the woman's domain. Men and women had important yet segregated roles. In the early 1800s, the Ohio Valley pioneer diet was dependent on what the local area could provide. Men hunted for game, primarily deer and wild turkey, but also bear, possum, and squirrel. Fish were plentiful. The families also kept hogs for eating and a few had cows for milking. Early pioneer women would forage for greens, sometimes looking in unusual places for guidance. The women of the Clinkenbeard family, arriving in Kentucky in 1780, "wo'd follow their
cows to see what they ate, that they might know what greens to get."100

Fat was the basic element in frontier food. Everything that could be fried was, for both the ease of cooking and the household uses for the leftover grease.101 Pork, usually in the form of bacon, was a staple, as was corn. As Christiana Tillson related: "We had no market and must live as did our neighbors on corn bread and "flitch"...the fat portion of the hog."102 Women prepared corn in a variety of ways: bread, mush, pudding, and a baked cake dubbed the "corn dodger."103 The dietary emphasis on corn and game easily became monotonous. One male pioneer remembers how he "had turkey-pot-pie till I got so tired I never wanted to eat any more as long as I lived."104 An Iowa settler made a similar comment: "I shall call the years 1838 and 1839 the Corn Dodger Period."105

As frontier farms became more productive and the wilderness receded, hunting by the men decreased in importance while gardening, butter-making and other tasks performed by women increased in necessity to the family.106 Although cooking was women's work, preserving this tradition in primitive frontier conditions involved women in new activities. Food preparation was a central domestic duty that could not be slighted; women were responsible for producing three heavy meals a day with limited
ingredients, rough cooking tools, and no market in which to shop.\textsuperscript{107} Most women cultivated a garden, where they grew a wide variety of vegetables such as potatoes, beets, carrots, tomatoes, turnips and pumpkins.\textsuperscript{108} In the days before the technology for canning was developed they preserved foods by drying. They also produced butter: churning, like spinning, was a strenuous yet exacting process that took skill and patience. Women required advantage of the area's wild nuts and berries. Maple syrup was used for sweetener, a "very excellent sugar suitable for any use."\textsuperscript{109} Women also did barnyard chores connected with food production, such as milking cows and caring for chickens.

Despite women's efforts, pioneer families sometimes had poor nutrition and were often compelled to use contaminated water and spoiled food. Their diet, coupled with cramped living conditions in cold cabins, made pioneers susceptible to a variety of illnesses, especially malaria ("fever and ague"), cholera, typhoid, and pneumonia.\textsuperscript{110} Women in the west became part of the centuries-old tradition of lay healing.\textsuperscript{111} They used herbs and other plants, administering them in teas, poultices, and other forms, following practices learned on their farms in the east but declining in usage.\textsuperscript{112} It was common to adapt the treatments to the particular area, for, as Caroline Kirkland discovered, "the opinion that each region produces
the medicines which its own diseases require, prevails extensively."\textsuperscript{113}

In addition to collecting wild plants, women would grow in a corner of the garden their own patch of standard herbs such as sage, thyme, mint, and mustard for healing purposes.\textsuperscript{114}

Women also used Native American remedies.\textsuperscript{115} Caroline Phelps, whose husband's occupation as a trader brought her into more contact with Native Americans than the average Old Northwest pioneer woman, especially benefitted from their knowledge. On a visit to an Indian camp with her children to see a ceremonial dance, her daughter "ran through some fire, she was barefooted and burned her feet badly....I got an Indian doctor to cure my child's feet."\textsuperscript{116} Later her daughter was again injured, this time with powder burns. After trying "all kinds of medicine" on her own, Phelps "concluded to send for an Indian doctor," who saved her child's life.\textsuperscript{117}

The frontier increased the importance of the woman in the family by putting medical responsibility in female hands, as opposed to the east where, although some female healers practiced, middle-class patrons sought recognized physicians, all of whom were male. While the healing woman's remedies could be superstitious, e.g. bathing in beef broth to build strength, they were at worst ineffective.\textsuperscript{118} Many eastern male doctors, however, performed dubious and often dangerous procedures known as "heroic"
medicine.119 These involved bloodletting, purging, and an aversion to air and water.120 Although the woman healer could be assumed to be safer than the eastern male doctor, once the area became settled physicians gained medical dominance in the west as well.121 While responsibility for their families' health intensified women's traditional role as nurturers, this increased importance in the health sphere was only a temporary phenomenon on the frontier.

Two very different images of frontier motherhood appear in contemporary literature: Kirkland's description of the "softened aspect" of new mother Mrs. Doubleday, and Tocqueville's worn and wasted pioneer mother who "drained herself to give [her children] life." Although Kirkland's tale is tainted with eastern romanticism, children did have special meaning to a pioneer woman. Offspring ensured a future to her settlement efforts: although they increased her labor, they also gave it a purpose. Yet pioneer women also had to consider the present. The primitive housing, isolation from family, and rough conditions made women acutely aware of the risk of bearing and raising children on the frontier. (Even Tocqueville's dramatic representation did not mention death.) Therefore many western women sought to limit their offspring. These women accepted the responsibilities of motherhood matter-of-factly but considered them quite seriously.
Since pioneer life affected the roles of men and women, western marriages differed from eastern unions. The eastern marriage ideal was one of calm domesticity, in which the wife offered comfort and refuge to the hardworking husband rather than serving in a productive capacity. Women who had been raised with this idea and wed in the east would have to adapt their marriages to the frontier. The frontier marriage was a partnership of two workers, and both spouses labored to support the family. Women would have to be prepared for hard physical labor while also becoming more independent within their daily lives. Wives on the frontier had to take direct responsibility for themselves and their families in a way that their eastern counterparts, living in towns or surrounded by kin networks, did not.

This shift is apparent in census records, which show that women headed over half of the few single-parent households that existed on the frontier.\textsuperscript{122} Whether victims of their spouse's death or desertion,
many women heading a household alone on the frontier were considered widows. Women with children would remain single for a period of time only under certain conditions. If sons were old enough to continue the farm, it was unnecessary for mothers to enter immediately into a new marriage. A woman left with a large number of young children, especially girls, might not have the opportunity to remarry since men would hesitate to take on the burden of an "instant" family. Moreover, widows were expected to wait for a period of time before remarrying. Frontier husbands would often stipulate in their wills the length of the grieving period, and sometimes the funeral services would be held several months after the actual burial so as to prevent the woman from remarrying too soon.¹²³ These women had the option of returning east or depending on the goodwill of neighbors until they remarried or their children grew old enough to help. The nature of the frontier family livelihood required the presence of an adult male, at least during certain times of the year, and the woman left alone due to death or desertion, with no kin network to support her, could not continue her way of life alone. Western marriage gave women more opportunity to make an equal contribution to the economic survival of the family than they would have had back east. Yet the same environment that granted women
relative equity and autonomy within marriage also made them more dependent on their husbands over the long term.

