

AN EXPERIENCE OF HER OWN: WOMEN ON THE  
OVERLAND TRAIL

by

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Hundreds of thousands of individuals and their families made the journey westward on the Overland Trail during the nineteenth century, most commonly between the years 1840 and 1880. For decades afterwards, historians wrote of this journey and its significance in American history. However, these historians often did not include a large portion of the travelers in their analysis. Women were not taken much into account when researching the overland journey, despite the wealth of details provided within women's trail diaries. When women were included in Overland Trail scholarship, they were often characterized as fragile, unwilling participants in the move westward. This paper aims to reframe the involvement of women in the journey to the western frontier and contextualize their experiences within their own written accounts. Too often, women are mentioned only in their relation to men within historical scholarship. I analyzed nine women's accounts of their journey in order to gain insight on women's experience, not as wives or mothers, but as human beings coping with a wholly unique situation. I found that women demonstrated significant acts of resilience in their struggles with grief, exhaustion, and isolation. In these moments, women connected with the other women of their party as well as the natural landscape, drawing inspiration and comfort from both. Even with these coping methods, the trail was still a deeply challenging place to be for women. The journey was a truly personal experience, one that would follow the women for the rest of their lives.

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## Introduction

Between the years 1840 and 1860, about four hundred thousand people undertook the nearly two-thousand-mile journey to the West Coast. Much of the emigration was motivated by the possibility of economic opportunities in the West. As the eastern and midwestern states became more developed, workable land in a good location was difficult to find for many people, particularly for those who were not already wealthy.<sup>1</sup> Farmers had to settle for less productive, more remote land that left them facing financial hardship. After hearing word from early western settlers that there was plenty of productive land to be found in the West, many families made the journey westward to claim land of their own. The idealized conception of the West as a land of opportunity was also fueled by the discovery of gold in California in 1848, which only added to the draw of the West as a land overflowing with natural resources and prosperity. These land-related economic failures in the eastern and midwestern states acted as push factors while the vision of the West as a prosperous land of opportunity acted as pull factors for many families moving westward.

When a family made the decision to move west, the decision was usually made solely or primarily by the man of the household. While some women may have contributed their opinion on their family's decision to move or not, a man typically had the ultimate authoritarian power to compel his family to comply with his final decision. It is likely that the allure of the West applied most heavily to men and their families simply followed them as the decision-maker of the household. However, this did not mean that women were not attracted by those push and pull factors listed above. In some cases, women traveled the Overland Trail without a male figure,

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<sup>1</sup> Johnny Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.

such as a husband, brother, or father, indicating a new realm of possible motivations. In any case, there were a multitude of reasons for one to move westward.

While the trail officially began in Iowa and Missouri, many travelers came from further east to begin their journeys there. Their ultimate intended destinations included Oregon's Willamette Valley, Washington's Puget Sound, Utah, and California. Generally, the trail followed large rivers like the Missouri or Snake and wound through valleys and over mountains when necessary. Several forts and trading posts were present along the trail, offering a temporary reprieve for travelers. Those who crossed in the late nineteenth century also passed growing towns that offered more frequent resting and refueling points that were built up over time. Between resting places, the terrain was difficult to traverse, especially considering that most travelers were bringing all their belongings and provisions for the trail in covered wagons pulled by oxen. Many chose to travel in "wagon trains" consisting of multiple familial groups and more than twenty-five wagons. In most accounts and in this paper, these trains were referred to as "parties." Often, these parties got smaller as the journey went on. This happened for a variety of reasons, such as a wagon simply deciding to travel faster than the rest or darker circumstances like the death of party members. At times, the party would separate for a couple of days and reunite later, as in the case of substantial natural roadblocks that posed a danger to the party. In those cases, the women and children would float down the river, either on a ferry or a makeshift raft, while the men led the wagons and oxen over particularly difficult terrain. However small the parties became, it was rare for a family to be completely alone on the trail. This continued until

the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, which then presented travelers with a much safer and faster alternative to the Overland Trail.<sup>2</sup>

When studying women on the Overland Trail, it is important to note that they were almost never traveling alone. The journey from the eastern United States to the West Coast was both physically and mentally challenging even in ideal conditions. For an individual to undergo that alone, it was even more dangerous. There was also the issue of protection. During the nineteenth century, the societal consensus was that women were naturally submissive and fragile creatures without the ability to truly defend themselves. Whether or not women of the time believed that is unclear, but that mindset did seem to be common for many women in their accounts. Considering the uncertainty and possible danger on the trail, many women relied on their husbands or fathers to be a protective force, especially when the party encountered indigenous peoples or other individuals considered to be threats. Therefore, most traveled with their families, fulfilling the role of daughter or wife and mother. The interactions between a woman and her family, or other traveling companions, shaped her daily experience and her journey as a whole.

Any conclusion made about the condition of women on the Overland Trail cannot quite be extrapolated to make sweeping generalizations about how women experienced nineteenth century America. The journey along the trail was a deeply personal experience that put travelers into an unforeseen set of circumstances. Overland Trail traveler Rebecca Ketcham summarized this phenomenon quite well in her diary:

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<sup>2</sup> William L. Lang. "Overland Trail," *Oregon Encyclopedia*.  
[https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon\\_trail/](https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_trail/). Nov. 22, 2022.

“I believe it will not do to judge of character on this journey as one would anywhere else. The incidents or circumstances here develop character as nothing else can”<sup>3</sup>

As she explained, the conditions of the trail changed those who dared to travel it. In this way, the Overland Trail journey can be considered a wholly transformative experience.

This thesis was an extension of a paper I wrote in a previous history class on the topic of women’s experience on the Overland Trail, using their firsthand accounts as a guide. When I completed the initial paper, I found myself wishing I was able to research the topic further. In order to do so, I wanted to read and analyze more diaries than the previous paper, for which I only read three. By reading a higher number of diaries and more diverse stories, I hoped to form a deeper understanding of women’s emotional state and workload on the trail. Several questions guided my research. I wondered what different circumstances women encountered on the trail, how they dealt with them, and how they felt about themselves and their journey.

After completing my research for this paper, I found that I could answer those questions. These women may not have chosen to cross the plains but each one finished the journey all the same. They employed a variety of tactics to survive the difficult conditions they faced. Women cared for one another when sick, did daily chores as a group, went on walks and sang together, and engaged with the natural landscape. Each of these actions helped to combat the isolation, exhaustion, and boredom that they experienced on the trail, as well as demonstrated the connection that women felt to other women and the natural landscape. Significantly, most of these activities did not involve the men in their parties. Therefore, focusing solely on how

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Ketcham, Leo M. Kaiser, and Priscilla Knuth. “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plain: Miss Ketcham’s Journal of Travel,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 1961): 237–87.



women functioned in relation to men on the trail narrows the analytical scope in a way that misses each of the significant acts of survival. These acts, combined with the profound grief and loneliness these women experienced, demonstrated how women adapted and overcame the unique challenges they faced on the trail. However the women coped with it, the journey along the Overland Trail was a deeply personal one that affected women not as wives or mothers or daughters, but as people.

## Methods

This thesis draws on the accounts of several women who crossed the Overland Trail during the nineteenth century. In general, I selected sources with substantial levels of detail, including a variety of experiences, specifically when it comes to the traveling companions of the women themselves. Women traveling with a husband and children, just a husband, parents and siblings, or on their own were all represented within my sources. These accounts were either in the form of diaries written day by day during the crossing or reminiscences that were written sometime after the women had reached their destinations. In some cases, these reminiscences were written decades after the fact, which I considered when analyzing those texts. These accounts offered insight into not only the responsibilities and experiences of women on the trail, but their thoughts about themselves and their journey as well.

In total, I used nine diaries in my analysis. In my research, I read more than nine but the ones I did not use had levels of detail insufficient for proper analysis. Some were too short or were reminiscences from periods when I considered the women too be too young to properly remember the details of her journey. Typically, I found accounts from when the women were about nine years old or younger to be too young to consider seriously. In total, eight of the accounts were diaries and one was a reminiscence written in 1906, fifty-four years after the original crossing. Although this account was from the memories of Anne Kemp Gowdy when she was eight years old, I considered the writing to be sufficiently detailed, especially in the way that emotion was imbued in the writing, as well as how accurate her account was to the landmarks along the trail.

