"Aunt Amelia's Diary": The Record of a Reluctant Pioneer

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As our part of the project "Teaching Women's Literature from a Regional Perspective," my colleague Sheryll Patterson-Black and I have been studying the lives and writings of pioneer women on the Great Plains and in the Rocky Mountain West.

We live and work in the land of the great western frontier -- that vast, mythic male-dominated region of cowboys, Indians, outlaws, miners -- and more recently, Marlboro men. Where are the women?

According to the frontier myth, when women were there at all, they were there reluctantly -- afraid of hardship, afraid of the Indians, homesick, often physically or mentally sick -- there only because of a man whom they followed blindly.

Of course this is one-dimensional nonsense. Any superficial scanning of the published letters, diaries, journals and novels by western women reveals an entire range of human -- as opposed to feminine -- responses to the challenge and hardship of pioneering. Fortitude, strength, and excitement occur just as frequently as fear and trembling. Furthermore, Sheryll Patterson-Black's research has recovered a lost reality: the fact that among the adventuresome souls who came west to claim free land under the Homestead Act, at least 10% were single women. These women saw pioneering as an attractive economic alternative to their then very limited choices of career -- schoolteaching, domestic work or factory work. Sheryll's research has recently been published, fittingly enough, in Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, published by the University of Colorado.

A large question looms before us: why, given the unmistakable variety of attitudes women displayed toward the pioneer experience, did they suffer the fate of being so patronizingly stereotyped? This question I will postpone, as being too large to answer in the time available, although we do, in the course of the project, expect to answer it. I will move on to a question which does seem answerable -- namely, why were our "reluctant pioneer women" reluctant? For many were, and it seems appropriate to deal first with the reality underlying the stereotype before moving on to other realities. I recently found, in the Western History Archives
of the University of Colorado, the diary of a pioneer woman, Amelia Buss, who came to Colorado by wagon train with her husband and young daughter in 1866. They settled on a small farm near Fort Collins, about 100 miles north of Denver. The diary -- known affectionately as "Aunt Amelia's diary" among the staff at the archives -- is a classic of reluctant pioneering. Amelia Buss hates the wagon train -- the dust, the rain, the cooking for the next day which she did every night while the men rested, the Indians. When she arrives in Colorado, she hates their primitive cabin, the constant hard work, her isolation, and the frightening visits from curious Indians. In fact, she complains all the time. She is appealing, in a frail sort of way -- poor woman, so frightened, so unadventuresome, so overwhelmed.

Yes ... but. Attached to "Aunt Amelia's diary" is a note from her grandniece explaining its history. As Amelia was leaving New York for the west, her four sisters gave her the blank diary, and when it was completed -- i.e. when all the pages were full -- she returned it to them, whence it was handed on as a family momento, until it finally arrived in the Western History Archives. 1

The form of the diary is shaped by its purpose. Toward the end, Amelia condenses her daily entries so that she will have room, as she says to "close up my year with." The long closing entry -- the only retrospective statement in the entire diary -- is dated exactly one year from the day she first occupied her cabin in Fort Collins.

1 My title, "Aunt Amelia's diary" is chosen deliberately, to stress the importance of relatedness as a key to understanding what Amelia Buss herself wrote and the importance to her descendents of the diary as a family document.

The purpose of the diary also determines its contents, in a very important way. The diary is not a substitute for letters -- she writes to her sisters frequently but cheerfully ("if I had told them just how I felt they too would have been sad": diary entry one month after arriving in Colorado). The diary, with its private record of fears, worries, and complaints, is Amelia Buss's emotional link to her sisters and the female world of support and sympathy she has left behind. She writes what she would say if she were with her sisters, confident of their understanding and support. It is the only support she has. Soon after arriving in Colorado she writes: "I cannot tell anyone how I feel. I some times fear my health will fail if I do not soon feel better. I feel the want of sympathy very much."

Why is she so lonely? Because she has no female friends. This is extremely important. Amelia Buss has a family, a husband and a daughter, but she cannot depend on them for support.

Why doesn't she get the sympathy she needs from her husband? He tries, but her request and his response are formalized: "I told G(eorge) I wished he would read while I don my necessary work for I had an other homesick fit. he laughted at me but took the Evangelist and read it a loud."