In daily life, however, western wives spent much time alone, and the frequent absence of the husband increased the importance of the wife on the frontier. Many married women were left for months while their husbands scouted out new land farther west or attended to business. Caroline Phelps is a good example: "In September William started again to the Desmois [sic] river and left me in Lewistown. I stayed here all winter without hearing a word from him. In March 1833 he sent a man after me with a wagon."124 Women became protector of the home as well as keeper of the hearth. As one Illinois woman remarked: "I keep close to my gun and dog."125 Women also had responsibilities outside the home while men were absent. Caroline Phelps took care of her husband's trading store while he was away. His trips were so extended that Phelps became more knowledgeable than her husband about the daily operations and recordkeeping of the business. She reported how, when their house and store caught fire in the winter of 1840, "Wm. called to me...to come and tell him where his papers and most valuable things were....I told [my children] to sit down on their quilt [outside] till I came after them....I went into the house [and] told him which trunk to take...."126 The young wives who arrived on the frontier adapted to the new
situations they faced, becoming more responsible and independent. Yet this does not mean that they were happier with this kind of marriage than the one with which they came, or would encourage their daughters away from more traditional marital models.

Pioneer daughters' conceptions of marriage were necessarily influenced by their environment. The children who grew up on early midwestern farms usually married while in their early twenties, younger than their counterparts on the Atlantic seaboard, who married in their mid to late twenties. In parts of the Old Northwest the legal age with parental consent was seventeen for males and fourteen for females. With the abundance of land available to all, independent households were easy to establish for a young couple. This assumption is revealed in Anna Shaw's story of her first proposal: "the youth informed me that his 'dad' had just given him a cabin, a yoke of steers, a cow, and some hens. When this announcement had produced its full effect, he straightened up in his chair and asked, solemnly, 'Will ye have me?'" Since the local preacher or justice of the peace was often on a circuit and came by only once every few months, it was sometimes permissible for the couple to settle on their land before the wedding. Cohabitation or no, it has been estimated that up to 50% of frontier women were pregnant at the time of marriage.
less than a dollar and a half, the wedding ceremony itself was as simple as finding land on which to settle. Marriage certificates were often pieces of paper with one sentence signed by the justice of the peace, such as the following two examples:

The within-named persons were joined together on the 30th September, 1816.

G. M. Smith

Was married on the 8th February, 1820, Philip Scudmore to Ann Stone

Moses Michaels

For frontier women, marriage, although still an emotional event, was necessarily also a practical matter. Indeed, the frontier partnership was often portrayed as being almost entirely one of toil that would ruin the wife. Eliza Farnham described in less than romantic terms a newlywed couple she met on her journey to Illinois. The "hopelessly benighted and brutified" husband was tired of having "another man's woman do all my washin' and mendin' and so on, and at last I...thought I might as well get a woman of my own....I reckon women are some like horses and oxen, the biggest can do the most work, and that's what I want one for." The Indiana-bred bride seemed simply bewildered:
I'd never seen [my husband] but three or four times....He come to our house [in Indiana] once after night and him and the old man had a long talk out of doors....The next day, dad ast how I'd like to come *Illinice!* I didn't take his meanin' rightly, but John come again....[H]e said the old man had told him he might have me to go back with him if I was willin to it....[A]fter three weeks, we got married and put right off for his place.133

Farnham's narrative, although pessimistic with regard to the prospects of the pioneer wife, does illustrate two points. First, it was easy for a woman on the midwestern frontier to leave home to establish her own family. Yet this meant that she usually moved from dependence in her father's household to her husband's, with little or no time to develop independent interests. Realistically, young unmarried women on the frontier gave little thought to wage-earning beyond holding temporary jobs for extra spending money. Marriage was strongly encouraged by society, and especially by other women. For example, while on her journey Margaret Van Horn Dwight Bell was overwhelmed with instructions from women to "--get married,--get a husband-&c &c,"134 Although annoyed at the time, by the next year she had followed the advice.

Second, Farnham's story shows that frontier marriage was a reciprocal partnership of work. Although he tried without one, "John" eventually had to get a wife. Everyone recognized this on the frontier:
when a woman advertised in an Iowa newspaper for a husband, the editor exclaimed at the "rare chance" for a man "to obtain that useful and essential article of household furniture—a Wife." Through their hard work and productivity, western women had changed the image of the wife from that of a woman who radiated gentility to one who offered usefulness and essential partnership. Yet the image was still a domestic one.

Despite this unsentimental picture of frontier marriage, pioneer unions were more than just business. The abundance of land served as a social equalizer that could largely remove financial and class concerns from marriage considerations. Although some women's diaries are oddly reticent on the subject of marital love, others are more expressive in their affection and indicate a loving relationship between husband and wife, as do women's pioneer reminiscences. In addition, even girls who had grown up on the frontier would have imbibed some of the powerful romantic attitudes surrounding marriage through their few books and the traditions passed down by mothers and older sisters who had grown up in the east. Frontier folklore offered young women many ways to divine future husbands, such as sleeping with a mirror under their pillows to dream of their prospective mates, a practice which suggests an eager, if immature, attitude surrounding marriage.
These feelings reflect the powerful appeal of the eastern middle-class marriage ideal, even in the wilderness. Frontier mothers, married in the east under the influence of this construct, were more likely to impart this ideal to their daughters than to stress the reality of the tough pioneer working marriage they experienced in daily life. Although the older women themselves developed a new kind of marriage in the west, they did not necessarily consider this arrangement to be superior to that of the east. They saw no reason to reject the eastern standard simply because it did not conform to local conditions. As these women sought to extend the norms of the east, they would accomplish this in regard to marriage by encouraging their daughters to strive for role of the eastern rather than western wife. This was achieved passively rather than actively: although daughters saw their mother's productive contribution to the family and marriage partnership, the older women did not present this to their daughters as something positive; it was simply hard work that had to be done. When the need for labor lessened, women's duties would alter. Since women considered frontier conditions to be only temporary, the model of genteel marriage would be more relevant for their daughters' future.
6. Building Communities