I am quite interested in the idea of using women's first-hand accounts to inform women's history. Historically, when men wrote about women, they did not provide many details about the

woman herself; she was most often mentioned in what she was able to provide for men. In reading diaries and reminiscences of women on the Overland Trail, it presents a rare opportunity to learn about historical women from their own perspective. From this reading emerges a richer version of women's history, one that includes their inner feelings about their circumstances. This allows for a historical perspective that considers women as complete beings with their own thoughts, rather than one-dimensional figures viewed through the eyes of men.

## Existing Scholarship on Overland Trail Women

The topic of women's experience on the Overland Trail is one that has been largely ignored throughout history. Much has been written about the Overland Trail in general, but scholarship focused specifically on women is few and far between. For the purposes of this work, only sources that centered women's experience in the analysis have been reviewed. The works that have been written on this specific topic are quite diverse in viewpoint and heavily influenced by contemporary developments in women's rights and feminism.

From the nineteenth century to the present day, women's value and status within society have undergone tremendous change. They have gained the right to vote, own property, control their finances, and so forth. At that point, women began to be considered by society as worthy of historical interest. One of the earliest pieces of scholarship on Overland Trail women, written before women could vote or own property, was included in the 1877 book *Women on the American Frontier* by William Fowler. The lens through which Fowler presented women in his book almost always centered on their endurance. In his interpretation, women were able to tolerate the journey but did not do so willingly or enthusiastically.<sup>4</sup> A similar conclusion was reached in the 1958 book *Gentle Tamers: Women of the Wild West* by Dee Brown. Although the book covered the lives of women in the West in general, substantial sections were dedicated to women traveling to the West via the Overland Trail. In this work, Brown constantly referred to women as gentle, as suggested by the book title, and emphasized their femininity and frailty.<sup>5</sup> The picture he painted was of a submissive, sad woman who was simply following her husband's

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<sup>4</sup> William Worthington Fowler, *Women on the American Frontier* (Hartford, Conn.: S.S. Scranton, 1877).

<sup>5</sup> Dee Brown, *Gentle Tamers: Women of the Wild West* (New York: Putnam, 1958).

lead on the trail. Indeed, much early work is focused on this idea of an enduring woman, who exists only to serve her husband on any path he may take. The pioneer woman was painted as an unwilling but resilient character.

Whereas scholarship had emphasized that women were out of place on the trail and essentially forced to undergo the journey by their husbands, later works attempted to explain why women were so discontented by life on the Overland Trail, inspired by the development of modern feminism. In a 1973 thesis titled “Diaries and Reminiscences of Women on the Overland Trail: A Study in Consciousness,” Amy Kesselman crafted her argument using women’s trail diaries and examining their feelings about their situation and selves. From this analysis, she concluded that women on the trail often felt lonely and found a sense of solace and reflection through writing in their journals.<sup>6</sup> Women, she observed, longed to have a sense of home.

John Mack Faragher and Christine Stansell asserted in their 1975 article “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867” that women on the trail fought to maintain the “female sphere.” This phrase refers to traditionally female tasks such as home-making and child-rearing. The demands of trail life meant that women had to focus more on traditionally male tasks to keep the family alive and well. Faragher and Stansell attributed women’s discomfort to this fact; they argued that women longed to recreate or retreat into the female sphere but could not fully accomplish that on the trail due to the extreme and unusual circumstances.<sup>7</sup> In 1979, Faragher published a book titled *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, which he acknowledged “recast, entirely revised, and, in a few cases, rejected”

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Kesselman, “Diaries and Reminiscences of Women on the Oregon Trail: A Study in Consciousness” (M.A. thesis, Portland State University, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Johnny Faragher and Christine Stansell, “Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867,” *Feminist Studies* 2, no. 2/3 (1975): 150–66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177779>.

the ideas from his earlier article coauthored with Stansell.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to his earlier article, his book was more understanding of how power dynamics between men and women contributed to women's actions on the trail. This book focused specifically on the relationship between men and women on the trail. He concluded that while the emigration to Oregon was a family endeavor, it was truly the fulfillment of the male adventure fantasy, one that women had to comply with as wives. While the journey may have been liberating for their husbands, the wives of the trail were dependent on their husbands due to a lack of social power and confined to domesticity.<sup>9</sup>

Also in the year 1979, Julie Roy Jeffrey published her book titled *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880*. Jeffrey came to a conclusion not too different from that in Faragher's book. She argued that while the move westward offered women an opportunity to deviate from accepted gender norms, most did not deviate, instead finding a sense of comfort in traditionally feminine tasks. As the journey wore on, Jeffrey asserted, women found it harder to maintain a sense of home for their family and they wished nothing more than to get to their destination, where they would finally have a place to settle down.<sup>10</sup>

A few years later, in 1982, Sandra L. Myres' book *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* was published. Myres dedicated a chapter to the experience of women traveling westward, and in this chapter, she described the different responsibilities women had, women's varied expectations for travel, and how the journey affected women. Overall, she argued that the westward move was difficult but helped prepare women for their homes on the

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<sup>8</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey. *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).

frontier by forcing them to learn new skills and how to adapt to unexpected situations.<sup>11</sup> In all, her book was quite detailed when it came to both the hardships and pleasures women experienced on the trail, ending with an uplifting perspective on how the journey helped women thrive on the western frontier.

Like Myres, and in contrast to previous works that emphasized the negative feelings women had towards the trail, Lucy Jane Bledsoe's 1984 article "Adventuresome Women on the Overland Trail" focused on the positive aspects of women's experience. She wrote of women's awe of their surroundings, their leadership roles in their wagon train, and moments of joy or wonder they felt on their journey.<sup>12</sup> Her article was a direct response to some of the aforementioned works, like Dee Brown and Faragher and Stansell and their portrayal of women as unwilling, unhappy followers on the Overland Trail.

A later explanation of women's discomfort was given in "Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail," a 2010 article by Andrea J. Savadelis, but the author had a more generous and forgiving perception of the women's role in their tendency to fulfill traditional roles. Savadelis argued that women did experience negative feelings on the trail as a result of their inclination towards traditionally feminine tasks, but instead of ascribing that inclination to ignorance or fear, she attributed it to how women were socialized in society. All their lives, these women were taught to fulfill a very specific role and when they began their journey on the trail, they had to take on other tasks that fell outside of their defined gendered scope. These were tasks that they had been traditionally told they were unable, or not allowed, to

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<sup>11</sup>Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Jane Bledsoe, "Adventuresome Women on the Oregon Trail," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984): 22-29.

do as women. She noted that traditionally feminine roles, like cooking and homemaking, were centered around collecting resources. The scarcity of many types of resources on the trail made women's tasks even harder, compounded with the unfamiliar roles they had to fill.<sup>13</sup> Savadelis' analysis placed the "blame" of women longing for traditional roles not on the women themselves, as Faragher and Stansell had done in their article, but on society and the way that women had been raised during the nineteenth century. Her work represents a twenty-first century shift towards analysis of women's treatment in society and how that socialization manifests in their actions.

After reviewing previous scholarship, it seems there are two caricatures of women that emerge: the dutiful, melancholy woman who missed home and the exuberant, authoritative woman who thoroughly enjoyed life on the trail. With the numbers of women traveling the trail, both of those stereotypes were most likely represented in some of the women. However, the majority of the women likely had elements of both of these perspectives represented at different times throughout the journey. In reality, women are diverse and complex beings with the capability to have elements of both stereotypes within them at once and to vary their experience based on environmental and personal factors. It is worth examining what situations women encountered on the trail and how they coped with these experiences. Through analyzing diaries and reminiscences of women who traveled the Overland Trail during the nineteenth century, I hope to reconcile these two perceptions of women and present a result that would communicate the truly multifaceted nature of women, and human beings as a whole.

