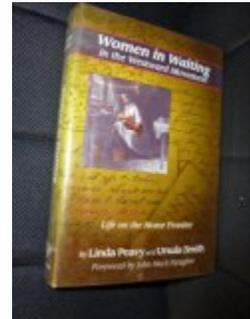


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda Peavy, Ursula Smith. *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. xviii + 381 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-2619-7; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2616-6.

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People interested in published pioneer women's journals and diaries have many to choose from: *Mollie: the Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories*, with introduction and notes by Donald F. Danker (1976); Lillian Schlissel's *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (1992); and Kenneth Holmes' *Covered Wagon Women* (1995), to name a few. These journals and diaries detail, for the most part, the women's journeys westward in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the company of family and friends, and tell a side of the story we hadn't heard until fairly recently. Now, with Peavy and Smith's *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement*, we are aware of another factor in this exciting and tumultuous time in our country's history for this book recounts the viewpoints of women who remained at the original homestead for years at a time while their husbands forged new lives on the frontier. Peavy and Smith's book helps us understand the complexities of such separations.

Building on their 1990 book, *The Gold Rush Widows of Little Falls* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press), Peavy and Smith give a comprehensive look at six women and their husbands, from Maine to Minnesota, who decided, for one reason or sometimes for several reasons, that they must live apart for a time in the hopes of a happy (and prosperous) reunion eventually. After locating materials relating to fifty-three couples separated during the westward movement, some of which they describe in the introduction, the authors used "double sets of letters that described in varying detail the day-to-day activities and experiences of wives on the home front and husbands on the far frontier"(xiv). These letters, plus family papers, business records, genealogies, and interviews and correspondence with descendants are the ba-

sis of this book. Each of the six chapters (after the introductory chapter) details a couple's early life, marriage, and family. Then the chapter explores concerns for the future; journeys westward by the husband; responsibilities and anxieties of the wife in her husband's absence; the relationship of the husband and wife while they are apart; and the possibilities for reunion—or the actual reunion itself—of the couple. A few photographs and extensive endnotes assist the reader in understanding "the dynamics of separation" for the six couples (p. 3).

The first chapter of the book, "Families in Flux: The Dynamics of Separation in the Westward Movement," is essential for a novice to understand the complexities of the westward movement and the people who decided to live separately for a while. In this chapter, Peavy and Smith use many of the other forty-seven families they researched as examples to explain how "far more common [a] phenomenon" separated families were than we realize (p. 5). They also use them as examples to explain some of the reasons men chose to go west alone and women chose to stay "home"; how "the ideology of separate spheres proved inoperable" (p. 18); and how women often had to participate in the business world besides caring for children and running a household; how most women had to earn money in some way since their absent husbands usually did not send them the support they had promised; how a woman's ingenuity and frugality often made the difference in her and her family's survival; how economics often meant a woman had to move in with relatives; how mothers tried to keep the memory of a long-absent father vivid in the minds of their children; how the thought of infidelity of a spouse and concern for his safety played havoc with a woman's mind; how some men sent for their wives and family to join

them in the west; and, most importantly, how diverse the situations were from family to family.

As educational as the first chapter is, Chapters Two through Seven are specific and important. Each chapter has a brief introduction of a few paragraphs which presents the parents and births of the individuals, the courtship of the young men and women, and their marital and family circumstances. These are followed by the specifics about the husband's departure for the west and the trauma that event brought to the wife, and continue with facts detailing the couples's separation and, in some cases, eventual reunion. One example is Sarah Burgert Yesler and her husband, Henry, who were separated from each other for almost seven years, while Henry worked as a carpenter in the West and surveyed the possibilities of opening a lumber business in California, Oregon Territory, or "the fledgling village of Seattle" (p. 143). The authors explain both Henry's wanderings as well as Sarah's activities, travels, and concerns. Sarah and their son, George, stayed in Ohio with family and friends until 1857, when Sarah joined her husband in Seattle, leaving George with relatives. George died suddenly in 1859 of "some virulent disease" and Sarah and Henry never returned to the midwest (p. 158). Before joining her husband, Sarah was one of many wives who found that "life in limbo was only another form of bondage" and that she was probably worse off than a spinster or a widow, both of whom could be more independent (p. 17).

Letters are sometimes quoted and the endnotes are often helpful to fill in the gaps of information. The magnitude of Peavy and Smith's research shows especially in the notes. For example, on page 284 of the paperback edition, Note #6 discusses how difficult it is to find the letters of "stay-at-home wives" because often they were not saved, while the letters of the men who went west "tended to be preserved and cherished by their families ..." Usually the women's letters that were saved have been preserved by the families "for their sentimental value rather than their historical value" and are less likely to be found in any archives.

The endnotes can be distracting at times. It seems Peavy and Smith could have easily written one book on each of the six women featured, and more of the "notes" could have been incorporated. Also, some maps would be helpful for orientation. For example, in the chapter about Sarah and Henry Yesler, a map or sketch of the Seattle area and Yesler's land in the 1850s would be meaningful to the reader. By Chapter Five or Six, the format—birth, meeting, marriage, children, departure of husband, tenacity of wife—seemed repetitious, even with the diversity of the individual circumstances. And, given all the information about the husband in the west and the growth of the children, the reader may wonder if the book is really about the "women in waiting" as the title claims. Could more have been deduced and discussed about each wife and her circumstances? Still, the related information about husband and children is integral to our understanding of the wife's situation.

This book is important to the on-going research and development of our ideas about the time period and the settlement of the West, especially regarding the circumstances of the "stay-at-home wives" whose stories have not been covered this widely before. It is possible that our awareness of the contributions these women made may "alter our stereotypical perceptions of the accomplishments of the men" (p. 5). The depth of the scholarship by Peavy and Smith is commendable, and both the novice and the veteran of this genre will enjoy reading *Women in Waiting* as well as gain in knowledge. With books such as this, our understanding of the nineteenth century and the great westward movement, including the lives of those who stayed behind and managed family, home, and businesses while others went west and expanded the boundaries of the country, is vastly increased.

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