For the isolated pioneer woman, communication with others was necessary for safety as well as socializing. The regular visiting between friends that was common back east was impossible on the frontier. Midwestern women could not afford the time to visit neighbors regularly, nor could they be selective about the people with whom they would associate. Especially in times of sickness and childbirth, women were dependent on the goodwill of their neighbors, whoever they might be. These neighbors could be hard to find. One pioneer woman commented, "I expect the sun may rise and set a hundred times before I shall see another human that does not belong to the family." Yet it was important that these other humans be women and that they be white. Even Caroline Phelps commented in her diary, "It is now eleven months since I saw a white woman," making it clear that she longed for more than the companionship of the Native Americans who surrounded her husband's trading post. Although forced to socialize with anyone available, women on the frontier sought those whose backgrounds and social class were similar.
to their own. When Caroline Kirkland learned of the possibility of an upper-middle-class couple moving nearby, she "was so much pleased with the idea of having a neighbor, whose habits might in some respects accord with my own, that I fear I was scarcely impartial in the view which I gave...of the possibilities of [the settlement]."\textsuperscript{139} Conversations with another woman gave female pioneers support and, in the face of discouragement, helped them to reaffirm their presence and goals on the frontier.

This benefit plus the scarcity of neighbors increased the value of other women on the frontier. In an area where mutual assistance was often the key to survival, one often had to depend on strangers. It was not uncommon for someone to show up at the door expecting to be fed and sheltered for the night for free. This created extra work for women, but they usually bore it with good grace. As Eliza Farnham explained: "It was impossible to deny [visitors] such a home as we had to share with them. It has been a severe burden to us females, overtasked as we had been...but we could not and often did not wish to escape from it."\textsuperscript{140} The expectation of hospitality sometimes meant that settlers had to be generous when they themselves had little give, and not everyone reached this ideal. One winter Caroline Phelps had nothing but "parched corn and crabapples" to eat. When a trader spent the night, Phelps noticed that he had
some biscuits. Determining that "he had more than he needed," she stole three and reported never regretting it.\textsuperscript{141} The system of hospitality was so ingrained that Phelps's own actions did not lower her expectations of others, and when slighted she responded with anger. On a trip, she and her family "stopped at some old miserly peoples' house where they did not want us to stay." Although they eventually let her sleep on the floor, she had to pay for "some milk and bread for my children."\textsuperscript{142} It is unlikely that Phelps kept the incident to herself as she continued her travels, just as Christiana Tillson, after a night in an unpleasant household, asked about her hosts at the next house she encountered and was told all "the gossip."\textsuperscript{143} Good treatment of strangers as well as neighbors was important for acceptance in the pioneer community.

**Women and exchange**

Another essential social network of the frontier community was the system of exchange. The "borrowing system" allowed scarce tools and labor to circulate throughout the neighborhood, and served as an important social ritual in which both men and women participated. In addition to its practical function of making a few materials go farther,
giving and receiving also helped to create feelings of community between neighbors. Indeed, this courtesy was often very necessary. As Caroline Kirkland put it: "a stray spek [sic] of fire, a sudden illness, or a day's contre-temps, may throw you entirely upon the kindliness of your humblest neighbor....If I treat Mrs. Timson with neglect to-day can I with any face borrow her broom tomorrow? And what would become of me, if in revenge for my declining her invitation to tea this afternoon, she should decline to do my washing on Monday?"144

Women especially participated in this household exchange, as they used many different household items and needed help with various onerous tasks. Sharing was so much a part of the female community that newcomers often found older settlers' requests rude. Thus Kirkland's observation: "to have [household items], and not be willing to share them in some sort with the whole community, is an unpardonable crime." Kirkland seemed to resent her neighbors' attitude, yet she inadvertently showed how the women in her community were linked together: "I could point to a cradle that has rocked half the babies in Montacute."145 Sometimes, however, items were loaned or assistance given to create an obligation to the donor that could be called upon later. In this case, women would give assistance and refuse immediate repayment to keep the ties of obligation strong for her own family emergencies.146
Sharing with one's neighbors was part of a larger social code that assumed equality between everyone. In one instance, Kirkland urged an eastern friend to dress in her best for a wedding they were both attending. Although the friend feared "'we shall be suspected of a desire to outshine,'" Kirkland "assured her we were in more danger of that other and far more dangerous suspicion of undervaluing our rustic neighbors--'I s'pose they didn't think it worth while to put on their best gowns for country-folks.'"147 Because the women on the frontier had more contact and real communication with those outside their own experience and social class than did their eastern counterparts, they tended to be more tolerant of others. Caroline Kirkland's book, for one, traces her transformation from an eastern snob to someone who considered herself a westerner. Western women developed new social standards that better fit with their environment and neighbors than did the eastern ones with which they arrived.

Female socializing centered on work. When frontier women did get together, it was in ways that combined work and pleasure, such as the quilting bee or group "apple-parings" to make apple butter (Figure 4).148 Thus the sexual division of labor led to sexual division of social time. When the land became somewhat more settled, however, people got together for more purely social reasons. In addition to events such
Figure 4. Mid-century sketch of a quilting bee. Although it idealizes rough pioneer life, it illustrates the feminine camaraderie and the exclusion of males that took place at such events.\textsuperscript{149}
as weddings and funerals, the new store became a gender-integrated central meeting place. As one merchant on the Ohio River described it: "there are mighty numbers of old and young women men and Boys collected here today full of interogations but totally Voyd of Money." Caroline Kirkland put socializing at the settlement store in more romantic light. A young female friend, attracted to the store clerk, suddenly "observed that she had never yet bought an article at the store, and really felt as if she ought to purchase something," and began spending more time (and money) there thereafter.

Women and the Pioneer Church

Another occasion for frontier socializing that mixed men and women was church attendance. Pioneer churches were usually informal, much more than their eastern counterparts. Services were held in a settler's home or a building that served another purpose during the week. These frontier services were primarily Protestant and non-denominational in an attempt to accommodate all participants. Meetings were sporadic, as they were dependent on the presence of a circuit preacher, although sometimes the settlers gathered without benefit of clergy to read the Bible. Religious
meetings were controlled primarily by men, yet attendance and participation were mostly female. Food was usually brought for communal consumption after the service. Services were important to women as they provided relaxation outside the home and a form of socializing with other women that did not revolve around work or life crises.

For women of faith, religious activity strengthened their sense of conviction that they could survive in the insecure frontier environment. Nevertheless, differences in religious convictions meant that some women would feel excluded from their fragile communities. Christiana Tillson recalled her reaction to her neighborhood's evangelical prayer meetings: "When I look back on these meetings now, I can recollect but one impression...that of intense disgust." For many women, however, religious services provided a sense of continuity, as preaching reaffirmed the validity of the traditions and values of the east that they were attempting to transplant. Religion was one way to carry the institutions of the east to the west for themselves and their children.