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<sup>13</sup> Andrea J. Savadelis, "'There Was Nothing in Sight but Nature, Nothing...': Nineteenth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Overland Trail," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 9, no. 3 (2010): 4-31.



In studying the experiences of women traveling on the Overland Trail, it can be easy to make sweeping generalizations about the experience of all women. However, in reading their diaries and reminiscences, I was struck by how much personality shone through the pages. I found it quite hard to compare their experiences, as the women were all so different from one another both in their personalities and in their contextual situations. Some of the women were mere children when they crossed with their families; others were mothers with children of their own. One was even a young woman traveling alone, without a single friend or family member. With such a wide breadth of experience, it is difficult to make a sweeping statement that encapsulates the female Overland Trail journey. Instead, I ventured to select common themes that characterized these women's stories. The four topics that seemed most prevalent in their writing were responsibilities, illness, nature, and regret/resilience. Through following the thread of these themes, I saw numerous examples of how the trail truly affected women. Through loss, isolation, exhaustion, engagement with nature, and so on, women were truly affected by their journeys. This experience was deeply personal and unique to each woman. Scholarships focusing solely on women's relation to the men on their lives does a disservice to all of the women who were profoundly touched by their personal experience.

## Chapter One: Women of the Trail

The women's backgrounds and journey trajectories are immensely important in understanding their accounts. While the accounts span the years 1847 to 1879, the majority took place in the year 1852, seemingly a popular year for emigration to the West Coast. This was possible due to the discovery of gold in Yreka, California in 1851, as well as a variety of other factors.

The earliest account I read was that of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer. The motivation behind her family's travel to Oregon is unknown. With her husband and eight children, she began her journey from La Porte, Indiana in April of 1847. They joined up with several other families in La Porte as part of a wagon train. The journey was quite difficult for her and her family towards the end; her husband contracted an unknown illness on the trail and later died after reaching Portland. From there, Elizabeth traveled alone with her eight children to Oregon City, where she eventually remarried and lived a quiet life.<sup>14</sup>

Elizabeth Bedwell set out in early 1852 with her husband and his daughter from a previous marriage. Although she did not write why they began the journey, the notes of Don Bedwell, Elizabeth's descendant and transcriber of the diary, indicated that they left shortly after the death of her husband's father. The family left Union Mills, Iowa and joined a wagon train. Bedwell's journal was quite sparse, likely due to her lack of formal education, but contained significant details about how far they traveled and what difficulties they encountered. In late 1852, the family arrived in Oregon and began homesteading in the town of Lafayette.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," 1848, Oregon Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Bedwell, "1852 Diary of the Oregon Trail," 1852.  
<http://www.oregonpioneers.com/BedwellDiary.htm>.

America E. Rollins Butler was another 1852 traveler. She made the journey with just her husband, along with the families they joined as part of the wagon train. The Butlers seemed to face less hardship on the trail than the others, perhaps due to the fact that they were not caring for children. The couple departed from an unspecified town in Illinois and arrived in Yreka, California in late 1852. The destination of Yreka may hint at the reason for their journey. In that year, many travelers ended up in Yreka seeking the gold that had been discovered in the region. Although it is purely speculation, the Butlers likely traveled west for economic purposes, possibly for gold. Two months later, Butler traveled with her husband to the Rogue River Valley in Oregon where they eventually settled.<sup>16</sup>

Alexandra “Elec” Uzafovage had a more unique background than the other women listed here. Born in Austria to Polish parents in 1830, she was no stranger to traveling. Her family moved from Austria to New York state, to New Orleans, and then finally to Louisville, Kentucky. When she was sixteen years old, she married Hugh Owens, a much older man. Mr. Owens had three brothers who had previously moved to Oregon and enjoyed some measure of economic success. Due to his brothers’ praise of Oregon, Owens was motivated to make the same journey and enjoy similar opportunities. At first, Alexandra resisted the idea but eventually agreed to move. Along with Alexandra and her husband came her daughter Julia, her mother, her brother, her sister, and her sister’s children. Their family joined one other family, due to concerns about Indian attacks, and embarked on their journey from Louisville to Oregon. Over the course of her travels, Alexandra experienced the loss of both her mother and daughter. Near the end of her journey, her party was walking with all their possessions in hand after losing their

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<sup>16</sup> America E. Rollins Butler, “The America (Rollins) Butler Diary,” 1852.  
[http://www.oregonpioneers.com/AmericaButlerDiary\\_1852.htm](http://www.oregonpioneers.com/AmericaButlerDiary_1852.htm).

wagons. Members of her party began splitting off and joining other passing parties for a chance at survival. Eventually, all that remained of her party was her husband and her brother, who thought she slowed them down too much. At their insistence, she was picked up by another family that took her in and helped her to arrive in Oregon. She reunited with her husband and the rest of her family, settling in Dallas, Oregon.<sup>17</sup>

Mary Woodland's account was in the form of two letters, which I considered to be diary entries of a sort. Most of the other accounts had some sort of editor's note from the transcribing party, which was immensely helpful in gathering background information. Mary's letters had no such note, so the information had to be extracted from the letters themselves. Mary was a woman traveling without a husband or direct family members, which was a very unique set of circumstances. She traveled with the Perrys, a family that was acquainted with hers from her home in Ohio. In this way, the Perrys seemed to act as her guardians during the journey, seeming to assume a parental role for Mary. She made it across the trail with relatively few recorded troubles and settled in Lafayette, Oregon. She married almost immediately upon arriving there. From her letters, it is unclear why she traveled to Oregon. She did refer to earlier letters within the surviving ones I read, so the answer may lie in those lost documents.<sup>18</sup>

In 1906, Anne Kemp Gowdy wrote a complete account of her 1852 journey. In the year of her journey, she was nine years old. She left her farm near Georgetown, Missouri with her family consisting of her parents and seven siblings, as well as three hired men, in spring 1852. Over the course of her travels, she lost her younger sister and her father to illness. After about six

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<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Uzafovage, "Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage," 1874, [http://www.oregonpioneers.com/AuntElecsJournal\\_1852.pdf](http://www.oregonpioneers.com/AuntElecsJournal_1852.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Mary Woodland, "Woodland Letters," October 1852, [http://www.oregonpioneers.com/Woodland\\_Letters1852.htm](http://www.oregonpioneers.com/Woodland_Letters1852.htm).

months of travel, her family settled in Salem, Oregon. As the only reminiscence within my sample of accounts, it does warrant a special disclaimer. Gowdy was relatively young when she crossed the trail and only wrote about the events fifty-four years afterwards. Therefore, every claim that she makes must be taken within the context of the gap in time between the experience and the recording of that experience. My reasoning when analyzing her account was that if an event or feeling stuck in her mind decades after the crossing, it must have been important to her at the time of crossing. Her recollections may have been colored by the passage of time but sentiment and feeling of the experience is still relevant. Although some claims could be incorrect or altered, I did not think that possibility outweighed the value of the detail and material in her recollection.<sup>19</sup>

By far the longest and most detailed diary in my sample was that of Rebecca Ketcham, a young woman who crossed the trail on her own in 1853. From Ithaca, New York, she joined a party of fifteen other individuals going to Oregon led by a man named Gray, who had already traveled back and forth across the trail. She implied in her diary that she had paid Gray to take her along and intended to make that money back once she reached Oregon. Her diary painted a vivid picture of interpersonal conflict within the traveling party. As a woman traveling without a husband or family, she was especially susceptible to the social ups and downs of the journey. Not only did she document the social dimension of the journey, but the physical one as well. Her diary held a rich description of the landscape and practical aspects of traveling. Due to the lengthy and comprehensive nature of her diary, she heavily contributed to the evidence I present in this thesis.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Kemp Gowdy, "Crossing the Plains: Personal Recollections of the Journey to Oregon in 1852," September 1906, <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/KempBook.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains."