Other diaries and journals confirm the sense that troubled women did not confide in their men because, as Amelia's entry shows, she could expect only rough comfort, no real understanding or sympathy.

What about children as a source of comfort? The answer here also is no. The daughter, age eight, is mentioned in the diary when she is worrisomely sick, when she does an unusual amount of work, or in the context of Sunday school lessons. When we realize that Amelia Buss was alone much of the time her first year, because her husband was off working elsewhere to earn the money for them to survive, the paucity of references to the child is surprising. The historical literature tells us that "childhood" came into its own in the 1830s, but it is clearly not our modern sense of childhood. In the 1860s, you did not talk to an eight year old child about anything important.
Where Amelia Buss looked for companionship was to other women. She began on the wagon train, and was disappointed: "I am all the woman there is in this big train."

Once she arrives in Colorado, Amelia hopes, quite desperately, for women friends nearby. But for almost a year she is thwarted by the scarcity of women and the distance between settlements.

Amelia Buss arrived in Colorado in late September. Two neighbor women visited her soon after her arrival. One was sympathetic, saying, "I really pity you in coming here." Amelia records in her diary "It was a comfort to feel I had the sympathy of even a stranger."

Two weeks later, her nearest female neighbors visits, and laughs at her for being homesick, telling her that she is living in more physical comfort than most of her neighbors. Amelia can't cope with this: "I found her social but somehow I felt more home sick after she went away than I did before she came."

These two women were the only women Amelia saw until the following June -- nine months -- and she saw them infrequently. There were nine visits in those nine months, all of which Amelia carefully recorded in her diary.

How did Amelia cope with the lack of companionship? She had rituals. At first, she lived for letters from home -- from her sisters. When letters arrived, she answered them immediately. When she first arrived in Colorado, she also turned to her albums -- of photographs and autographs, presumably -- but turned from them in disappointment because, as she said, "none of them speak to me and it only aggravates me."

Amelia had two more enduring rituals. One was the observance of Sunday, a private observance, as there was no church. This meant Bible reading, Sunday school teachings for her daughter, and plain and simple longing for the Christian community she had left behind. Amelia Buss was deeply religious, as were many women of her generation, and her sense of religion was social and communitarian.
The other consoling ritual -- the most consoling -- is the diary itself. She makes almost daily entries, recording her work -- washing is the most frequently mentioned -- her fears and loneliness, her annoyances at her husband, the weather, the occasional visits, the slow process by which her log cabin becomes home (a bedstead, a table, wall hangings, and best of all -- after six months -- a privy).

Amelia Buss's process of adaptation to her new surroundings is shown in her diary, as much in the form as in the content. All through the long winter the entries detail work, tiredness, loneliness. Spring brings a dramatic difference. April 6: "the return of spring is drivinge the winter from my heart." Her entries get shorter -- less detailed -- as spring advances. She rarely misses a day, but complains less. There is more company -- her husband is at home most of the time, and people visit more frequently. And of course she is busier -- there are crops to tend in the summer. In mid-July, she gives up the daily entries, and saves her space for her final, retrospective entry, dated, as I said before, exactly one year from her arrival in Colorado.

In that entry, she summarizes the themes I have explored in this paper. First, the hardship "when I look back over the past I have no wish to live another such a year" and the regrets for "all my former privileges and the society of friends."

Then, the important step -- reconciliation, resignation -- adaptation seems the best word - "Now I have settled down with the belief that here I shall end my days and the sooner I make it home the better."

And with this adaptation, she can now close her diary with an acknowledgement of what it has meant to her: "This little book may seem full of trifling troubles to you, but at the same time they were great to me, more than I knew how to bear ... and now farewell little book you shall not carry more complaint to my friends at home."

So ends the diary of one reluctant pioneer woman. Aunt Amelia's sisters helped her -- and us -- by giving her a blank diary. She filled the pages with a vivid record which demonstrates the importance of female companionship to
pioneer women and also demonstrates the importance of the diary form itself as a private reaching out to a known and familiar female subculture. In this way, one woman's complaints, fears and longings have helped us in our wider effort to understand the pioneering experience for all women, and have also deepened our understanding of the fortitude shown by even the most reluctant pioneer women.