The community that pioneer women created for themselves was almost entirely female, one that grew out of and focused on the home, female labor, and mutual assistance. Bonds were strengthened when pioneer women assisted each other around the birth and deathbed.
Despite communication with relatives through letters home, the isolated frontier conditions meant that women had to depend on their nearest neighbors no matter what their social class. The egalitarian community based on the rhythms and realities of life on the frontier diminished as the land became more settled, neighbors became less dependent, and organizations became more structured. This development was encouraged by the presence of eastern socializing mediums such as church. Before this occurred, however, women formed community networks unique to the west that stretched, rather than strengthened, eastern norms.
7. Women and Wage-earning

Midwestern women focused on the home while they worked for their own and their family's security. Although their production for home consumption was extremely demanding, some women sought to further support the farm by bringing in cash. Most of the money they earned went for necessities, but women also attempted to acquire comforts associated with life in the east.

Both older and younger women earned money on the frontier, and each favored certain jobs and spending habits. Yet because of the overwhelmingly agrarian nature of the Old Northwest frontier (in 1820 over 90% of the frontier population was in agricultural occupations, as compared to 69% in settled land), occupations available to women outside of productive work on the farm were limited. Married farm women who earned money usually did so in simple ways, such as selling eggs or butter. This money was used to upgrade the home or provide minor luxuries. As Caroline Kirkland observed: "'spinning-money' buys a looking-glass perhaps, or 'butter-money' a nice cherry table." Others were more down to earth. One woman
sold butter and chickens; but "all she wanted with the money, she said, was to buy coffee, tea, and whiskey." Thus limited wage-earning by married women was both common and casual on the semi-settled frontier. Women measured their earnings not in dollars but in the items they could purchase. These women made their everyday skills profitable, but for most, earning goals were secondary to their roles of wife and mother. Profits were used simply and their application centered on the home. Of course there were always exceptions, such as Phoebe Russell Twist, who used the proceeds from her homemade cheese sales to buy sixty-six acres of timberland in her own name. Yet even modest money earned by women was valuable in that it allowed the men to use the larger earnings from the farm in other investments such as more land or cattle.

Younger women, often the daughters of the pioneers, sought money to help the family. Sometimes, such as with schoolteaching, they were paid just enough to support themselves. Young women on the frontier, however, did enjoy using extra money on themselves. Like their mothers, they measured their wages in material terms. Spending was directed toward items associated with the east, primarily clothes. Although less home-oriented than their mothers, most young women anticipated quitting employment outside the home upon marriage. They had little reason not to do so, and the jobs they
had were usually unrewarding, financially and otherwise. This did not mean, however, that married women could not earn money other than by selling farm products.

**Women and Innkeeping**

One way for older or married women to use their home skills to earn a livelihood rather than just supplementing the family farming income was by innkeeping. Women commonly ran inns with their husbands, and occasionally by themselves. Frances Trollope, an Englishwoman who lived in Ohio during the 1830s and wrote a book on her experiences, remembered a female neighbor who ran a "little public-house at the bottom of the hill." Margaret Van Horn Dwight Bell encountered many inns and female innkeepers on the eastern edges of the Old Northwest as she travelled to Ohio in 1810. Her attitude towards these women was negative: "landlady (I hate the word but I must use it)."

Bell's protests center on her perception of these women as unfeminine. She comments with regard to their personalities: "we found the landlord very good natur'd, & obliging, & his wife directly to the contrary--We find the men generally, more so than their wives--;"
appearance: "the landlady is a fat, dirty, ugly looking creature....She has a very suspicious nature & I am very afraid of her--She seems to be master, as well as mistress & storekeeper...;" and actions: "[the lady innkeepers] all took their pipes before tea." 164 Bell found some of these women so remarkable that they verged on the supernatural: "we found an inn kept by 2 young women, whom I thought amazons--for they swore & flew about 'like witches' ...."165

Though not uncommon for married women on the edges of the midwest frontier, innkeeping was not a career into which most women felt they could venture by themselves. Bell's comments indicate that, at least at the turn of the nineteenth century, the public perception of an innkeeping woman was not positive. Single women might hesitate to risk the dangers of running a frontier inn, and only the less orthodox tried it alone. Additionally, it seems that some lone businesswomen had no desire to remain sole proprietors. Bell "found a house at the foot of the [mountain]--A woman and her two sons live there and & keep cakes & beer--The woman told me she had no husband at present--I suppose she has one in expectation--."166

Married women travelled to the frontier to farm, not keep inns, although the money earned from an inn could be used to support the farm often operated in conjunction with the inn. Keeping an inn and farm involved extra hard labor, and the farm would have to have a
good location to make the venture worthwhile. Most women were involved in rural innkeeping as part of a male-female partnership and maintained a division of labor. The male tasks, however, were designated as such more for social than physical reasons. They involved handling and serving liquor, bookkeeping, and taking care of the guests' horses. Women kept to female tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, as did one male innkeeper's sister Bell noted "who seems to take direction of the female part of the business." Yet for the married and unmarried who did attempt it, innkeeping served as a way for women to make money with materials they had on hand and using knowledge within their sphere.

**Frontier Domestics**

Young unmarried women had more freedom than women with families and exercised the option of hiring themselves out to a farming neighbor; as towns began to develop, they were needed as domestics in hotels and private homes. Older or married women found opportunities as laundresses. The relative isolation and self-sufficiency of women on the frontier bred independence and a spirit of egalitarianism. Frances Trollope noted the difficulty she had in
getting servants for her household. One issue was terminology: "it is more than petty treason to the Republic, to call a free citizen a servant." The young women she did obtain immediately placed themselves in positions of authority with the greeting, "I'm come to help you." They expected to be given both respect and freedom in their jobs. This included eating dinner at the table with the family: Trollope lost a domestic who would not "stay in a family where she did not eat at table with the lady."