The final diary I read was actually an amalgamation of two separate diaries, which were combined by a historian who originally began researching the published journal of Jennie Smith and upon speaking with her descendants, was given the unpublished journal of Kate Smith, Jennie's sister. The two diaries were matched up by date of entry so that one date would have two entries, one from Jennie and one from Kate. This resource was valuable for seeing how two women could experience the same day and write about completely different things, showing how subjective these diaries truly were and also how unique the experience of each woman was. According to their diaries, Kate and Jennie Smith were seventeen and eighteen respectively when they began their journey from Kansas in 1879. They traveled with their parents and three other sisters in a covered wagon along the established trail. In September 1879, they arrived at their destination in Puyallup, Washington. Before the journey, the family had moved around quite a bit, seemingly due to the father looking for better opportunities for work. The move to Washington was likely another attempt by Mr. Smith to find work. As their journey occurred quite some time after the rest of the women I studied, some differences can be seen, like the presence of cities along the trail and mentions of railroad tracks. Despite more amenities along the trail, the Smith family's experience was similar enough to that of the other women, for whom I did not consider the year of their travel to be an issue. <sup>21</sup>

Now that there is a better representation of the variety of women studied, it is important to address the sample size issue that nine diaries present. To read every available diary or reminiscence of women who crossed the plains would take much more time and resources than

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Jacobs, Kate Smith, and Jennie Smith, "Kate and Jennie Smith Diaries of 1879: Overland Journey to Washington Territory," 1879, <http://www.oregonpioneers.com/kate-jennie-smith1.pdf>.

almost anyone would be able to dedicate. Therefore, I kept my scope narrow and focused on these nine diaries. Due to the small sample size, it would be improper to make conclusions about all women who traveled on the Overland Trail during the nineteenth century. Instead, I aimed to make observations based on common experiences for this diverse group of women, while acknowledging that their journeys are not representative of all women. In reading the diaries, four common themes emerged: daily responsibilities, illness, nature, and regret vs. resilience. These four themes were found within each account I read and seemed to be common experiences for not just the women I studied, but perhaps for most women who traveled on the Overland Trail. Each theme represents a different facet of women's lived experience, covering what they did, what they saw, what they experienced, and what they felt. From these commonalities, I hoped to construct a holistic view of women's experience on the Overland Trail.

## Chapter Two: Responsibilities

In nineteenth-century American society, women were often expected to take care of domestic tasks, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, and childcare. These responsibilities typically fell within the immediate household as women were traditionally expected to occupy the “private” sphere in society. However, the journey across the Overland Trail disrupted the typical separation of public and private life. The wagon train did not offer much privacy for families; they often mingled with other families and individuals from their party, even at traditionally private moments such as mealtimes or bedtimes. This reality brings into question the role of women when not confined to the home.

The most common tasks that emerged within the accounts were washing and baking. It can be assumed that this work was being done by the woman for the rest of her immediate family, as these tasks seem to be exclusively female, and no men were mentioned doing either in any of the accounts. It seemed rare that the women had enough time to thoroughly complete tasks as Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer noted that “here we have a good time for washing, which we women deem a great privilege.”<sup>22</sup> In this mention, Geer’s use of the pronoun “we” and the phrase “we women” indicate that washing was a universally female task that the women in the wagon train would have all done. The women likely did the washing as a group; Elizabeth Bedwell mentioned that “there was 8 women washed there” in her description of a hot spring that the wagon train had happened upon.<sup>23</sup> This indicated that women completed tasks together at times. It is unclear whether this was done out of pure practicality, or if there was a community building aspect to working on tasks together.

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<sup>22</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” August 12, 1848.

<sup>23</sup> Bedwell, “Diary of the Oregon Trail,” August 25, 1852.



These domestic tasks were referred to infrequently and with quite a bit of nonchalance. One may assume that these tasks were not done often due to their infrequent mention; but in reading the accounts, it seemed the tasks were mentioned only when nothing else of importance had happened that day. For example, on a weekend spent waiting for the ferry, Rebecca Ketcham recalled having a “quiet time of it” with the rest of the women in her party and mentioned washing and baking several times within one paragraph.<sup>24</sup> In her other entries, she hardly mentioned her daily tasks at all, preferring to write of excitements on the trail and other dramas within her party. This trend exemplified a common problem when reading women’s trail diaries. Each diary entry was not a perfect telling of the day’s events; it was simply a collection of what the woman deemed most interesting about her day. Therefore, there is value in sorting what is written and what is not. Although it can be difficult to determine what a woman decided to leave unwritten, I found that some diary entries did not include descriptions of things that certainly occurred daily, such as cooking, or only mentioned events days after they happened. There were a variety of unique reasons for why a woman would not include things in her daily entries. Therefore, I often found what was unsaid or infrequently mentioned was most valuable in making conclusions about the lives of women on the trail.

In addition to those other daily tasks, women were also responsible for the care of children on the trail. This was best exemplified by a set of sentences from Geer’s diary: “Men making rafts. Women cooking and washing and babies crying.”<sup>25</sup> The sentences were split into men’s and women’s activities; the inclusion of babies crying in the sentence of women’s tasks showed that women were expected to take care of crying children and any other needs they may

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<sup>24</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p.283.

<sup>25</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” October 30, 1848.

have had. Attending to the children seemed to be a full-time job; Geer noted that she was only able to write in her diary when her “babe and all hands are asleep.”<sup>26</sup> When Alexandra Uzafovage was taken in by the Brown family, she was at first apprehensive at being a burden to Mrs. Brown, who already had several young children. However, Mrs. Brown admitted that she was “quite given out trying to do everything herself and she really needed help.”<sup>27</sup> Adding another person to a party was a difficult thing as it meant dividing limited provisions into even smaller portions, but it seemed that caring for children was such an overwhelming task that the possibility of having help outweighed the risks of taking on another person. In all, childcare seemed to be one of the most time-consuming responsibilities for women on the trail.

In addition to traditional domestic tasks that they would have done in the East, the women on the trail also foraged in the nearby wilderness for fuel, noting several sources during their journeys. It seemed to be a duty not anticipated by the pioneers of the trail; America Rollins Butler noted that on the third day of her journey, “very little attention [was] paid to agriculture.”<sup>28</sup> In this instance, Butler seems to be using the term “agriculture” quite loosely to refer to any natural product. However, a few weeks into their travels, the women began to understand the necessity of knowing the landscape and made notice of what type of fuel sources were available in which places. It took on a bit of an instructional tone at times, as when Elizabeth Bedwell wrote that “you will have to use Buffalo chips for 200 miles.”<sup>29</sup> The attention paid to those details demonstrated the significance of finding and gathering fuel sources to the women’s lives on the trail. Additionally, the way that they include this information seems to be

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<sup>26</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” July 29, 1848.

<sup>27</sup> Uzafovage, “Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage,” p. 15

<sup>28</sup> Butler, “The America (Rollins) Butler Diary,” April 21, 1852.

<sup>29</sup> Bedwell, “1852 Diary of the Oregon Trail,” June 14, 1852.

like an instructional guide to surviving on the trail, hinting at their goal of perhaps helping others to do the same.

Another responsibility on the trail, although not unique to women, was the keeping of a diary. Although not necessarily a required task, diary writing was something taken quite seriously by women on the trail. Many of the women rarely skipped a day of writing and if they did, it was because they were either sick or nothing of note happened that day. In analyzing the diary entries of women on the Overland Trail, much can be gained by looking at what the writers choose to include and not to include and the levels of detail they went into in their entries.

Diaries that focused on survival facts such as where to find fuel, which rivers were safe to cross, and how far they could travel in a day in certain places indicated a diarist that was extremely busy in their day-to-day life and could only focus on recording essential details. In contrast, diaries that included information about the diarist's emotions or details about the other pioneers on the wagon train indicated a diarist that had free time for themselves and did not have to focus too heavily on just surviving each day.