As labor was scarce, young women found themselves able to command good salaries. Domestic help could earn approximately a dollar a week in private homes, and up to twice that in hotels. Young unmarried wage-earning women might live at home, but they used at least part of their salaries on themselves. Trollope provides a typical scenario with one live-in domestic: "I gave her very high wages, and she staid [sic] till she had obtained several expensive articles of dress," whereupon she left Trollope's employ. Young women on the frontier expected to marry, and once wed they would have neither the time nor the inclination to do other's housework. None of the wage-earning household helpers mentioned in the sources I examined had primary family responsibilities. It seems safe to assume that these women viewed their jobs as a temporary expediency rather than a long-term livelihood.
Young white women were not the only ones employed in domestic service in the Old Northwest. The female emigrants from the south and east also included black women, though blacks comprised 1% or less of the Old Northwest pioneer population. Vague wording of the slavery prohibition clause in the Northwest Ordinance allowed slavery in the territory and white settlers also easily used methods such as indentureship that kept many blacks in de facto slavery. Nevertheless, free blacks always outnumbered slaves on the frontier. Their options were limited by the white settlers, some of whom, fearful of free blacks and unwilling to share the land, worked to restrict legally the access of free blacks of either sex to their area of the Old Northwest frontier. Few blacks on the frontier owned land; most served in menial jobs. For black women in particular there was even less opportunity. Although it seems there was little incentive for free blacks to migrate to the prairies, more arrived each year.

Eliza Farnham had the impression that black women were scarce on the frontier: "no consideration could have procured the assistance of...a colored woman, because none such were there." Yet they were present. Caroline Phelps's husband obtained for her a black
domestic who stayed with them as the family moved upriver: "we pack[ed] all our things aboard the keel boat and myself and black Charlotte go on back with two children...." The Phelpses seemed solicitous of Charlotte's needs, and although it is unclear whether Charlotte herself was a slave or a servant, the episode ends with the mention of slavery: "our black girl got lonesome and wanted to go down the river. Wm. had some business down at Sweet home and so while he was there he let our girl go to the man that owned her husband." Phelps' second domestic, however, was definitely not a slave: "I left my children at home with the black girl we had hired..." It would appear that free blacks and slaves not only both lived on the frontier, but sometimes in close proximity to each other as well as to white settlers.

Although Lydia Bacon's observation of black men and women tapping sugar maples seems neutral: "the labor is performed by blacks and superintended by their Mistress...." prejudice was apparent on the frontier. One man Christiana Tillson encountered mentioned his experiences with an "infernal old black cook," whom he called "an old black devil," claiming she made "coffee as black as her derned old face...." Even though Tillson relates this dialogue ironically, showing the man to be stupid and ill-bred, his feelings were representative of much of the frontier. In all, the presence of blacks in general and
black women in particular in the role of servants rather than equals elicited little comment from contemporary observers. Perhaps blacks were not so rare as to excite special notice. As fellow pioneers, however, black women had many in the same problems of adjusting to frontier life as white women, yet they seem not to have been considered by the white authors.

The hard life and mutual dependency brought about by harsh frontier conditions worked to break down economic and social barriers. In the case of Native American women, racial barriers could also sometimes be somewhat lowered, as in Caroline Phelps' experience. This was not true for black women, however. Although they were present in the daily operations of white frontier society they were carefully kept in place. By the 1830s women's activity in the abolitionist movement was gathering momentum, but the progress was centered on the northeast. In the midwest development was slower. Occupied with productive tasks in the home, pioneer women lacked both the time and the social networks necessary to sustain interest and effectiveness in the reform effort. Thus, frontier conditions and frontier women did little to help marginalized black women. They remained in positions of servitude, as they had in the east, rather than finding independence on the Old Northwest frontier.
Pioneer Schoolteachers

One of the few occupations open to Old Northwest pioneer women outside of the domestic sphere was schoolteaching. Although in the early nineteenth century men were preferred for this occupation, women slowly began to take over the profession, both in the east and especially on the frontier, where financially strapped rural communities could pay women two-thirds to one-half of a male instructor's salary. The transformation of teaching into a woman's profession was justified, however, on loftier grounds. The assumed superiority of the feminine character would guide the students morally and spiritually as well as intellectually. The frontier women who were to provide this guidance were usually young and unmarried. Married teachers, often working from their own homes, were not unknown. Education of their children was important enough that some frontier mothers were willing to teach their own and other's children to ensure it occurred. Most often, however, pioneer teachers were not married, occasionally younger than some of their pupils, and only slightly more educated. Teachers had to instruct pupils ranging in age from six to twenty in poorly equipped one-room schools, and an almanac or hymn-book from home were often the only
schoolbooks. The job could be daunting, and the turnover rate was high\textsuperscript{189} (Figure 5).

Students' attendance was interrupted by farm work. A casual attitude toward school, coupled with the teacher's youth, could lead to discipline problems. But the teacher had to be diplomatic, for she depended on her pupils' parents for food and shelter. Anna Shaw, a teacher at age fifteen, explains this practice: "I boarded round' with the families of my pupils, staying two weeks in each place....I often found myself in one-room cabins, with bunks at the end...[in] which I slept with one or two of the children."\textsuperscript{190} Like young women who served as domestics, schoolteachers experienced life away from home yet remained in the protection of home life.

Theoretically, as a singular and prominent figure, the teacher held a position of influence in the area. Realistically, there was little an often teenaged girl wanted to or could say in a loose-knit community operated by the fathers of her students. Frontier schoolteachers did not seek to bend tradition and parlay their jobs into something more than they were; most were only teaching to pass the time until marriage.\textsuperscript{191} Like the young women working as domestics, female frontier schoolteachers earned some money for themselves separate from their families, and often spent their small funds in preparation for marriage. Shaw remembers receiving her
Figure 5. Warm rendition of a pioneer schoolteacher and her pupils. In reality the schoolteacher's day was often not this tranquil, nor her schoolroom so well-equipped.\textsuperscript{192}
first wages: "I...joyously spent the entire amount for my first 'party
dress'...It did all a young girl's eager heart could ask of any gown--it
led to my first proposal." Despite women's low wages in
comparison to men, and although not a position of great influence,
teaching brought respectability to the young women who chose it.