In examining why some women's diaries were varied from others when it came to level of detail, one major distinction could be made: the absence of children to look after. For example, America Rollins Butler had only herself and her husband to look out for on the trail; they seemed to have adapted quite well as indicated by the way their wagon took the lead during part of the journey.<sup>30</sup> This meant they were ready to start moving before the rest of the wagons and could maintain that pace for the day. The smaller size of their familial unit may explain the speed at which they were able to prepare their wagon for travel. As Butler did not have to focus on taking care of another person or persons, other than her husband, she may have had more time

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<sup>30</sup> Butler, "The America (Rollins) Butler Diary," May 8, 1852.

to focus on writing in her diary and engaging with the other members of the wagon train. This can be shown in her repeated mentions of the follies of other pioneers such as Mrs. Tait, Mrs. Ballen, and Miss Balbot. For example, she noted how “Mrs. Tait with a mind as changing as the wind had adopted the bloomer dress” and in the next entry, she wrote that there were “two more bloomers this morning Mrs. Ballen and Miss Balbot.”<sup>31</sup> Although only mentioned in this source, it is important to note that the “bloomer dress” was a form of female fashion that broke gender conventions of the time, hinting at some sort of subversion of gender expectations on the trail. Butler’s writing lacked the informative tone and inclusion of survival details, such as where to find fuel and how many miles traveled, that the others focused on. It may have been that she did not find those details as important, perhaps due to more ease in surviving on the trail without having to support children. Instead, she wrote of the weather and the effect it had on the mood of the wagon train as well as other assorted problems and triumphs of the journey. Similarly, Rebecca Ketcham kept a quite detailed account of her journey and the various disagreements between members of her party. She rarely mentioned daily tasks like washing or baking. Perhaps she did not consider those actions to be important enough to her to be included in the diary. What she did include were details surrounding her emotions. One day, she opened her diary entry by proclaiming “this morning my heart was light as it has been since I started.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout her writing, she mentioned how she felt about herself, her journey, and her fellow travelers. The amount of time spent discussing the latter was quite indicative of her involvement with the social tensions of the party. Her diary included long paragraphs ruminating on whose side she took and if that was right, such as when she reflected on her defense of Mr. Gray, writing that she did “not

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, “The America (Rollins) Butler Diary,” May 7-8, 1852.

<sup>32</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 264

know why it is [she] always fe[lt] inclined to side with men like him against everyone else.”<sup>33</sup>

Alongside the great length of her diary, Rebecca’s focus on her feelings and the personal dramas of her party indicated that she had significant free time in her day to be involving herself in these issues and writing about them at length. While this difference may have been a reflection of Rebecca’s personality and sense of what was important to include, this was most likely due to her not having a husband or children to tend to during her journey. In all, the vastly different topics and level of detail in Butler and Ketcham’s entries as compared to other women’s diaries indicated a different kind of lifestyle for those on the trail with and without children.

Exemplifying the other side of this phenomenon, Elizabeth Geer and Elizabeth Bedwell both had to take care of children as they crossed the country. In comparison to women with no children, like Butler and Ketcham, their entries were briefer and stuck to essential information, such as distance traveled and weather conditions. When they did mention their children, it was often in a negative light. Geer frequently mentioned her children in her diary, most times in the context of having to help them. In one of her first entries, she commented on having to go to bed “chilly and cold, which is very disagreeable, with a parcel of children.”<sup>34</sup> In this statement, she mentioned her children alongside the terrible conditions. In a situation such as that, she would have had to put her children’s comfort before her own; therefore, their presence would have made the circumstances worse for her. She continued to write about how she had to put her children’s needs first throughout her diary. With her husband sick and her children fatigued, she walked the muddy, rainy trail holding her baby while the rest of the children were carried to camp on oxen. When she arrived, she “could scarcely speak or step.”<sup>35</sup> After the death of her

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<sup>33</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 352

<sup>34</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” April 23, 1848.

<sup>35</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” November 18, 1848.

husband and her family's move out of Portland, she had to walk alongside the wagon as her older sons drove the wagon forward. She mentioned that sometimes she would "be behind, out of sight of the wagon, tugging and carrying my little ones along."<sup>36</sup> Having to pull along children and manage their needs while walking for miles a day on bad roads must have taken a toll on Geer. Her exhaustion and preoccupation with maintaining her family's survival showed in her writing and its lack of extraneous detail. In the case of Elizabeth Bedwell, her literacy may have affected the level of detail she included in her entries. Her diary did not explicitly mention any struggles with writing, but considering the brief, fragmented nature of her sentences she may have had trouble constructing full, detailed sentences. For example, one of her entries consisted of only the phrase "lay up and rested," and many of her other entries were not much longer.<sup>37</sup> From her use of language and spelling, she may not have had as extensive of an education as some of the other women, so she may have limited her writing to what was strictly necessary. From what she did include, it did seem like she focused much of her time on washing clothes, fueling the fire, and surveyed the land around her for survival purposes. For example, she noted a poisonous spring and bad crossings whenever she could.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, she could have been so busy that she did not have the time to write in full sentences, instead sticking to important details only. From either her own literacy limitations or preoccupation with other matters or both, Bedwell's diary lacked the detail and emotion that others included.

An interesting complication to the assertion that women with children included less detail than women without children was the sudden increase of emotional writing towards the end of Geer's diary. As previously addressed, Geer may have begun to use her diary as an emotional

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<sup>36</sup> Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," February 24, 1849.

<sup>37</sup> Bedwell, "1852 Diary of the Oregon Trail," July 4, 1852.

<sup>38</sup> Bedwell, "1852 Diary of the Oregon Trail," August 8, 1852.

outlet as the trail got more difficult. Especially as her husband became sick, she would have had no one to speak to about the pressure she felt caring for her eight children and dying husband. She herself noted that she was in a “strange land without money or friends.”<sup>39</sup> The details of her last few entries seemed to represent her frustration at the terrible situation her family found themselves in; something she could not have shared with her children as she had to remain strong for them. Her diary could have offered a place for her to communicate her feelings alone on the trail. In her case, it was a uniquely harrowing situation in which she was under a tremendous amount of stress to survive, which must be considered when analyzing her diary. At the end of Geer’s diary, she began to describe the toll that the journey was taking on her, notably as her husband became sick. After his death, she wrote of how difficult it was to manage her children alone and how “comfortless” her life was without her husband.<sup>40</sup> In Geer’s case, the sudden delve into her emotional state and the richness of detail after entries of plain description could be explained by the worsening of her circumstances and a need for an emotional outlet. She may have been able to confide only in the pages of her diary as the rest of her life was focused on the survival of her family on both a physical and emotional level.

Geer’s diary demonstrated how the obligations of a mother could be overwhelming without support from a male figure. On the trail, men’s tasks seemed to revolve around the practical side of travel. They tended to the oxen and other animals, drove the wagons, arranged transport across rivers, and at times hunted for food when provisions ran low. All these tasks were mentioned in passing within the women’s diaries. There were times when women would get involved with these tasks, as in the case of Rebecca Ketcham driving her party’s wagon when

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<sup>39</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” February 2, 1849.

<sup>40</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” February 2, 1849.

Mr. Gray got too tired to drive. However, she admitted she did not know how to drive well and if Mr. Gray had not woken up as they got to a rough patch of land, “the carriage would have been over in a minute.”<sup>41</sup> Clearly, this reversal of roles did not happen often. In other women’s diaries, moments like these were rarely mentioned, if at all. In Elizabeth Geer’s case, she had to take on traditionally male tasks after her husband’s passing, on top of the washing and baking and childcare, and this proved to be a significant amount of work that drove her to near exhaustion. This is not to say that women naturally relied on men or were not capable of taking on these responsibilities. The point here is that the gendered division of labor within the familial unit was clear and prevented women from taking on traditionally male roles, as they already had enough work to do with their traditionally female tasks. These divisions became especially pronounced as men got sick or died over the course of the journey, exposing how strict nineteenth century gender norms had been.