The women earning wages in the west, especially domestics and
schoolteachers, tended not to be the women who emigrated but rather
the daughters who accompanied them or were born on the frontier.
Although these young women had household duties, unlike their
mothers their responsibilities were light enough that they could seek
employment outside the home. Frontier conditions allowed women to
make money, and, especially in the case of domestics, gave them a
degree of control over their wage-earning that they might not have
enjoyed elsewhere. While in the east women were entering the
industrial sector with factory and mill jobs, in the west women
remained chiefly in domestic employment. Schoolteaching, the
exception to this, was soon established as ideally suited to the
feminine nature, as was housekeeping; women's moral influence was
as necessary in the classroom as it was in the home for the settlement
of the west. Young employed western women supported the eastern
values of traditional femininity that their mothers were working to
uphold within the home. Their choice of occupation reflected this, as
did the way they regarded and spent their wages. Even highly independent women such as those sent from the east to teach in pioneer schools for the National Board of Popular Education were responding to the call to women to use their ability to tame the west with their feminine qualities.¹⁹⁴

The nature of women's limited economic opportunities in the west also enforced eastern values. Western women saw the outside employment available to them as supporting, rather than undermining, these standards. Thus the frontier pulled women in two directions: while increasing their productivity and compelling them to perform nontraditional tasks within the home, the lack of economic development and diversification on the rural frontier restricted wage-earning options to occupations well within the female sphere. Thus even when women in the Old Northwest frontier took jobs outside the home, they continued to affirm the values of domesticity, caretaking, and moral guidance.
As the mid-century neared, sparse settlement gave way to more established communities which had increased contact with the east. With this shift, the norms that shaped family life also changed. Garfield Farm in LaFox, Illinois is an example of this transition, for it contains deliberate eastern touches while retaining some elements of a frontier outpost. Today Garfield Farm exists as an operating historical farm. It began to take its present form in 1841 when Vermonters Timothy and Harriet Garfield bought a piece of land at a road junction in Kane County, Illinois. Because of the strategic location of the land, the Garfields decided that, in addition to farming and raising their eight children, they would run a small inn.

After four years the Garfields were successful enough to move out of their first shelter, a cabin, into a larger house built by Timothy and his sons with homemade bricks. The Garfields' new home was the only brick house in the neighborhood, functioning as a status symbol as well as a working inn. From the brick facade to the absence of fireplaces (only modern stoves were used), the house announced that
the Garfields "had arrived." The family never considered themselves pioneers heading west to tame the wilderness. Rather, they intended to reach a higher level of economic and social status than they had attained back east. To do so, they sought to be the most eastern, or by association the most civilized, among their neighbors in their new western setting.

Unlike the single-roomed log cabin, the house that the Garfields designed together was the first in their area to feature a separation not only of social and work space but of male and female space as well. First, there was the kitchen, the heart of Mrs. Garfield’s activities as farm and innkeeper’s wife, located approximately in the center of the house. In terms of 1840s household planning, the room was well designed, with room for stove and shelving. The wooden sink was placed against a special low window through which the well water could be handed by an available child. This was a true convenience, as was the stove in which baked goods were made. Beyond the window was the "kitchen garden" in which Mrs. Garfield grew herbs and a few vegetables. Fruits and vegetables were still hung to dry, as the technology for canning had not yet arrived. The kitchen crockery and furniture were strictly functional, with the exception of the cupboard, whose wood grain had been painted on with a feather to simulate a higher quality of wood than what was actually used. This
was a not uncommon device that homeowners used by mid-nineteenth-century to make themselves appear wealthier and more established than they actually were.

The importance of furniture can be seen in the sitting room directly off the kitchen. This room was the domain of female household members and guests only. Situated in the front of the house, it contained the best furniture, some of which had been brought from New England. The decor imparted a parlor-like atmosphere, one which had associations with eastern urban life and women. It was a place for the women to sew and talk separate from the men, an oasis of gentility on the western farm.

The male counterpart for this "ladies room" was the tavern, located on the other side of the house. This enclave, nearly devoid of furniture, was absolutely not a place for women. Even Mrs. Garfield avoided the tavern, keeping her housekeeping duties there to a minimum. Buying a round of drinks was a literal expression: one man bought a drink and the single glass was passed around the room for all to sip. This left relatively few glasses to wash, if they were cleaned at all.

The tavern and the sitting room were connected by the dining room, where men and women met. The sexual segregation of the inn was a change from the conditions found in earlier, rougher inns,
which, as Margaret Van Horn Dwight Bell discovered, often consisted of just one or two rooms altogether. Here women had the choice of sitting in the tavern or remaining outside. The Garfields wanted social position, and they sought to achieve it by having the most refined inn in the area. By the time they settled and built their inn, it was easier to obtain the materials and take the time to create their design. With the encroachment of civilization, any more primitive plan would have seemed inappropriate.

Upstairs, however, the Garfield's careful planning gave way to a more ad hoc arrangement. The primary sleeping area consisted of one large room, with the guests using pillows and blankets placed on the floor. Notably, although men and women did not socialize together downstairs, they often slept in the same room upstairs. Here propriety bowed to necessity: it was often too difficult to keep men and women in separate sleeping quarters, especially when this entailed breaking up families. This was no less than what guests expected; as seasoned travellers relate, they were often "obliged to sleep every & any way,"197 but, as Farnham was told, "a body gits so they don't mind it after a little."198 Women found their own ways to adjust without sacrificing modesty. As the daughter of another pioneer innkeeping family recalled: "there being no room for partitions, both the men and women had to do their undressing in
front of each other. But...the women managed...[T]hey got into bed with all their clothes on. Then, with the covers pulled up, did all their undressing and also dressing...."199 The presence of so many people was expected to be sufficient chaperonage.

It was not unheard of, however, for this system to break down. Bell described one such misadventure in her 1810 diary. Arriving at an inn with her companions and finding it packed with wagoners, Bell was lucky to get a bed.

I...had scarcely lain down, when one of the wretches [wagoners] came into the room & lay down by me on the outside of the bed- -I was frighten'd almost to death & clung to Mrs. Jackson who did not appear to mind it--& I lay for a quarter of an hour crying & scolding & trembling, begging him to leave me--At last, when persuaded I was in earnest, he begg'd of me not to take it amiss, as he intended no harm and only wish'd to become acquainted with me--a good for nothing brute, I wonder what he suppos'd I was....The man & his wife, who are here, & their family, John Jackson & his wife, & Mrs. Jackson, were all in the room.200

A few minutes later Bell's friend Susan came into the room and told a similar story. After calming down they tried to get some sleep, but "lay but a few minutes, when one of them came into our room again crawling on his hands & knees--" Later Bell is angry, not at the wagoners, but at her companions, especially Mrs. Jackson, who failed
to protect her adequately: "...Mrs. Jackson who is much too familiar with [the wagoners], & I believe it was owing entirely to that, that they conducted so." This example shows how much women were responsible for themselves on the frontier: note the inaction of Bell's male travelling companions.

In keeping with earlier traditions, the safety of the guests in the Garfield's establishment was also up to the guests themselves. The Garfields, as innkeepers, slept downstairs, away from the guest sleeping chamber in a tiny master bedroom located off the kitchen. This location not only allowed the Garfields to be aware of and accessible to any late-night arrivals, but also made it easier for Mrs. Garfield to perform her duties, which included getting up during the night to keep the stove hot. Mrs. Garfield's tasks took her outside of the house as well, into the garden and the barnyard. In the yard, however, she performed traditional female jobs, such as making soap and giving the inn's linens their quarterly washing in a cauldron over an open fire.

Garfield Farm was a combination of eastern propriety and western practicality. Although the inn had some features that today would seem unorthodox (such as the sleeping arrangements), the Garfields maintained traditional gender roles, and even made a conscious effort to add a touch a civilization to their outpost. This is
evidenced by the items of decorative furniture, the modern stoves, and the segregation of social space inside the home. Sometimes, however, tradition triumphed over the desire to be socially up-to-date: although by the 1860s, ready-made cloth was certainly the cheapest and most efficient way to make clothes, Mrs. Garfield still insisted that her loom be set up every winter so she could weave for her family until the end of her life. In some ways Harriet Garfield remained a pioneer woman.
9. Conclusion

When the frontier was fresh, the isolation of homesteads made the family not just the central but often the only existing social unit. The dependence of these families on women increased their importance, particularly the value of their labor. With the establishment of towns and communities, the work and therefore the role of women changed. Once the family farm was no longer laboring for its own subsistence, strongly dependent on the woman's production, there was a shift in the perception of what the woman should do within the family. The farmer's wife still labored, but her labor was of a different kind. Now she was a consumer rather than a producer. Farm mechanization, ready-made cloth and soap, centralized creameries—all helped to bring about the metamorphosis. As farm production became "defeminized," standards for housekeeping and appearance rose. One woman, longing for "the good old simple days," complained of the new standards: "formerly, 'dressing up' was reserved for special occasions. Now the farmer's wife who sends her daughter to village school, must keep her fit for
church all through the week."\textsuperscript{202} The woman spent more time within the house serving her family, focusing her attention on being a household manager, a mother and a moral guide.

Not all women were so nostalgic for the "simple" pioneer times. Younger women were especially eager to welcome the advance of civilization. One woman remembers how in the 1850s, her father told her and her sisters to "store away your loom, wheels, warping bars, spool rack, winding blades, all your utensils for weaving cloth" because they were no longer necessary to support the family. At this news the young women "clapped their hands in delight and said 'we can now piece quilts,' for at this time it had become the fad to piece quilts and see who could bleach their hands and keep them the whitest."\textsuperscript{203} The rough constructive labor of the pioneer women had given way to more decorative feminine arts. Most pioneer women accepted and welcomed the transformation in their daily lives that time, and in many ways their own efforts, had wrought. To them it was only natural to want to be freed from many of their productive tasks: while some skills, such as weaving, were a craft, others, such as soap- and candle-making, were merely unrewarding drudgery.

It is well established that women on the frontier were participants in productive labor that was essential to the survival of their families. Yet this labor in and of itself was not liberating.
Indeed, the "Madonna of the Prairie" idea was that the frontier woman, through her hard domestic work, would reaffirm, rather than reject, the traditional domestic values she absorbed in the east. Yet upon their arrival in the west, women found themselves faced with tasks for which eastern life and education had left them ill-prepared. These women found significance not in the specific tasks accomplished but in the fact that they accomplished them. Almost immediately upon her arrival at her Illinois home, Eliza Farnham distanced herself from helpless eastern women: "if any delicate lady asks how I could have undertaken the scrubbing [of a dirty cabin] myself, I reply that if I had not, no one would."204 The additional responsibilities that life on the Old Northwest assigned to women also granted them a sense of their own strength that surprised even the women themselves. After describing how she harvested a wheat field practically unaided, Rebecca Burlend scarcely believes the story herself, feeling the need to insist that "my statements...are uncoloured facts."205

Despite their pride, however, most pioneer women considered too high the price of feeling it: exhaustion, lost looks and perhaps early death. Implicit in their goal to tame the Old Northwest was their own desire to return to a more conventional femininity, one in which the women endeavored to make the home a pleasant place for their breadwinning husbands. If the women had any doubts as to the
validity of their goal, it was affirmed by the outpouring of instructive domestic manuals in the 1830s and 1840s which were popular in the east and available in the west. These manuals portrayed women as having great moral as opposed to economic influence inside the home.206 Throughout the development of the frontier, women actively adapted in ways they felt supported this goal. Their insistence on feminine attire, their maintenance of a division of labor among their children even if they themselves occasionally crossed the divide, the phenomenon of early marriage, wage-earning in feminine ways only, and their emphasis on female community to reaffirm their civilizing objectives--these are but some examples of women rejecting the opportunities to carve out new roles that the unsettled frontier offered them. With men absent or dependent economically on them for the survival of the household, women experienced a new sense of autonomy. Yet the original generation of pioneer women did not consciously exploit the full potential of this opportunity. Always assuming that their hard work and non-traditional accomplishments were but temporary expedients, they expected, rather than protested, the change in their roles that occurred with settlement. Because of this attitude, most western women did not even think to challenge the sexual status quo.
This is not to say that there were not some women who missed the sense of challenge and self-worth that came from their earlier life. Although the labor itself was harsh, many women savored the satisfaction that came from it. Eliza Farnham described this sentiment while she relaxed from a day's work with a new acquaintance: "She could...understand something of the feelings which had prompted my labors, and participate, to a certain extent, in the joy of success." In a way that the young could not appreciate, a number of the older women clung to their more productive ways; some, such as Mrs. Garfield, continued to spin until after the Civil War. These women were described as "old ladies who could not give up holding up their end of the 'single tree' as yet," the "single tree" being the cross-piece that connected a double team of horses, a symbol for equal or cooperative labor. This terminology shows that the women realized both the significance of their work and the reason they were reluctant to abandon it. The fact that these women dealt with their loss of productivity by repeating pointless and outdated tasks shows they did not know how to break free of the prescription for male and female behavior that they themselves helped to spread as part of the settlement of the Old Northwest.

The pioneer experience did, however, give women who grew up on the frontier a degree of independence that their mothers, raised in
The settled east, did not grasp for themselves en masse. These young women witnessed the ways in which female effort could be a force for change as civilization sprang up around them. This faith in themselves served as one impetus for the involvement of midwestern women in the reform movements of the mid and late nineteenth century. Yet these women were also influenced by their mothers' active attempt to transplant eastern values to the frontier. Thus, activity in reform movements, such as temperance, and suffrage, and child health and welfare, drew on the idea that second generation midwestern women, with their inherent morality, could be a force for change in the same way their mothers had been a force for civilization on the frontier.
End Notes

3 Mary P. Ryan, "The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860," *Women and History* (Summer/Fall 1982), 38.
7 Ibid., 15.
10 Rohrbough, 1.
12 Rohrbough, 69.
13 Ibid., 49.
17 Fry, 36.
20 Ibid., 11.
21 Davis, 46.
24 Tillson, 31.
25 Ibid.
26 Jeffrey, 33.
28 Myres, 131.
30 Davis, 43.
31 Rohrbough, 113.
32 Davis, 70.
40 Farnham, 39.
Edward Eggleston, The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), frontispiece, see also 56. Eggleston spent his 1840s youth in Switzerland County, Indiana, and often used the frontier midwest setting for his novels.