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<sup>41</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 339



### Chapter Three: Illness

As anyone who has played the classic Overland Trail computer game knows, those who traveled overland were quite susceptible to various illnesses. A lack of proper nutrition, unsanitary conditions, and physical stress all contributed to the plethora of diseases and ailments peppered throughout the women's stories. In most diaries, the occurrence of illness becomes more frequent as the journey progresses, indicating that the process of traveling had weakened parties over time. Over the course of the Overland Trail emigration, about nine out of every ten deaths were attributed to disease.<sup>42</sup> Due to the lack of proper medical care and knowledge, the experience of both contracting an illness and watching a loved one get sick was often one of hopelessness. After losing her mother and daughter to a sudden illness, Alexandra Uzafovage wrote "Oh, if I had only known what to do instead of crying."<sup>43</sup> Not only did the women on the trail experience firsthand the deaths of their friends and family members, but at times they also blamed themselves for not doing more, adding to their mental burden.

In general, the most prominent disease on the trail was cholera.<sup>44</sup> As a waterborne illness, it was easily spread among parties due to the lack of clean water and proper hygiene. Nineteenth-century society did not have a reliable way to prevent the spread of the disease, and even less so on the Overland Trail. Anne Kemp Gowdy's reminiscence mentioned that "the cholera was raging on ahead" and that "where we came on where it had been, the graves were thick, side by side, for nearly or quite a quarter of a mile."<sup>45</sup> The other diaries did not mention cholera by name, but in looking at the accounts of the recorded deaths, it appears that some of those were

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<sup>42</sup> Robert W. Carter, "'Sometimes When I Hear the Winds Sigh': Mortality on the Overland Trail," *California History* 74, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 146–61.

<sup>43</sup> Uzafovage, "Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage," p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Carter, "Mortality on the Overland Trail," p. 146.

<sup>45</sup> Gowdy, "Personal Recollections of the Journey to Oregon," p. 11.

very likely the result of cholera. For example, the deaths of Alexandra Uzafovage's mother and daughter seemed to happen within hours, with the two individuals going from perfectly fine to cramping and vomiting then dying in the span of a night. The quick nature of the illness as well as the symptoms align well with that of cholera.<sup>46</sup>

While not all of their losses were from cholera, many women lost loved ones in the crossing and reflected upon it in their diaries. In some cases, they wrote of a profound grief and loneliness after the deaths. One such example was Alexandra Uzafovage's struggle with loss. In her recollection of the journey, she wrote "my grief nobody knows...my pen cannot begin to make the least description."<sup>47</sup> In this section, her sentences became quite short, conveying the indescribable nature of her grief. Her feelings of loneliness were quite common among women who experience loss on the trail. Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer referred to her husband as her "last remaining friend" after he passed, leaving her alone to care for their seven children.<sup>48</sup> In the next day's entry, she wrote of knowing "what none but widows know...how comfortless is a widow's life."<sup>49</sup> Although she was surrounded by her children, she felt abandoned by her husband's death. Feelings of isolation were frequently recorded by women on the trail, partially due to the loss of loved ones and the difficulty of connecting with others when grieving.

Grief was a difficult emotion to deal with on the trail. When a loved one passed away, they were buried on the side of the road and due to the transitory nature of life on the trail, they had to be left behind. Often the final resting places of people on the trail would have been a substantial distance from the destination of their surviving family, making it difficult to travel

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<sup>46</sup> Carter, "Mortality on the Overland Trail," p.147.

<sup>47</sup> Uzafovage, "Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage," p.10.

<sup>48</sup> Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," February 1, 1849.

<sup>49</sup> Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," February 2, 1849.

back to visit the grave. Uzafovage noted the finality of burial on the trail when she wrote she had to “leave the grave where [her] dear mother and child were forever.”<sup>50</sup> Not having time to properly grieve at a loved one’s grave or return easily to the site of burial likely contributed to the depth of grief on the trail.

While some illnesses led to death, others were treated as an irritating but accepted part of the journey. Some incidents were even written about in a light-hearted tone, such as Rebecca Ketcham’s numerous mentions of her party’s bouts of diarrhea and her assignment of blame to the party’s cook, Mr. Gray. On the road, diarrhea did often become a more serious issue or was an indication of a more serious disease, but it also seemed to be a frequent nuisance for emigrants. Women also made frequent notes of whoever in their party was feeling a “chill,” which can be assumed to be a cold, fever, or a general unwell feeling. For example, the diaries of Katie and Jennie Smith mentioned individuals having a chill over thirty times, showing how often members of their party felt unwell.<sup>51</sup> Most times, someone having a chill was not elaborated upon in the diary and instead mentioned in passing as just another part of the woman’s day. The dismissive treatment of these minor illnesses within the diaries indicated how integrated illness was into the lives of Overland Trail emigrants.

Another dimension of illness on the trail was the way that it often led to more work for women. There were two different ways that this phenomenon manifested itself. One was the reality that when one woman was sick, the other women of the party had to take on her daily responsibilities, often leading to further stress for the rest of the women of the party. When Katie Smith’s mother and sister had a chill, she wrote that she “had all the work to do” and “how

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<sup>50</sup> Uzafovage, “Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage,” p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> Kate and Jennie Smith, “Overland Journey to Washington Territory.”

discouraging it is to have them all sick.”<sup>52</sup> Women, of course, were most times tasked with domestic chores like cooking, washing clothes, mending tents and covers, and childcare. Episodes of illness increased the workload of the remaining healthy women, leading to further physical exhaustion and discouragement like that mentioned by Katie Smith. This phenomenon may have created a cyclical effect within parties wherein a woman got sick, her companions faced stress covering for her tasks, and therefore they became more susceptible to catching an illness which causes the cycle to repeat itself.

The second way that illness created work for women lay in their responsibility to care for the sick. In almost every woman’s account, I encountered at least one mention of a woman having to care for a sick member of the party. In this case, caring for a sick individual meant either administering medical care or offering emotional or physical comfort. Elizabeth Geer noted an instance where she spent the night taking care of a sick man alongside his wife. The two women “sat up all night with him” while they themselves were in a perilous situation, stuck on a raft with dwindling provisions.<sup>53</sup> Instead of getting some much-needed rest, Geer had decided it was more important to stay up through the night and comfort the dying man. In the diary of Alexandra Uzafovage, she described how women would sit with each other when one of them was sick. For example, one of her party members, Mrs. Brown, sat with a sick woman, Mrs. Lyle, all night and combed her hair, offering comfort and practical support when Mrs. Lyle could not take care of herself. Another instance involved an unfortunate accident where a girl in their party was shot due to an accidental misfire of a firearm in their wagon. As the girl lay dying, Uzafovage stayed up through the night sitting with her and assuring her that she was not alone.

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<sup>52</sup> Kate Smith, “Overland Journey to Washington Territory,” June 17, 1879.

<sup>53</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” November 9, 1848.

In a situation as isolating and uncomfortable as the journey across the trail, the small comforts that women gave one another in times of sickness and pain were extremely significant.

A particularly interesting case of women and illness was that of Anne Kemp Gowdy, who wrote frequently of her mother having to tend to people both inside and outside their party. It is important to note here that Gowdy's reminiscence was written over fifty years after she crossed the plains as a nine-year-old, so the stories of her mother may have been exaggerated in her memory over the years. Regardless, her tale seemed quite laden with unfortunate circumstances and her mother took charge in those moments. She commented on this herself, saying that "there was so much sickness and so many deaths."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps she felt this way because her mother was quite often involved with the sick and dying. When their party reached the Dalles, they encountered a young boy abandoned by his party and extremely ill. Gowdy's mother "could not bear to turn the poor boy off" and they accepted them into their party, despite being quite poor themselves and limited in their supplies. Even in times of such scarcity, her mother decided it was more important to care for a sick boy, especially one who did not have any other sources of support. Earlier in their journey, Anne's mother had assumed responsibility for another child, a newborn baby who lost his mother during the birth and whose father could no longer support him. Her mother and her aunt had assisted with the birth, although the family were initially strangers they encountered on the road. In this way, the responsibility of the woman to take care of others transcended past family or party boundaries.

As shown through the women's accounts, illness was woven into the very fabric of the Overland Trail. Experiences of illness seemed to be gendered, with women being tasked with the care of sick party members. In this way, women were often their party's doctor and nurse

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<sup>54</sup> Gowdy, "Personal Recollections of the Journey to Oregon," p.7.

alongside the rest of their daily responsibilities. In addition to increasing women's physical workload, illness and death took a mental toll as women had to continue working and traveling while dealing with exhaustion and grief.

## Chapter Four: Women and Nature

Although life on the Overland Trail was one of hard work and peril, women still seemed to find aspects of the journey they enjoyed. In many accounts, women took time to express their wonder and excitement at the surrounding scenery. Certain journals were full of descriptions of the landscape and the various natural features encountered on the trail. It is important to note that some journals were sparsely detailed, and some were quite elaborate. This phenomenon goes back to chapter two, where I discussed the effect of having children on a woman's level of detail in her diary. Regardless, most women made some mention of the landscape, whether their interest was based in survival or pleasure.

In most diaries, the natural beauty of the trail seemed to correlate with the enjoyment of the journey. In Katie Smith's diary, she wrote that the land "is very beautiful and if it continues we will have a pleasant time as anticipated."<sup>55</sup> In Mary Woodland's letters to her friends back home, she admitted that she "do[es] not feel always discouraged the country so far is very romantic and pleasing for more than I had expected."<sup>56</sup> In these quotes, the women made a connection between a positive experience and a pleasing natural landscape. This correlation also worked in the opposite direction; when the landscape got more difficult, women tended to be more pessimistic or mournful in their entries. In quite a different tone than her previous statement, Mary Woodland wrote that "in my last letter I told you our journey was charming and full of delights...but that did not last more than one fourth of the way...prickly pear began to take the place of grass and for days very little else could be seen."<sup>57</sup> In this section, she was describing the portion of the trail between Fort Kearny, Nebraska, and the Black Hills of South

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<sup>55</sup> Kate Smith, "Overland Journey to Washington Territory," May 5, 1879.

<sup>56</sup> Woodland, "Woodland Letters," June 21, 1852.

<sup>57</sup> Woodland, "Woodland Letters," October 1852.

Dakota. As soon as she reached this barren stretch of land, her journey suddenly stopped being “charming” and became tedious.

In general, the women’s accounts seemed to praise the landscape less as the journey went on. I do not believe this occurred because the landscape was less interesting closer to Oregon. Rebecca Ketcham continued to comment upon her “wild and beautiful” surroundings in a positive manner for the entirety of her journey.<sup>58</sup> However, even her enthusiastic account mentioned the land fewer times in its second half. In her case, this likely occurred because she was preoccupied with the social tensions within her party and how they worsened over the course of her travels. For other women, they likely became distracted by their worsening circumstances. Elizabeth Geer admitted that by the end of her journey, she “was so fatigued that [she] could scarcely speak or step” and Alexandra Uzafovage wrote that when she had to resort to walking with her possessions, she “was so very given out.”<sup>59</sup> These women faced physical exhaustion as they neared their destinations, which may have caused them to focus more intensely on keeping themselves and others alive, instead of observing the land. Likewise, the novelty of the landscape and scenery must have declined and seemed less worth mention.

The connection between the land and the women’s mood may also have been due to an association between beautiful landscapes and God. Many of the women were religious and this was evident in their writing. When describing the daily weather, America Rollins Butler wrote that “the sun is coming forth in all his majestic splendor making everything bright and beautiful...and makes us the admiring worshippers of the great giver of all good.”<sup>60</sup> Referencing God as the giver of all good, she clearly associated him with the natural landscape. Similarly,

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<sup>58</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 379.

<sup>59</sup> Uzafovage, “Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage,” p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> Butler, “The America (Rollins) Butler Diary,” April 25, 1852.



Rebecca Ketcham compared the prairie to the Garden of Eden, asking “Could Eden have been more beautiful?”<sup>61</sup> By imbuing description of the prairie with religious concepts, these women demonstrated a clear love and respect for the natural landscape. After all, God was believed to be the creator of all natural things so to love nature was to love God.

Religion was not the only motivator in women’s interest in the landscape. Women also expressed an interest in the more practical application of nature’s flora and fauna. Many of the diaries made note of how much grass and wood were present at each leg of their journey. Grass was important for their oxen and other animals to graze on, and wood was crucial to building a fire for warmth and cooking. In the diary of Elizabeth Bedwell, she made a mention of those two resources in almost every entry. Depending on the day, she would write that there was “plenty of grass” or a “scarceity of grass” or “some timber” or the “first timber for 200 miles.”<sup>62</sup> The purpose of including these details may have been to inform future travelers of what to expect at certain points on the trail. Many women mailed their diaries back east after arriving in Oregon for their friends or family that were considering beginning the journey. Other women may have written about these details because that was how the Overland Trail guidebooks they read before their journey had been structured, and the women took that as their example. Either way, the diaries made it clear that the women had decent knowledge of the land and how it could be used to support their survival.

Not only did women become educated in the types of natural materials around them for survival purposes, but some women also expressed explicit aesthetic interest in the landscape, at times fulfilling the roles of explorer, botanist, and geologist. This is most clearly exemplified in

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<sup>61</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 252.

<sup>62</sup> Bedwell, “1852 Diary of the Oregon Trail.”

Rebecca Ketcham's journal. Hers was the most loquacious of the diaries I read, and she had a certain adventurous spirit that shone through in all of her writing. Her love for nature was interspersed throughout her diary. She even expressed a wish to explore the landscape further than what she could see from the back of a pony or in the wagon. In describing a faraway mountain peak, she wrote "What views there must be from then! I would love to be as familiar with these parts as Fremont or Kit Carson."<sup>63</sup> By comparing herself with two prominent explorers of the West, she showed that her admiration was not satisfied with a passive journey through the West; she wanted an active role in exploring the landscape. She may have considered herself to be a pathfinder, or at least an aspiring one, despite the trail being crossed by thousands before her.

Although it seemed most women were familiar with the landscape, some women had a deeper interest in the land. For example, Rebecca Ketcham wrote of her experiences exploring the areas around her party's camp and the different flowers she encountered. Often she would compare them to ones she was familiar with at home in New York and weigh their qualities against one another, like when she noted that one was "beautiful but larger than what I have seen at home."<sup>64</sup> In another instance, she wrote that some snowdrop bushes "looked more like old friends than anything I have seen in a good while."<sup>65</sup> In comparing the flora to familiar plants from home and even referring to them as her friends, Rebecca displayed a moderate level of comfort with the natural landscape and a bond with the flora of the trail. Another woman, Elizabeth Geer, expressed similar interest in the natural wonders of the trail. She commented frequently on what she called "nature's curious works" and gave detailed descriptions of

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<sup>63</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 350.

<sup>64</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 369.

<sup>65</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 374.

different natural processes, such as a spring that “every few minutes the water will bounce up three or four feet.”<sup>66</sup> These facts could not be gained simply from a passing glance; she had to have quietly observed the spring for some time to gain that information. Within the details of these women’s diaries one can see that some were invested in the landscape on a deeper level than that of survival.

In all, the natural landscape was important to women on multiple levels. From a survival standpoint, it was essential for women to learn how to use different natural sources for fuel and to be able to recognize difficult terrain. Women also indulged in study of the landscape as a hobby, taking on the role of botanist or geologist at various points. This interest in nature could have been an important resource for women to distract themselves from the hardships of trail life and turn the journey into something exciting for them to experience.

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<sup>66</sup> Geer, “Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer,” August 22, 1848.