Faragher, Women and Men, 54.

Strasser, 126.


Faragher, Women and Men, 55.

Alida Belting, "Frontier Midwest was Often Rough Home for Women," The Champaign-Urbana News Gazette, 2 September 1979, B18.


Faragher, Women and Men, 55.

Straton, 67.

Faragher, Women and Men, 57.

Strasser, 89.

Faragher, Women and Men, 57.

Straton, 70-1.

Emeline Crumb, quoted in Stratton, 71.

Tillson, 149.

Ibid., 63-4.

Kirkland, 61.

Mary Kenyon, from Letters of John and Mary Kenyon, 1856-65, Manuscript Collection, Iowa State Historical Society, quoted in Riley, 199.

Burlend, 91-2.

Jeffrey, 72.

Sarah Everett, quoted in Jeffrey, 72.


Phelps, 237.

Bartlett, 361.

Tillson, 40.

Ibid., 49-50.

Ibid., 59.


Tillson, 128.

Sochen, 37.

Davis, 35.

Ibid., 56.


Davis, 40.

Myres, 154.


Ibid., 213.

Ibid., 211.

Ibid., 241.

Myres, 155.

Hyatt, 109.

Harper's *New Monthly Magazine* 43, 257 (October 1871), 711.


Fry, 61.


Jeffrey, 72.

Burlend, 91.

Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 100.

Jeffrey, 71.

Rohrbough, 24.

Fry, 68.

Tillson, 148.
Edward Everett Dale, "The Food of the Frontier," *Illinois State Historical Society Journal* 40, No. 4 (1947): 43-5. Corn whiskey was the major by-product, but corn had a myriad of other applications. Corn cobs were used for fuel, bottle-stoppers and toilet paper, among other things. Corn cob toilet paper was used well into the twentieth century in very rural areas. One western memoir involving a humorous encounter with corn cob toilet paper is Irma Wallem, *Expect a Worm in Every Apple* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1987), 26. The corn-cob pipe was smoked by both men and women on the frontier, and corn had other recreational uses, such as slicing cobs to make checkers. A corn cob checker game is on display at the Garfield Farm Museum discussed later in the paper. See also Nicholas P. Hardeman, *Shucks, Shocks, and Hominy Blocks: Corn as a Way of Life in Frontier America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 173-4.

John Hedge, Draper Collections, quoted in Rohrbough, 25.


107 Ibid., 52.

108 Dale, 47.

109 Bacon, 386.

110 Stratton, 71.


112 Stratton, 72; Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 92.

113 Kirkland, 62.


115 Ehrenreich and English, 35.

116 Phelps, 223.

117 Ibid., 226.

118 Myres, 157.

119 Ehrenreich and English, 37.

120 Ibid., 39-41.

121 Ibid., 59.

122 Davis, 71.

123 Ibid., 63.

124 Phelps, 216.

125 Jeffrey, 45.

126 Phelps, 235.

127 Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 88.
128 Fry, 61.
129 Shaw, 49.
130 Davis, 53.
131 Ibid., 52.
133 Farnham, 19-23.
134 Bell, 29.
135 Waterloo Courier (1860), quoted in Riley, 196.
136 Hyatt, 352.
137 Frances Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 49.
138 Phelps, 221.
139 Kirkland, 57.
140 Farnham, 49-50.
141 Phelps, 211.
142 Ibid., 222.
143 Tillson, 64-5.
144 Kirkland, 65.
145 Ibid., 67-8.
147 Kirkland, 65-6.
148 Fry, 72.
149 Fry, 71.
150 Colonel John May, journal, quoted in Rohrbough, 62.
151 Kirkland, 150.
153 Stratton, 173.
154 Jeffrey, 95.
155 Stratton, 183.
156 Tillson, 80.
157 Davis, 139.
158 Kirkland, 147.
159 Trollope, 49.
160 Faragher, Sugar Creek, 105.
161 Ibid.
162 Trollope, 100.
163 Bell, 34.
164 Ibid., 57, 5, 14.
165 Ibid., 14.
166 Ibid., 34.
167 Ibid., 25.
168 Trollope, 52.
169 Ibid., 55.
170 Ibid., 54.
171 Davis, 160.
172 Trollope, 55.
173 Davis, 121.
175 Davis, 122.
176 Ibid. 124.
178 Berwanger, 31.
179 Farnham, 94.
180 Phelps, 217.
181 Ibid., 219.
182 Ibid., 223.
183 Bacon, 386.
184 Tillson, 60.
187 Myres, 184.
188 Ibid.
189 Jeffrey, 92.
190 Shaw, 45-6.
191 Jeffrey, 90.
192 Eggleston, 270.
193 Shaw, 47.
Polly Welts Kaufman, *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914), 10. The exception to these statements is prostitution, a profession not discussed in this paper due to the lack of material found on prostitutes on the Old Northwest frontier. Apparently, the agrarian nature of the frontier, plus the lack of concentrations of men, made prostitution less viable in the midwest than in the far west.

Garfield Farm and Tavern Museum is a living 250-acre homestead that is operated primarily by volunteers in the manner of the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to the farm and inn, Garfield Museum includes five historical outbuildings (two barns, a granary, a chicken house and a buggy shed) and features breeds of farm animals common in 1840. It is open to the public Sundays and Wednesdays June through September, and by appointment year-round. After becoming aware of Garfield Farm through a feature in the September 15, 1991 *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine*, I obtained the information regarding the Garfields and their inn during a personal tour given by Greg Vosefski, assistant director of the museum. For more information contact: Garfield Farm Museum, 3N016 Garfield Rd., P.O. Box 403, LaFox, IL 60147-0403; phone (708) 584-8485. Although I learned the facts surrounding the Garfields and their inn during my tour, the interpretation of the farm and its inhabitants is entirely my own.


Bell, 23.

Farnham, 77.


Bell, 41.

Ibid., 43.

McMurry, 96.


Farnham, 94.

Burlend, 91-2.

Ryan, 19.

Farnham, 81.

Hill, quoted in Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 209.
PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