## Chapter Five: Regret and Resilience

The experiences of women on the trail were varied and full of both dangers and wonders. In their diaries, one can see a mix of regret and resilience in their recording of these experiences. Each woman was affected in her own way by the journey and the particular conditions she survived. In Alexandra Uzafovage's account, she admitted she "never could bear letting [her] mind get on that subject but a very little at a time."<sup>67</sup> In this case, the "subject" is her overland travels. Her journey was a particularly difficult one. She lost her mother and child, and at one point, her party lost the wagons and animals, so she had to undergo some of the journey on foot with her worldly possessions in her arms. Her experience of loss and pain on the trail was not an uncommon one. At the very end of her journey, Elizabeth Geer lost her husband to an illness he contracted on the trail and of her experience thus far, she wrote "if I could tell you how we suffer you would not believe it."<sup>68</sup> The last few weeks of traveling had been quite difficult for her family as her husband was deathly ill and she was left to take care of the children. Compounding her difficulties, the weather had been constant rain and cold, to the point where she was "so cold and numb that [she] could not tell by the feeling that [she] had any feet."<sup>69</sup> The negative emotions these women held towards the journey was understandable in their uniquely trying situations. Even women who did not experience great loss or hardship on the trail still expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with the journey. In her diary, Jennie Smith admitted she could not "do anything but think of the past and compare it with the present and build air castles and dream of the future."<sup>70</sup> For many like Jennie, the crossing of the trail was an unfortunate means to an end.

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<sup>67</sup> Uzafovage, "Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage," p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," January 31, 1849.

<sup>69</sup> Geer, "Diary of Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer," November 18, 1848.

<sup>70</sup> Jennie Smith, "Overland Journey to Washington Territory," August 31, 1879.

It was a brief period of discomfort that would hopefully lead to a brighter future for them and their families.

While it was simply a transitional period for some, several women enjoyed aspects of their life on the trail. In the words of Mary Woodland, “you could all find enjoyment in your own way here.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, many of the accounts had moments of joy interspersed with the hardships of trail life. The diaries of the Smith girls both frequently featured pleasant experiences. However, the overall positive tone of their diaries may be because the two girls made the crossing about twenty years after the others I studied. The Smith family was able to stop in several developing cities along the way and refresh their animals and provisions, something that the women who crossed in the 1850s did not have the option to do. In addition, their journey may have been better informed by the experiences of those who went before them, and their party may have been better prepared. Due to that, they did not experience the same level of hardship. However, the Smith girls still traveled in a similar fashion and were subject to the same long days, dusty weather, and uncomfortable rides as the rest. Despite the uncomfortable situation, Kate Smith recalled going on a “ramble over the hills” with her sister and another young woman where “each sang a song which has revived our spirits greatly.”<sup>72</sup> Within the Smith girls’ journals as well as those of other women, evening walks with other women seemed to be a commonly enjoyed experience on the trail. Most women seemed to find comfort in the presence of the other ladies of their party and when they were unable to enjoy female companionship, many wrote of feeling lonely and isolated. In no diary is this more apparent than that of Rebecca Ketcham, who frequently conveyed her desire for other women’s company. She had traveled

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<sup>71</sup> Woodland, “Woodland Letters,” June 21, 1852.

<sup>72</sup> Kate Smith, “Overland Journey To Washington Territory,” May 7, 1879.

with other women, but due to frequent tension within her party, she had not become close to them. There was one instance where Rebecca had defended their party's unpopular leader, Mr. Gray, to one of the other women. As a result, "some words passed between [them] though nothing very hard."<sup>73</sup> Still, the interaction was clearly a negative one, as Rebecca then described the other woman, Mrs. Godley, as "the most simple, most imprudent woman."<sup>74</sup> Similar interactions littered her journal, exemplifying how hard it was for her to get along with anyone in her party. When she heard that her party may be overtaking another with four ladies in their party, she wrote that she was "very anxious to do so" and if they could spend time together "it would be pleasant for us all."<sup>75</sup> She, and many other women longed for female companionship and believed it made their journey more enjoyable.

It is important to note that these moments of peace and companionship were most often exclusive to women without children. Those who had children found it much harder to go on long evening walks, like the Smith girls, or go explore the landscape, like Rebecca Ketcham. It also made it more difficult to spend time with other women, especially if the other women in their party were taking care of their own children. Alexandra Uzafovage commented upon this phenomenon in her recollection, stating that "the rest of the women had their children to look after and they seemed to have cares. But now I didn't feel that fear or care and it was all hope."<sup>76</sup> Of course, this feeling only came after the loss of her child, but it is an important commentary upon the difference between childless women and mothers on the trail.

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<sup>73</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 380.

<sup>74</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 380.

<sup>75</sup> Ketcham, "From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains," p. 282.

<sup>76</sup> Uzafovage, "Journal of Alexandra Uzafovage," p. 16.

Quite common were demonstrations of resilience within the accounts of women. Each of these women survived the journey to Oregon, a feat that alone stands as a testament to their resilience as many travelers did not survive the journey. Throughout their experience on the trail, many of the women were unsure of whether they would make it to that point but were determined to try their best to achieve their goal. Rebecca Ketcham was of the opinion that the hardships of the journey were “just nothing at all if one is prepared with a good stock of patience and cheerfulness.”<sup>77</sup> In one of her letters, Mary Woodland wrote how “all fear and dread seems to leave us and all that matters is to push on get through with your life if you possibly can.”<sup>78</sup> The Smith girls were so dedicated to “pushing on” that when a group of men from a nearby town visited their camp and invited the two girls to go out in town, the girls declined, with Kate writing that they “have given up to camp life until [their] journey is completed.”<sup>79</sup> The girls’ willpower to remain in camp was a testament to the enduring mindset that women on the Overland Trail had to adopt. Another strategy was to soothe oneself by thinking of what one’s life would be like after reaching the Western states. For example, America Rollins Butler described herself and her husband as “all buoyed up with success and spe[e]dy arrival & unbounded wealth in California.”<sup>80</sup> The thought of her eventual success had helped to keep her mind on positive matters.

Many acknowledged the difficulty of their journey but did not let it deter them from continuing. Rebecca Ketcham echoed a similar sentiment when she asserted that “with all the pain [she] suffered and the loneliness [she] felt, [she] did not once wish [she] had not started.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 271.

<sup>78</sup> Woodland, “Woodland Letters,” October 1852.

<sup>79</sup> Kate Smith, “Overland Journey To Washington Territory,” June 27, 1879.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, “The America (Rollins) Butler Diary,” May 9, 1852.

<sup>81</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 338.

Her account is particularly littered with statements such as these, most likely due to the lengthy nature of her writing as well as her status as a woman traveling alone. This positive mindset was one that she adopted before even beginning her journey. She wrote that she had “made up her mind to endure a great deal, to find heartless people, and have a great deal to endure.”<sup>82</sup> By managing her expectations, she had been able to maintain a relatively strong attitude when it came to the difficulties of the crossing. She continued to make similar statements about enduring anything she encountered throughout her journal. The constant affirming statements could have been her way of comforting herself in a situation where she did not have any friends or family, as each of the other women had.

In any case, women’s journeys were full of both hardship and enjoyment. Many women employed survival tactics such as seeking out female companionship or writing positive affirmations in their journals to keep their spirits up in the face of difficulty. These acts of survival are significant in that they show where women found comfort in their daily lives. In these moments of enjoyment, women sought out other women or their own company to improve their attitude on the journey.

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<sup>82</sup> Ketcham, “From Ithaca to Clatsop Plains,” p. 288.



## Conclusion

In general, each woman expressed her doubts and moments of suffering during the long journey. The Overland Trail was not kind to every traveler who crossed it; feelings of regret were to be expected as part of the experience. Women faced a multitude of daily tasks like washing and childcare as well as the responsibility to care for unwell members of their party. In many instances, this responsibility extended beyond their party to other pioneers they encountered along the trail. However, many of the women also wrote about moments of wonder, joy, and resilience during their journey. Despite their circumstances, they were able to persevere and get to their final destinations. Embracing moments of happiness may have been a key part of that survival. Many women found community with one another, going on walks, engaging in daily tasks and chores as well as singing together. Others found comfort in the natural landscape, becoming familiar with the flora and fauna of the trail. After reading these accounts, it is impossible to claim that all of these women were reluctant travelers ruled by the will of their husbands, or least they did not think of themselves as such. Most of the journals infrequently mentioned the male figures in their lives, except when describing something he had done that day. The experience was a personal one for each woman, filled with its own ups and downs. The women processed this experience through writing diaries and synthesized their feelings on the page. The important distinction here is that each woman's journey was her own, not her husband's or father's or child's. It was something for her alone and it was something she carried with her for the rest of her life.

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